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# Brazilian backlands (*sertão*) – natural disaster or ecocatastrophe? An ecocritical reading of João Guimarães Rosa’s landscapes

**Abstract.** In the wake of some realist novels and of Euclides da Cunha’s *Os sertões* [*Rebellion in the Backlands*, 1902], a body of writing known as “regionalist literature” developed in the 1930s around the *sertão*, the semi-arid region of the northeast center of Brazil, which becomes invariably depicted as a universe of natural and human catastrophe inhabited by characters of few words, emotions or thoughts.

At first glance, it seems that João Guimarães Rosa should be part of this regionalist lineage: all his stories revolve around the landscape of the *sertão*, and his only novel is entitled *Grande sertão: Veredas* [*The Devil to Pay in the Backlands*, 1956]. Nevertheless, not only does Guimarães Rosa locate his geographical *sertão* in a slightly different place than the regionalists did (i.e. in the Minas Gerais), but his way of describing the *sertão* as the product of the interactions between human practices and the natural environment renders his work distinct from these authors. To better highlight this difference, we will rely on the concepts of “natural disaster” and “ecocatastrophe” as defined by Kate Rigby in her book *Dancing with Disaster*.

**Keywords:** *sertão*, paradise, regionalist literature, biodiversity, natural disaster, ecocatastrophe, ecocriticism.

## Literary representations of Brazil as a paradise on earth

The West has long believed in the real and concrete existence of a paradise on earth; until the Renaissance, it was convinced that this paradise, located in a place difficult to

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reach, somewhere beyond the oceans or on top of a mountain, would be discovered one day. As a rule, medieval maps of the world represented this paradise, even if its place varied from map to map. In *Visões do Paraíso* [*Visions of Paradise*], the Brazilian historian Sergio Buarque de Holanda shows that this set of beliefs was responsible for the production of a certain type of European discourse on Brazil. When Europeans first arrived in Brazil in 1500, they thought that this earthly paradise had finally been found: the first reports about the New World mention a lush natural setting, a mild climate, and a wealthy land where food was plentiful, thereby conveying the image of a country where an easy life freed from hard work was possible (Buarque de Holanda 2000).

The Eden-like features characterizing the descriptions of Brazilian nature during the 16th century had a long life. Even once the belief in the existence of such an earthly paradise had waned, these features continued to pervade numerous accounts of Brazil in the following centuries, and the identification of the country with its beautiful and generous natural setting would become a commonplace in literature – even if the descriptive accents shift across the centuries and according to prevailing literary influences. While the first literary descriptions of Brazil expressed a pure and simple enchantment in the face of the splendor of tropical nature, in the 17th and 18th centuries, among the writers of a generation already born in Brazil, a less naïve attitude towards nature emerged, which was reflected in the prevalence of the chronicler's enumerative devices: for Manuel Botelho de Oliveira (1636-1711) or Frei Manuel de Santa Maria Itaparica (1704-1768), for example, writing about nature meant lists and descriptions of fruits, plants and animals presented as abundant and delicious products for consumption. Rather than simply portraying Brazil as a place of great beauty, these accounts were intended to draw attention to its capacities for yield and commercial exploitation. In the Romantic period, after Brazil had gained its independence and its literature separated from the Portuguese, these more pragmatically driven inventories slowly disappeared to give way, as in all Romantic literatures, to a grandiose and sublime nature valued for its capacity to enter into correspondence with the most extreme states of mind of the poet – as in José de Alencar's work, for example<sup>2</sup>. As a rule, what emerges from this body of Brazilian literary texts (at least until the second half of the 19th century) is a deep confidence in the everlasting beauty and productivity of the national space, able whatever happens to remain identical to itself thanks to its innate capacity of regeneration. The idea that a natural disaster could disfigure is conspicuous by its absence in the literary imagination: Brazil hosts a safe landscape, in no way at risk of degradation, disappearance or exhaustion.

2 For these examples, as well as for a brief history of how Brazilian literature represented nature from its origins until the early 20th century, see Carvalho 2005.

## The emergence of a Brazilian landscape of natural disaster: the *sertão*

In the second part of the 19th century, however, a very specific Brazilian landscape drew the attention of writers for reasons exactly opposite to those that were valued until that time: it is the scrubby region of the northeast center of Brazil, called the *sertão*, whose semi-aridity worsened to desertification in the last 30 years of the 19th century as a result of successive droughts (the most memorable one being that of 1877-1879). If the *sertão* had already been the object of idealized descriptions and Brazilian identity markers in the same way as the Amazon or other tropical landscapes, this disaster with catastrophic human, animal and vegetal consequences singularizes this region and totally reverses the imaginary representations earlier attached to it. In the literature of realism, it becomes a place of natural disaster par excellence, and Nature, instead of being the bountiful Mother, begins to be perceived as the Other, as a violent adversary animated by clearly hostile forces towards powerless human beings – as shown for example in *Dona Guidinha do Poço* by Manuel de Oliveira Paiva (written in 1892, but published posthumously in 1952), *A fome: cenas da seca do Ceará* by Rodolfo Teófilo (1890) and *Luzia-Homem* by Domingos Olímpio (1903).

The way natural disaster is represented in these novels is in agreement with what Kate Rigby, in her book *Dancing with Disaster*, calls the “modern myth” or “cultural narrative” of modernity (Rigby 2015: 4, 16): unlike premodern narratives which conceive natural disaster as a punishment from God or an astrologically determined misfortune (influence of a bad star<sup>3</sup>), the modern narratives, while keeping the connotation of bad luck contained in the word “disaster”, construct a nature that neither acts in a predetermined way nor in the context of any morality and any consideration for human beings, but by sheer caprice or malevolence. Individuals are simply victims of their natural environment. They are conditioned by it, and the reverse is not true: there is no questioning, either from the narrator or from the characters, about any possible human responsibility in this disaster.

The writer and journalist Euclides da Cunha, who continues in his both scientific and literary book *Os sertões* (1902) [Rebellion in the Backlands] to weave the pattern of a *sertão* marked by aridity, misery and death, brings nevertheless a breach in the “modern narrative” by introducing a new and different element in his etiology of natural disaster: in a bold way for the time, he explains the desolation of the contemporary *sertão* not only by way of climatic reasons and unfavorable weather conditions, but also emphasizes, in one subchapter of his book entitled “How a Desert is Made”, the significant role

3 As Rigby points out, the word “disaster” comes from the French *désastre*, which contains the word *astre* = “star”, and signifies thus “the malign influence of an unfavorable planetary aspect or conjunction”. Cf. Rigby 2015: 16.

played by man with his savage methods in exploiting nature: the aboriginal forest-dweller's methods of trimming trees with axes and then burning them to ashes, and of cultivating these naked areas until they were completely "exhausted" and "untillable", were copied and aggravated on a large scale by the colonizer, who planted farms (*fazendas*) surrounded by huge sugar cane and coffee plantations in the interior of the country. Contributing to this work of devastation was the arrival of the "hardy backwoods pioneer" in search of gold or diamonds:

He attacked the earth stoutly, disfiguring it with his surface explorations, rendering it sterile with his dredges, scarring it with the point of his pickax, precipitating the process of erosion by running through it streams of water from the wild torrents. And he left behind him, here, there, and everywhere, great melancholy and deserted *catas* [holes], tracts forever sterile now, with the intense coloring of upturned clay, shedding a vermilion glow in the midst of the wilderness--tracts where not even the humblest of plants could thrive, and which bore the suggestive appearance of enormous dead cities, crumbled in ruins. (Da Cunha 1944: 44)

*Atacou a fundo a terra, escarificando-a nas explorações a céu aberto; esterilizou-a com os lastros das grupiarias; feriu-a a pontações de alvião; degradou-a corroendo-a com as águas selvagens das torrentes; e deixou, aqui, ali, em toda parte, para sempre estéreis, avermelhando nos ermos com o intenso colorido das argilas revolvidas, onde não medra a planta mais exígua, as grandes catas, vazias e tristonhas, com a sua feição sugestiva de imensas cidades mortas, derruídas.* (Da Cunha 1984: 33)

In passages like this, Da Cunha shows that he understood the existence of causal links between human socio-cultural practices and the way the physical environment manifests itself: the victims produced by natural disaster are far from being just "innocent", in the sense that human beings themselves contributed to the destruction of some landscapes. To qualify the way Da Cunha conceives the desertification of the *sertão*, and if we pursue borrowing the terminology of Rigby, the word "catastrophe" or "ecocatastrophe" would be more appropriate than "natural disaster" – even if in everyday contemporary language their meanings are similar. Indeed the etymology of "disaster", as we have seen, alludes to something inescapable and preordained. The word "catastrophe", for its part, is made up of the two Greek words *kata*, "down", and *strophe*, "turn": it signifies a "sudden turn or overturning" which has nothing predetermined in itself and does not necessarily lead to the end of something, but rather brings about a change of direction and practices (Rigby 2015: 17). This implies a human understanding of the origins of what happened and a human agency for building new paths.

Whatever the case may be, a whole literature called “regionalist literature” developed in the 1930s in the wake of these works, depicting the *sertão* as a universe of natural and human calamity. This literature is characterized by protagonists who, as if in mimicry of the hostile and arid landscape that surrounds them, appear hostile to each other, arid in their emotions, thoughts, words. The most well-known example is certainly the novel *Vidas Secas* (1938) [*Barren Lives*] by Graciliano Ramos, which tells the story of a family struggling to survive in the desolate landscape of the *sertão*. The characters are distinguished by a difficulty in speaking and expressing themselves, mostly due to their feeling of the uselessness of any communication in such an environment-inflicted misery. Discouragement and resignation reign supreme; no improvement can be expected from human acts. In these regionalist novels of the 1930s, da Cunha’s allusions to a nature dependent not only on climatic hazards, but on what the human race does with it, went unheeded.

## Guimarães Rosa’s representations of the *sertão*

### The *sertão* in the novel *Grande sertão: Veredas*

At first glance, it seems that João Guimarães Rosa should be part of this regionalist lineage: the sense of place plays an important role in all his work, and this place reduces itself, or rather enlarges itself, to the dimensions of a whole landscape called *sertão*. If this word does not appear straightaway in the titles of Guimarães Rosa’s numerous stories, it is, significantly, retained for the title of his main work – *Grande sertão: Veredas* (1956). The only novel ever written by Guimarães Rosa, it is presented in the form of an immense monologue of almost 1000 pages (uninterrupted by chapters), for the benefit of an intellectual of the city by an older landowner named Riobaldo and meant to be the account of his turbulent youth as a *jagunço*<sup>4</sup>. This book has been translated into English as *The Devil to Pay in the Backlands* – a quite loosely translated title, since while the original puts forwards typical Brazilian landscapes, like *sertão* and *veredas*, the English one neutralizes its power to evoke Brazil by using the more generic word “backlands”; besides, by introducing the “devil” in the title, the focus shifts from landscape to the demonic forces supposed to have played an important role in Riobaldo’s life.

Reading Guimarães Rosa’s novel with a “horizon of expectations” determined by the imaginative world built by the regionalist writers around the *sertão*, the reader must nevertheless quickly realize that the Rosanian landscape is not the same as in the

4 A *jagunço* is a bandit, an armed-hand hired by rich and influential people (mainly *fazendeiros*) in the backlands of Brazil, regions (still today) badly controlled by the government; his task consists, by means of unscrupulous acts like wars and murders, in eliminating all the rivals and possible opponents of their silent partner (both other *jagunços* or isolated persons) to impose his will and arbitrary power.

writings of these regionalists: his *sertão* is not that of the northeast region of Brazil, but the landscape of the Minas Gerais – which is an arid landscape too, but much more diversified than the “pure” *sertão*. As Guimarães Rosa himself explained to Edoardo Bizzarri, the Italian translator of his *Grande Sertão: Veredas*, the Minas Gerais is essentially made up of infertile and sandy *chapadas* (a kind of plateau) where only scrub grows – but between these *chapadas* there are *veredas*, or depressions of clay soil where all the water of these landscapes is concentrated and which, by extension, are green, fertile and animal-populated places. In common language, the paths and streams that run in labyrinthine networks in these oases are also called *veredas* (Guimarães Rosa 2003: 40-41). This diversified landscape allows Guimarães Rosa, unlike other writers of the *sertão*, to reuse all the literary commonplaces on the paradisiacal character of Brazilian nature, be it in the form of praise of its magnificence and exceptionality or in the enumerations of its extreme biodiversity. Hence, nature is said to be “a real delight” : “clear streams, springs, shade and sun” and “you don’t see them like that anywhere else” (G. R. 1963: 21); lists of plants and animals follow one another – prompting the translator of the novel into French to say that all these exotic terms “belong to the regional or perhaps imaginary fauna recorded by G. R. in his notebooks – not listed in the dictionary” (G. R. 1991: 57). What distinguishes these representations from the usual *hypotyposes* of Brazilian literature, however, is the extreme sensitivity and the loving sweetness that emerge from them, and which also introduces a completely unexpected contrast with the violence and cruelty of the daily world of the *jagunços*. Riobaldo, who, like all the other *jagunços* (although, as a “literate” *jagunço*, to a more refined degree), thinks mainly of hunting, hating and killing, is surprised to feel himself vibrating with tenderness and understanding with nature when he is in the company of Reinaldo-Diadorim, a *jagunço* towards whom he has ambivalent sexual impulses. He is literally dazzled by the beauty of the world, which he had never noticed before Reinaldo-Diadorim showed it to him:

Until that time, I had never heard of anyone stopping to admire birds just for the pleasure of it, watching their comings and goings, their flight and alighting. That called for picking up a shotgun and taking aim. But Reinaldo liked to. ‘It’s really beautiful’, he taught me. On the opposite side there was a meadow and lagoons. Back and forth the flocks of ducks flew. ‘Just look at them!’ I looked, and grew calmer. (G. R. 1963: 121)

*Até aquela ocasião, eu nunca tinha ouvido dizer de se parar apreciando, por prazer de enfeite, a vida mera deles pássaros, em seu começar e descomeçar dos vôos e pouso. Aquilo era para se pegar a espingarda e caçar. Mas o Reinaldo gostava: – ‘É formoso próprio...’ – ele me ensinou. Do outro lado, tinha vargem e lagoas. P’ra e p’ra, os bandos de patos se cruzavam. – ‘Vigia como são esses...’ Eu olhava e me sossegava mais. (G.R. 2001a: 195-196)*

Riobaldo learns to see, and thus the animals, trees and flowers that surround him pass from the status of objects of his consumption (eating animals and fruits) or indifferent natural objects, to that of subjects-agents likely to interact with him and impact his mood and life in a positive way.

If, concretely, Guimarães Rosa locates his geographical *sertão* in a slightly different place than the regionalists did, and benefits from the leisure to intercalate within his story, without a blatant disjunction with reality, scenes of paradisiac nature, the fact remains that his *sertão* is also, for the main part, a hellish world governed by the dryness of climate and people, as well as by outlaws, “where the strong and the shrewd call the tune” (G. R. 1963: 13). There is in the novel a landscape of disaster that coincides perfectly with the *sertão* of the regionalists, and even exceeds it in silence, heat and doom: in the one called the “Sussuarão desert” [*Liso do Suçuarão*]: “There we were in that appalling thing: a weird, Godforsaken waste, shifting under foot. It was a different world, crazy, an ocean of sand” (G. R. 1963: 38). In spite of its terrible reputation, according to which nobody has ever returned from it, the intrepid *jagunços* agree to follow their chief in the hope of reaching their enemies more quickly. “What nobody had ever done before, we felt ourselves able to do” (G. R. 1963: 36). The pages dedicated to their expedition reflect a world of catastrophe at all levels: that of the action (languid characters having lost the ability to speak and to move; a frozen and colorless landscape), which is mimicked by the style (short, dry and breathless sentences) and reinforced by a vocabulary of negation, lack and emptiness: “Not the least sign of shade. No water. No grass [...]. And we were lost” (G. R. 1963: 41). The challenge launched by this ordeal proves too great, and the weakened and defeated *jagunços* return to less harsh landscapes.

Nevertheless, it is not on this image of an inexorable landscape that the Sussuarão desert has the last word: towards the end of the novel, Riobaldo, now leader of his group of *jagunços*, takes the risk of a new attempt to cross the plateau – without preparation of any kind, but by examining it attentively and with the purpose in each step to identify all signs of plant and animal life. The experience of this dreadful world is therefore quite different from that of the first, failed crossing; as if by magic, the desert comes to life and reveals little by little its secrets. “I heard the hum of bees all the time. The presence of spiders, ants and the wild bees proved there were flowers, too” (G. R. 1963: 412-413), and indeed, if closely looked at,

The plants were not just rough grass, or the fearful monk’s-head cactus [...]. Then came the blue-flowered treebine and the yellow sertaneja-assim and maria-zipe, dripping dew, and *sinházinha* whose delicate flowers are so laden with dew [...]. And herbage. And berry-covered *bumelias*. (G. R. 1963: 413)

*Mesmo, não era só capim áspero, ou planta peluda como um gambá morto, o cabeça-de-frade pintarroxa, um mandacaru que assustava [...]. Depois a tinta-dos-gentios de flor belazul, que é o anil-trepador, e até essas sertaneja-assim e a maria-zipe, amarelas, pespingue de orvalhosas, e a sinhazinha, muito melindrosa flor, que também guarda muito orvalho [...]. E a quixabeira que dava quixabas. (G.R. 2001a: 729)*

They even find a pocket of drinking water, so that they “did not suffer too much from thirst” (G. R. 1963: 413). They do not suffer from hunger either, since they meet wild cattle. “It was an ugly world, exaggerated in all its features”, but this bareness “contains everything” (G. R. 1963: 412). Were they “upheld by the strong arms of angels” or helped by the demon, as Riobaldo likes to believe at times? Whatever the case may be, the gap between the two journeys over the same landscape is striking: the immobile and implacable backdrop of the first crossing, which tightly conditions and then expels by its harshness all human beings from its territory, becomes in the second description a place that, while still terrible, can nevertheless offer the means for survival. Under the willpower of careful human gazes which seek to understand and absorb, a dynamic interplay has been created between human beings and the *sertão*: the frozen landscape of the ecocatastrophe is brought to life and reveals unsuspected riches.

### **The *sertão* in the stories of the collections *Corpo de Baile* and *Sagarana***

The narrative “*O Recado do Morro*” [“Message from the Hills”], a novella initially published in the collection of stories *Corpo de Baile* (1956), retraces the journey made through the *sertão* by a small group of men: Pedro and Ivo, locals, serve as guides to a German naturalist, a friar, and a rich landowner (*fazendeiro*). This journey, carried out by people of different origins, vocations and cultures, is also a journey through diverse types of knowledge and varying degrees of apprehension of the *sertão*. More specifically, there is a clash between academic knowledge, epitomized by the German naturalist (who always considers nature from an objective and external point of view), and the popular and practical knowledge of nature, embodied by the guide Pedro Orósio (who knows nature only by his immersion in it). Thus, if like his clients Pedro Orósio can see the beauty of the *sertão*, as to

other things that Mr. Alquiste, the friar and Mr. Jujuca do Açude referred to – he couldn’t understand them, without any explanation they remained out of reach for him; this was the case with their comments that everything there was a Lundianian or Lundlandia <sup>5</sup>,

5 This is a reference to the famous Danish paleontologist and botanist Peter Lund (1801-1880), who discovered and explored several caves in the regions of Brazil crossed by the group in our story – an allusion, of course, that an uneducated person like Pedro could not understand.



these kinds of names. No doubt that educated people had access to secrets; but these secrets were of no use for a farmer like him, who had only his health and sweat for his work, and God's protection in everything. A field worker, leaning over the earth from sunrise to sunset, and pulling all the strength out of his body, how should he benefit by continuously thinking? And even to understand what lay next to him, he only had the power to understand them according to the necessities of life – by hate or by love. More he couldn't do.<sup>6</sup>

*Mas, outras coisas, que seo Alquiste e o frade, e seo Jujuca do Açude referiam, isso ficava por ele desentendido, fechado sem explicação nenhuma; assim, que tudo ali era uma Lundiana ou Lunlândia, desses nomes. De certo, segredos ganhavam, as pessoas estudadas; não eram para o uso de um lavrador como ele, só com sua saúde para trabalhar e suar, e a proteção de Deus em tudo. Um enxadeiro, sol a sol debruçado para a terra do chão, de orvalho a sereno, e puxando toda força de seu corpo, como é que há de saber pensar continuado? E, mesmo para entender ao vivo as coisas de perto, ele só tinha poder quando na mão da precisão, ou esquentado – por ódio ou por amor. Mais não conseguia. (G.R. 2001b: 28)*

On the other hand, Pedro Orósio, also referred to as Pedrão Chãbergo or Pê-Boi, is the one who knows the region best and is able to interpret the signs of the earth; that is what his different names and nicknames signify in different languages: Pedro comes from *pedra*, “stone” in Portuguese; Orósio from the Greek *oros* (ὄρος), “mountain”; Chãobergo from the contraction of *chão*, the Portuguese word for “soil”, and *Berg*, the German word for “mountain”; and Pê-Boi is a combination of *pé*, “foot”, and *boi*, “ox”, an animal that, because of its strength, weight and resistance, is often associated with the ground<sup>7</sup>. Pedro is a man of the soil and the stone produced by the *sertão* landscape, he is an element of this landscape constantly in dialogue with the other elements, and that is why he can reverse the famous law of the *sertão*, a law of vengeance and of the victory of the strongest. Pedro was indeed doomed to die in an ambush perpetrated by seven individuals and organized by Ivo, jealous of Pedro's success with women – but Pedro gets the protection of the *sertão*. A hill gives out a terrible shout, “Death by betrayal” [*“Morte à traição!”*] (G.R. 2001b: 36), that could not be heard by ordinary people disconnected from the earth, but that was captured by Gorgulho, a poor dumb man with sharp senses. Without understanding the meaning of what was said by the hill, Gorgulho, by repeating the message and passing it on to others, manages to convey it across the *sertão* until it is transformed into a song by the poet Laudelim and deciphered by Pedro – who thus can

6 All translations of Guimarães Rosa's stories are mine.

7 I was inspired here by the analysis of the names of Guimarães Rosa's characters made by Anna Maria Machado in *O Recado do nome* (2003), expounded by Tannús Alves 2013: 26.

escape his terrible fate. As a result, for people who are deeply connected with it, the *sertão* has nothing to do with a *locus terribilis*, but plays the contrary the role of a sentient and sensitive creature sending them messages of protection and helping them to maintain suitable living conditions. As said in “*Estoria de amor*” [“Story of Love”], the *sertão* seen from the outside is scary, but once one immerses oneself in it and finds the key with which to understand it, it is perfectly possible to harmoniously interact with it. “Almost everyone is afraid of the *sertão*; not even knowing what the *sertão* is. Sertanejos are wise and aware men” (G.R. 2001c: 136).

“*O Recado do Morro*” shows that the unwritten law that inexorably rules the *sertão*, which is that of the strong, the violent, and the destructive, can be changed and has to be changed. Catastrophes, ecocatastrophes, as well as human catastrophes, are not part of an irrevocable destiny, they must not occur. This story is a call to cultivate, rather than an ethic of power and physical strength, a sustainable ethos based on the alert listening to the “other-than-human” voices.

“*Cara-de-Bronze*” [“Bronze-Face”], another novella originally published in the book *Corpo de Baile* (1956), appears as a continuation of this idea of elaborating new laws for the *sertão*. A landowner needs a man in whom he can have confidence to carry out a secret mission. To choose the most suitable person among his cowherds, it is not their physical performance that he puts to the test, but the degree of poetic attention they give to nature, their craft to “talk and feel until the husks of the soul softens”. Part of the test was to answer this question: “Is it possible to like something immediately? How is that? How can that be?” The answer that pleases him best is the one given by Grivo, who did not respond with “yes” or “no”, but with a poetic comparison with the magic of nature: “Isn’t it in the lapse of a second that the silk floss tree suddenly dresses in white?” (G.R. 2001b: 103). The silk floss tree (*paineira* in Portuguese) grows fruits which have the form of big eggs that suddenly explode to give way to a mass of fibrous matter which resembles cotton – the metaphor thus suggests that unexpected positive feelings, like unexpected transformations of nature for even more beauty, can crop up without warning.

Grivo leaves for two years. When he comes back, nobody could know what he went to look for, nor what the aim of his expedition was. But what is certain is that he returns enriched with a wealth of knowledge about the *sertão* landscape, a place where “every tree, every plant, changes its name almost at every step” (G.R. 2001b: 108). This expedition serves as a pretext for the establishment of long lists of plants and trees, even if these enumerations are not put in the body of the text itself, but consigned to notes at the very end of the narrative. Guimarães Rosa, as in some passages of *Grande Sertão: Veredas* where we find the same type of lists (see above), seems thereby to pursue the tradition of the 17th century chroniclers eager to reveal the wealth of Brazil: but at the same time, as mentioned for example by José Miguel Wisnik (Wisnik 2016), these enumerations

function as a way to show that the *sertão* is a place where language is created. Gilberto Freyre had already pointed out in *Casa Grande & Senzala* [*The Masters and the Slaves*, 1933] that Brazil has a language in constant elaboration and development, to which new words need to be frequently added because the Portuguese vocabulary is not sufficient to express the complex Brazilian reality. In this context, there is no doubt that Guimarães Rosa actively contributed to this enrichment of the Brazilian language.

Assisted in his difficult peregrinations through the changing landscape of the *sertão* as well as through the moving landscape of new words by Saci, a playful Brazilian mythological figure and friend of nature<sup>8</sup> (G.R. 2001b: 111), Grivo learns to pay full attention to the diversity of things and to their living sources rather than to their inert and passive appearance. Had not his master expressed the wish, already before his departure, that the “who” (and not the “what”) of things had to be found by him? (G.R. 2001b: 102)

Without depicting the *sertão* as a grandiose landscape (be it in its beauty or sublimity as in Romanticism, or in its nakedness and misery as in the regionalist movement), Guimarães Rosa, through his character Grivo, produces in this story the masterstroke of presenting this landscape as a genuine miracle thanks to its unexpected capacity for transformation, its refined diversity and its encouragement to constantly seek new words.

If some Rosanian stories present themselves as pure hymns to the biodiversity of the *sertão* and play the role of an invitation to be aware of it, others clearly express the deep concern that this biodiversity may well disappear, and that nature may become mute and withdraw from any fruitful collaboration with human beings. Such is the case in “*Estória de Amor*” [“Story of love”], also first published in the collection *Corpo de Baile*. In this story, the source of life for many peoples, namely the stream that supplies water to the Samarra farm run by old Manuelzão in the middle of the *sertão*, stops flowing one day for no apparent reason:

When least expected, the brook stopped. It happened in the middle of a night going towards dawn, and everyone was asleep. But everybody felt, suddenly, in his heart, the snap of the silence that it made, the sharp lack of the sound, of the little noise. They woke up, spoke to each other. Even the children. Even the dogs barked. Then everyone got up, tried to find the backyard, went out with a light to see what was not there [...]. The sobbing brook had dried up with no remainder, and perhaps forever.

8 Sací is one of the more popular characters of Brazilian folklore. He is probably a derivation of a figure belonging to the Tupi-Guarani mythology (indigenous mythology), a magical one-legged child associated with nature. With the arrival of African slaves, he turned black and used to smoke a pipe. He likes to play tricks on people, especially those who are disrespectful of nature.

*Quando menos esperassem, o riachinho cessou. Foi no meio duma noite, indo para a madrugada, todos estavam dormindo. Mas cada um sentiu, de repente, no coração, o estalo do silenciosinho que ele fez, a pontuda falta da toada, do barulhinho. Acordaram, se falaram. Até as crianças. Até os cachorros latiram. Aí, todos se levantaram, caçaram o quintal, saíram com luz, para espiar o que não havia. [...] O riacho soluço se estancara, sem resto, e talvez para sempre. (G.R. 2001c: 113)*

This disappearance, mentioned at the beginning of the story as having happened three years previously, is a real enigma for the inhabitants of the farm, who now have to go very far to get their water supply. Whose mistake had it been? Where was the little brook now? Although these questions punctuate the text, they are never answered. The reader, as she becomes familiar with Manuelzão's biography and thoughts, cannot help but interpret the event as a warning signal from nature that has to be taken seriously. We learn that four years earlier Federico Freyre, a rich *fazendeiro* characterized as the incarnation of the “power of modern money” (G.R. 2001c: 155), had fallen in love with this remote corner of the world called Samara, and had acquired thousands of acres there. He then hired Manuelzão to cultivate this wasteland, to tame cattle, and to run the new farm, whose location was chosen, for obvious convenience, next to the creek. And it transpires that just one year after the farm was established the creek dried up.

The clearest clue in favor of interpreting the disappearance of the creek as a response to the mercantilization of nature is given in the parable of the “*Boi bonito*” [“Beautiful Ox”] narrated by old Camilo. In this story within a story, a landowner is in despair because he does not succeed in taming one of his oxen. He promises to give his beautiful daughter in marriage to the man who will manage to do so. One of the cowhands sets out in search of the ox, and he pursues him until he arrives in an enchanting landscape:

In a field of many waters. The *buritis* gave the sense of altitude, with their brooms of flowers. Only the grass of the *vereda*, which was crazy about being green – green, green, greenish. Hidden underneath, in these greens, a little stream explained itself: with the frenetic water – “I am a brook that never runs dry...” – it really didn't dry up. Everything resided in that little brook. That place didn't split in several parts. And this was the house of the Ox. The Ox, who came jogtrotting.

*Num campo de muitas águas. Os buritis faziam alteza, com suas vassouras de flores. Só um capim de vereda, que doitava de ser verde – verde, verde, verdeal. Sob oculto, nesses verdes, um riachinho se explicava: com a água ciririca – ‘Sou riacho que nunca seca...’ – de verdade, não secava. Aquele riachinho residia tudo. Lugar aquele não tinha pedacinhos. A lá era a casa do Boi. O Boi, que vinha choutando. (G.R. 2001c: 181)*

Faced with this mythical and harmonious landscape untouched by man, the cowhand understands that it would be a mistake to tame this Ox, and he asks the landowner to let this animal run free. What is suggested here is that otherwise this stream could well be at risk of drying up, as the stream that provided water for the Samarra farm.

In this story again, the protagonists are warned by voices usually unheard (voice of nature, voice of poor or marginalized people), which use the cracks opened by the ecocatastrophe to question the cultural narrative of modernity and its hostile attitude towards the natural world: human well-being is linked to that of other kingdoms, and the keys for a human-friendly collaboration with nature lie in the hands of human beings themselves.

Finally, some stories by Guimarães Rosa go even further and show not only a nature that refuses to collaborate with the new modern or colonial requirements, but a nature that is vengeful and destructive: “*Sarapalha*” for example, one of the stories gathered in the collection *Sagarana* (1946), takes place in an area that had been cleared many years earlier for the construction of a village and the establishment of rice plantations. In this venue, where the land has been violated and where native vegetation has been replaced by a monoculture, malaria soon arrives and settles in, decimating and driving out most of the population. “The land was no longer worth anything” (G.R. 1982: 118).

What is remarkable, however, is that the village comes back to life in another form: nature and the *sertão* take back their rights, as countless species of flowers and animals invade the deserted village. Nature had previously been mastered and organized, but as soon as the constraints disappear, it reinvents new possibilities of life and new relationships of interdependence. What is even more remarkable is that the few people left in the village manage to integrate perfectly into this new environment born in the ruins. “A better life than ours” does not exist (G.R. 1982: 122). Stricken by malaria, one of the characters experiences the greatest harmony with his environment during his crises, when nature adorns itself with its most beautiful colors and manifests, as if in solidarity, the same symptoms as his (cf. “shuddering”, “quivering”, “twitches”, “tremble”, “shaking”, “convulsions”):

The flowers of the mastic tree are shuddering yellow. There is a quivering in the pink stems of the frog grass. The *Heliotropium indicum* twitches its long leaves, as long as mango tree leaves. The branches of the broom tremble, shaking their little orange stars. And the *Luehea divaricata* drops cracked fruit, going into convulsions. – But my God, how beautiful this is! What a beautiful place to lie down on the ground and perish!

*Estremecem, amarelas, as flores da aroeira. Há um frêmito nos caules rosados da erva-de-sapo. A erva-de-anum crisper as folhas, longas, como folhas de mangueira. Trepidam, sacudindo as suas estrelinhas alaranjadas, os ramos da vassourinha. A pitangueira se abala, do jarrete à grimpa.*

*E o açoito-cavalos derruba frutinhas fendilhadas, entrando em convulsões. – Mas meu Deus, como isto é bonito! Que lugar bonito p’r’a gente deitar na chão e se acabar!* (G.R. 1982: 137-138)

The ecocatastrophe caused by monocultures and malaria has obviously given rise to transformative practices and enabled the emergence of new ways of being and dwelling for the few people not (yet) decimated: they completely immersed themselves physically and psychologically in their environment, and the distinction between the animate and the inanimate no longer applies.

## **Conclusion: The sertão as a “planetary garden”**

If the scientific etymology of the *sertão* seems to refer to the word “desert” (the first syllable would have disappeared, while the augmentative *-ão* would have been added), our reading allows us to interpret the word according to a second etymology. No longer as a *sertão* derived from *desertão* (that is, “great desert”), but a *sertão* resulting from the contraction of the verb *ser* (to be) and *tão* (so, so much)<sup>9</sup>. The *sertão* is the place where there are “so many things”, the *sertão* is the place of the play and interplay of the multiple, of the connection, disconnection, and networking of all *veredas*, the *sertão* is a metaphor for the whole world and the whole biodiversity of the world. We can now understand why the narrator of *Grande sertão: Veredas* defines the *sertão* as having no borders and being “everywhere” (G. R. 1963: 4), and ends his novel with the word “passage” [*travessia*] (G.R. 2001a: 872) followed by the mathematical sign for infinity  $\infty$  (which, strangely enough, has been forgotten or omitted in the English translation of that text).

From the ecocritical point of view, the greatest merit of Guimarães Rosa’s texts is to show that the *sertão* is not a given landscape in which man is irreversibly condemned to misery, but a landscape subject to transformation depending on the way it is looked at, listened to and generally handled. If humans are unable to perceive its potential richness and diversity, if they refuse to see beyond its apparent harshness and violence – to which they have themselves contributed – and just aim to control and exploit it with the means of new technologies, the *sertão* will gradually turn completely mute and sterile. If, on the contrary, careful attention is paid to its voices, the *sertão* can then become a point of departure for an immense “planetary garden”<sup>10</sup> functioning on the basis of a “natural contract”<sup>11</sup>, that is, a contract taking into account the rights and interests of

9 Cf. Mônica Meyer, in her book *Ser-tão natureza: a natureza em Guimarães Rosa*, Belo Horizonte (MG): Editora UFMG, 2008, had already decomposed the *sertão* in two words. Nevertheless, her *ser-tão* does not mean exactly the same as mine. For her, the more the physical space of the *sertão* is filled with spiritual life and transcendence, the more it becomes *ser-tão*.

10 For this expression, see G. Clément 2000.

11 In the sense given by M. Serres 2020.

other ontologies than the human one. As in his story *Campo Geral* [“General Field”], where the main protagonist Miguilim, a visually impaired little boy, cannot be aware of the beauty of the surrounding landscape until he gets glasses (G.R. 2001c: 105-106), Guimarães Rosa invites us to look at the *sertão*, and by extension at the world, with a reenchanting gaze able to recognize and admire its richness – be it real, hidden or potential. Where possible, this new gaze will be oriented toward the spirit of “dancing with disaster” (Rigby) and thereby prevent ecocatastrophes; and where the “turning point” has already taken place and damage incurred, it will help to identify such crises and to reflect and fight for the creation and use of more sustainable practices.

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