

# Animality and Textual Experimentalism in João Guimarães Rosa's *My Uncle, the Jaguar*

Ana Carolina Torquato

Independent Scholar

E-mail: [anacarlostorquato@icloud.com](mailto:anacarlostorquato@icloud.com)

## Abstract

This article analyses how form and content are intertwined in the story *My Uncle, the Jaguar* (1961) by Brazilian writer João Guimarães Rosa. In the first part, I use the fourteenth episode of *Ulysses* (1920), 'Oxen of the Sun', as an example of how language and form can convey ideas. The next section deals with Rosa's efforts to create a character-narrator who seems to be on the verge of *becoming-animal*. The character's transformation into a jaguar-like being is ambiguous, seeming to be both psychological and behavioural. In this sense, there is no evidence whether his metamorphosis is physical. However, the language of the narrative conveys his transformation, transcending him from Portuguese to Tupi-Guarani, to an animal snarling onomatopoeic language. To support my argument, I use a theoretical framework derived from Animal Studies and Anthropological Studies as a means of giving a better explanation of the variable cultural background concerning human-animal relationships.

**Keywords:** *zoopoetics, language, animality, metamorphosis, human-animal relationships, Brazilian literature, João Guimarães Rosa*

## Introduction

Animals have been widely depicted in all literatures across the ages. The type of representation varies according to different aspects which have been considered by scholars such as Keith Thomas in *Man and the Natural World* (1983), Erica Fudge in *Perceiving Animals* (1999), Maria Esther Maciel in *O animal escrito* (2008), Arturo García and José Joaquín Moreno in *Los animals en la historia y en la cultura* (2011), among others. The idea that they are more than just part of the landscape, metaphors, or symbols to discuss human affairs appears more consistently in 20<sup>th</sup>-century literature. Interestingly, as humanity increasingly becomes more urban, literature grows more attentive to animals' agency. Therefore, as the Anthropocene advances, animals are in process of 'disappearing, but [at the same time, grow] more visible than ever'<sup>1</sup> in modern culture.

Literature can address animal alterity and thinking, in the awareness that 'animals possess communicative zones',<sup>2</sup> and that they have complex existences; these are common themes usually associated with the experience of modernity and

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher T. White, 'Animals, Technology, and the Zoopoetics of American Modernism', PhD Diss., The Pennsylvania State University (2008), 2; available at [https://etda.libraries.psu.edu/files/final\\_submissions/1141](https://etda.libraries.psu.edu/files/final_submissions/1141) [accessed 3 November 2021].

<sup>2</sup> Aaron M. Moe, *Zoopoetics: Animals and the Making of Poetry* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014).

experimentalism. In this regard, zoopoetics also explores the subject of literary writing itself, for it deals with ‘questions of writing and representation, [as it] proceeds via the animal’.<sup>3</sup>

This article will examine the novella *My Uncle, the Jaguar* (*Meu tio o Iauaretê*, 1961) by Brazilian writer João Guimarães Rosa (1908-1967). My main purpose is to address the animality of the text as the main interpretation for the language metamorphosis in the narrative. Hailed by Brazilian literary criticism as one of the greatest writers of the twentieth century, Guimarães Rosa has been translated into several modern languages and is known for its linguistic experimentalism, the representation of animals and animality, and the relationship between humans and animals. Although *My Uncle, the Jaguar* is not the only example in Rosa’s broad experimental work, it is certainly one of the most challenging in terms of the denseness of language and context.

To further exemplify the use of language in connection with a theme, I wish to place Rosa’s text side by side with the episode ‘Oxen of the Sun’ in James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922). Both narratives are produced in the context of Modernism, as both are connected to the main themes and styles explored by this literary current of the first half of the twentieth century. Therefore, they are also an expression of modernist experimentalism and change in perspectives.

## Literary Modernism and Linguistic Experimentalism

However diverse and spread in time Modernism might have been, it shares a common historical context across the world: the considerable changes in human life and the perceived need to transform the world. The historical background which creates a preamble to modernist thinking includes the rise of the Industrial Revolution (1760-1840), the Theory of Evolution (mid-19<sup>th</sup> century), and the advent of the germ theory of disease (ca. 1860). These events, among others, promoted a profound restructuring of society’s beliefs and lifestyle. While the Industrial Revolution changed most aspects of people’s daily lives and income, Evolution Theory led individuals to re-evaluate their beliefs to accommodate the idea of a *non-creationist* world and the awareness that we are all animal species.

Though modernity has been experienced by societies worldwide as a significant change in their lifestyle, their traditions and cultural practices, it triggered a whirlwind of intellectual and artistic productions. These texts and works of art are not only a product of disquieting times but also reflect upon what these entail. Most of all, they reveal a feeling of estrangement and newness that permeated collective perception, a trait that flourished in what we understand today as a remarkable artistic movement.

The epithet of Modernism is certainly versatile. The idea of the literary text as a puzzle – dear to modernist writers such as James Joyce<sup>4</sup> – was popular among authors

<sup>3</sup> Kári Driscoll and Eva Hoffmann, ‘Introduction’, in *What Is Zoopoetics? Texts, Bodies, Entanglement*, ed. Kári Driscoll and Eva Hoffmann (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 4.

<sup>4</sup> See the epigraph to Don Gifford and Robert J. Seidman, *Ulysses Annotated: Notes for James Joyce’s Ulysses*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., rev. and enlarged by Don Gifford (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008), n. p.: ‘I’ve put in so many enigmas and puzzles that it will keep the professors busy for centuries arguing over what I meant, and that’s the only way of ensuring one’s immortality.’

of the time. Many texts which configure Modernism as a literary movement present enigmas involving syntax, vocabulary, narrative organization, intertextuality and especially plot.

In Latin America, Modernism thrived among some of the most important writers of the twentieth century. Mário de Andrade, for instance, created the shapeshifting anti-hero *Macunaíma* (1928), a quasi-mythological narrative where the reader finds a patchwork illustration of the diverse language universe of Brazilian mythology. Another example is Jorge Luis Borges's narratives, such as *Historia de la eternidad* (1936) in his early career, following his *Ficciones* (1944), *El Aleph* (1949), and *El libro de los seres imaginarios* (1959), to name a few. Borges's works are crowded with images of dreams, labyrinths, misunderstandings, and mythological creatures at the same time as it proposes critical analyses of metafiction.

In Brazil in the 1930s, the movement was permeated by fictional accounts of droughts and famine that struck the world in the early twentieth century, such as Graciliano Ramos's *Barren Lives (Vidas Secas)*, 1938 – a poetic illustration of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century Brazilian droughts which introduces one of the most important animal characters in Brazilian literature, the dog Baleia. In a similar take, Rachel de Queiroz's *The Fifteen (O Quinze)*, 1930 depicts the lives of the poor side by side with their animal companions and semi-domestic animals. In these novels, the human struggle is represented in proximity to the lives of animals of different species, creating space for different dynamics involving animals as subjects and agents.

Brazilian post-war literature features João Guimarães Rosa's poetic and neologism-filled prose and animal-like language in *Sagarana* (1946), *Grande Sertão: Veredas* (1956), *Meu tio o Iauaretê* (1961), and other works. Analogously, Clarice Lispector's stream-of-consciousness narratives like *A Hora da Estrela* (1977) and *A Paixão Segundo G.H.* (1974) both examine the human mind and the relationship with animals in literature. Both authors seem to share a similar interest in visiting zoos and aquariums of different kinds and in various locations around the world. Their prose is closely attentive to both the inner lives of animals as it is to analysing humans' psychological and emotional lives. The century is filled with various other writers who have dedicated close attention to animals as more than creatures but as subjects and agents. However, João Guimarães Rosa is possibly the Brazilian writer who has most consistently focused his narratives on animals and nature.

### The Experimental Novel: Rosa and Joyce

Critics have acknowledged a connection between modernist experimentalism and the representation of animals, since 'the generic notion of "the animal" has provided modernity with a term against which to define its most crucial categories: "humanity", "culture", "reason", and so on.'<sup>5</sup> Although animal fiction refers to an imaginary representation of animals, in this article I am mostly interested in a narrative where animals are 'not *like* the animal, in imitation of the animal – but with their animality speaking'.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Philip Armstrong, *What Animals Mean in the Fiction of Modernity* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 1.

<sup>6</sup> Margot Norris, *Beasts of the Modern Imagination: Darwin, Nietzsche, Kafka, Ernst, and Lawrence* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019), 1.

In the English-speaking world, James Joyce's *Ulysses* is one of the most cited works of modernist experimental prose, while João Guimarães Rosa holds a similar position in Brazilian literature. Both writers are representative of their respective literary contexts and their work has faced similar setbacks in their publishing history. Even though the two writers belonged to different cultural traditions and worked with different themes, Joyce's and Rosa's techniques share a common willingness to explore the multiple boundaries of literature and language. Much has been published about the *strangeness* of both authors' texts as well as how *difficult* their narratives seem to be to the common reader. Possibly for this same reason, but also his noticeable interest in experimental literature, Rosa is frequently compared to Joyce since their writings are endowed with similar qualities.

While Rosa's and Joyce's texts shared formal features mostly related to the writing style, an interest in neologisms, wordplay, and multilingualism, to some extent these similarities can be also seen at the level of content. For example, in *Grande Sertão: Veredas* (1956), Rosa creates a 700-page narrative without chapter markings and with peculiar punctuation. The odd structure presents the narration of a story which is mostly based on memories and events that happened in the past. Guimarães Rosa creates such narratives using a similar technique as James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, focusing on formulating the character's psychological and emotional life, 'from the lowest pre-speech level to the highest fully articulated level of rational thought.'<sup>7</sup>

*Grande Sertão: Veredas* (1956) focuses on the intimate life of a man who tells his story to a mysterious listener as a means of redeeming himself from the guilt deriving from his past actions. His narration often resembles the stream of consciousness characteristic of *Ulysses*. Most importantly, the relationships between characters are also somewhat alike. Both novels describe how the characters are affected by the actions of others which consume their interior lives with the feeling of doubt and regret. Whereas in *Ulysses* we follow a man who leaves the house to run errands, but also to forget his wife's betrayal-to-be, in *Grande Sertão: Veredas*, the narrative focuses on the main character's wondering how things would have turned out if his late friend had not hidden his identity as a woman.

In addition, both novelists use a region to create a microcosm of the world: Dublin for Joyce, the Brazilian *sertão* for Rosa. In the two cases, the main characters are *everyman*, who represents both an individual and a group. Although none of the characters seems to lead particularly interesting lives, Riobaldo being a farmer and Leopold Bloom a canvasser, their questioning towards life and the situations presented before them are often imbued with the existentialism common to their contemporaries.

The similarities between James Joyce's and Guimarães Rosa's works are also noticeable in works such as *My Uncle, the Jaguar*, a novella that employs some of the techniques most visible in Joyce's *Ulysses*. Although James Joyce's prose is not focused on animal characters – except for Bloom's very eloquent cat whose 'Mkgnao' seems to be a response to his human conversation – his work is a strong example of how form and content can be inherently connected in experimentalist prose. In what follows, I will explore how Guimarães Rosa's zoopoetics in *My Uncle, the Jaguar* makes use of similar techniques as James Joyce's episode 'Oxen of the Sun' in *Ulysses*.

<sup>7</sup> C. Hugh Holman, Addison Hibbard and William Flint Thrall, 'The Stream', in *The Stream-of-Consciousness Technique in the Modern Novel*, ed. Erwin R. Steinberg (Port Washington, NY and London: Kennikat Press, 1979), 6.

### James Joyce's *Ulysses*

Since each episode is written in a different narrative style, James Joyce's *Ulysses* is usually described as a novel that combines various other novels in one single volume. The diversity of its literary style, the constant wordplay, the numerous references to other literary works and contemporary events, alongside broken linearity, turn *Ulysses* into a highly complex mosaic which singles it out as a 'notoriously intimidating book'.<sup>8</sup>

Joycean experimentalism lies both on the surface and at the core of the narrative. While the text appears sometimes fragmented by the different styles and references used by the author, the writing style mimics the complexity of the human consciousness. The stream-of-consciousness narrative gives the reader privileged access to the characters' secret mental processes. Consciousness, in this sense, 'indicates the entire area of mental attention, from preconsciousness on through the levels of the mind up to and including the highest one of rational communicable awareness.'<sup>9</sup> Most of the time, no voice separates the action from the character's inner lives and thoughts, which frequently intersect in the text without being framed by the narrator. In this sense, the text depicts not only fully-formed ideas which are ready to be verbalized by the characters, but also the mental monologues which precede the externalization of thinking.

Each episode demonstrates experimental qualities, but the fourteenth chapter, 'Oxen of the Sun', is particularly interesting for my argument. In this episode, in his wandering around the city of Dublin, Leopold Bloom goes to the National Maternity Hospital to visit Mina Purefoy, who awaits the birth of her ninth child. By the time he gets there, he receives the news from a nurse that the patient is doing fine and that the birth should happen soon. The nurse used to be Leopold's and Molly's neighbour, so they exchange some words on amenities, but soon Bloom meets Dixon, a medical student who treated his bee sting some time ago. Dixon invites Bloom for a small gathering inside the hospital with some other men, among whom is Stephen Dedalus.

According to Joyce's own schemata for the novel, the technique used in this episode is 'embryonic development', the symbol is 'mothers' and the organ is the 'womb'.<sup>10</sup> In the corresponding event in Homer's *Odyssey*, Odysseus and his men are 'coasting the island of the sun-god Helios';<sup>11</sup> despite being warned not to touch Helios' cattle, Odysseus' crew ends up slaughtering the animals to feed their hunger. For this reason, some of the imagery developed in the episode refers to cows and oxen, starting with the last name of one of the masters of the National Maternity Hospital, Dr Andrew J. Horne:<sup>12</sup> 'Of that house A. Horne is lord.'<sup>13</sup> The theme's choice is appropriate on many levels, but also in the animal symbol used; cows are usually associated with the idea of fertility, motherhood, and breastfeeding.

<sup>8</sup> Jennifer Levine, 'Ulysses', in *The Cambridge Companion to James Joyce*, ed. Derek Attridge, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 122.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Humphrey, *Stream of Consciousness in the Modern Novel: A Study of James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Dorothy Richardson, William Faulkner, and Others* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1972), 2.

<sup>10</sup> Gifford and Seidman, *Ulysses Annotated*, 408.

<sup>11</sup> Gifford and Seidman, *Ulysses Annotated*, 408.

<sup>12</sup> Gifford and Seidman, *Ulysses Annotated*, 408.

<sup>13</sup> James Joyce, *Ulysses*, intr. Declan Kiberd (London: Penguin, 2000), 502.

Besides the choice of reference, carefully chosen names and animal imagery, ‘Oxen of the Sun’ represents *fecundity* and *birth* also in its form by linguistically mimicking the historical development of the English language.<sup>14</sup> The text proceeds through a gradual transition from Old, Middle, to Modern English and ‘tries out style after style, discarding each in turn, never allowing one to take more than temporary precedence over another, and keeping its readers, always, off balance.’ Intertextuality also plays a significant part in this episode, which displays an ‘impertinent manhandling of other writing (impertinent in the double sense: both cheeky and, variously, inappropriate or inaccurate)’, all done with the purpose to ‘cohere in a formal and thematic unity that the reader must discover.’<sup>15</sup> The readers are invited to ‘travel “historically” on a plane of language constantly evoking and transforming the past’.<sup>16</sup>

The text begins with Latin phrases in ‘the manner of the *Frates Arvales*’,<sup>17</sup> a Roman house of priests who would conduct rituals in honour of a fertility goddess. These incantations are repeated three times and they serve as protection for the ones in need: ‘Deshil Holles Easmus. Deshil Holles Easmus. Deshil Holles Easmus. Send us, bright one, Horhorn, quickening and wombfruit’.<sup>18</sup> The opening Latin style lines both refer to the Roman presence in England and the fact that the historical phenomena had influenced the English language vocabulary and syntax.<sup>19</sup> Also, the English lines that follow represent an invocation to the sun as a fertility image; ‘Horhorn’ refers both to the hospital director A. Horne and to Helios’ cattle.<sup>20</sup>

In the next lines, Joyce does an ‘imitation of the Latin prose styles of Sallust (86–34 BC) and Tacitus (56–120 AD)’.<sup>21</sup> After the Latin style, the narrative imitates Anglo-Saxon prose by employing repetitive alliterations, very common in Old English.<sup>22</sup> The text continues in this fashion, going through the history of the English language by using various styles to reproduce the literary language of different writers across different epochs, such as Milton, Swift, Defoe, among others. The episode ends with language being born in the form of American English slang – ‘The Deity ain’t no nickel dime bumshow’<sup>23</sup> – which possibly represents the ‘future’ of the English language.

Besides the formal work with language, writing the narrative’s events in the appropriate register, the text also presents this gestation of language through its different narrative styles throughout time. Language is in close contact with the content which is being narrated in the episode. What Joyce devises in this chapter is the development of experimental prose and its origins across time. The evolutive language of ‘Oxen of the Sun’ illustrates the writer’s intention to establish a parallel between the episode’s theme

<sup>14</sup> The most comprehensive study of the episode’s linguistic and literary make-up remains Robert Janusko’s *The Sources and Structures of James Joyce’s ‘Oxen’* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1983).

<sup>15</sup> Levine, ‘*Ulysses*’, 145.

<sup>16</sup> Susan Bazargan, ‘Oxen of the Sun: Maternity, Language, and History’, *James Joyce Quarterly* 22.3 (1985): 272.

<sup>17</sup> Gifford and Seidman, *Ulysses Annotated*, 408.

<sup>18</sup> Joyce, *Ulysses*, 499.

<sup>19</sup> Albert Croll Baugh and Thomas Cable, *A History of the English Language*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 1.

<sup>20</sup> Gifford and Seidman, *Ulysses Annotated*, 408.

<sup>21</sup> Gifford and Seidman, *Ulysses Annotated*, 408.

<sup>22</sup> Gifford and Seidman, *Ulysses Annotated*, 409.

<sup>23</sup> Joyce, *Ulysses*, 561.

of gestation and linguistic development. The episode embodies the idea of fecundity, birth and motherhood in its characters, plot, language and style.

### Guimarães Rosa's *My Uncle, the Jaguar*

*My Uncle, the Jaguar* (1961) by João Guimarães Rosa depicts a conversation between two people: an indigenous man, who owns the house in the forest where the conversation happens, and a white man who seems to be a jaguar hunter who has arrived in the house as an unexpected visitor. The text does not provide much information on the personalities of the two characters, yet we know that while the white man remains nameless, the indigenous man mentions that he goes by different names, but the one which was given by his mother is Bacuriquirepa, which is of Amerindian origin. *Bacuri* stands for 'tree' or 'fruit' and *-quirepa* possibly comes from *kirepe*: path.<sup>24</sup> The visitor seems to be a jaguar hunter for the text mentions that he may not have been alone but accompanied by other hunters who are not characters in the story. The indigenous man was a hunter himself but ceased his hunting activities due to his being related to the jaguars. The conversation between the two starts amicably, the men drink *cachaça* and talk about jaguar skins, but it soon takes a turn when Bacuriquirepa says he is a jaguar and that he killed some of his neighbours in partnership with other jaguars. The white man feels threatened by the speech of his interlocutor and ends up firing his gun at the indigenous man. Whether the animal characteristics exhibited by Bacuriquirepa are physical or psychological remains ambiguous throughout the text. However, he mentions behavioural physical changes such as walking on all fours or mating with a female jaguar, although there are no events in this specific sequence that illustrate such attitudes apart from what is told by the man.

The writing technique used by Rosa is particular to his style and identifiable in his most famous work, the novel *Grande Sertão: Veredas*. The text is written in dialogue but, throughout the story, the reader has only access to the indigenous man's voice; all information regarding the visitor's questions, answers and comments is provided through Bacuriquirepa's voice.

The text combines different languages: Portuguese, Tupi-Guarani and some inflections of African languages (Bantu). The variations among these follow the indigenous man's transformative journey towards *becoming-animal*.<sup>25</sup> the more he claims to be a jaguar, the more hybrid the text becomes. The register changes in proportion to his statements, so the usage of Tupi-Guarapi words, neologisms and onomatopoeias grows in relation to his alleged animal transformation. In other words, the text's form and content overlap. The former statement is also accurate when describing James Joyce's 'Oxen of the Sun', where the metaphor of birth and fecundity suggested by the location of the episode is closely related to the explored content: the gestation of the English language and literature.

<sup>24</sup> Erich Soares Nogueira, 'A voz indígena em "Meu tio o iauaretê", de Guimarães Rosa', *Nau Literária* 09.01 (2013): n. p.; available at <https://seer.ufrgs.br/NauLiteraria/article/view/43371/27869> [accessed 3 November 2021].

<sup>25</sup> For this notion, see Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. and foreword by Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, MN and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 232-309.

When it first came out in 1961, the text was deemed excessively challenging by readers and critics alike. It is only after the publication of the essay ‘A linguagem do Iauaretê’,<sup>26</sup> by the Brazilian poet and literary critic Haroldo de Campos, that the main public could begin properly understanding Guimarães Rosa’s intentions. In his essay, Campos examines in detail the linguistic artifices present in *My Uncle, the Jaguar* and helps readers to embark on an assisted reading journey. Campos draws some similarities between Joyce’s and Rosa’s works, mostly concerning an aspect which he names ‘the revolution of the word’ (*Revolução da palavra*),<sup>27</sup> as a reference to the linguistic experimentalism in the literary works of both authors. Besides this aspect of experimentalism, another trait which emphasizes similarities between Joyce’s and Rosa’s texts is the interference of languages other than the dominant English and Portuguese.

The title *My Uncle, the Jaguar* – in Portuguese *Meu tio, o Iauaretê* – consists of both Portuguese and Tupi-Guarani. The first half of the title is Portuguese for ‘my uncle’ and *Iauaretê* means ‘true jaguar’ in Tupi.<sup>28</sup> In a broad sense, the analogy painted in Rosa’s text through the choice of characters, the dissimilar perceptions of the natural world coming from them, and the combination of languages is a remake of the colonial period, representing the cultural clash between the natives and the European colonisers.

Bacuriquepa’s indigenous background is also key for a better understanding of his close connection to the jaguars. This is demonstrated by his family history, more specifically when he talks about his mother. He explains that his mother was an indigenous woman: ‘My mother was Péua from the Tacunapéua tribe, far away from here.’<sup>29</sup> In this passage, the character probably refers to the *Tucunapéua* people, who originate from northern Brazil, near the state of Pará.<sup>30</sup> Further in the text, the character explains that his mother taught him that the jaguars were his relatives: ‘Eh, the jaguar’s my relation, the jaguaretê are my people. My mother used to say, my mother knew how to call uê-uê... The jaguaretê my uncle, an uncle of mine.’ This information adds to our conclusion that this connection with the jaguar is part of the indigenous cosmology, which perceives some dominant animals like jaguars as equal subjects. Bacuriquepa even refers to jaguars as ‘people’, and does not hold on to the frequent dichotomy of animal vs. human: ‘You want to know about the jaguars? Uh-hu, they’ve got such a temper, they don’t talk like other people...’ (‘MUJ’, 312) The indigenous man clearly states that jaguars are to be seen as people or subjects. This belief, described as *perspectivism* by Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, allows Amerindians to experience different viewpoints during war and religious rituals. These

<sup>26</sup> In Haroldo de Campos, *Metalinguagem & outras metas: ensaios de teoria e crítica literária* (São Paulo: Ed. Perspectiva, 2006), 57-63.

<sup>27</sup> Campos, ‘A linguagem do Iauaretê’, 58. Campos uses a phrase which had been employed as the title of Eugene Jolas’s modernist manifesto, ‘Revolution of the Word’ (1929), and later echoed in F. R. Leavis’s unsympathetic review ‘James Joyce and the Revolution of the Word’ (1933).

<sup>28</sup> Campos, ‘A linguagem do Iauaretê’, 58.

<sup>29</sup> João Guimarães Rosa, ‘My Uncle, the Jaguar’, in *Masterworks of Latin American Short Fiction: Eight Novellas*, ed. Cass Canfield, Jr., intr. Ilan Stavans, trans. Giovanni Pontiero, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (New York: Icon Editions, 1996), 326; hereafter ‘MUJ’ with page references in the text.

<sup>30</sup> Not much is known about the Tucunapéua people. However, I could find evidence that they were still living until at least the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, for there is a record of them trading with the former province president Francisco Carlos de Araújo Brusque. See Laura Trindade de Moraes, ‘O Poder Simbólico Das “Bugigangas”: Índios E Regatões Na Província Do Pará (Século Xix)’, MA Diss., Universidade Federal do Pará (2016).

perspectives can be interchangeable between humans and animals, for the role of the subject is not only attributed to humans.

The jaguar transformation, in this sense, is also cultural. Although the text does not give us concrete details on whether Bacuriquirepa's physical form is mutable, we soon learn that the changes presented in the story are most likely of a behavioural and psychological order. The character often mentions that he perceives his own body in a jaguar form when he claims to be responsible for killing his neighbour's family. The description of the kill is interestingly *not human* but *animal*. There is a feeling of trance that takes over him, clouding his vision and memory; when he comes back to his senses after the attack, he notes the marks of the attack on his and his victims' body:

I felt hungry but I didn't want his food – he was such a proud man. [...] After an hour it turned cold, so cold I felt cramp in my leg... Eh, I don't know what happened after that, I woke up and found myself in the farmer's house. [...] I was lying in a pool of blood, my nails all stained with blood. The farmer was dead, bitten to death, the farmer's wife, his daughters, his little boy... Eh, juca-jucá, atîê, atiuca! ('MUJ', 340)

Concerning the change in form, behaviour, and language, I argue that all these categories are united to represent a common idea. In this sense, linguistic experimentalism and content work together to represent the concept of *becoming-animal*. However, despite having killed his immediate neighbours, Bacuriquirepa does not disapprove of his own behaviour, nor does he believe it to be a crime. In this regard, it seems that he perceives his doings from a different, animal perspective. Historically, in some Amerindian traditions, the act of cannibalism was common in certain rituals, such as celebrating war victories. These celebrations would entail a change in perspectives, where humans would become other humans or other animals, like jaguars.

In the late sixteenth century, Hans Staden, a German soldier and explorer, came to Brazil and ended up being captured by the Tupinambá people. They were known for practising anthropophagous rituals, during which they would eat the flesh of their enemy as a means of experiencing different perspectives. The Tupinambás were known as speakers of the Nheengatu language, an indigenous language of the Tupi family, which can be seen in passages of *My Uncle, the Jaguar*. In a curious anecdote, Hans Staden records witnessing a cannibalistic feast and, upon seeing a man eating the leg of a human, he wants to understand the reason behind the cannibalistic act:

This same Konyan Bebe had a great basket full of human flesh in front of him. He was eating a leg and held it to my mouth, asking whether I also wanted to eat. I said [to him]: a senseless animal hardly ever eats its fellow; should one human then eat another? He took a bite, saying: Jau ware sche [Jauara iche]. I am a tiger [jaguar]; it tastes well. With that, I left him.<sup>31</sup>

The extract possibly refers to a ritual of cannibalism that was practised by some of the natives. The anecdote testifies that while the man is eating another human's flesh, he *is* not human, but a *jaguar*. The term used by the native is 'Jau ware sche' or *I am a jaguar*. Thus, there is a close connection between this late episode and the story by Guimarães Rosa.

<sup>31</sup> Hans Staden, *Hans Staden's True History: An Account of Cannibal Captivity in Brazil*, ed. and trans. Neil L. Whitehead and Michael Harbsmeier (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 93.

The scene described above embodies the idea of perspectivism. It refers to ‘the conception, common to many peoples of the continent, according to which the world is inhabited by different sorts of subjects or persons, human and non-human, which apprehend reality from distinct points of view’.<sup>32</sup> The points of view can be interchanged in religious rituals; usually, perspectivism does not involve all species of animals, but mostly ‘great predators and the principal species of prey for humans’.<sup>33</sup> In shamanic rituals, usually only the shamans can accomplish the transition between points of view, and they are the ones who can come back and report what they have seen in their experience.<sup>34</sup>

Even though the situation is plausible considering Bacuriquirepa’s cultural heritage, the *becoming-animal* he describes scares his visitor, who does not share his background. The turning point of the conversation between the two men is when Bacuriquirepa asks for the white man’s watch as a gift and the request is refused. After his visitor refuses what Bacuriquirepa regarded as a courtesy, he claims to be listening to a jaguar approaching the tent. The jaguar seems to be on the lookout, lurking around the house, as if waiting for the right time or the *right signal* to attack: ‘She’s getting close. [...] She’s creeping up, she wants something to eat. [...] If she starts roaring, eh, mocanhemo, you’ll be scared all right.’ (‘MUJ’, 311)

As the narration continues, Bacuriquirepa reveals his animal characteristics more consistently and describes the attacks he has performed. In addition, the native discloses to be often in the company of jaguars, either to hunt with them or to watch for them. Besides, the native keeps trying to persuade his visitor to be unarmed and take a rest: ‘Take your clothes off, put your watch in the armadillo skull, your revolver as well, nobody’ll touch them. (...) you try to get some sleep.’ (‘MUJ’, 312) This relationship becomes more complex in the eyes of his visitor when Bacuriquirepa implies having privileged knowledge of the behaviour of the animals, such as knowing what is happening from a distance, as if he could listen to the jaguar talk from afar – the *Jaguanheném*.<sup>35</sup> The cultural clash which is re-enacted in the text becomes much more evident when these details come to the surface.

At some point, the native realizes that the white man might be feverish and affirms that the latter’s friends – who are named but do not appear in the story – are ‘sure to bring some medicine... Hum-hum’ (‘MUJ’, 308), but later adds that his friends are ‘no good’, that they ought not to have let the animals go. Although the two of them are alone, Bacuriquirepa can tell that there are other men near the perimeter of the house and that the white man and his friends are jaguar hunters. Bacuriquirepa seems to be cornering his visitor, leaving him vulnerable and fearful, therefore much more prone to his attack.

Bacuriquirepa predicts that these hunters do not seem to be a match for the jaguars, and they will probably be hunted down by the animals. He continues: ‘I listen with my ear to the ground. A horse running [...] I can follow its trail... Right now I can’t, it’s no good, too many trails here. They’ve gone far away. A jaguar’s eating

<sup>32</sup> Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, ‘Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism’, *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 4.3 (1998): 469.

<sup>33</sup> Castro, ‘Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism’, 471.

<sup>34</sup> Castro, ‘Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism’, 471.

<sup>35</sup> Tupi for ‘jaguar talk’; Haroldo de Campos, ‘A Linguagem do Iauaretê’ (1970), in *Metalinguagem & outras metas: ensaios de teoria e crítica literária* (São Paulo: Editora Perspectiva, 2006): 57-63.

them.' ('MUJ', 308) Thus, the visitor is now alone, or he will think he is after the indigenous man says so. The path is now free for the possible attack which is being orchestrated by Bacuriquirepa. These sudden insertions on the topic of *being animal* become more frequent throughout the story, as if the indigenous man wanted to scare the other with the imminence of danger, implying he was a menace. Evidence of the character's jaguar-like nature multiplies and he repeatedly states that he shares a family bond with the jaguars. This information potentializes his interlocutor's fear: 'It's wicked – that I killed jaguars. The jaguars are my relations. [...] For everyone I killed, I put a small stone in the gourd.' ('MUJ', 310)

The man's monologue gets closer to *becoming-animal*, since it shifts in similar ways as his behaviour. The metamorphosis is not only apparent in content, but it also lies in language. The text starts with a Portuguese register permeated by some Tupi insertions that will frequently appear throughout the narrative: 'Nhem'; 'Nhenhem'; 'Nheengava'; 'Jaguanhenhém', among others. Haroldo de Campos affirms that these are speech marks revolving around the Tupi word '*Nhehê*' or '*nheeng*', which essentially means 'to speak'.<sup>36</sup> Therefore, the more Bacuriquirepa becomes a jaguar, the more he speaks the language of the jaguars – *jaguanhenhém* – which is named in the story by using indigenous languages roots.

It is worth noting that whenever the character refers to the jaguars, he mainly uses Tupi words. In the introduction to the 2021 edition of *Estas Estórias*,<sup>37</sup> Walnice Nogueira Galvão presents a concise study of the Tupi words used by the author to refer to the jaguars. In the introduction to the 2021 edition of *Estas Estórias*, Walnice Nogueira Galvão presents a concise study of the words in Tupi used by the author to refer to the jaguars. Based on what the character explains concerning his jaguar family, Galvão points out that Bacuriquirepa's relatives consist mainly of the black and yellow jaguar. Others, like the *Felis concolor*, popularly known as the cougar (*sussuarana* in the text), do not belong to the character's jaguar family. Bacuriquirepa cautions that his real family is not the cougar, but the black and the yellow jaguar, for these are the *true jaguar* – the *iauairetê*. This justifies the Tupi vocabulary as a reference to the man's jaguar family relations, *pinima*, *cangussu*, *pixuna* or *pixaúna*; all words refer to specific types of jaguars which fit the pattern previously stated by him.

Moreover, the character often claims in his speech that he is *an actual jaguar* but sometimes his affirmations remain in the realm of speech. However, in certain moments, the indigenous man supports his statements with facts of his everyday life alongside the jaguars: 'Apê! Fine and pretty. Don't you think I look like a jaguar? I'm a jaguar... I'm – a jaguar!' ('MUJ', 319) He also describes his relationship to one jaguar which he calls 'Maria-Maria' and informs his interlocutor that they met in the middle of the forest: 'The first jaguar I ever saw and didn't kill was Maria-Maria. I was sleeping in the bush not far from here, beside a little fire I'd lit. [...] She came up to me. Woke me up, started sniffing at me. I looked into those pretty eyes, yellow eyes with little black flecks flickering in the light... [...] She was talking to me, jaguanhenhém, jaguanhém...' ('MUJ', 319-20) Maria-Maria becomes his partner in what seems to be a sexual and amorous relationship. After telling this story, the character reacts angrily

<sup>36</sup> Campos, 'A linguagem do Iuairetê', 59. In this passage, Campos also mentions his source for the linguistic study conducted in his essay, the *Curso de Língua Tupi Viva ou Nheengatu*, by José Vieira Couto de Magalhães (1837-1898).

<sup>37</sup> João Guimarães Rosa, *Estas estórias* (São Paulo: Editora Global, 2021).

when his interlocutor asks whether Maria-Maria had a mate: ‘Nhem? Does Maria-Maria have a mate? No, she hasn’t any mate. Xô! Pa! Atimbora! If any mate turns up, I’d kill him, finish him off, even if he’s my relation!’ (‘MUJ’, 321) The previous passage contributes to the reader’s confusion about the nature of his relationship with the animals; although the man claims to have established concrete interactions with the jaguars, at the same time, none of these actions is shown outside the limits of Bacuriquirepa’s speech.

As the story advances, the text becomes increasingly obscure due its gradual mutation into other languages. The language initially used is Portuguese, which changes to Tupi and then transitions to something the reader cannot make any sense of. This progression causes a strong feeling of estrangement. When the text achieves its complete metamorphosis, the character seems to have also changed in behaviour, becoming less human-like and more like the jaguar he claims to be. The indigenous character states that he was partly responsible for the death of the black man without visible displays of repentance: ‘I was also feeling hungry and thirsty, but now I wanted, how can I put it, I wanted to see the jaguretê eating the black man... [...] A-hã, the black man wasn’t my relation, he shouldn’t have wanted to come with me, uê.’ (‘MUJ’, 335) By saying that the other human was not his relation, the speech reveals that he does not identify with humans as his equal species. On the contrary, he is professedly ‘siding’ with the jaguars. At the end of the novella, Bacuriquirepa seems to have been deprived of the language humans can understand. Most of his speech is made of a combination of all the languages used before plus a few onomatopoeias and mostly animal snarling.

The last paragraph depicts the aftermath of the encounter between the two men. The visitor senses the attack is imminent and fires his gun at Bacuriquirepa, who agonizes and pleads for mercy. The final words are enigmatic, and they seem to be evidence of *animal language* since the character has given many signs throughout the novel that he was transforming into one:

Get out, the shack’s mine. Atimbora! [...] The jaguar’s coming, Maria-Maria, she’ll eat you... The jaguar’s my relation... [...] Oi, the jaguar! Ui, ui, you’re a decent fellow, why do you want to do this to me, don’t kill me... I... Macuncôzo... Don’t do this, don’t... Nhenheném... Heeé!... Hé...Aar-rrã...Aaãh... you arrhoôu... ae... Remuaci... Rêiucàanacacê... Arraã... Uhm... Ui... Ui...eê...êê...ê... (‘MUJ’, 342)

The final speech is a mixture of growling, Tupi and Portuguese (in the original text). Haroldo Campos has cracked the code in the parts which could be translated; he finds that these last words read ‘Don’t kill me! I’m your friend, half-brother, almost relative!’<sup>38</sup>

Although what we see in Guimarães Rosa’s narrative cannot be configured as a shamanic ritual, its background comes from Amerindian traditions popularly spread among native peoples through oral history and myth. Rosa’s character is consciously Amerindian and claims to come from a tradition which perceives some animals as equals in subjectivity to humans to the extent of having a familial relationship.

<sup>38</sup> Campos, ‘A linguagem do Iauaretê’, 62.

## Conclusion

Language and ideas are intertwined in the novella *My Uncle, the Jaguar*. The narrative presents ideas that are exemplified in the form of the text. The question of language being presented here works consistently with the idea of perspectivism and the Amerindian notion of relationship with other non-human beings. The text proves to surpass the limits of language, but also humanity and animality while trying to transition between the common understanding of what humans are like and venturing a representation of animal behaviour in the text. What Guimarães Rosa achieves in this animalistic novella is the purpose of representing his theme of choice through form in a very similar manner to James Joyce representing birth and maternity through the embryonic development of the English language in 'Oxen of the Sun'. As Joyce's text ends with American English slang, perceiving it as a sign of the constant evolution of languages, Rosa's text likewise closes with the growling of an animal which gives us the sense of it reaching a human's inherent animality as it is expressed by the story's indigenous cultural background. Although both works are quite distant in meaning, they present similar characteristics which allow us to perceive how form and language can be a way of conveying ideas and plot.

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## **Animalitate și experimentalism textual în nuvela lui João Guimarães Rosa *Unchiul meu, jaguarul***

### **Rezumat**

Articolul analizează cum forma și conținutul se intersectează în povestirea *Unchiul meu, jaguarul* (1961) a scriitorului brazilian João Guimarães Rosa. În prima parte, folosesc episodul al paisprezecelea din *Ulise* (1920), 'Boii soarelui' ca exemplu prin intermediul căruia limba și forma transmit idei. Următoarea secțiune se concentrează asupra eforturilor lui Rosa de a crea un personaj-narator care pare a fi pe punctul *de-a-deveni-animal*. Transformarea personajului într-un om-jaguar este ambiguă, părând a fi atât la nivel psihologic, cât și comportamental. În acest sens, nu există nicio dovadă dacă această metamorfoză este și de ordin fizic. Însă, limbajul narațiunii sugerează transformarea și transcede de la portugheză mai întâi către limba tupi-guarani și apoi către o limbă onomatopeică care imită un mârâit de animal. Pentru a-mi susține argumentul, mă folosesc de un cadru teoretic care derivă din studiile despre animale și din studiile antropologice pentru a da o imagine mai clară a mediului cultural variabil privitor la relația dintre uman și animal.