



## The *Opus Dei* of violence in Augusto Matraga

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**ABSTRACT.** The experiences experienced by men in modernity transform literary narratives, thematically and formally, establishing the aim to use allegory as an explanatory stage of that new reality. In the book *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, by Walter Benjamin, he conceives allegory as the revelation of a hidden truth that does not represent things just as they are, but provides a version of how they were or might have been. As a reflection of the principles implied in that reading, this paper takes Benjamin's allegory as an analytical category aiming at identifying the representation of violence in the short story *A hora e a vez de Augusto Matraga* (The Hour and Turn of Augusto Matraga), by Guimarães Rosa. Our analysis opens a dialogue with the dialectical perspective, in which social-historical conditioning factors contribute to understand Minas Gerais backlands, whose *ethos* supplies a perception of the world incorporated by Guimarães Rosa's poetics, widening the view of a violent and enchanting world.

**Keywords:** violence, Benjamin's allegory, Guimarães Rosa.

### A *Opus Dei* da violência em Augusto Matraga

**RESUMO.** As experiências vivenciadas pelo homem na modernidade transfiguraram as narrativas literárias temática e formalmente, estabelecendo o escopo para requisitar a alegoria como instância explicativa dessa nova realidade. No livro *Origem do drama trágico alemão*, Walter Benjamin a vislumbra como a revelação de uma verdade oculta que não representa as coisas apenas como são, mas oferece uma versão de como elas foram ou poderiam ser. Como ressonância dos fundamentos implicados nessa leitura, este trabalho adota a alegoria benjaminiana como categoria analítica visando identificar a representação da violência no conto *A hora e a vez de Augusto Matraga*, de Guimarães Rosa. Nossa análise mantém diálogo com a perspectiva dialética, na qual os condicionantes histórico-sociais concorrem para compreender os sertões mineiros, cujo *ethos* provisiona uma percepção de mundo que a poética rosiana incorpora, ampliando a visão de um universo violento e encantatório.

**Palavras-chave:** violência, alegoria benjaminiana, Guimarães Rosa.

It is  
A terrible thing to kill.  
But not only others would we kill, but ourselves too if need be  
Since only force can alter this  
Murderous world.  
(Bertold Brecht, 2013)

### Introduction

The act of rethinking the circumstances in which literature establishes as a foundation for the comprehension of the world and for the structuration of the spiritual life of men has been attracting an increasing number of supporters. As an answer to a movement that relativizes its importance as a way towards the formation of ethical, moral and aesthetic values, Antoine Compagnon reminds that it is proper of literature to contribute to the self-awareness of the individual and of his or her social relations.

Since the act of experiencing the reading of literary texts comprises the apprehension of imagination, beliefs and emotions, it encompasses a movement of learning, an unreplaceable knowledge surrounded by singularities, which reaches in a peculiar manner those who engage in it.

The dialectic character of this practice contributes as sediment of subjectivity, allowing the man to access, in a critical and appreciative way, the reality from which art takes its thematic motives. As a window that opens to the world, this immersion into symbolic productions offers the possibility of questioning and problematizing

the vicinity that conditions him socially, manifesting and constructing demands in need of answers (COMPAGNON, 2012).

Within the scope in which literature subsidizes the man with multiple ways of apprehending reality, Guimarães Rosa's reports are paradigmatic. Usually transfiguring Brazil from the *ethos* of the backlands, they enable the approximation of an original culture, with a constellation of characters and situations unparalleled in our literary history. The aesthetic richness of his work consists, among so many other aspects, on rescuing from the lofts of our conscience a lost past, made distant by time, but that insists on perpetuating as an ideal of life, persisting timelessly in the memory of those who have the backland universe kept by the power of imagination. The broad resonance achieved by Rosa's narratives led us to reflect about the pertinence of having them as object of study, electing *A hora e a vez de Augusto Matraga* (The Hour and Turn of Augusto Matraga) to be analyzed in this article, because the narrative is deemed as one of the most inventive and original works of the Brazilian literature.

More than arbitrary, this choice mirrors the interpretative richness allowed for by the story, full of social, political, economic and religious questions, always liable of new framings. In this sense, the theoretical conception that attests its presence as *corpus* of this article has its reach and limits established when we absorb Benjamin's allegory as an analytical resource, seen as the revelation of a hidden truth that does not represent things just as they are, but provides a version of how they were or might have been. When we decide to establish how historical factors shape the protagonist's course of life, violence appears as a narrative category that endangers his presence in the world, violence that meets the representation of the many faces of the backlands. In the methodological field, we will address the forms taken on by violence, conditioned to the dialectic model, perspective in which aesthetic interferences require the comprehension of the literary object in its entirety. Without apprehending said object by units, dissociating background, form and content, nor by dualities, opposing these elements dichotomically, these poles should unify, seeking for a synthesis in which exteriority is invoked to assist in the apprehension of the structure and tenor of the ideas analyzed, providing criteria for determining its validity in the aesthetics sphere (CANDIDO, 2000). Accepting the demands of the objective world as a conceptual milestone in the definition of dialects, we assume that the reading of a short story should respect a decisive detail: the

story alludes to a fictional world, whose interpretations should be subjected to the dynamics instituted by its internal logic.

For the objectives intended in this work, we divided the report into three moments. Its initial composition approaches the violent actions as a structural component in the life of Nhô Augusto, highlighting the authoritarian nature that entangles the backland society and those who inhabit it. The second moment echoes the attempt to repress his cruel indole, refrained by an unrestricted faith in divine principles, when his past is redeemed through an inner search for a spiritual regeneration by means of the religious practice. Finally, without the protagonist reaching the askesis in this conversion attempt, the short story ends with a contradiction: accredited by blood rituals, the final battle against Joãozinho Bem-Bem materializes the sacred project of Augusto Matraga: ascending into heaven. We infer that, as allegories of these rebirths, these stages register, also, the character's forms of abandoning the world, and in each one of these forms, death is figuratively present, allowing for constructive experiences. This cycle starts with his first fall, when he loses his political, economic and social power, a defeat that leads him to asceticism and penitence. Selflessness and charity purge the evil deeds practiced in the past, sins that only the faith in God could redeem. However, this surrender to religious contemplation ceases when Nhô Augusto is tempted by life and death drives, declining the monastic values that used to lead him. The once lost impetus and will return, preparing him for the revenge against Major Consilva, when death seals the fate that was waiting for him, embedded in the blood that brought about his liberation.

### On the theory

The discussion on the relevance of using the allegory as a theoretical support to the analysis of literary narratives reached the 20<sup>th</sup> century, seeking to conciliate the ideological field in which it was found, accrediting it as an artifice to assimilate a contradictory and incomprehensible social universe, dependent of and rooted in a historical foundation. In the midst of the uncertainties experienced by the man, it emerges in society as a consequence of aesthetic and ethical conditioners: aesthetic, for absorbing new forms of apprehending art, and ethical, for the predominance of Marxist paradigms, guiding a political view of the literary making. When combining the properties that found these two approaches, Walter Benjamin assimilates the social time as a determining factor for the correct fruition

of art, in whose interpretation the allegory consubstantiates as an elucidative vector of the past of and in history.

The critic conjectures about this question in the book *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, reminding that the allegory consolidates in an innovative manner as a hermeneutic component, from the 16<sup>th</sup> century, differing from the connotation perpetuated in the Middle Age. According to his reading, this resurgence is inserted in the aesthetics when the Baroque dramaturgy opposes the classic one, both conceived as expressions located in distinct spiritual universes, lacking, to him, differentiated valuations. The *corpus* of Benjamin's analyses were German plays of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, called dead literatures, in which he sought to distinguish tragic drama from tragedy. The decentration and disillusionment of the man in modernity provided the scope of his reflection: the tragedy, through mercy and terror, would provoke the purifying catharsis: on the stage, one single event manifested a conflict that was being judged by a superior entity, by gods that deliberated on human fate. The tragic drama, still mobilized in his thematic composition by the principles of the Christian allegory, would offer the view of finitude of the man marked by death, acted out on a stage that is not a real place, without relationship with the divine. Insecure spectators live these dramas, all submerged into the imminence of the movement of history, condemned to turn their thoughts to problems to which they cannot see a solution. The cosmic instance and the gods, guardians that were once capable of passing sentences and foretelling, languish, revealing the despair of the man with the downfall of the values that used to guide him.

In the absence of the cosmogony implicated on the classic tragedy, the Baroque allegory finds strength in the metamorphosis and in the mutability of expression, invading the modern world from a new perspective. The ambivalence is intrinsic to it: loss and salvation, fragment and totality; unity and diversity cross each other in the hybrid ways it promotes. In this contradictory configuration,

[...] the concrete universe seems to be devalued: its elements are interdependent; nothing deserves a fixed physiognomy. But this very same allusiveness to the objects make them grand and attractive; the undifferentiated world turns into a treasure of senses (MERQUIOR, 1969, p. 105)<sup>1</sup>.

With the image of the skull and the wandering saturnine state of melancholy, the allegory reveals an ambiguous mode of being, through the

concentration of emotional states marked by instability, alternated between sadness and ostentation. Sérgio Paulo Rouanet reminds being pertinent Benjamin's thought when he approaches the allegoric view of the wandering and raging profile of the man, in dialogue with the text *Mourning and Melancholia*, by Sigmund Freud: "[...] dying as objects of the historical world, things rise as supports to allegoric significations" (ROUANET, 1981, p. 11)<sup>2</sup>. The lethargy of melancholy, as he copes with the present, would derive from an unresolved relationship that follows him: his inability to get rid of the past leads him to feel guilty, preserving an incessant bereavement:

If the object becomes allegorical under the gaze of melancholy, if melancholy causes life to flow out of it and it remains behind dead, but eternally secure, then it is exposed to the allegorist, it is unconditionally in his power. That is to say it is now quite incapable of emanating any meaning or significance of its own: such significance as it has, it acquires from the allegorist (BENJAMIN, 2003, p. 183-184).

In light of this maintenance of incessant bonds of melancholia with the past, Benjamin elaborates conjectures to consolidate his reading of the allegory as a means to recover other echoes and versions of facts petrified by history. Differently from what stamped it in the medieval didactics, treating as one theme the dichotomy of Good against Evil, whose occurrence was ruled by the need to be a convention and an expression, codifying an unstable Christian message, in the Baroque aesthetics the allegory constitutes an expression of a theological convention already consolidated. It is no longer used in order to disseminate and make hegemonic a religious worship: many times ago the diversity of social, ideological and cultural components the Medieval Catholic Church confronted had been overcome, established as a worldview already constructed. The question was not about converting into a Christian who was not so already, but rather, eliminating, with art, the shock that persisted between the reformist and the counter-reformist proposal. The demand for other artistic expressions for religious dilemmas that now emerged was evident: there was no more one single Christian convention to be imposed, but the mutable expression of a belief already assimilated, questioned by the reform started by Martin Luther. Answering this context, and contesting a religious hegemony now shaken, the centrality of the

<sup>1</sup> The following quotation was translated by the authors of this article as other ones from works in Portuguese: [...] o universo concreto parece desvalorizado: seus elementos valem uns pelos outros; nada merece uma fisionomia fixa. Mas essa mesma alusividade aos objetos torna-os magnos e atraentes; o mundo indiferenciado se converte num tesouro de sentidos (MERQUIOR, 1969, p. 105).

<sup>2</sup> [...] morrendo enquanto objetos do mundo histórico, as coisas ressuscitam enquanto suportes de significações alegóricas (ROUANET, 1981, p. 11).

Baroque allegory moves from Satan, which was a figure of the Middle Age, and another protagonist, is called out.

Everything about history that, from the very beginning, has been untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful, is expressed in a face - or rather in a death's head (BENJAMIN, 2003, p. 166).

According to Benjamin, adopting the allegory as an analytical support in this new time is an imposition of the historical conditions with which the man is faced. He reminds that, since the Baroque, we realize that we are far from the non-contradictory interiority of the Classicism, mirror of a closed world that is uniform in its concepts, able to express itself in the simplicity and luminosity of the symbol. We are survivals of the gradual destruction of the great ancient values, dishonored and transformed by the mercantilization of life that is permanently involved by the ephemerality that characterizes it. The unspeakable thing that besieges the man, without him finding answers to the questions that torment him, suggests that every fact noted, every relation established, every fulguration felt, can have countless meanings. For us to express coherently in this universe of uncertainties, the allegory is configured, therefore, as an exemplary resource: we say something knowing that it means something else; we frequently refer to other levels of signification, almost always distinct from that in which we are. In the symbiosis between the aesthetics and the social dimension, going beyond a mechanistic view on art, the main role of the allegoric reading is emphasized: valuing art, inserting it into the course of the historical time, revealing how its procedures unveil cultural ruins and wrecks that the symbolic attitude tends to hide, as if they carried eternal, immutable and universal values (HELENA, 1985; BENJAMIN, 2004).

Reborn under the sign of a time in which varied forms of violence have led to the decay of experience, directly linked to the collective memory and to tradition, and have intensified life, related to the private existence of the individual and to his loneliness, the allegory rises in modernity to express the concrete and material convention of facts taken on by history. Dissociated from the image maintained in Ancient and Medieval Times – just as for Romanticism –, it is converted into a maintainer of the memory of the world, manifesting actions repressed and erased in each era, using residues and fragments abandoned in time. In a frank opposition to the symbol, which tends to present art timelessly, it operates in intimacy with the element detached, ignored, scrutinizing the contingency and what has

been forgotten in the version of the winners in the book of the history. As Helena (1985) assures, this view of the world should be thought in connection with the

[...] dissolution of experience ties of a community life, and consonant with the dissolution of values of an art founded on authenticity, unicity and sacredness (HELENA, 1985, p. 28-29)<sup>3</sup>.

Marked by the stigma of the anonymity, the man should activate, through the filter of his consciousness, a frame able to condition him to these new spaces: in opposition to the authenticity, the falsity; to the unicity, the copy; to the sacred, the profane<sup>4</sup>.

### Rosa's trans-regionalism

Wide is the feeling of world and the aesthetic repercussion achieved by Guimarães Rosa's work. Accredited by the novel *Grande sertão: veredas* (Big Backcountry Tracks) and by a singular collection of short stories, there are many conditioners that consecrate his narratives. Located at Minas Gerais' backlands, his motives often turn to a rural universe in constant dialogue with the harshness of the immutable social reality. With every part of his prose filled with poetic veins, his literary project surpasses the regional dimension, absorbing the backland *ethos* and attributing an artistic form to the hardships and inquietudes of the characters' existence. His themes often echo an anti-ethical representation of the agrarian world, contemplating the new and the old, the modern and the traditional, the sacred and the profane, which, amalgamated, suggest a singular microcosm of which Brazil is constituted. Unlike modernist writers, who accentuated the national character in their works far beyond the figurative meaning, and those of the 1930's, who disseminated a regionalism that was costly to the naturalist reminiscences, Rosa's literature is based on a series of contradictions, and a large portion of its richness resides in antinomies: the intrigues that vivify the backlands surpass tradition, although they constitute, by contrast, value and reference to the memory.

As recurrent thematic aspects in his work, rites, legends, religiosity and mysticism stand out, gaining new projections when taken away from their sources and original spaces, finding in orality the means to

<sup>3</sup> [...] dissolução de laços experienciais de uma vida comunitária e também em consonância com a dissolução dos valores de uma arte fundamentada nos pressupostos do auratizável: a autenticidade, a unicidade e o sacralizado (HELENA, 1985, p. 28-29).

<sup>4</sup> A more comprehensive perspective of the reach and limits of the allegoric resource in the analysis of the historical and literary text can be seen in the article *A alegoria benjaminiana e a modernidade* (Benjamin's Allegory and Modernity), published in *FronteiraZ* magazine (PEREIRA, 2013).

vocalize habits and customs of a deep Brazil. As a line of force that sets this choice of the author, the narrators perpetuate the existence of the backlands, creating a fictional universe that returns to the origins of the act of narrating, assimilating the myth as one of the most important reasons for substantiating his plots. By ensuring the presence of mythologies in other formats in modernity, old forms are mobilized, transformed and shaped in new contexts, visualized under the light of a new perspective in Guimarães Rosa's prose. With this movement of knowledge perduring timelessly, boundaries rupture, allowing for the allusion to the trans-regionalism defined by Antonio Candido when he refers to his literature: "How to solve this paradox of a regionalism that is not regionalism, of a universality that is as particular as possible?" (CANDIDO et al., 2011, p. 28)<sup>5</sup>. Dividing the discursive networks of writing into two types of matter – the historically given, maintained in people's consciousness, and the fabular, forged in the lofts of imagination –, regional and picturesque aspects are innovatively shaped by the stylization and elaboration of the language, reconfiguring the geography, society and the man.

Walnice Nogueira Galvão (2008) conjectures that Rosa's prose, with stylistic and formal innovations, points the apogee and decline of Regionalism, and of the psychological novel, about which his work would have done a synthesis, overcoming it. The Regionalism developed from the 1930's, molded in frequently linear reports, addressed the social and economic regions of the country based on sharply ideological notes, resembling a documentary in its form, a trend to which the author was little inclined. With naturalist traits, the works of the authors of that generation included the presence of coronels, bandits and migrants, the drought, the 'caatinga' and the inequality of society, themes re-approached in Rosa's reports under another aesthetic appearance.

Parallel to this generation, another literary trend, mostly established in Rio de Janeiro, declined the economic, political and social motivations as thematic 'leitmotiv' and turned to the self-absorption and the interiority of the man in the psychological novel. Avoiding the engagement and the regionalist documental character, the lofts of subjectivity featured these reports as sources for discussion and reflection. When finding their roots in the French catholic novel, these narratives incarnated a reaction to the particularization of the

regional, manifesting a criticism to the picturesque, to the exuberance of the tropics and to the immanence of a godless world. With substitute traces of this exasperated living, there is the downfall of values, the questioning of the inflections of subjectivity, the concern with fatality, besides religiosity, emerging in the obsession with the sin and searching for the transcendence and the supernatural. Contributing formally to this introspective digging effect is the inner monologue and the stream of consciousness, disaggregating the discourse and darkening the reports with imprecisions and inquietudes likened to the functioning of the mind (GALVÃO, 2008).

In the confluence and overcome of the characteristics of these movements, the success of Rosa's work would be found: the valuation of the backland culture allies to formal findings, especially linguistic, influenced by the 20<sup>th</sup> vanguardism, ingrained, also, in the cosmopolitan and experimental vein of the author. This transgressor and visionary sense goes beyond the treatment given to the contents narrated: the structure of his reports speculates, as well, about the properties of the short story as a genre. Opposing what is usually claimed by theory, they can be long, similar to the structure of novels, ignore the existence of one single center of action to which parallel events would converge, contributing to guarantee the cathartic effect of the outcome. These innovations have an impact on the crossing of the voices of the characters, on the defense of the interaction between form and content, on the rescue of popular culture, revaluing expressive particularities of a region decaying with the industrialization process in Brazil. The degree of complexity reached in this inventive and original writing, creator of neologisms and permeated by a Baroque exuberance that rescues archaisms and the use of the word as literary elements, led the literature in Brazil to new paths from early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The aesthetic properties of the short story *The Hour and Turn of Augusto Matraga* condition, to a large extent, the motivations and characteristics mentioned earlier. Published in 1946, in the book *Sagarana*, it is, according to the author, the

[...] most serious story, synthesis and key, somehow, of all of the others [...]. As for the form, it represents for me an intimate victory, because, from the beginning of the book, its style was what I sought to find out (ROSA, 1984, p. 11)<sup>6</sup>.

Narrated in the third person, it emphasizes two constants in the backland life: violence and

<sup>5</sup> Como se pode resolver esse paradoxo de um regionalismo que não é regionalismo, de uma universalidade que é a mais particular possível? (CANDIDO, 2011, p. 28).

<sup>6</sup> [...] história mais séria, de certo modo síntese e chave de todas as outras [...]. Quanto à forma, representa para mim vitória íntima, pois, desde o começo do livro, o seu estilo era o que eu procurava descobrir (ROSA, 1984, p. 11).

religiosity, both interacting and influencing the fate of the characters, revealing a Manichaeist worldview, divided between good and evil. The simplification that delimitates the backlands in this dichotomy does not find support in the way this opposition develops in the plot: at times religiosity justifies cruel actions, at times violence sublimates ascetic practices, dulling the multiple personas taken on by the protagonist in the course of the report, preventing his framing into only one of those poles. The complex configuration emanating from this ambivalent profile of the character reveals a view of the spatial microcosm where he experiences life. Contaminated with fights for power and demonstrations of courage that justify the actions of men, whose fate is nothing but the act of living, to him, surviving is a gift to be returned to God day by day.

### Ethics, aesthetics and violence in the backlands

The interpretations of Guimarães Rosa's short fiction cover several readings. With some frequency, aiming to meet the purpose of answering to the archetypal and mythological mentions impregnated between the lines of the narrative, the ways taken by the critique find in the symbol a referent that would correspond to the perception that most approximate to the backlands emulated by the author. Acting as a patina that polishes without disguise the contradictions experienced in that society, the endorsement to the sense of completeness emanated by the symbolic resource can be foreseen in the title: *The Hour and Time of Augusto Matraga*. Superlative and apocalyptic, it assimilates the future of the protagonist mediated by an unreducible fatalism, molding a scatological sense to his end. Subjacent to the reading that conditions the course of his actions to the determinations of the fate, from this viewpoint a metaphysical connotation predominates, in which the existence of Augusto Matraga is subject to attributes dissociated from his own will, urging us to comprehend the narrative without considering historical conditioners. By borrowing Alfredo Bosi's proposal in the reading of the poem *A máquina do mundo* [The Machine of the World], by Carlos Drummond de Andrade, whose refusal to accept the ahistoricity suggested by the title of the poem feeds an attitude based on timeless dictates, we relinquish this uniform and closed view.

The analysis intended in our reading is inclined to take an opposite way, ignoring the comprehensive universality imposed by the symbolic resource to the existence of Rosa's hero, dissociating him from a contraposition with his surroundings. Assimilated

with no battles or conflicts, the serious and philosophical tone of the enunciation that entitles the story suggests the predominance of essentialist values, highlighting bonds lost between men and divinities a long time ago. When considering that, since the Pax Romana, the Latin expression *vox populi, vox Dei* carries the idea of a God that has lost his voice, entrusting it to a plural historical subject, the people, it is necessary to stress the protagonist's untamed nature, valuing his ability to transform himself and reality. We can ponder that the influence exerted by social dictates, granting them violence as a mark that would follow his finitude, holds precepts of the nature that involves his existence. This legacy allows us to look at his journey just as a palimpsest, in which layers of denied lives are unveiled, kept buried by religious and social values, pruning the reach of a confirmed alterity with the redeemer death that leads him to heaven (BOSI, 2003).

We start the analysis by contemplating a significant textual indicator that anticipates the cycle of violence that will follow the journey of the protagonist towards death: "Matraga is not Matraga, he is not. Matraga is Esteves. Augusto Esteves, son of Coronel Afonso Esteves, of the *Pindaibas* and of the *Saco-de-Embira*" (ROSA, 1984, p. 341)<sup>7</sup>. Invested in the beginning of the story in the *persona* of Nhô Augusto, the narrator's negativity, when judging one of his faces, entangling aspects of personal, social and, we will see later on, political order, emerges as a prolepsis, linking this information to his end. However, the impression of non-existence and insignificance, of the annihilation that shapes Augusto Matraga as a frail and weak character, dilutes temporarily when we are informed about his ascendance: son of a coronel, nephew of a murderer uncle, his genealogy suggests a past encircled by power and authoritarianism. After the detailing of his paternal lineage, we find Nhô Augusto in a novena at the camp of Virgin Mother of Sorrows, behind the church, during a women auction. He appears imposing: "[...] tall, wide chest, dressed in black, stepping on other people's feet, tense arms, forming an angle with his elbows" (ROSA, 1984, p. 342)<sup>8</sup>, taking possession of Tomázia, known as Sariema, as one of his girls, expression of the physical, social and financial virulence that his presence imposes. After the henchmen beat up the yahoo who was in love with Tomázia, on his

<sup>7</sup> Matraga não é Matraga, não é nada. Matraga é Esteves. Augusto Esteves, filho do Coronel Afonso Esteves, das Pindaibas e do Saco-de-Embira (ROSA, 1984, p. 341).

<sup>8</sup> [...] alteado, peito largo, vestido de luto, pisando pé dos outros e com os braços em tenso, angulando os cotovelos (ROSA, 1984, p. 342).

demand, he authorizes Quim Recadeiro to dismiss them, and, we will see later, they will start to receive orders from another master.

The narrator continues, reinforcing his cruel indole through the reminiscences of Dionóra, his wife, and his uncle, owner of the *Pau Alto* farm, where she stays overnight with Mimita, her daughter, and running away with Ovidio Moura. Dionóra's disillusion and helplessness enable digressions about the previous life of her husband, remembering his flaws and faults: he was

[...] crazy and unstoppable, like a large wild animal. And, at home, always withdrawn [...]. In the farm he had other pleasures, other women, the tricks and hunts game [...] He had been like that since he was a little boy, a crazy and abundant boyhood, typical of an only child of a foolish father (ROSA, 1984, p. 346)<sup>9</sup>.

She also remembers he used to kill for nothing: a certain occasion, he did so with a sickle, to pay back some offense suffered. About her, he liked nothing but her mouth and flesh. And, to talk about the vagueness of these feelings, she recalls that the first three years of marriage were filled with love; in the next two, doubts reigned, and, in the other years afterwards she could only tolerate and resign.

With irony that foreshadows the decline that awaits him, in the course of the narrative this authority and chaos connotation will change after successive affective and material losses. Subject to demands that fortune alone can explain, the life of Nhô Augusto moves to other dimensions, engendering unexpected plans: reasons of personal and social order put him before new purposes, disturbing him and exposing an unknown face of the world. Abandoned by his wife – who, tired of the abuse and of an irrelevant married life, ran away with Ovidio Moura – and by his henchmen, financially coopted by Major Consilva, he decides to defy who humiliated him by taking away his power and, it is discovered later, his sense and reason. When invading by himself the Major's farm for a payback, it is possible to foresee, in this fight, the suffering approaching. At the first sign,

[...] the clubs hit the rider like a fish jumping inside the net. Strokes on his head, shoulders, thighs. Nhô Augusto bent and fell. [...] And, with his hands and feet tied, twisted by the henchmen's wrists, he roared and howled, and writhed so much that his clothes were torn, and his body seemed to be about to split into two halves (ROSA, 1984, p. 351-352)<sup>10</sup>.

After the beating and whipping, death was expected: "[...] barely walking, he came carried, knife wounds all over his body, bones broken, covered with thick mud, and dust with blood" (ROSA, 1984, p. 352)<sup>11</sup>. As a culmination of the wretchedness that was reaching him, and just like a property used as one pleases, he was dragged and branded with a hot iron, carrying forever the stigma of belonging to someone else, deprived from the privilege of having his origins and identity recognized. Counted as dead, his body rolled down a ravine that, inhabited by bushes and a black couple, received the nearly-dead corpse about to be brought to life again.

Briefly showing how violence establishes in the plot, centered on the circumvolutions that permeate Nhô Augusto actions, we point out that the perception of his falls and rises allows for several interpretations, like the symbolic one, attributing value to the analogies with Western myths and archetypes. The most disseminated of these readings indicates a path that refers to the mythical trilogy of initiation rites – life, death and rebirth – reappearing in the Christian molds of sin, penitence and redemption or, also, of hell, purgatory and heaven. In this parallel, it is suggested that the existence of crimes committed by the protagonist, succeeded by his apparent death after the punishment imposed by Major Consilva's henchmen, followed by the resurrection carried out by the black couple, prefigures the transition from the earthly life to the eternal one, from the death of the body to the salvation of the soul. Emulating the Christianity trinity and Christ's martyrdom, this rite of passage also shelters another interpretation: the escape of his wife, the loss of his henchmen and the beating that almost led him to death would be a premonitory *Via Crucis* to be fulfilled for him to reach his regeneration before God (GALVÃO, 2008). Coherent, as one can find equal identities between the facts narrated and those of the biblical universe, rooted in the same ground of affinities, these visions attest the violence in the story in a limited manner, distancing them from the social-historical conditioners that found it. Alfredo Bosi's records in the book *Céu, Inferno* [Heaven, Hell] reinforce the limiting power of this form of knowledge supported on analogies and symbolisms; little dialectic and suppressor of the contradictions that involve the man and the environment that shapes him, said

<sup>9</sup> [...] "doido e sem detença, como um bicho grande do mato. E, em casa, sempre fechado em si [...]. Na fazenda ele tinha outros prazeres, outras mulheres, o jogo de truque e as caçadas [...]. Fora assim desde menino, uma meninice à louca e à larga, de filho único de pai pancrácio" (ROSA, 1984, p. 346). (ROSA, 1984, p. 346).

<sup>10</sup> [...] já os porretes caíam em cima do cavaleiro, que nem pinotes de matrinhãs na rede. Pauladas na cabeça, nos ombros, nas coxas. Nhô Augusto desceu o

corpo e caiu. [...] E seguro por mãos e pés, torcido pelos pulsos dos capangas, urrava e berrava, e estrebuchava tanto, que a roupa se estraçalhava, e o corpo parecia querer partir-se em dois, pela metade da barriga (ROSA, 1984, p. 351-352).

<sup>11</sup> [...] vinha quase que só carregado, meio nu, todo picado de faca, quebrado de pancadas e enlameado grosso, poeira com sangue (ROSA, 1984, p. 352).

form frequently finds a meaning by associating the immanence of the I in the Other and of the Other in the I, establishing a similarity between terms and things that are, *a priori*, always inside the same regime of world.

Fundamental to assess how the allegory collaborates with the purpose of this article, we refute the idea that assimilates violence to superior predictions, as Hegel (2001) preconizes in its *Aesthetics*. Alluded as ontological condition that besieges epic figures, the destructive character and the cruel nature would be inherent to the stature required by that genre, whose heroes had divine protection. Personal revenge, foreseen among the designs that involved the gods since their conception, was part of this energy of heroic ages. In the same pace, we object the similarities indicated between the protagonist and biblical figures: conceived in a unique cosmogonist universe, under a closed totality of world, the allusion to representatives of the Christian world translates into a deficient appropriation as an elucidative counterpart of the narrative. We judge that, by meeting immediateness in order to endow the analysis with aesthetic efficacy, the importance of the context is sacrificed to the detriment of analogies that refer more to the appearance than to what substantiates the actions and the life of Rosa's character.

Distanced from these interpretative parameters, to explain how violence seeds the decline, the death and the salvation of Nhô Augusto, we highlight the need to emphasize the function exerted by the external elements in the context into which the work is inserted. Candido's assertion regarding the bonds established between literature and society meets our purposes, since, to the critic, the literary making is always arbitrary and deforming, even when the goal to be achieved is to perform an exercise of observation and transposition of reality, "[...] because mimesis is always a form of poesis" (CANDIDO, 2000, p. 12)<sup>12</sup>. We consider that there is a double registration in the critic's view: in one instance, a level of reality, and, in another, a level of elaboration of this reality. The subject narrated is structured on external elements, narratively converted and transfigured into literature. In the light of these assumptions, we understand that, when evidencing the violence in the plot, the protagonist should be seen as a hero of his time who lived the effective historical conjuncture in the fictional field in which the short story was shaped. Recovering the backland culture, in whose social composition the henchmen system imposed its own

law, its ill-considered nature is subsidized by requirements of a world that held specific values and demands. The issues and solutions that besiege Nhô Augusto's acts should be accepted within a political framework, in its broad meaning, that contemplates the conditions into which he is immersed, comprehending him, somehow, as a substrate of this environment. Founded on the correspondences between text and context, and because violence is a structural value in the report in analysis, the marks of history and the dynamics of the backland society rise as relevant aspects to light this work.

Jaime Ginzburg (2012), in the book *Crítica em tempos de violência* (Criticism in Times of Violence), asseverates that the formation of the Brazilian nation is intensely permeated by the presence of violent acts. Since colonization, our society has been marked by events of arbitrary order, configured, also, as pedagogical functions. Missionary expeditions, punishing those who had difficulty apprehending the religious contents or who refused to abandon their culture, used violence as an instrument to mold the native into the patterns established by the colonizer. Intrinsically linked to imposing acts, and related to the domination of a class over the other, the omnipresence of authoritarian structures allows assenting that, in the origins of the Brazilian life, these acts did not occur casually. Incorporated in our constitution and formation, since past times, they defined the forms of relationship between the public and the private, organized governmental institutions, sedimented forms of relationship between classes, and established the importance of each one of these structures in the social fabric.

Together with the reading that recovers the history of Brazil as an explanation for the violence that would extend from colonization to contemporaneity, as a reflexive act of this practice, we find other formats of subjugation and domination in the microcosm of Minas Gerais' backlands. In this rural universe, with its particular order of world, inhabited by men that dictate their rules under an archaic form of justice, the law of the strongest, the recognition of the spheres of domination that constitute their existences is a paradigmatic condition in the interpretation of the short story. Its elaboration reflects heroic acts of characters forged under miserable conditions, in which experiencing cruelty resonates as an answer to the *modus vivendi* of a region permanently abandoned by public authorities. Deprived from alterity, without governmental support, knowledge, ability and organized forces to claim the presence of the State that would institutionalize means for

<sup>12</sup> [...] pois a mimese é sempre uma forma de poiese (CANDIDO, 2000, p. 12).



transforming this reality, its inhabitants live a situation of financial and personal dependence. The existence of this social model in the interior of Minas Gerais is the backdrop on which demonstrations of strength and courage perpetuated in Rosa's report are developed. By making visible what is old but not past, he designates and denounces the practice of violence in a region where a forgotten portion of the Brazilian population resided. The author restituted importance to customs rooted many times ago, and contemplates this uncommon geographical space that, since *Os sertões* (Rebellion in the Backlands), by Euclides da Cunha, was being treated as the order of the day in the coastal regions of the nation celebrating the 20<sup>th</sup> century, having backwardness for emblem.

When appropriating literary mechanisms to translate this reality, Rosa's short story reverberates social antagonisms and contradictions of a region isolated from the development of the country, highlighting the sterile possibilities of changing a declining society. As Jaime Ginzburg reminds, the difficulty in translating literarily events of oppression and traumas had already been overcome by authors like Clarice Lispector, Rubem Fonseca and Graciliano Ramos. Through artifices, such as hybridism of genres, relativization of the truth, problematization of the language, astonishment before the object treated, they indicated in the structures of the literary forms the difficult and melancholic perception of a violent and traumatic reality (GINZBURG, 2012). By attributing, in his prose, an aesthetic value to the backlands and to what constitutes it, lifting values dissociated from the industrial and urban Brazil that emerged in early 1950's, Guimarães Rosa points towards the permanence of controversial images of the Brazilian society, referring to a country that met modernity too late, whose iniquities, present in its structure since its foundation, remained as the order of the day.

The rescue of this context makes notorious the properties obtained by the allegory that, transcending the visible and the immediate, rescues the sense subtracted from expressions the time has covered with dust, and destroys the illusion of harmony intended by the symbol. Absorbing as external elements the living conditions maintained in Minas Gerais' backlands that, before being conjectural, were structural, it is possible to return to Nhô Augusto's fate and comprehend the *pathos* that involves him: as a worn and shapeless imitation of his father, deprived from strength and power, only moral decay is left.

To adorn a point of contact between his uncontrolled actions and his surroundings, we deem

to be relevant to consider his excesses and violent attitudes as a result, also, of the economic substrate that was dying off. The death of his father did not make him understand that goods and political power were vanishing, and that misfortune and uneasiness were approaching:

Now, with the death of Coronel Afonso, everything was becoming even worse. No way. Nhô Augusto was becoming more senseless, more reckless and unrulier. And with huge debts, defeated in politics, no credit, losing lands, waiving his farms as payment, and everything to make one sick, no doors, like white walls (ROSA, 1984, p. 346)<sup>13</sup>.

Major Consilva sees the opportunity for personal gains in these unique moments that time and history brought, and rises as the new mandatary of the camp *Córrego do Murici*, condition that impels him to carry out revenge cultivated for a long time against the family of his old enemy, Coronel Afonso. Provisioned by money and the haughtiness that increase his power and rearrange the servile behavior of those who approach him, the chance of a new political and economic picture emerges in the region. A synthesis of this situation can be recovered in the compliance of Nhô Augusto's henchmen with the Major's project, as Quim Recadero reports:

[...] the henchmen were not coming... They did not want to stay with Nhô Augusto anymore... Major Consilva took four as his men, paying well [...] the greatest one, the head, even asked them to say, showing disrespect: - Tell Nhô Augusto he must pay the money he owes us (ROSA, 1984, p. 349)<sup>14</sup>.

With an evident ruin, which surpasses physical and moral aspects, the downfall of the authoritarian fame of Nhô Augusto gains visibility:

[...] everybody there says that you have nothing anymore, that you have lost your farms and riches, and that you will get poor very soon [...] (ROSA, 1984, p. 350)<sup>15</sup>.

The misfortune and decay that the winds of the backlands blew for a very long time come closer in various forms: abandoned by his henchmen, wife and daughter, his honor and haughtiness are

<sup>13</sup> Agora, com a morte do Coronel Afonso, tudo piorara, ainda mais. Nem pensar. Mais estúrdio, estouvado e sem regra, estava ficando Nhô Augusto. E com dívidas enormes, política do lado que perde, falta de crédito, as terras no desmando, as fazendas escritas por paga, e tudo de fazer ânsia por diante, sem portas, como parede branca (ROSA, 1984, p. 346).

<sup>14</sup> [...] os bate-paus não vinham... Não queriam ficar mais com Nhô Augusto... O major Consilva tinha ajustado, um e mais um, os quatro, para seus capangas, pagando bem. [...] o mais merecido, o cabeça, até mandava dizer, faltando ao respeito: - Fala com Nhô Augusto que sol de cima é o dinheiro!... P'rá ele pagar o que está nos devendo (ROSA, 1984, p. 349).

<sup>15</sup> [...] todos no lugar estão falando que o senhor não possui mais nada, que perdeu suas fazendas e riquezas, e que vai ficar pobre, já-já" (ROSA, 1984, p. 350).

devastated, disseminating throughout the camp that his hatred and evilness justify his death:

[...] they are saying that you have never respected other people's daughters, nor married women, and more, that you are like an evil snake, which must be killed when someone sees it [...] (ROSA, 1984, p. 350)<sup>16</sup>.

The blindness perpetrated by power, dominating his sense of measure, the narrowness of his conscience and his unlimited arrogance, causing the abandonment by those who used to follow him, foretells his ruin: violence, used as a mediating instrument of his relationship with the world, returns as punishment and answer for his inconsequent acts.

When recognizing the relevance of what we have mentioned before, we regard that it is licit to state that the Brazilian formation and the backland *ethos* are historical conditioners that allow accepting belligerence as a vein that determines the protagonist's personality, whose saga, started under the dictates of prepotency, declines with the beating ordered by the new mandatariness of the camp. This long-awaited payback was not accidental: as previously mentioned the roots of this absence of limits date back to a past of hostilities between families. The long permanence of this animosity is remembered on the occasion of the revenge imposed to Nhô Augusto, when Major Consilva exclaims, sipping with pleasure his retaliation: "The chill-out time is over, Esteves, you're dog! [...]"<sup>17</sup>. The latter claims to be suffering for unresolved quarrels, insuflated by old pending issues: "Shitty Major! Just to tease, for being my father's enemy [...]" (ROSA, 1984, p. 350, 351)<sup>18</sup>.

If questions of honor, power and material order explain this legacy of animosity, we conjecture another motivation for the violence picture continuously repeated by the coronels. By disseminating cruelty as a valor cultivated within his family, Nhô Augusto would have found a support for his behavior on the figure of his father, allurer and promoter of arbitrariness, and on his murderer uncle, maculated by the crime and the stigma. This troubled descent finds a parallel in Major Consilva's moral values, whose defining parameter of justice ignores respect, forgiveness and condescendence. As a point of convergence of these precepts, we recall the law of retaliation: in the Code of Hammurabi, in

early 1700 B.C., in Babylon, it preached the fair reciprocity of a crime and its punishment, registered in the expression 'an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth'. Important due to the bonds maintained between the ideas of justice and violence contained in the report, for the purposes of this article, it is worth highlighting the substitute practice that associates said law, the Hellenic concept of *guénos*, defined

[...] in terms of religion and of Greek law as *personae sanguine coniunctae*, that is, people connected by blood ties. Thus, any crime, any *hamartía* committed by a *guénos* against someone else has to be religiously and necessarily avenged (BRANDÃO, 1990, p. 37)<sup>19</sup>.

The displacement of the Hellenic concept towards the backlands invites us to think about the way that the sacred is presented in the initial part of the short story – pragmatic and utilitarian –, opposing the model of justice practiced in the Greek world, linked to divine determinations. Dissociated in modernity from the power of gods and from the predictions of fate and of destiny, it is important to think about how autonomous the nature of the protagonist would be, who is trapped into an atavic violence as the only way that provides him with a meaning in life. Because the divinities do not play the role of guiders of his wills and thoughts, he subjects himself to other forms of power, like traditions socially instituted. The rescue of the idea of *guénos*, in this context becomes relevant, as we judge that the longevity of the villainies of Nhô Augusto and Major Consilva, and of their respective parents, go beyond the scope in which such practices would cease with a solidary act. Bearers of a cultural heritage kept in harmony with disorder, the ideology and the institutionalizing forces that rule the backland society are decisive in the establishment of these individual values, fostering, alluring and perpetuating the bellicose behavior of the characters.

This reading dialogues with the varied forms that society has used to mold the subjectivity of the man throughout history, opposing his fight for freedom of ideas and emancipation. It is known that in the gap in between the Ancient Era and the Renaissance, the cosmogony that ruled the diatribes of heroes and mortals in the tragedies is replaced for the guilt and sin disseminated with Christianity. In both circumstances, the man's autonomy is limited: at times his values and wills answer to the emanations of pagan gods, at times, to the religious dictates of

<sup>16</sup> [...] estão dizendo que o senhor nunca respeitou filha dos outros nem mulher casada, e mais que é que nem cobra má, que quem vê tem de matar por obrigação" (ROSA, 1984, p. 350).

<sup>17</sup> Tempo de bem-bom se acabou, cachorro de Esteves! [...] (ROSA, 1984, p. 350).

<sup>18</sup> Major de bosta! Só de pique, porque era inimigo do meu pai! [...] (ROSA, 1984, p. 351).

<sup>19</sup> [...] em termos de religião e de direito grego como *personae sanguine coniunctae*, isto é, pessoas ligadas por laços de sangue. Assim, qualquer crime, qualquer *hamartia* cometidos por um *guénos* contra o outro tem que ser religiosa e obrigatoriamente vingados (BRANDÃO, 1990, p. 37).

the Christian world, characterizing a dependence of answers to what was unknown and unfathomable to him. As a consequence of this devotion to superior laws and commands that rule him, the man has difficulty opposing the instances that monopolize his consciousness, obstacle that has been following him from a very long time in his struggle for autonomous thinking. Luiz Costa Lima, in the book *Limites da Voz* (The Limits of Speech), extends this theme to the literary sphere, when proposing a reflection about the forms of freedom and legitimation of subjectivity throughout the Middle Age. The scope in which the critic undertakes this initiative recognizes that there was a moment in which the man conquered the right to express himself on behalf of the I, giving up on the hetero-directed condition, defining a new positioning, the self-centered.

The point of contact of the proposal exposed above with what we have inferred in this article – the social injunctions determining the comprehension of the violence that spans the actions of the characters in Rosa's short story – is set when Costa Lima defines the constitution of this hetero-directed subject, whose identity has been always established based on something external in relation to him. By experiencing a world inside an idea of totality, the answers to his questions were provided by magnanimous and incontestable gods that have never failed in their predictions. Sheltered in this set of limitations that surround him, the notion of an individuality for the man implied the subsumption of the I to some type of control: by being recognized as an autonomous subject dissociated from a bond with an external and inclusive term that granted him sense and orientation – whether it was his family, his community, his nation or God –, the issue of the objectivity and validity of what such *I* thought or said was automatically questioned (LIMA, 1993).

Concluding what we have mentioned about the Greek concept of *guénos* and the subsumption of the man to social conditioners, how to apprehend the violent attitudes of Nhô Augusto, Major Consilva and his henchmen? It is plausible to assent that, in addition to occurring within a causal nexus, they are similar to the institutional impositions perpetrated in the Ancient and Middle Ages, oriented by a legacy of family values socially reaffirmed. The arbitrary behavior of the characters, endorsed by the social instances that deliberate on their lives, make room for them to proclaim heterodox forms of justice, like revenge, disseminated as a convention inside deceitful dynamics of social normality. Connected with the origins of the historical formation of Brazil, even though this eternal dispute between men and

families are endless, it has no winners. In the singular judicial system established in the backlands, law does not reach men, and arbitrariness evidences the disorder: blood ties impel the infinite haughtiness that absorbs peace at the camp of *Murici*.

As a synthesis of this *modus vivendi*, dependent of instances that human brings does not control, rather, affirms and accentuates, Nhô Augusto will keep experiencing the loss of friends and family, left only with the disillusionment of building a present without perspective of future accomplishment, always turning to the past. The values he worships gravitate around his father's grandness and glory, a patrimony of virulence and senseless that led him to recklessness and megalomania. Surviving as a distorted mirror of the power once held by his father, it is impossible to ponder about his strength and power to find other senses in life. Physically and morally defeated by Major Consilva, and left to his own fate, we are pressed into contemplating as ours his thoughts, assimilating the question that haunts him: what does it mean to live and act in the backlands, where the future is defined by the strongest, consequence of a controversial and hetero-directed form of life? The answer appears before him as a dilemma, reinforced by the forceful exile to which he is imposed after the beating that almost led him to death: abandoning violence, denying the surroundings that shape him, and himself. Subject to a new form of submission, by accepting suffering, which purges the pain and brings wisdom, migrating to asceticism and penitence, he will lessen the pain caused by the whips that torment body and soul through Christian teachings. Willing to answer to the prayers and litanies of the black couple, which attenuate his afflictions, Nhô Augusto leaves behind the profane life and emerges from this figured death as a new man, converted by the power of faith in a model of virtue and devotion.

### Final considerations

What is the conclusion to which we come in this initial analysis of the short story *The Hour and Turn of Augusto Matraga*, in whose context violence emerges coloring the steps of the protagonist? We advocate the hypothesis that the violent *pathos* that follows him and the authoritarian nature that entangles the backlands find their origins in the historical formation of Brazil, permeated by testimonies of arbitrariness, coercion and authoritarianism.

Dependent of principles guided by the social dynamics that surrounds him, whose strength

resides in the affirmation of cultural values to be continuously perpetuated, there is coherence in situating the submission of the character to principles dictated by collective instances, to understand the violent acts practiced in that region of the country. Under and from this perspective, the transposition of the concept of *guénos* from the Classical Antiquity to the backland society becomes acceptable, within which questionable modalities of justice continue to be used as practices that build honor and vanity.

Since we have demarcated the reading of the short story in three distinct stages, we remind that it was in the first moment of the cycle of action, redemption and salvation that we fed the idea of comprehending the violent path that shadows the protagonist. By establishing a relationship between text and context, we reiterate the importance of founding our reading on Benjamin's allegory, for recognizing correspondences between the internal elements of the work and the historical exteriority that shaped it. Able to recover traces of evidences of history and reconsider them according to a different direction, surpassing the uniformity of the discourses that ignore the facts that prove hostile to the ideological conceptions of every era, the allegoric component allowed exposing a backland whose face remains in Brazil nowadays. The atmosphere of violence, which involves the fictional field in which the story is molded, denounces a space dominated by institutions deprived from legality, determining the forms of acting and thinking of the man, domination against which he cannot stand. With the election of violence as the common thread of the reading undertaken in *The Hour and Turn of Augusto Matraga*, anachronistic forms of life that cross the backland context and reach other social structures in the country are updated. The ubiquity of this edifying trait of the Brazilian nation advances in time, contributing to the permanence of a registration in which the contemplation of the past can serve to define actions in the present. The reality of Minas Gerais' backlands, composed of disorder, revolt and injustice is actual and reaches the aesthetics, demanding new approaches and critical perspectives in the form of assimilating literature.

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