

THE MAGICAL WORLD OF JOÃO GUIMARÃES ROSA'S *Primeiras Estórias*

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In recent years, much critical attention has been given to a type of literature in Latin America known as Magical Realism. Although there has been some confusion regarding the meaning of the term, which writers are currently practicing it, and where it is most prevalent, João Guimarães Rosa's name is consistently linked to it in Brazil. Although most of this author's international fame stems from his brilliant novel, *Grande Sertão: Veredas*, is it perhaps a lesser-known work, *Primeiras Estórias*, which establishes him as a veritable master of Magical Realist prose.¹ In an interview shortly after the publication of this collection of tales in 1962, Guimarães Rosa suggested that its title, as well as its way of looking at life, came after a turning point, a near brush with death in 1958, which left him with an enriched vision of reality.² It is precisely this enriched vision which links him to other Magical Realist writers in Latin America. Like them, he feels that the writer's job is to reveal and unfold, not simply portray.³ Ironically, he is often accused of deforming reality, although the world he describes is sometimes based on accurate, factual information. Most of his settings are taken from direct observation of life in the *sertão*, the backlands of Brazil, where reality has acquired supernatural overtones and is enriched by the imaginations of its inhabitants.

1 João Guimarães Rosa, *Primeiras Estórias*, (Rio de Janeiro: Livraria José Olympio Editora, 1962). All further references to this work will appear in the text.

2 Luis Harss and Barbara Dohmann, *Into the Mainstream*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), p. 157.

3 Harss and Dohmann, p. 150.

The unique emotional and spiritual atmosphere of the *sertão* is fundamental to the creation of Guimarães Rosa's magical world in his fiction. According to the Cuban writer, Alejo Carpentier, who is one of the major representatives of Magical Realism in the Spanish-speaking Americas, the New World possesses inherently magical qualities.⁴ Carpentier calls it "lo real maravilloso", for it is man's faith, or belief that magical things can and do happen in real life, that provides the basis for Magical Realism in literature. In isolated areas, primitive mythologies are still at work and strongly influence the way American man perceives the world around him. Reality is presented from the point of view of one who believes that "lo maravilloso" is a natural part of life, and that faith is unshakable. The Magical Realist writer draws from history, geography, religion, myth, legends, and even from everyday occurrences which seem to be born of fantasy but are, in fact, part of the New World reality. For Guimarães Rosa, the Brazilian *sertão* is one of the most magical places of all.

It is not only his choice of subject matter, however, that associates Guimarães Rosa with the Magical Realist writers. It is his attitude, the tone expressed in his works, and the narrative point of view he chooses for his stories which suggest that mystery and magic exist within the peripheries of the "real world." A mythical, legendary, or so-called "primitive" system of reference is used, and characters, narrators, and implied authors tend to come from the margins of mainstream culture. They are children, elderly people, outlaws, withdrawn intellectuals, servants, madmen, Negroes, Indians, backwoodsmen, mountainmen, and even animals with human qualities. They give the impression of being on a journey through life, persons in the process of an important transformation. Each has a unique sensibility, due in part to the fact that he is removed from the vital workings of society and lives in a world where the extraordinary is commonplace. While the rational-minded, cosmopolitan reader may be awestruck at some of the events described in *Primeiras Estórias*, the characters generally show no reaction to them. Strange happenings are accepted with no attempt to offer logical explanations. No explanations are needed.

There are twenty-one stories in the collection and, where it is difficult to find obvious common threads to unite them,

⁴ See Alejo Carpentier, "De lo real maravilloso americano", in *Tientos y diferencias* (Mexico: U.N.A.M., 1964), pp. 115-135.

there is an underlying current which makes the reader aware that the stories do somehow form a magical, elusive whole. The reader is treated to slices of life from a world where there is a "terceira margem do rio", and he must accept that such a place does exist, whether he understands it or not, if he is to enter into that world and fully experience it. It is often difficult to say what the plot of any particular story is, for as other critics have observed, Guimarães Rosa borrows from the story-telling habits of the ancients, where the detour can be as important as the main current.⁵ Some stories seem to be little more than anecdotes or reflections, spontaneously delivered. As a result, the reader may sense something magical in all the stories, but he may never fully identify the nature or the source of the magic. This element of Guimarães Rosa's style suggests a similarity to yet another type of imaginative fiction, the classical European Fairy Tale. Despite their brevity, his stories, like Fairy Tales, suggest a complete world. In a few carefully chosen words, he is able to suggest many events. Repetition is used for emphasis and to control the movement of the plot. Feelings and relationships are rarely treated in a direct way; instead, they are externalized and shown by the character's actions or by his surroundings. Everyday objects such as a bird or a toy, which seem to have no particular meaning, represent the character's emotional state. Just as a character is set apart from society, the episodes in a story may be isolated. The need to establish one episode's relationship to another is not felt, although there is generally a tendency toward intensification as the story progresses until a transformation of some sort occurs. Most of the narrations in *Primeiras Estórias*, like true Fairy Tales, depict a process of development and maturation, showing that man has the capacity to transcend himself.

There are some obvious parallels between Magical Realism and the Fairy Tale, although the two types of literature should not be regarded as identical to one another in every respect. Each, in its way, portrays a world where all things are possible, where miracles are not a cause for wonderment, and where faith is the *sine qua non* for reader acceptance. During the moment in which the reader is immersed in the tale, there can be no doubt in his mind that things *did* happen as they are related. As Max Lüthi points out: "Fairy Tales are unreal but

⁵ Hans and Dohmann, p. 150.

they are not untrue; they reflect essential developments and conditions of man's existence."⁶

Fairy Tale characters, like those of Magical Realism, come from the remotest branches of society. Detailed physical descriptions of them are rarely provided, but their personalities are clearly expressed through their actions and beliefs. Children are important figures in Fairy Tales, although they are not the helpless beings often found in adult fiction. They are clever enough to make their own way in the world, but they sometimes receive help from outside sources such as "magical helpers" and animal friends. Like all marginal characters, Fairy Tale personages do not perceive the world as a large place and do not have a firm grasp on the nature of reality. Nevertheless, they trust their perceptions and accept things as they appear to be. Everything the Fairy Tale hero experiences seems natural to him, and he does not show concern or astonishment when confronted with something beyond his comprehension. Because he is essentially isolated, he is not tied down to a static relationship with other people or with his surroundings and, therefore, he is able to make effortless transitions from one level of reality to another.

"Um moço muito branco" is an excellent example of how Guimarães Rosa has borrowed from the tradition of the Fairy Tale and captured the essence of Magical Realism to create a vision uniquely his own. It portrays a young man, gleaming white in appearance, disoriented in his surroundings, incapable of speech, who may be a permanently shocked victim of an earthquake or a being from outer space, depending on the version of reality the reader prefers to believe. The young man appears in a village one day and performs various inexplicable feats. He gives a blind beggar a seed for a plant unknown to that region of Brazil, which has one beautiful bloom and then dies. A girl he touches on the breast is left with a life-long feeling of happiness. A man who treats him kindly suddenly discovers a buried treasure. Most importantly, however, the young man brings with him a feeling of *saudade*, indescribable longing, never before experienced by the townspeople, which remains long after he has gone. The only witness to his arrival in and departure from the town is the village idiot, who claims the young man disappeared into the sky on wings.

In this story, Guimarães Rosa uses one of his favorite stylistic techniques, that of the narrator-witness who tells the

⁶ Max Lüthi, *Once Upon a Time* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), p. 70.

story but does not play a major part in its unfolding. Although the outer framework of the story is in the more impersonal third person, the first-person presence of the narrator is also strongly felt. The narrator, or implied author, carefully selects his details, offers opinions, and generally presents his information to the reader in a very subjective way, making only occasional attempts at objective observation. For example, the story begins with a factual account of an event supposedly recorded in history and the narrator imitates a journalistic style, as if he were detached from the disaster he describes. The language he uses, however, is highly emotional, and he gives far more detail than necessary for a factual report. This blend of subjective and objective information helps to set the stage for the rest of the story:

Na noite de 11 de novembro de 1872, na comarca do Sêro Frio, em Minas Gerais, deram-se fatos de pavoroso suceder, referidos nas folhas da época e exarados nas Efemérides. Dito que um fenômeno luminoso se projetou no espaço, seguido de estrondos, e a terra se abalou, num terremoto que sacudiu os altos, quebrou e entulhou casas, remexeu vales, matou gente sem conta; caiu outrossim medonho temporal, com assombrosa e jamais vista inundação ... (p. 99).

The narrator explains that much of what happened after this disaster has become part of the region's folklore and the story has become inexact as it passed from grandfather to grandchild. Although he, too, learned about the event in this imprecise way, he seems to feel that the legend will have more validity for the reader if it is presented in a pseudo-factual way, and thus he adopts the tone of a historian.

Another important source of information for the narrator is José Kakende, the town idiot, who befriended the strange young man during his stay in the town. José claims to have seen him arrive and, later, leave in what appears to be a flying saucer. On St. John's Eve, a traditional night in folklore for magical happenings, José Kakende recalls that he helped the young man light a series of bon-fires in a prearranged pattern and, then, watched him ascend into the heavens. What lends a certain amount of credibility to José's story is that he describes this event in terms of his own beliefs and, therefore, relies heavily on Christian mythology for his phrasing:

... o rôjo de vento e grandeza de nuvem, em resplendor, e nela, entre fogo, se movendo uma artimanha amarelo-escura, avoante trem, chato e redondo, com redoma de vidro sobreposta, azulosa, e que, pousando, de dentro desceram os Arcanjos, mediante rodas, labaredas e rumôres. (p. 101)

Aside from the opening paragraph where a specific date is given, all other references to time in the story are based on saint's days. This gives most of the narrative the tone of an ancient legend, and also shows that Christianity, in its most literal application, is strongly at work influencing the characters' perceptions of the world. Angels and miracles, as described in the story, are a natural part of that world, whereas spacemen and flying saucers are not. For this reason, no mention is ever specifically made of the latter, although José's description will certainly evoke this image in the mind of the reader who is familiar with space-age technology. The juxtaposition of angels and spaceships produces an unsettling effect in the narrative, but the two concepts strangely appear to be in harmony.

The narrator, who serves as a filter between José Kakende's eye-witness report and the reader, stresses the fact that José is a simpleton. He admits that the story may not be true, but the reader is left to decide for himself. The narrator appears to be open to any number of possible interpretations. He is always aware that he is dealing with a legend; he often provides several variations of the story from different points of view, and he includes what "people say" as well as factual information in his report. His role is not to interpret nor to judge, but simply to tell all he knows, regardless of the source. He ends his tale abruptly, as if its meaning had been made quite clear, but the reader is left with many questions unanswered. The only certain response is the feeling of being exposed to an extraordinary world where the magical and the real exist side by side:

Todos singularmente se deploraram, para nunca, mal em pensando. Duvidavam dos ares e montes; da solidez da terra. Duarte Dias, de do, veio a falecer; mas a filha, a mōça Viviana, conservou sua alegria. José Kakende conversou muito com o cego. Hilário Cordeiro, e outros, diziam experimentar uma saudade e meia-morte, só de imaginarem nêle. Ele cintilava ausente, aconteceu. Pois. E mais nada. (p. 104)

"A menina de lá" tells the story of a very strange little girl called Nhinhinha who begins to perform miracles then suddenly dies, perhaps because she herself has willed it. Nhinhinha spends her brief life conjuring up strange varieties of toads and unexpected gifts of guava jam. Her parents, who cannot understand her odd behavior, hope that she will learn to work more ambitious miracles with time and will bring in a profit with her unusual talent. Just as the future seems hopeful, however, Nhinhinha works her last miracle: she asks for a little pink coffin with bright green lining for her own burial. The child's inexplicable death does not surprise her parents, but it does drastically change their lives. For no apparent reason, the mother spends each day in prayer repeating the name Nhinhinha had given her, "Menina grande... Menina grande", and the father continually strokes the little stool where his daughter used to sit. They come to regard her death as a miracle, and she is thereafter known as Santa Nhinhinha.

This story is narrated in the first person, once again by a narrator-witness, although the narrator is never identified and it is not clear how he gets his information. He seems to have a particularly keen insight into the working of the child's mind, and much of the story is narrated as if it were being told from a child's perspective. An uncommon number of diminutives are used, and other characters have no names except those used to identify their relationship to Nhinhinha-Mãe, who is also called "menina grande" by the child, Pai, and Tiantônia. The parents' point of view is also represented, and emphasis is placed on the total lack of communication between Nhinhinha and the adults in her life:

"Ninguém entende muita coisa que ela fala...
"— dizia o Pai, com certo espanto. Menos pela estranheza das palavras, pois só em raro ela perguntava, por exemplo: "— ele xurugou?" — e, vai ver, quem e o quê, jamais se saberia. Mas, pelo esquisito do juízo ou enfeitado do sentido... ou referia estórias, absurdas, vagas, tudo muito curto: da abelha que se voou para uma nuvem... ou da precisão de se fazer lista das coisas todas que no dia por dia a gente vem perdendo. (p. 20)

Because of her strange behavior, her family feared that she might be simple-minded, and they began to feel a deep frustration with her: "Ninguém tinha real poder sobre ela, não se sabiam suas preferências. Como puni-la? E, bater-lhe, não

ousassem; nem havia motivo. Mas, o respeito que tinha por Mãe e Pai, parecia mais uma engraçada espécie de tolerância" (p. 21). This inability to communicate with Nhinhinha makes it impossible for the adults in the household to understand or appreciate her magical skills while she is alive. Only after death do her accomplishments take on the aura of "miracles" in the minds of the adults in the family, and only then do they become respectable and worthy of meditation.

As in the story, "Um moço muito branco", Christianity, when taken literally, provides a mythological basis for the unfolding of otherwise inexplicable events. Nhinhinha's behavior, like her death, can best be understood when considered in the same light as the miracles described in Christian doctrine. Because the characters in the story come to believe that miracles can happen and that those who perform them are saints, the narrator is able to state in a completely sincere tone: "Sei, porém, que foi por aí que ela começou a fazer milagres" (p. 22). Like Nhinhinha's family, the narrator does not totally understand the child, but he accepts unusual powers as real once he comes to think of her as a saint. The faith of others in her enables Nhinhinha to perform a miracle of an entirely different nature after her death: she transforms the lives of her parents and converts them from greedy, shallow people into pious and contemplative ones.

"O cavalo que bebia cerveja" also involves unusual behavior by an unusual character, in this case an Italian immigrant who owns a ranch in the *sertão* and keeps his beer-drinking horse in the bedroom of his house. Giovânio is like a figure borrowed from folklore, and everything he does takes on a legendary aspect. For him, "normal" behavior consists of spending each day seated on the porch eating bucketsful of lettuce while his disgruntled servant, Irivalíni, carries hundreds of bottles of beer into the house for the horse's consumption. It is Irivalíni (also called Reivalino) who acts as narrator of the tale, and his attitude is of great importance to the reader's perception of events. In the beginning of the story, he expresses surprise and disbelief at Giovânio's behavior:

Saiu, para surgir com um cesto com as garrafas cheias, e uma gamela, nela despejou tudo, às espumas. Me mandou buscar o cavalo: o alazão canel-clara, bela-face. O qual — era de se dar a fé? — já avançou, avispado, de atreitas orelhas, arrendondando as ventas, se lambendo: e grosso bebeu o rumor daquilo, gostado, até o fundo... (p. 94)

Irivalíni is further shocked and dismayed to find that there is a darker side to life at the ranch. He discovers that Giovânio also shares his home with his brother, a horribly mutilated war veteran forced to live in reclusion because of his grotesque appearance. The servant reacts with horror at the sight: "Não tinha cara, a bem dizer — só um buracão, enorme, cicatrizado antigo, medonho, sem nariz, sem faces — a gente devassava alvos ossos, o comêço da goela, gargomilhos, golas" (p. 96).

Giovânio never explains his life-style to anyone, and Irivalíni never asks for explanations. The servant does eventually rebel, however, and he runs away from this strange, confusing place. Years after his boss' death, he returns to the ranch with a changed outlook, which is reflected in the tone of the narrative. Perhaps the transformation takes place because Irivalíni discovers that life outside the ranch's confines is stranger than life within it; perhaps it is because he has learned to respect an individual's right to live according to his own value system. In any case, he finally begins to understand Giovânio's bizarre actions, and he no longer seeks explanations. Giovânio's way of looking at the world has become the norm. He says, in conclusion: "Eu, Reivalino Belarmino, capisquei. Vim bebendo as garrafas tôdas, que restavam, faço que fui eu que tomei consumida a cerveja tôda daquela casa, para fecho de engano" (p. 97).

Although the magical elements are of a vague nature here, what makes it possible to view the story as an example of Magical Realism is the treatment of the character, Giovânio. Irivalíni describes what he has seen with his own eyes, but the reader is always left with the impression that there is little veridical about this legendary man. Giovânio is presented *as though* he were a mythical being while, at the same time, the reader is asked to believe that he was real. His actions are not impossible, but they are unlikely and inexplicable, like the actions of a folk character. Within the context of the story, Giovânio is acting according to an established set of norms, but because these norms are not those of most readers, he and his world appear marvelous.

Many of stories in *Primeiras Estórias* seem more closely related to the classical Fairy Tale than to those narratives associated with Magical Realism in the Spanish-speaking Americas. The beginning and ending stories of the collection, "As margens da alegria" and "Os cimos" are good examples in the Fairy Tale vein. They are twin stories, relating two separate excursions by airplane to the building of a new city in the

interior by a little boy, who is simply known as "um menino". All characters in these two stories are known by generic names, as children are inclined to label people, such as o tio, o piloto, o homenzinho, a mãe, and o engenheiro. Diminutives are often used, and the style is simple and childlike. The stories begin with the standard "once upon a time" formula of Fairy Tales and end with the boy learning a lesson about life, as children in Fairy Tales do. "As margens da alegria" begins: "Esta é a Estória. Ia um menino, com os Tios, passar dias no lugar onde se construía a grande cidade" (p. 3). Its companion story, "Os cimos", begins in much the same way: "Outra era a vez. De sorte que de novo o Menino viajava para o lugar onde as muitas mil pessoas faziam a grande cidade" (p. 168). Everything is presented through the child's eyes, and all is a source of wonder, amazement and surprise. Underlying the apparent simplicity of the narrative, however, is a commentary about nature versus modern technology, for in both stories the child discovers the essence of happiness and beauty in a wild animal, rather than in the technological marvels that surround him. He learns that contentment and disenchantment are often born of the same experience, and he learns to savor them both. In "As margens da alegria", where the child is younger, the lesson is clearly stated: "Descobria o possível de outras adversidades, no mundo maquinal, no hostil espaço; e que entre o contentamento e a desilusão, na balança infidelíssima, quase nada medeia" (p. 6). In "Os cimos", the lesson is more subtle, as the boy is growing up and is being initiated to the complexities of life. He learns to overcome childish fears and possessiveness and to find love and beauty in that which can never truly belong to him: "Sorria fechado: sorrisos e enigmas, seus. E vinha a vida" (p. 176). In this story, he has lost part of his innocent youth, but he moves into the mainstream of life with an expanded vision.

The unlikely protagonist of "Seqüência" is a cow who, suffering from homesickness and *saudade*, decides to run away from her owners and seek out her birthplace. A young cowhand from the ranch pursues her over many miles of uninhabited land, while the narrative point of view shifts back and forth, from cow to man, until the final scene when the two reach their destination. The adventure suddenly ends in a most unexpected way when the young man realizes that the cow, his magical helper, has led him to a far-off land for a reason. There, as though it were preordained, he falls in love at first sight with a woman and she with him. The narration ends with the guarantee that they will live happily ever after:

As quatro moças da casa. A um delas, a segunda. Era alta, alva, amável. Ela se desescondia dele. Inesperavam-se? O moço compreendeu-se. Aquilo mudava o acontecido. Da vaca, ele a ela diria: — "É sua". Suas duas almas se transformavam? E tudo à razão do ser. No mundo nem há parvoíces: o mel do maravilhoso, vindo a tais horas de estórias, o anel dos maravilhosos. Amavam-se. E a vaca-vitória, em seus ondas, por seus passos. (p. 69)

"Substância" is also a love story. Its title refers to manioc meal, an everyday item which mysteriously acquires magical properties and causes a young plantation owner to fall in love with one of his workers. Maria Exita is beautiful and has a perfect disposition, but no other men are interested in her because of her family's history: her father is a leper, her mother is insane, and her brothers are notorious outlaws. Still, Sionêsio is drawn to her, as if by magic, and in the end, they are overwhelmed by love and devote the rest of their lives to one another.

"A partida do Audaz Navegante" shows the force of children's imagination, and once again attributes magical properties to a common object, this time a cow chip. When sent down an overflowing creek, it becomes the ship of a great navigator and inspires many adventures on a rainy day. It also involves the subtle transformation from childhood to adolescence as two of the audacious navigator's "crew" experience the first glow of young love.

"A Benefazeja" tells the story of a woman who combines the characteristics of the Fairy Tale's good and evil witches. Although she is ugly, scorned by everyone, and totally unlovable, her "wicked deed" has greatly benefitted the community while causing herself pain. She kills her monstrous husband and stepson because they are cruel and terrorize the village. No one else in the town is able to carry out this act, yet no one thanks her or appreciates her sacrifice. The villagers do not realize she had destroyed her only human bonds, and she quietly leaves the town, dragging the carcass of her dead dog with her, never to be heard from again. Like many classical Fairy Tales, this story sets out to teach the reader a lesson about life. It has a highly moralistic tone and points out that philanthropists come in all forms.

"A terceira margem do rio" is of key importance in the collection, since it symbolizes the place where all these mysterious transformations occur and where all the characters

dwell. It also stress the fluidity of time and space in all the stories. In it, a son narrates his father's sudden decision to spend his life in a canoe on the river. From the day the man enters the boat, he never communicates again with a human being, although he does not go, out of sight. Many years pass, his clothes turn to rags, and he eats only the small bundles of food his family leaves on shore. Nothing seems to change for the man on the river, while on land, his wife dies, and his children grow old and move away. Only the son who narrates remains behind. Slowly, he begins to understand that his father is doing something important, though the essence of it escapes him. He signals to his father that he is willing to replace him on the river, but as the old man heads toward land, the son, now an old man himself, is afraid and runs away. It is as though his father were coming back from death or from an unknown world to claim him, and he is not ready to go. Now, living in guilt and asking for pardon, he reflects on the meaning of life and death with a new awareness:

Sofri o grave frio dos medos, adoeci. Sei que ninguém soube mais dele. Sou homem, depois desse falimento? Sou o que não foi, o que vai ficar calado. Sei que agora é tarde, e temo abreviar com a vida, nos rasos do mundo. Mas, então, ao menos, que, no artigo da morte, peguem em mim, e me depositem também numa canoinha de nada, nessa água, que não pára, de longas beiras: e, eu, rio abaixo, rio a fora, rio a dentro — o rio. (37)

The process of self-examination, the realization of one's strengths, weaknesses, and capabilities, the shedding of false aspirations, and the acceptance of one's destiny are of fundamental importance in *Primeiras Estórias*. The desire to know, where one comes from and where one is going, to understand what lies at the root of human experiences, is what links Guimarães Rosa's work to other literatures seeking similar knowledge and understanding. Clearly, there are elements of the classical European Fairy Tale and Magical Realism in these narratives. The isolated setting of the *sertão* allows the author to portray characters who live on the fringes of rational, mainstream society an view reality from their own, primitive system of reference. The stories are brief and deal matter-of-factly with everyday life, but life in Guimarães Rosa's mythical *sertão* is inherently magical. There, it is possible to fall in love at first sight and live happily ever after, to make wishes that

come true, or turn sorrow into good deeds and wisdom. It is not, by nature, a world of joy and comfort but, because its inhabitants have faith in the impossible, the impossible comes to be. Anything can and does happen there because the characters are capable of making transitions from one level of reality to another with amazing ease.

One reason why Magical Realism, as a literary label, has remained unclear for many critics is that the writers who use this mode of expression are non-conformists. Each has sought to reveal his own magical world, and each produces unparalleled works. The reader must certainly come to the conclusion, after reading *Primeiras Estórias*, that each man's search for himself is a unique experience. The characters that people the pages of the book, like the author himself, are unquestionably individual in their approach to life, yet they speak for us all. *Primeiras Estórias* is the voice of everyone who has glimpsed at some time in his life "a terceira margem do rio" and has felt a hint of understanding.