

## **The choice for the fantastic: interview with Murilo Rubião <sup>1</sup>**

Elizabeth Lowe

**You've been unheard of for over 20 years. How do you feel now that you've been "discovered"? Has your relatively recent success somehow changed your way of working or your way of thinking about fiction?**

It changed mainly because my book was adopted in the entrance exams of the Federal University of Belo Horizonte. It forced me to rethink my literature and study the problem of my fiction by the need to explain it to students. But I don't think that was very profitable. This rediscovery of my work causes me a certain boredom and especially a certain remorse, because it temporarily removed me from my daily and permanent contact with my fiction. But anyway it was a valid experience, because it comes to indicate other paths for me other than that of doing conferences, lectures, teaching, which is not my profession.

**Do you think Brazil has been excluded from the so-called "boom" of Latin American literature?**

I find this a somewhat complex problem, because it even involves literary politics and advertising of certain writers. As for Brazil, we have a great difficulty in penetrating the major centers because of the Portuguese language, while the Castilian language is spoken in all countries of South America, Central America and the United States through immigrants in areas markedly formed by people of Latin origin. We have an ease that Spanish-speaking ones do not have, to read very easily and understand Castilian. This is not the case with the other peoples of Latin America. Now I think everything will come in time. If really Brazilian literature has any importance, this will be recognized sooner or later, because we all know that glory, immediate praise, has never led to a classical awareness of literary work.

**Currently there is a "boom" in Brazilian and Minas Gerais literature. How would you explain this blooming of contemporary Brazilian letters?**

The explanation in Minas Gerais is not difficult. We have, more than in any region of Brazil, other than Rio de Janeiro, a great literary tradition. At the time of gold, Portugal sent to Minas the best cultural representatives, such as a Gonzaga, a judge who came here as ombudsman, and a series of architects, painters, even Portuguese with Chinese influence who came from Macau. With this tradition, which remains to this day, it is not difficult to explain the primacy of Minas Gerais literature within Brazil. In Rio de Janeiro, with the entourage of D. João VI, came a series of painters, including French and intellectuals, which also provided an excellent cultural tradition, which was continued through Manuel Antônio de Almeida, Machado de Assis, Raul Pompéia and, modernly, Marques Rebelo, one of the greatest story writers of the language.

**Do you consider Brazilian writers marginalized?**

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<sup>1</sup> LOWE, Elizabeth. A opção do fantástico: entrevista com Murilo Rubião. **Revista Escrita**. São Paulo: year IV, 29, pp. 24-33, 1979.

I find this very relative. I think the writer complains too much about this alleged marginalization by the public authorities or publishers. Currently, for example, there is an excess of literary contests in all states. With regard to editors, I think the editor in Brazil is somewhat relegated, because they have few conditions to survive. With editions that rarely reach 50,000 copies, it is very difficult for publishers to escape bankruptcy or concordats, as is the case of José Olympio, perhaps the largest publisher in Brazil, Martins, which went bankrupt. There are those that arise and disappear every five years, such the costs and the small number of copies of each edition. They can of course be compared to publishers in other countries. One must note the difficulty that the new writer in France finds to publish in Gallimard. Gallimard usually publishes authors, or foreigners or nationals, over forty years, which does not happen in Brazil, because it is very normal for the writer to release his first book in his twenties to thirties.

### **Why your choice for the fantastic?**

Evidently the presence of the fantastic is capital in my work. Every writer, after a certain time, fully lives the literature he makes, to the point of not knowing if he is being influenced by what he writes or if he is making a type of literature according to his tradition, with the environment, with the reality in which he lives. My greatest coexistence has always been, since childhood, with the fantastic. Perhaps it was the reading of children's tales, fairy tales, the reading of Don Quixote, a reading in which I fully believe. Don Quixote and Sancho Panza were absolutely real figures to me, in fact Don Quixote was always for me much more real than the Sancho Panza, although he also has something fantastic. Later I read a series of thinkers who lead us to think of another reality, which is not the one we live in. This was also an invitation to the fantastic.

### **Do you believe that the fantastic is a way of expressing a political or social reality in disguised terms?**

Within this literature there is always a social criticism, a nonconformism with the current political regimes that dominate most of the world at the moment. Of course, since Adam and Eve, since man began to think, there has always been a constant struggle against power, including against God, which is read a lot in sacred history. Today we are against dictatorships, against governments that do not allow freedom of thought and expression. I find it impossible to have any kind of literature other than a social approach, participation and engagement. Not in the sense that the writer becomes a militant of any doctrine, whether Nazi, communist or allegedly democratic. The writer can take their position without having to military and without having to participate in guerrilla action. Everyone has his or her role in society. Some fight in the jungles and some write. And maybe those are the important ones, far more important than the guerrillas.

### **Have you come to a literary definition of the fantastic?**

I think Todorov's structuralist definition of the fantastic is very precarious. The fantastic in our century, whose greatest precursor is Kafka, and here in Brazil is Machado de Assis, is very different from that of the nineteenth century. In the last century, the fantastic was more tragic and dark, as we see in the stories by Edgar Allan Poe or Hoffman. Today we do not

have the same reluctance to accept the fantastic that had the reader of the last century. That one always thought that there was a certain realism in the background, that the fantastic was not a complete unreality. In the modern fantastic there is a need for the writer to impose his unreality as if it was real to the point that the reader, finishing reading, to be in a certain doubt whether the reality in which he lives will not be false, and whether the true reality will not be that of fiction. The times, the history, force the writer to take a different position from that of previous centuries. The fairy tales would no longer fit, the dark fantastic, because the modern reader would not accept them, although fairy tales are still works of the best fantastic realism, in the modern or ancient sense of expression.

### **What are the special challenges of the fantastic genre?**

The main challenge is exactly the difficulty that the writer has to impose a possible reality as being reality, the super-real given in clear and normal terms. As if the cordial coexistence with its dragons, its monsters, had the greatest naturalness. So the writer has first to live with the mystery. After a certain coexistence, he begins to treat the super-real as if it were reality. If he falls into fantasy, in the gratuitous fantastic, he can't impose his mystery.

### **What is the writer's role?**

The main function is not to be alienated. This function serves both the writer of any country and for the Brazilian. What can lead the writer to error is too much participation in politics, a participation within party lines. On the other hand, he cannot escape the reality of the historical and social moment in which he lives. He has to participate and that's a must. I think at some point the writer can escape a little from reality, but he always ends up participating, even more than the average citizen, seeing in the future ways that can improve and help the man of the present.

### **Does being a Brazilian writer impose any duty beyond what is assumed by the writer from another country?**

Being an underdeveloped country, or developing, as others want, the obligation of the Brazilian writer is much greater than that of the European writer. We are in a society in formation, governed by transitional regimes, which are generally dictatorships. If there is no plurality of parties, a government is a dictatorship, whether communist or allegedly democratic, as is the case in Mexico. These are countries where unions have no freedom, where the people can only speak out by voting within the official party. Hence this responsibility not only of the Brazilian writer, but also of the South American writer, to fight with his weapons, through the word, through his literature.

### **Why did you choose the short story?**

The choice for the short story must have been the legacy of my childhood readings, especially Don Quixote, a novel formed by a series of stories, or even fairy tales. Machado de Assis himself wrote more short stories than any other genre. Given my sobriety of language, the need for brevity, I was led to make short stories. I did poetry in my youth, and thank God I only published two poems, having torn the others. I've never felt inclined to romance. I also think of writing two novels and purposely left them for later because I see a very large

incompatibility between the short story and the longer genres. The novel requires a language less sober, less tense, less simple than the one adopted in the story. The story is not a springboard to other genres, as previously thought. Either you make a story, or you make romance. It is very difficult to deal with both genres.

**The city is an increasingly pronounced presence in contemporary Brazilian fiction. Your stories are urban. What is the meaning of the urban context in your work?**

Brazil is a new country, without a very large rural tradition. The cities were formed here in the time of gold and diamond. There is a constant migration from the countryside to the city. Who lives in the country does it because it is not possible to live in the city. We have, of course, an agricultural tradition as well. We can mention the recent example of Guimarães Rosa, who left small towns, who was a doctor for a long time in small villages. There's still a backland, there's still the man in contact with the ground. But, from Machado de Assis here, we were driven to walk to urban fiction. We felt the need to make stories that departed from the regional to the universal, always having the universal as an end. Evidently, the universal forces fiction to be urban because it is necessary to make a story that can happen in any country. And the universal term is the urban. You can't run away from that.

**What is the function of the urban context for fantastic literature?**

I think the fantastic could never survive long in the countryside. It turns out that in Guimarães Rosa's work, much of which takes place in the backland, there is a certain fantastic thing naturally inherited from Afonso Arinos, the uncle, and in which there is the mystery of the hauntings, of the headless mule (although, treated by a minor author, it would be just folklore). The fantastic does not live well with the countryside because it has to migrate to small towns, to the big centers, otherwise it stays in fantasy, in folklore. It is in the city, from where the mystery apparently escaped, however, that we find much more easily the surrealist things, the inexplicable things that we are forced to accept. The habits of the city, this surrender to the machine, this surrender to the consumer society, make life much more absurd than in the farms where life is simpler, where there is no pollution, where man is less enslaved by all these infernal machines that man in the city has to accept. We have become used to living with the fantastic in front of these machines.

**Is your interest in death and cyclical repetition based on any specific philosophy or religion?**

The basis of course is the Catholic religion, a religion that later did not convince me. Catholicism is much more linked to death than to life, and even transforms life into death. That is why I left not for the eternity they taught me, but for eternity already in life. In this way life would be just a circular thing that would never reach that eternity, but also we could never get rid of it. As I have abandoned religion and I am now an agnostic, my tendency is not to accept eternity and also not to accept death in life. So I stand in this constant circle between eternity and life without accepting this separation between life and death.

**So would this theme in your work be a challenge to Catholic doctrine?**

Evidently it is. This is a way of contesting, of not accepting, a fight against what I have been imposed to for years. It was against my nature and against any rational religion of our time, or even against the oldest ones, for example eastern religions, of much greater wisdom.

**The themes of death, cyclical return, infinity in your work remind Borges a lot. I asked the previous question thinking also of the great influence on Borges of the mysteries meditated on in the Kabbalistic tradition, as well as Plato, Nietzsche and eastern philosophies. Do you identify yourself in any way with Borges or with the traditions mentioned above?**

I believe that this influence is due to the Jewish-Kabbalistic tradition, because on both sides, I am descended from families of Jewish origin, New Christians as they are called here. They were Portuguese Jews who to achieve freedom had to be baptized and accept the Catholic religion. Perhaps that is why the religious teachings I received within Catholic doctrine were unconvincing, because these ancestors of mine might not believe much in this religion either. I think if Borges has this eastern influence, I didn't. Today I sometimes accept and find the eastern religions maybe purer than those of the West, but I have already come this knowledge in a later time, when I no longer believed in any religion. Perhaps because I could not deepen into Catholicism I was still only in the Old Testament, which must be a Jewish heritage. The prophets, their premonition, in that violence, had a decisive influence on my literature. That's why I don't have much or no affinity with Borges.

**Why is your insistence on biblical epigraphs?**

My world of fiction is very much related to the Bible. I write a short story without thinking about the epigraph. When I get to its end I go to the Bible and I find it there, exactly. Sometimes, thinking about making a certain story, I immediately find the corresponding epigraph in the Bible. This is due to the excessive reading, or rereading. I never know if my story starts or ends in the epigraph.

**I have noticed in urban fiction an apocalyptic tendency, in which the author takes on a prophetic role and points out the destruction of the city. Would your preference for the epigraphs of the Old Testament and especially *Revelation* be the reflection of your apocalyptic view of the contemporary urban world?**

Perfectly, because under that shadow of the atomic bomb, we are always under the terror that the city may be destroyed. The prophets asked for or predicted the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah and other cities, evidently thinking of building a new world, a new life, new cities. But my generation, and today's generation, has no hope that nones will emerge from the destruction of the city. The destruction will be total.

**Your characters have exotic names. How do you get to choose these names?**

It's interesting because sometimes the name of a character of mine has origins in the subconscious. I chose Cariba's name thinking I was even creating a name. However, Cariba was from "Caraíbas" in Central America, if I'm not mistaken, and also here the Brazilian "Caribbean" was the white for the indigenous. Since I've read a lot about indigenous in my childhood, it's possible that the influence comes from there. There are names that are formed

by suggestion – I see a name or a literary passage and a similar name comes to me. The story "Epidólia" is the only one born from a dream. I've modified the dream a lot, but not in the story. I got up at three o'clock in the morning and wrote. The next day I thought the name should come from Roman or Greek mythology, or from a poem. I looked into several reference books, but I couldn't find the name. It must have been born from the dream.

**Does the mythical theme of the quest coincide, in your work, with the female character?**

All art is mainly linked to women. But often, in my short stories, both the character can be female, as it could be male. This is the case, for example, of "Barbara". Barbara was just the meaning of ambition, of the desire to have much more of the things that can be enjoyed. If I named Barbara in the story, it's because that's already a fat name. The character had to be female. Maybe also because the woman is the fairy, the sorceress, and even the tradition of mythology gives a major importance to the woman. The gods are men, but there is a constant fight between the gods and women. Although in the Christian tradition she has determined all the things we are suffering and living. The Christian religion is very much against women. In Greek mythology, deep down they are the ones who dominate.

**What is your opinion on the women's situation in Brazilian society?**

Now the Brazilian woman is breaking free. Women in Brazil, given the Catholic tradition, the Portuguese tradition, have always been marginalized. It was a thing to be used. But with the urbanization of the country, today women play almost 50% of the role she should play. In the United States, the competition of the sexes made the woman independent of the man. She can live quietly, without obligation to be married, to have children. She can choose her profession, her husband, and whether she should have children or not. I think, in Brazil, this achievement is still in half. But we will get there within the possibilities of race, of the conditions of tropical country, which sometimes lead the woman to fall into the exaggeration of sex much more than the man. But the Brazilian woman is still very attached to tradition, to traces of the Catholic religion.

**You have been around great Brazilian writers, such as João Guimarães Rosa and João Cabral de Melo Neto. Do you have any memories to share with us?**

When I was working in Madrid in the fifties, João Cabral was doing research in Seville for the Brazilian government in the Archive of the Indies. In one of the newspapers we received from Brazil he said that Guimarães Rosa had been a candidate for the Brazilian Academy of Letters and had not been able to get elected. João Cabral, showing me the newspaper, made fun of our great writer, saying that it was his nonsense, that the Academy was for hams, guys who had nothing more to tell, which was not the case of our Guimarães Rosa. João Cabral spoke as if entering the Academy was the end for the writer. To apologize a little, but with a lot of irony, he said that deep down Guimarães Rosa was a naive, without malice, that joining the Academy was a foolish vanity. Ten years later João Cabral also applied to the Brazilian Academy. I wasn't with him after the election, but I still hope for the occasion to know if he has finished the work or if the Academy served him as a springboard to be ambassador. At Itamaraty, they care a lot for you to be a member of the Academy, not to be a good poet. In fact they would not understand the verses of João Cabral. Or else our poet thought his poetic

work was finished. His last book, *O Museu de Tudo*, falls far short of the first book and of *Duas Águas*; of *Life and Death of a Severino* and so many others.

I didn't meet Guimarães Rosa, unless by correspondence and reading, because when he moved to Rio, I had already returned to Belo Horizonte, and then I went to Europe. But when I was assigned to Seville and Madrid, they asked if I didn't want to take a dossier on Spain, with economic, social data, etc. In the literature part I was more or less aware. Then I went to get this dossier and in the elevator of Itamaraty in Rio de Janeiro was a gentleman in a bow tie, and when he heard my name presented by the diplomat João Pinheiro Neto he exclaimed, "Murilo Rubião! What a thing we meet here. I liked the Ex-Magician so much!" All the time holding my hand. He had a somewhat effeminate voice, and, holding my hand for so long, I blushed. When we got out of the elevator, I asked João Pinheiro, "Who is this fairy in bow tie?" "It's Guimarães Rosa!" I sat on the floor, hit my hand on my head, and said "Oh, no!"

### **What is your opinion about the current political and social situation in Brazil?**

At the moment we are living a transition phase of the most serious, because not only we are without the essential freedoms, but we are also economically at a dead-end. Economic crises lead to social and political transformations. That's why it's difficult to predict the future. And living this transition with governments that do not have an ideology, that start only from a series of principles, for example, that politicians have led the country to disgrace, that we can only find our way through technocrats. So no one can predict how far we're going and what awaits us. I have the impression that even the politicians in power find themselves at the same crossroads.

### **What are your plans for the future and your literary projects?**

I have several projects, all structured. Three books of short stories; one drawing up old stories, another with stories of youth, and a third of unpublished stories. Then I intend to end my literature with two novels. That's if I have five years to go.