

Guimarães Rosa's poetics and the sertão

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***Abstract:** Guimarães Rosa and James Joyce are very frequently compared due to the experimental nature of their work. This paper argues, however, that there are significant differences in their experimentalism and that Rosa engages in a long-standing tradition in Brazilian literature that explores and at the same time challenges the potentialities of regional culture. His work configures a dialectical interplay between erudite and popular sources, oral and written language, modern and traditional forms. The sertão – the backlands – as envisaged by him is shaped as a landscape which is both imaginary and real, concrete and symbolic, geographical and cultural.*

Writers are not commonly their own best critics, but it may not be amiss to lend an ear to Guimarães Rosa's comment when he refuses comparison with James Joyce. "People are not correct when they compare me with Joyce", he once said, "he was a cerebral man, not an alchemist". The opposition between intellect and miraculous transmutation implied in this statement can be quickly counterbalanced by what is really thought to put the two writers on a similar standing. Joyce's elaborate and revolutionary work on words, as we all know, was an essential element in his creative process and one could immediately refute Rosa and insist on the comparison resorting to the counter-argument of both writers' experimentalism, which would have no other effect than take us all back to where we started. The difficulty of Joyce's writing, the unreadability of his texts and the challenges they pose to literary criticism are in fact common features he shares with his Brazilian counterpart. Both Joyce and Rosa prevent any passive consumption of their work and place considerable demands on the act of reading and interpretation. But my argument is that Rosa's experiments with language might indeed eventually prove to be completely different from those generally associated with the work of the author of *Ulysses*. Let me clarify, however, that this article is intended as a discussion of the practices of writing Rosa engaged with and of his poetics rather than of Joyce, his work or a comparison between the two. It is, therefore, the nature of Rosa's experiments with language and form that is my main focus here.

If it is true, according to Colin MacCabe, that Joyce declared war on the English language and that he was "concerned not with representing experience through language

but with experiencing language through a destruction of representation”¹, Rosa, on the other hand, declared that his intention was to go back to the origins of language. In an interview given to Gunther Lorenz in January 1965, one of the rare occasions on which Rosa spoke at length about his work, he claimed to be a reactionary of the language (“um reacionário da língua”), that is, somebody who tried to restore the original meaning of words, by cleansing them of the impurities of daily use (“impurezas da linguagem cotidiana”) and by using each one of them as if it had just been born².

When he died, in November 1967, João Guimarães Rosa had long been acknowledged as one of Brazil’s most prominent literary figures. His reputation had been built throughout twenty years of activity, during which he had published four collections of stories and one novel. Two other collections of short stories would be published posthumously³. A doctor who gave up medicine to become a diplomat, Rosa actually started his career as a writer in 1946 with *Sagarana*, immediately acclaimed as one of the most important works of fiction to appear in Brazil in years. Antonio Cândido was one of the first to point out the density and vigour of his linguistic achievements, on which, according to the Brazilian critic, Rosa constructed a very personal mode of regionalism. The amalgam of local and universal elements, concrete landscape and magical space would become one of the writer’s most striking characteristics, which made the same Antonio Cândido say a few years later about *Grande Sertão: Veredas*:

A experiência documentária de Guimarães Rosa, a observação da vida sertaneja, a paixão pela coisa e o nome da coisa, a capacidade de entrar na psicologia do rústico, – tudo se transformou em significado universal graças à invenção, que subtrai o livro à matriz regional, para fazê-lo exprimir os grandes lugares comuns, sem os quais a arte não sobrevive: dor, júbilo, amor, morte, – para cuja órbita nos arrasta a cada instante, mostrando que o pitoresco é acessório e na verdade o Sertão é o Mundo.⁴

This documentary aspect of Rosa’s work, his observation of life in the interior of Brazil, the interest in language and in naming that Cândido refers to can be witnessed in Rosa’s Archive, kept at present at the Instituto de Estudos Brasileiros (USP), with the materials the writer collected throughout his life: his library, with around 3.500 volumes, much of his correspondence, personal documents, originals, etc. Of special importance to those concerned with Rosa’s creative process are the thirty-odd folders and the twenty-odd notebooks in which he carefully made notes about the enormous range of subjects that caught his attention. Also important are the seemingly endless lists of words, expressions, names and toponyms that he gathered over the years. They cover a wide variety of topics and show the writer at work, patiently finding his way through language, expanding his vocabulary, changing standard forms, inventing new ones, as if language were some plastic substance that he could mould at his will.⁵

But it was not only words in isolation which Rosa was concerned about. His folders also contain countless registers of popular quatrains, songs, romances and stories that he had read or heard. In fact, a vast collection of oral literature, consisting of whole or fragmentary texts, which, like a *bricoleur*, Rosa integrated in the narrative fabric of his work. His special interest in the *romanceiro*⁶ is demonstrated by the several versions of romances which we find in his Archives. His use of this material varied from the simple inclusion of a fragment, as he did with the traditional *Romance da Donzela Guerreira*⁷ in one of the stories of *Corpo de Baile*, to the borrowing and full development of this same theme in *Grande Sertão: Veredas* [*The Devil to pay in the Backlands*]. Romances were also the source he drew from to produce his own versions of these traditional stories. *Histórias de bois* were among his favourite, not only because of his proverbial fondness of horses and cows but certainly because they provided him with the sort of material he could work on. He seemed to be particularly interested in the processes of composition used by folksingers and story-tellers. Drawing from some of the popular, oral romances he had collected, like *Vaca do Burel*, *Boi Pintadinho*, *Boi Liso*, *Rabicho da Geralda*, *Boi Espaço*, and the *Romanço do Boi Bonito*, he created his own version of the *Décima do Boi e do Cavalo*, included in *Corpo de Baile*. In the manner of the ancient rhapsodes, he fused existing materials, combining motifs and themes, rearranging and juxtaposing elements taken from tradition.

We know that in oral culture transmission depends on formal devices that are intended to help the singer's memory. Thus, he draws from a common repertoire of rhymes, poetic formulas, recurring motifs and rules of combination that can be permanently rearranged to produce a new song or a new story. The interplay between improvisation and repetition is central to this process and seems to define the way traditional oral culture operates. So, in a way, more than the texts themselves, Rosa used these principles of composition to create his own versions of "popular" poetry, like the *quadras* (quatrains usually rhyming ABAB) which are frequent in his texts. Other popular forms, like proverbs, can similarly go through different degrees of re-elaboration and intervention, in order to undo the reader's expectations or to make a critical comment on their content.

But perhaps the most handy example of Rosa's ability to draw from and combine different sources is embodied in the very word *Sagarana*, where a neologism is created by the juxtaposition of a word of Germanic origin (*saga*) to a Tupi suffix *rana* meaning in the manner of, similar to. By blending the oral and the written, local and foreign elements, erudite and popular sources, Rosa functions as "an agent of contact between two cultures", in the words of the Uruguayan critic Ángel Rama.

The popular element is never accessory in Rosa's text. It is never an embellishment. It is never included because it is picturesque, or helps lend a local touch to his narrative. Stories, songs, fragments of romances or quatrains play an essential role in so far as they can shed light on a character's predicament or make a comment on the action. Sometimes they function as enigmas that demand elucidation. Whichever be

the case, they always take on a symbolic significance. The same symbolic significance which Rosa attributes to the *sertão*⁸, this concrete but also legendary space which he portrays in his fiction. The *sertão* was an integral part of Guimarães Rosa's early life. But it was most of all a vivid presence in his memory and imagination. Rosa's formative years as a writer began in his childhood. He grew up listening to stories of herdsmen and *jagunços*⁹, told him by Juca Bananeira, a black worker employed by his father.

But it was much later, as a practising doctor in the interior of Minas Gerais, that Rosa came into even closer contact with the world he had heard of since he was a boy. As he rode his horse to visit his patients, he learned about the region he was going to depict in his works and went on listening to stories, told him by its inhabitants. It was to this world that he gave literary shape in *Sagarana*: its people, customs, its landscape, animals, vegetation. After becoming a diplomat, he returned to Minas Gerais once again in May 1952, this time to drive cattle with a group of herdsmen. The journey was recorded in two journals that, albeit fragmentary, enable us to retrace his itinerary, roughly the same paths his *jagunços* would tread in *Grande Sertão: Veredas*. Riding his horse with a notepad and a pencil in his hands, for ten days Rosa took notes. At this point, the ethnographer, the linguist, the anthropologist comes in full view. Moreover, the journals allow us to witness the process of creation of his stories. Words, phrases, songs, names of trees, different kinds of vegetation, different types of cattle, scraps of conversation – everything seemed to draw his attention. His unquenchable curiosity and his keen interest in the region and in the herdsmen and their way of living can be seen in his careful register of what he saw and heard. From these notes, images of the *sertão* start taking shape amidst comments, observations, songs and stories. The notes draw a landscape made of minutiae: the description of a cow, of a bird, a plant, the colour of the sky. In everything, an eye for details. Very often, apparently objective descriptions are permeated by the writer's own very personal touch and outlook.

From these details, Guimarães Rosa draws his cartography of the region. There are myriads of flashes showing the attentive observer but also revealing the poet who, in the very act of documenting, often transcends the objective note and offers his own particular way of mapping out the *sertão*. The notes evidence the writer's adherence to the world surrounding him, captured through his senses. Reality is perceived by eye and ear. This sensorial experience of reality is a common feature in the stories of *Corpo de Baile*. Olquiste, one of the characters of *Recado do Morro*, can be seen as a kind of alter ego of the writer, taking notes in his pad, asking questions and drawing. On horseback, crossing the *sertão*, Olquiste reminds us of Rosa. Throughout the journey, the traveller, carrying his camera and his binoculars, takes notes of the geographical and geological features of the region, with its lakes, caves and hills. The details of flora and fauna do not escape his foreign eyes either.

In *Buriti*, hearing is the sense through which one of the characters apprehends reality. The sleepless Chefe Zequiél looks into the night only to find out that “No silêncio nunca há silêncio” (“In silence there never is silence”). The voices and images of the

sertão, suggested in the journals, make themselves heard and seen in his works. Stifled by what Rosa calls “a megera cartesiana” (the Cartesian shrew), the voice of nature speaks to the poets and outcasts who people his stories. Some of the characters can listen to it; others have to learn, as is the case with the narrator and protagonist of *São Marcos*, one of the stories in *Sagarana*. Blinded by an old wizard’s verbal spell, he is forced to listen to the voice of nature to be able to find his way out of the woods. In *Cara-de-Bronze*, the main character leaves on a journey in quest of the “quem das coisas”, “cumprindo lei de ver, ouvir e sentir”¹⁰; in *Recado do Morro*, a message sent by nature travels through the *sertão*, carried by lunatics, children and outlaws until it becomes a song which contains within itself a revelation; in *Uma Estória de Amor*, the stories told by two old outcasts lend meaning to the main character’s dry and lonely life.

Like in *Sagarana* and *Corpo de Baile*, Rosa’s stories thematise the power of poetry to restore meaning in a world which has lost its transparency and has become a forest of unintelligible symbols. Words, in isolation or in songs and narratives, are seen as a poetic force which can overcome wear and trivialisation, drawing man and nature closer.

Rosa saw the writer as someone who should invest himself with the power to invent and to name. In his poetics, signifier and signified belong to each other (“o som e sentido de uma palavra pertencem um ao outro”). So, it was the writer’s task to work towards the re-motivation of language, in an attempt to restore man’s relation with nature. To re-motivate prose and re-work forms he would make lavish use of poetic techniques and devices: alliteration, assonance, internal rhyme, syntactic reversals, ellipses, onomatopoeias, etc. “O Burrinho Pedrês”, one of the stories in *Sagarana*, shows some of these devices in action: the sound of hooves and the slow rhythm of the cattle being driven in the *sertão* are produced by alliteration, internal rhyme and metrified prose. The use of a sequence of sixteen verses of five beats aims at reproducing the slow movement of the cattle, with their flanks swaying, their backs rising and falling, the noise of bellows, the clash of horns.

The *sertão* has been a theme in Brazilian literature practically since its beginnings. In fiction, it has been represented as a desert, cattle-raising hinterland region, which is a reserve of ancestral traditions and repository of ancient language and customs. For Guimarães Rosa, the *sertão* was certainly much more than a geographical or sociological concept. It was a cultural notion but, more than anything else, it was “sheer literature”, as he himself used to say. Rosa contributed, with his works, to constituting the *sertão* as a literary landscape, much in the same way other Brazilian writers like José de Alencar, Euclides da Cunha and Graciliano Ramos had done before him. For him, the *sertão* was not the slow-changing face of the country but a matrix space, where the re-enchantment of the world was still possible. The *sertão* defies precise definition and Rosa’s work stresses time and again its elusive but all-encompassing nature. His probing of this region, its habits and inhabitants takes on an epic dimension in what is considered to be his masterpiece.

Grande Sertão: Veredas is the self-searching narrative of the now retired Riobaldo, who looks back on his early life, his becoming a *jagunço* and his rise to the position of chief of his band. More importantly, it is his attempt to order and make sense out of his past experience, in his quest for the meaning of his existence. In almost 500 pages of dense and convoluted prose, he enquires about the nature of good and evil, about issues of life and death and tries to come to grips with two absolutely central questions which keep obsessively recurring throughout his account: the existence or nonexistence of the devil and the nature of his relationship with Diadorim, a mysterious *jagunço* who turns out to be a young woman fighting among cruel and fierce men.

Opening with a dash, his narrative is one uninterrupted flow of speech, punctuated with questions posed to an interlocutor whose presence is hinted at but whose voice is never heard. Riobaldo addresses him, questions him and echoes his comments but his listener never says a word. This long monologue, in fact a dialogue in which one of the parts is missing, is intended as an account of his past adventures and ramblings as a *jagunço*, given to this educated man who came from the city to hear him and take notes.

Naturally, one of the problems Riobaldo will have to face is how to order his narrative of events in a life that seems to have been lived under the sign of disorder. Trying to make sense of everything he has gone through and frequently referring to the difficulty of narrating, he ends up by producing a very entangled account, which moves backwards and forwards, reproducing at the level of discourse his ramblings through the *sertão*. The first fifty or sixty pages of the novel reflect this difficulty and are the most obvious example of the problems facing both narrator and reader. Riobaldo, seeming to grope for a beginning, disregards chronology and, in a process of association of ideas, brings up the issues which worry him. False starts, disrupted chronology, fragments of past events, a string of stories which seem to be trying to illustrate something, a maze of motifs, a profusion of names and places, the pervasive figure of the devil – these are some of the problems the reader is confronted with in this convoluted, confusing narrative which begins *in medias res*. Only later will he resume a fairly chronological order. But even when he does, he often goes back, corrects himself, explains, questions and, at the same time, keeps on drawing his interlocutor's – an obvious vicarious representation of the reader – attention to the difficulties involved in the process of narrating. Throughout, the difficulty of narrating is equated with the difficulty and danger of living. For Riobaldo, language fails to give a truthful account of these past events, of reality, of his experience. His awareness is voiced in these two complementary ideas, which echo each other and become a leitmotif and a refrain repeated insistently throughout the text: “Viver é muito perigoso” (living is very dangerous) resounds in “Contar é muito dificultoso” (telling is very difficult).

Riobaldo's concern and his speculations about the existence or nonexistence of the devil permeate the whole of these introductory pages. The account he gives of his life and deeds as a *jagunço* is triggered by one question, which he would like his learned listener to help him clarify: the possibility of making a pact with the devil.

The middle-aged Riobaldo is concerned with solving this enigma, which has disturbed him ever since he quit his life as a *jagunço*. He is particularly interested in finding out whether he did or did not really make a pact with the devil in order to defeat the assassin of one of the main leaders of the band. This doubt has persecuted him all along and he tells his life story in the hope that he will be able to come to a conclusion. As a matter of fact, he expects his listener, who is a man of learning, to help him pacify his tormented conscience, by stating the devil's nonexistence.

The story he has to tell is one of love and battle: of his love for the ambiguous Diadorim and of the war he had to fight to defeat the evil forces of the murderer and to restore order in the *sertão*. It is the story of the hero of unknown origins who joined the band and became in turn Riobaldo Tatarana (fire caterpillar) and Urutu Branco (white rattle-snake); it is the story of his gradual transformation into the leader of the band and into the man who succeeded in crossing the ominous desert – the Liso do Sussuarão –, and in bringing about the fight in which Diadorim kills the treacherous Hermógenes and avenges Joca Ramiro's death.

It was to fight this deadly war and beat the murderous traitor that Riobaldo had resorted to a pact with the devil. The crossing of the infernal Liso had been tried before and had failed. In order to attack the rival band, it had to be tried again. Uncertain about his courage and strength to succeed in defeating the devilish Hermógenes, Riobaldo felt he needed an alliance with dark and evil forces.

His narrative is an investigation into the nature of evil. Searching his conscience, he now tries to understand fear, courage and the drive that makes people act. And this Faustian *jagunço* muses, suffers and repents. By going over all he has been through, he is able to come to the conclusion that the devil, like the *sertão*, is everywhere. It is inside man, objects, and plants. For Riobaldo, the cosmos is ruled by a positive force, represented by God, but it is equally prone to the intervention of a negative, evil force which he identifies as the devil. Because of the perennial struggle between these two principles, living is very dangerous and difficult. It is certainly this same idea that underlies Riobaldo's conception of the *sertão* as both paradisiacal and infernal. It is the luminous, idyllic region of waterfalls, birds, trees and flowers, but is also the threatening, nightmarish stage of violence and conflict, where the war rages between rival bands and between the *jagunços* and the governmental forces.

In *Grande Sertão: Veredas*, “Tudo é e não é.” (Everything is and is not). Ambivalence or what Antonio Cândido has called “reversibility” seems to be its underlying principle. It is in Diadorim, the *Donzela Guerreira*, who is both man and woman, both the *jagunço* Reinaldo and Maria Deodorina, the only daughter of Joca Ramiro. It is also in the *jagunços*, sometimes represented as heroes, sometimes as outlaws. It is in the *sertão*, which, according to one character, “não é malino nem caridoso; ele tira ou dá, agrada ou amarga, conforme o senhor mesmo.” ([the *sertão*] is neither evil nor good; it gives or takes, pleases or embitters, depending on each person);

Presiding over the characters and the landscape is the São Francisco River. As it did with Riobaldo's life, the São Francisco is a line which divides this territory into two parts ("O Rio São Francisco partiu minha vida em duas partes"). The concrete reality and relative order and normality of the right bank, with its identifiable topography, contrasts with the other side of the river. The left bank, with its clearly ominous connotation, is a legendary space, shrouded in mystery; it is a misty place of unclear geographical boundaries, unstable names, peopled by men who seem to have emerged from the depths of time.¹¹

The river, a very physical presence in the novel, takes on a very clear symbolic meaning, as an image of change and fluidity. It embodies what seems to be the meaning Riobaldo has been looking for, in so far as it contains the idea of crossing and of life in flux. On trying to order the facts of his existence, on searching for the hidden significance of his past experience, Riobaldo realises something essential about himself. His revision of the past, therefore, enables him to come to terms with his own life and with himself. Despite the difficulties involved in, and the problematic nature of the account, telling ultimately helps give meaning to lived experience. Through narrative, Riobaldo is reconciled with his past and the man he used to be. His confrontation with himself is what brings about his realisation that life implies risk and change and that accepting this is a means of living to the full. In his reconciliation with the past, he closes his narrative with the one significant word which seems to explain it all: *travessia* (crossing).

This protean text defies the reader and offers a multiplicity of readings. In its very complex structure, *Grande Sertão: Veredas* blends lyric, epic and dramatic elements. Simultaneously narrative of adventures and metaphysical investigation, the novel also retells a turbulent and bloody chapter of Brazilian history, when bands of gunmen infested some regions of the country spreading violence and disorder. *Grande Sertão: Veredas* is an extraordinary example of how Rosa's works transcend regionalism, no matter how imbued they are with regional flavour and atmosphere. It is also an example of what he could do with language. By choosing to let Riobaldo speak in his own voice, he resolved the dichotomy between the language of the erudite narrator and the language of the "sertanejo" (the inhabitant of the *sertão*), a formal problem which had been typical of the work of most of his predecessors. His disruptive syntax, his use of onomatopoeia and alliterative prose were some of the instruments he employed to re-motivate language. Pauses, interjections, ellipses, punctuation were some of the devices he used to create the effect of orality, so characteristic of his work.

If these stylistic devices are used to a large extent in *Grande Sertão: Veredas*, Rosa's experiment with language offers an even more daring instance in *Meu Tio, o Iauaretê*, a short story in *Estas Estórias* which is a reinterpretation of another central myth in Brazilian literature – that of the Indian. Here, besides his usual practice of deforming or creating words, Rosa produces a hybrid language, resulting from a blend of Portuguese and Tupi. The short story thematises the tragedy of the loss of cultural identity of a half-Indian, half-white jaguar hunter. Not knowing exactly who he is, the

narrator and protagonist of this story ends up by identifying himself with the jaguars he used to hunt. The narrative of his metamorphosis into what he believes to be his ancestral totem is dramatised in a one-sided dialogue, punctuated by words and expressions in Tupi – the *nhenhengatu*¹². As the hunter narrates jaguar stories, he speaks jaguar language, which he calls “jaguanhenhén”. His speech is full of onomatopoeias, interjections and Tupi monosyllables and words, as, for example, in “Eh, catu, bom, bonito, porãporanga!”¹³, where the words in Tupi and their “translation” in Portuguese come side by side to make understanding possible. Throughout, as he speaks and drinks “cachaça”¹⁴, his evil intention of killing his listener transpires. In the end, his listener, who had foreseen danger, shoots him. As he dies, the metamorphosis shapes itself as an inarticulate language and becomes a sequence of monosyllables and animal-like sounds:

Ui, ui, mecê é bom, faz isso comigo não, me mata não ... Eu – Macuncozo ...
 Faz isso não, faz não ... Nhenhenhém ... Heéé! ...
 Hé... Aar-rrâ ... Aaâh... Cê me arrhoû... Remuaci... Rêiucàanacê... Araaã...
 Uhm... Ui... Ui... Uh... uh... êêêê... êê...ê...ê...¹⁵

Just as Tupi is used in the text to refer to the jaguar language, the jaguar theme is resolved in the metamorphosis of the hunter into his ancestral totem. Thus, form and meaning mirror and belong to each other. More importantly, language is re-worked not simply for the sake of experiment but rather to voice a cultural loss.

Reading Guimarães Rosa is not an easy task and I have just pointed out some of the aspects of his achievement and mapped out some of the problems involved in reading his works. As for Joyce, I am sure the problems posed by his own use of language and by his daring experiments also demand from the critic strategies of interpretation. If it is true that his works investigate the process of the production of meaning and defy the usual relations between reader and text, then perhaps critics need to try to function as mediators and help these writers be read. As for the opposition that Rosa saw between himself and Joyce, the differences lie in their outlook and relation to their own cultures and literatures rather than on one being a “cerebral man” and the other being “an alchemist”. Rosa used to the full his intellectual capacities as a reader interested in philosophy, religion, and literature; as an ethnographer, keen on foreign and domestic cultures; as a linguist, completely aware of the possibilities inherent in his own native language and in the several others he knew very well. If he was an alchemist, as he implies in the contrast with Joyce, the power of transmutation of language and form is not a prerogative that belongs to him only, no matter what different effects his work may have produced and ends it may have served.

Notes

1 Colin MacCabe. *James Joyce and the Revolution of the Word*. Macmillan, 1981, p. 4.

- 2 Gunther W. Lorenz and João Guimarães Rosa. Literatura deve ser vida: um diálogo de GWL e JGR, in *Exposição do Novo Livro Alemão no Brasil*, 1971 (Genoa: January 1956), pp. 341 and 338 respectively.
- 3 *Sagarana*. 1st ed. Rio de Janeiro: Universal, 1946; *Corpo de Baile*, 1st ed., 3 vols. Rio de Janeiro: José Olympio, 1956; *Grande Sertão: Veredas*. 1st ed. Rio de Janeiro: José Olympio, 1956; *Primeiras Estórias*. 1st ed. Rio de Janeiro, José Olympio, 1962; *Tutaméia*. 1st ed. Rio de Janeiro, José Olympio, 1967; *Estas Estórias*. 1st ed. Rio de Janeiro, José Olympio, 1969; *Ave Palavra*. 1st ed. Rio de Janeiro, José Olympio, 1970. Only three of his works are available in English: *The Devil to Pay in the Backlands*, trans. James L. Taylor and Harriet de Onis. New York: Alfred Knopf, 1963; *Sagarana. A cycle of stories*, trans. Harriet de Onis. New York: Alfred Knopf, 1966; *The Third Bank of the River and other stories*, trans. Barbara Shelby. New York: Alfred Knopf, 1968.
- 4 Antonio Cândido. O Homem dos Avessos, in *Tese e Antítese*, 2nd ed. São Paulo: Nacional, 1971, pp. 121-39 (p. 121).
- 5 His creations and re-creations are identified with a mark – m% – to indicate that he had modified something.
- 6 Collection of romances and popular songs and poems.
- 7 This is a traditional story, which centres round a young woman who dresses as a soldier and goes to war to fight and defend her country.
- 8 Sertão: word of unknown origin; a geographical but also cultural concept, it does not translate well as backland.
- 9 Jagunço: a gunman belonging to a band.
- 10 The character involved in the quest of the “who of things” must obey his master’s order that he should see, hear and feel.
- 11 Antonio Cândido. O Homem dos Avessos, in *Tese e Antítese*, 2nd ed. São Paulo: Nacional, 1971, pp. 121-39.
- 12 Nhenhem: Tupi word meaning to speak; nhenhengatu: living language.
- 13 Catu: bom (good); poranga; bonito (pretty, beautiful).
- 14 Cachaça: strong alcoholic drink made from sugar cane.
- 15 João Guimarães Rosa. Meu Tio o Iauaretê, in *Estas Estórias*, op cit., pp. 126-59 (p. 159). Macuncozo: African word used here to refer to blacks killed by jaguars; re muaci: Tupi words meaning friend, half-brother; rê iucà anacê: Tupi words meaning frind, to kill, almost relative.



Guimarães Rosa on horseback in the “Sertão” of Minas Gerais, in Mai 1952