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# "El prisionero": a *romance* in a story by João Guimarães Rosa

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Abstract

Recorded since the 16th century by oral and written traditions, the *romance* "El prisionero" was transmitted by different ethnic groups, from the Iberian Peninsula to Spanish and Portuguese colonies of the New World. Brazilian writer João Guimarães Rosa rephrased this vast repertoire of traditions in his prose fiction. Considering this premise and reference works on the Iberian *romance*, this study aims to discuss the possible influence of "El prisionero" in "Quadrinho de estória" (1967), examining themes and motives of the tale and the *romance*.

keywords: Pan-Iberian *romancero*. Brazilian literature. João Guimarães Rosa.

The popular poetic tradition of ballads or *romances* in Spain and Portugal spanned several generations, from the late Middle Ages to the 20th century, and was absorbed by Brazilian literature. The historical, legendary, and lyrical features of these poems could provide an essential key to understanding the compositional process of João Guimarães Rosa's prose fiction. The philologist Roger Wright comments on the nature of ballads:

> The Spanish ballad (in Castilian, "romance") is simple in form. It can be of any length. [...] from 12 to 412 lines, but the average is 50 to 60. Most lines are octosyllabic [...] The themes of the ballads that are most appreciated nowsdays deal with universally interesting emotions such as love, sex, duty, honour, horror and poetic justice. (WRIGHT, 2007, p. vii-viii)

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For the researcher Candace Slater (1982, p. 3-4, author's emphasis), the influence of the Iberian ballad tradition on Brazilian literature "[...] incorporates multiple strands. The term *romance* itself may be applied to either oral or printed compositions. It means not only 'ballad' but also 'novel', 'tale', 'fable,' and 'story' [...]". The uses of the term "ballad" vary according to theories and studies. However, it should be noted here that when the term is employed in literary contexts, it always refers to a traditional or literary narrative poem, composed by anonymous or literate poets to be sung or recited.

As observed by Frank Sidgwick (2020, p. 7), the term "ballad": "[...] essentially implies singing; but from about the middle of the eighteenth century the modern interpretation of the word began to come into the general use". Shasta M. Bryant has written the following elucidative commentary on the terms "ballad" and "*romance*":

> The word *romance* comes from a Vulgar Latin term meaning "in the vernacular" and apparently was used at first to distinguish the Vulgar Latin speech (which was developing into Spanish) from Classic Latin. Archaic forms of the word appear frequently in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries as synonyms for the Spanish language. By the fifteenth century, however, the word have come to mean the type of literary composition which we usually refer to as the ballad, although there are important differences in origin, form, and spirit between the Spanish ballads and the English ballads. Early collections of ballads were often called *romanceros* [...] (BRYANT, 1973, p. 9)

The influence of the Pan-Iberian *romancero* on Brazilian literature is a wide field of research, but remains unexplored, notably due to the lack of primary sources, and due to the way in which oral literature was preserved and transmitted. Thus, many *romances* of the traditional Portuguese, Sephardic and Spanish repertoire may have disappeared without leaving any record. Nevertheless, fragments of *romances* have survived through secondary sources. David Bunchan (2015, p. 7) highlighted an essential point regarding such sources: "Balladry's most obvius correlations, however, are with the various kinds of folk narrative, though comparatively few ballads have precise counterparts in recorded folktales." Hugh Shields (1991) and Huw Lewis (2004) showed that some ballads or *romances* appear in folktales or share themes and motifs with them.

The Spanish medievalist and literary historian Ramón Menéndez Pidal (1953, p. 40) attributed the *mouvent* of the *romance* to the plurality of aesthetic, moral and poetic formulas culturally adapted through its variants. In Brazil, all the *romances* came from Portugal. The genre resisted until the beginning of the 20th century, but every year the number of people who know how to remember some stanzas decreases, said the Brazilian polymath Luís da Câmara Cascudo (1984, p. 208-209). The American literary folklorist Francis James Child (2016, p. 59) explained in the essay "Ballad Poetry" that ballads "[...] are extremely difficult to imitate by the highly civilized modern man, and most of the attempts to reproduce this kind of poetry have been ridiculous failures." Reflecting the thought of a generation of scholars, Child and Menéndez Pidal defined ballads as a truly national form, maintained by inherited traditions. Cultural studies expanded this theory and vinculated the *romances* to a collection of epics, folk tales, poetry and songs.

The focus of this study is a traditional ballad published in Spanish and Portuguese anthologies, entitled "Romance del prisionero," "El prisionero" or "O prisioneiro." The *Pan-Hispanic Ballad Project*, based at University of Washington, records 43 versions of the *romance*: 27 versions were collected in Spain; 12 versions were collected in Portugal; and only one was collected in Argentina, Morocco, Uruguay and Venezuela. The database does not contain any version collected in Brazil. Also, the Spanish folklorist Mercedes Díaz Roig (1990, p. 225-226) said that the four versions in Latin America are from Argentina, Uruguay and Venezuela, with few variations from the ancient text. According to Díaz Roig, "El prisionero" is well documented in ancient tradition, but still quite sparse in Modern times, and shows features in common with the so-called Songs of Captivity and Songs of May.

In *Flor nueva de romances viejos*, Menéndez Pidal (1962, p. 194) mentions that several verses and traductions of "El prisionero" became famous, such as "The Captive Knight and the Blackbird," by John Gibson Lockhart; "Der Gefangenen," by Emanuel Geibel; Thor Lange's ballad "Fangen", and Damas Hinard's version "Le vieux seigneur prisonnier." For Miguel Ángel Pérez Priego (2013, p. 269), one of the most interesting aspects of "El prisionero" is precisely the artistic amalgam of features from popular and erudite genres (poetic symbols; love themes; lexical elements; expressive formulas; etc).

The purpose of this study is to analyse the possible influence of "El prisionero" in "Quadrinho de estória," tale of *Tutaméia*, subtitled Terceiras Estórias (*Tutaméia*: Third Stories), collection published in 1967 by the Brazilian writer João Guimarães

Rosa. The objective of the analysis is to identify similarities that may indicate traces of this Iberian *romance* in Guimarães Rosa's tale. The initial sections of this paper are descriptive in nature and have a brief literature review on the ballad genre and on "El prisionero;" the final section comparatively examines motifs and themes shared by the ballad and the tale.

The theoretical framework includes works of Donald McGrady (1992), Frances J. Child (1875), Guy Le Strange (2013), Hugh Shields (1991), John A. Crow (1979), Jon Stephen Vincent (1978), Manuel da Costa Fontes (1997), Miguel Ángel Pérez Priego (2010; 2013), Paul Bénichou (1970), Roger Wright (2007; 2012), Samuel Gordon Armistead (1986; 2005), and Ramón Menéndez Pidal (1953, 1968), among others.

## The hybrid nature of the romance

When the British Orientalist Guy Le Strange (2013, p. xiv) discussed "the age of the *romances viejos*," according to "good authority," he asserted that: "[...] no extant Spanish ballad can lay claim to an earlier date for its composition than the year 1400, also but few are of the 15th, most being of the 16th and 17th centuries." Between 1546 and 1550, Martín Nucio printed in Antwerp an edition known as the *sin año* (it has no printed date) of the *Cancionero de romances*, a collection of "primitive ballads" from oral tradition and from the earlier broadsides (*pliegos sueltos*). Le Strange's edition of the *Cancionero* includes "El prisionero" in its first section, "Miscellaneous Ballads." In *Popular Ballads of the Olden Time,* Frank Sidgwick (1903, p. viii) explained: "A few ballads defy classification, and will have to appear, if at all, in a miscellaneous section."

As John Armstrong Crow (1979, p. 31) pointed out: "The ballads of Spain, called *romances* in Spanish, are an essential key to understanding the country and its literature." The American Hispanist disagrees with the thesis according to which "[...] the ballads represent the breaking up of the epic tradition (...) that the epic was the earliest form of Spanish literature and that the Moors never composed poetry in Spain."

Crow (1979, p. xxix) proposes that some of the *romances* were probably drawn from the same poetical tradition of the early *kharjas* (refrains), "the much older lyric poems of love," a kind of *cri de coeur* originated from folk poetry: "In the *kharjas* a girl of the lower class bewails the loss or absence of her lover;" but the *romances*, stated Crow

(1979, p. 32): "[...] found additional inspiration in the various heroes and of the stories of the epics, often fused the two currents, and then took on a vigorous life of their own."

In *Romantic Verse Narrative*, the German literary critic Hermann Fischer (1991, p. 26) remarked the distinction between the "two currents," referring to the hybrid content of the *romance*: "While the epic is by nature a homogeneous whole, the *romance* is a mixture of influences as a result of its Germanic, Celtic, classical and oriental roots."

Authority on Irish traditional ballads, Hugh Shields (1991, p. 41) depicted the old oral ballad as a song reporting a fulfilled action and "[...] information about a series of intellegibly motivated events in the past". This report, added Shields, can be formally detached in style and chronologically ordered to narrate a significant fact from the daily life or from the historical past: "But ballads are much more than a documentary report because these qualities of representation generally tend strongly to a dramatic purpose."

Seymour Resnick and Jeanne Pasmantier (1994, p. 70) define the old *romances* as anonymous poems transmitted orally, but remark that the actual origin of its tradition remains a debatable matter in Spanish literature, because for some modern scholarship ballads "might be fragments of epics," while other line of research finds its origin in the 15th century. Both literary traditions take into account very specific characteristics.

The critic and historian of the Spanish literature Julio Rodríguez Puértolas (1992) conceived the *romance* as a narrative poem, a literary form sung or recited with musical accompaniment, rooted in the period of decline of the medieval Castilian epic poetry, transmmited by oral and written versions. *Romances* are equivalent to European ballads, although more widespread in Iberian world than in other contries, pondered the British Hispanist Christopher Colin Smith (apud PUÉRTOLAS, 1992, p. 5). The distinction between ballad and medieval *romance* is a persistent question, source of many theories.

According to Rhiannon Purdie (2008, p. 84), since the 15th century, a wide range of medieval *romances* survived by adopting the musical form of ballads, and due to this fact: "The close relationship between these two genres is widely accepted, though ill understood, thanks to some narratives which appear in both *romance* and ballad form and some individual texts that sit squarely between genres." Purdie considers the music an essential aspect to distinguish an early ballad from a late *romance*, "tacitly assuming that medieval *romance* was either read or recited." The Finnish folklorist Holger Olof Nygard (1976, p. 12 apud PURDIE, 2008, p. 84) mentioned this distinction in "Popular

Ballad and Medieval *Romance*" (1976), in the following reflexion: "The melodic aspect would suggest that ballad is a separate genre, distinct and independent of the *romance*."

For the Spanish literary historian Miguel Ángel Perez Priego (2010, p. 164-165), some *romances* are not specifically limited to a historical or literary aspect. They do not relate to any concrete fact or specific literary source, but have novelistic features and report to stories of vengeance, treachery, mystery and passion, such as the "Romance de la Infantina" and "Conde Arnaldos." On the other hand, *romances* like "Rosa fresca," "Fonte frida" and "El prisionero" involve lyrical details resulting from the combination of folkloric motifs and symbolic elements. In this sense, the polysemy inherent to the poetic message of "El prisionero," plenty of meaning, would contribute to its perpetuity.

Roger Wright (2012, p, 423) considered the oral epic and old oral ballads "related parts of the same genre," as suggested by later records of popular ballads and by the *Poema de Mio Cid*, the written counterpart of the epic: "This is not to claim that the epic was a long ballad, or a sequence of many ballads, for it has a coherent structure of its own as a single entity." However, both forms were called *cantares*; they may present dramatic dialogues performed by people (*juglares*), musical accompaniment, analogous plots, themes and verse structures. According to Wright (2012, p. 423), if later ballads on historical themes can be interpreted as reconstructed fragments of earlier epics that mirror modern fantasies, whose "[...] only performances in medieval reality were of the shorter *romances* (...) it is reasonable to see them all as manifestations of the one genre; which we can for convenience call the genre of Medieval Spanish Oral Literature." This permeability of the romance to other cultural heritage had already been analysed from a complementary point of view by Samuel Gordon Armstead and Joseph H. Silverman:

> The modern tradition has continued to rearrange these early narrative components in patterns that vary from one geographic sub-tradition to another and which, in combination with aditional narrative types originally extraneous to (...) [a romance] cycle, attest to a complexity of thematic associations (...) (ARMISTEAD; SILVERMAN, 1983, p. 11).

Braulio do Nascimento (1995, p. 549) asserts on the origin and literary form of the Brazilian *romances* that the study of the versions included in a *romance* cycle reveals intertextualities and thematic combinations evidenced by the number of variations on its

themes and motifs. Then each new version of a *romance* can represent a textual mosaic. Likewise, traditional narrative poetry assimilates features of other cultures and preserve traces from related genres, as the monological tone focused on the subjective life. In this sense, explaining how dramatic monologues absorb elements of different genres, Daniel Curley clarifies important themes in "El prisionero," such as isolation and solitude:

> Just as Ovidian monologues perpetuate the rhetorical traditions of Roman tragedy at large, so the absolute isolation in which his characters perform might reflect conventions of tragic staging closer ho his own era. Of course, the solitude of speakers has been a trope of epic from the very beginning: Hector, in a celebrated example, debates with himself outside the walls of Troy. It is easy for epic narrators, with their all-encompassing perspectives, to isolate their characters and afford them privacy. (CURLEY, 2013, p. 141)

Maria Soledad Carrasco Urgoiti (2005, p. 376) considers the preeminence of the soliloquy the key element in the "romances de cautivos." She has referred to this aspect as a poetical legacy from the Renaissance period and the Petrarchan tradition, heritage accepted by sixteenth-century poets. Metrical variety is a feature of the lyrical passages from the "romances de cautiverio," each stanza of octosyllabic verses is followed by refrains composed in hendecasyllable lines, or mixed with complementary short verses.

These *romances* usually omit any allusion to real contingencies, space or time to depict the scenario where the prisoner or frustrated lover was left alone with his laments and expectations. Textual segments, dialogues or soliloquies that reveal the principals's own words are a relevant structural feature of *romances*, explained David W. Foster:

> Having established a context of some major significance, the poem allows the heroes and the villains, so to speak, to reveal themselves with their own words. Soliloquies and dialogues do unquestionably lend dramatic intensity to oral or pseudo-oral literature, and the Spanish ballad is noted for placing the characters of these narrative works directly before the audience without the overtly intervening voice of the ministrel. More important, such dialogism promotes the "directness" in terms of action

> and human motivation associated with the *romances* that is in such sharp contrast to the nonnarrative and often tedious psychological introspection of contemporary fifteenth-century lyric poetry. Here (...) the few words uttered by each immediately serve to fix in the audience's mind their characters which are so pivotal in the elaboration in subsequent texts of the theme of sin and punishment. (FOSTER, 1971, p. 54)

In "Nerval et la chanson folklorique" (1965), the literary historian Paul Bénichou employed the term *rêverie* to explain the outcome of "La Pernette," ballad whose plot includes the motif of "the poor lover who is kept in prison," a kind of song of mourning. Shields (1991, p. 53) emphasized Benichou's concept of *rêverie*, noting how "[...] it can serve provisionally for this feature in general, which is usually in first-person discourse though not always easy to atribute, whether to a particular speaker or to the narrator." The *rêverie* emerges as "evident fantasy" from the pleading of a girl "who wishes for a double death" because her lover was condemned to the gallows:

> If you hang my Pierre you must hang both of us;
> Hang me at dawn and him after day;
> On the road of Compostela bury us both,
> Cover him with roses, cover me with flowers;
> All the pilgrims who pass will take a bit of it.
> They will say "God save the souls of the poor lovers
> That have both died of love." (SHIELDS, 1991, p. 54)

The *revêrie* might be better defined as an internal monologue, "[...] in the style of the monologues frequent in medieval novels. [...] the patching up of faulty texts is only an incidental function of the *rêverie*," depicted Shields (1991, p. 54-55). The narrative function of a speculative *rêverie* at the end of ballads implies its affective value, which "often has the tone of a lament" or of "unfulfillable wishes." Instead of the abrupt and bleak final, explains Shields (1991, p. 56), the more detailed version of "El prisionero" shows the unnamed protagonist looking to an imaginary future in an extended *rêverie*: "I'll send word to my beloved to bake me a pie: not a hare pie or a swallow or fish pie but a hammer-and-file pie garnished by a blacksmith. So we shall file the fetters and hammer

the tower and when the tower falls the prisoners will go free." The prevalence of soliloquy and other themes of "El prisionero" in Guimarães Rosa's tale "Quadrinho de estória" is discussed in the next parts of this paper, after some notes on the *romance*.

## The *romance* "El prisionero"

"Era infinitamente maio..."
*Desenredo*, João Guimarães Rosa

Damas Hinard (1844, p. 247) prefaced his traduction of "El prisionero," titled "Le vieux seigneur prisonnier," starting from a question pertinent to literary historians and folklorists of the Romantic nationalism. Several Spanish editors of collections of ballads related "El prisionero" to García II, king of Galicia and Portugal, who, after having been defeated by his brother, King Sancho II of Castile, was imprisoned in 1071 by him in the castle of Luna, where he died on 22 May 1091. However, pondered Damas Hinard, nothing designates this character, not once named in the countless versions of the poem.

The *Cancionero General*, published in 1511, records a six lines version entitled "Romance del prisionero." Puértolas (1992, p. 169) related the version to the fifteenth-century troubadour poetry. The early longer versions (*noveladas*) have a happy-ending, preceded by complicated adventures, but it is the short version that best illustrates the intense lyrism of the prisoner's grief. The literary critic Erich von Richthofen (1970, p. 158 apud PUÉRTOLAS, 1992, p. 170) recalls that Al-Mu'tamid, last ruler of the taifa of Seville in Al-Andaluz, deposed by the Almoravids in 1097 and kept prisoner in Morocco, wrote poems comparing himself to birds, whose freedom the poet envied. The 1920 edition of Le Strange's *Spanish Ballads* registers a long version of "El prisionero." The version quoted by Le Strange was translated into English verses by Roger Wright in the collection *Spanish Ballads*, included in the section "Love and adventure ballads:"

| | |
|---|---|
| “Por el mes era de mayo,<br>quando haze la calor,<br>quando canta la calandria<br>y responde el ruiseñor,<br>quando los enamorados<br>van a servir al amor,<br>sino yo, triste, cuytado,<br>que bivo en esta prisión,<br>que ni sé quando és de día,<br>ni quando las noches son,<br>sino por una avezilla<br>que me cantaba al albor.<br>Matómela un vallestero;<br>¡ déle Dios mal galardón!<br>Cabellos de mi Cabeza<br>llégan me al corvejón,<br>los cabellos de mi barba<br>por manteles tengo yo,<br>las uñas de las mis manos<br>por cuchillo tajador.<br>Si lo hazía el buen rey,<br>haze lo como señor;<br>si lo haze el carcelero,<br>hácelo como traydor.<br>Mas i quién agora me diesse<br>un páxaro hablador,<br>si quiera fuesse calandria,<br>o tordico o ruiseñor:<br>criado fuesse entre damas<br>y abezado a la razón;<br>que me lleve una embaxada<br>a mi esposa Leonor,<br>que me enbíe una empanada,<br>no de trucha ni salmón<br>sino de una lima sorda<br>y de un pico tajador,<br>la lima para los hierros<br>y el pico para la torre!”<br>Oídolo avía el rey,<br>mandóle quitar la prisión.<br>(LE STRANGE, 2013, p. 3-4) | “The month is now May,<br>the summer’s beginning,<br>the clear nightingale<br>and lark are both singing,<br>young people in love<br>with their loving are busy,<br>but I am alone<br>and sad in this prison;<br>I can’t tell when it’s night,<br>I can’t tell when it’s morning;<br>a bird used to sing<br>and announce it was dawning,<br>but an archer has killed it –<br>may God harshly reward him!<br>The hairs from my head<br>reach down to my ankles,<br>the hairs of my beard,<br>I used them as blankets,<br>the nails of my hands,<br>I used them as blades;<br>if the King has decreed this<br>his decision he’s made,<br>but if it’s the jailer<br>then I’ve been betrayed.<br>I need someone to give me<br>a bird that can talk,<br>a nightingale, lark,<br>a thrush or a hawk,<br>that’s been trained among women<br>to reason and more;<br>it could carry the word<br>to my wife Leonor<br>to send me a pie,<br>not of salmon or trout,<br>but containing a pick<br>and a file to get out,<br>the pick for the tower<br>and the file for my chains.”<br>The King heard this cry<br>And has freed him again.<br>(WRIGHT, 2007, p. 7) |

The American Hispanist Donald McGrady (1992, p. 273-274) dedicated a study to “El prisionero,” recognizing that, despite being one of the most widespread of the genre, there

are few studies on the *romance*, perhaps due its brevity and absence of an effective action or express anecdote. However, the poem has a multiplicity of novelistic motifs under its apparent simplicity. According to McGrady, the oldest version of the *romance* was found reproduced in facsimile in the *Cancionero General* recompiled by Hernando del Castillo in 1511, edited by Antonio Rodríguez-Moñino in 1958. Crow's anthology reproduces a version of the "Romance del prisionero," translated into English verse and titled "Maytime." Crow (1979, p. 35), McGrady (1992, p. 274), and Puértolas (1992, p. 169-170) cite the same version of the "Romance del prisionero" recorded by Ménendez Pidal in *Flor Nueva de Romances Viejos*, published in 1928, but Crow noted that the second and fourth verses of the *romance* do not appear in previous editions of *Flor Nueva*:

Que por mayo era, por mayo
cuando hace la calor,
cuando los trigos encañan
y están los campos en flor.
cuando canta la calandria
y responde el ruiseñor,
cuando los enamorados
van a servir al amor;
sino yo, triste, cuitado,
que vivo en esta prisión;
que ni sé cuándo es de día
ni cuándo las noches son,
sino por una avecilla
que me cantaba al arbor.
Matómela un ballestero,
¡ déle Dios mal galardón!
(CROW, 1979, p. 35)

It hapenned in the mounth of May
In summer warmest hour,
When shafts of wheat were ripening,
And fields were all in flower,
When the skylark sings his happy song,
And the nightingale responds,
When lovers cross their hearts and swear
To their truelove to belong;
All save for me who in my pain
Locked in this dingy cell,
Where night and day are both the same;
No difference could I tell
If there were not a tiny bird
Why at daybreak sang to me.
Alas, an archer killed that bird;
God, bring him misery!
(CROW, 1979, p. 35)

Puértolas (1992, p. 170) considered the first eight lines of the *romance*, entitled "Prisioneros" in his collection, echoes from the medieval spring songs of the Provençal repertoire and Galician-Portuguese lyric. The death of the "avecilla" represents a painful break with the exterior world and alienates the prisoner from reality. The seclusion and the lack of communication with the outside world and with other beings constitute the dramatic essence of the *romance*. Puértolas (1992, p. 48) also underlines the theme of loneliness and defined the prisoner as a character hopelessly condemned to solitude,

"personaje irremediablemente condenado a la soledad." The incommunicability is part of his irremediable condemnation. Many romances reinforce this incommunicable world employing symbols, such as chains, closed doors, windows with bars and prisons. The heroine of the *Romance de la linda Melisenda*, the daughter of Kings of Castile, finding the doors locked, and without knowing how to get in, used a magical incantation to open them widely: "[...] las puertas halló cerradas/ no sabe por dó entrar;/ con arte de encantamiento/ las abrió de par en par" (PUÉRTOLAS, 1992, p. 48-51).

In these *romances*, the characters represent segregated figures stalked by all sort of solitary confinement. Puértolas (1992, p. 52) defined them as tormented heroes, product of a hopeless universe. He compared this portrait of the lonely characters to the formal fragmentation of the *romance* mainly in shorter versions that conclude the poem abruptly, with a "short-ending," without superfluous details. The truncated form of such *romances* results of its fragmentation, referred by Menéndez Pidal's expression "saber callar a tiempo," and corresponds to a dramatic cosmovision or fatalistic logic.

The purpose of understanding Nature and the desire to communicate with the natural world suggests an attempt of reintegration into life. In "El prisionero," both desires are intrinsically frustrated. The attempt of dialogue with Nature can be delightful to some degree, however, it may be incapable of eliminating unrealizable aspirations. This kind of dialogue has a dramatic function. It exposes the real situation of the prisoner, dealing with uncertainties. The *romancero* is replete with frustrated dialogues and unanswered questions. The ongoing dialogue is unsatisfactory because one of the key interlocutors is incapable of responding effectively. Then, according to Puértolas (1992, p. 54-55), the abridged version of the romance "El prisionero" portrays the hero's dialogue with the exterior world or with the Nature personified by the bird that is silenced by an archer.

Michelle Débax (1996, p. 91) compared the *romance* to an account, which is done through texts that seemed to exclude ties to all narrativity. Thus the shorter version of the "Ballad of the prisoner" or "El romance del prisionero" is not only the mourning of the prisoner in his closed cloister, but recounts the grief due to the loss of the sole bond with the outside world, a tiny bird. The Galician-Portuguese *Barcarolas* and *Cantigas de amigo* equally include regrets of an enigmatic self for an absent love or "friend."

D. Gareth Walters (2002, p. 99-100) translated into English prose the Menéndez Pidal's shorter version of the "Romance del prisionero," comparing the poem to "[...] a

genuinely lyrical utterance, comprising the prisoner's lament. With the coming of Spring he contrasts his plight with the lot of those who enjoy freedom and love." The shorter versions usually end with the prisoner cursing the archer who killed the bird:

> It was in the month of May when the warmth returns, when the wheat ripens and the fields are in flower, when the lark sings and the nightingale replies, when lovers start to serve love; but not so for me, sad and wretched as I am, who lives in this prison, who does not know when it is day or when it is night, except for the little bird that sang to me at dawn. An archer killed him; may God reward him as he deserves! (WALTERS, 2002, p. 100)

The *romance* was registered in a longer version of forty lines. It continues beyond the end of the text quoted above to add "[...] the name of the prisoner's wife, his hope that she can help him to escape, and the happy resolution whereby the king orders his release." However, according to Colin Smith (1964, p. 207 apud WALTERS, 2002, p. 100): "In this state the ballad is nothing special," and the tension created by suspense and non resolution of a dilemma (well exemplified by the "Romance del prisionero") is common in European ballads. The plight of the man who is deprived of his liberty, noted Urgoiti (2005, p. 376), is a poetical motif of the *romance*, equally usual in the sixteenth-century "romances de cautivos." In some versions of the *romance* "El cautivo y el ama buena," the master's wife being moved with compassion and loving care, release the prisoner. The version ends with the idea of justice. The "poetic justice," argued Wright (2012, p, 423), is a theme shared by the epic and the contemporary oral tradition: "For example, it is the king in the epic whose eventual change of heart towards the exiled hero leads to the desired conclusion: kings in ballads often have similar functions (it is the unnamed king who releases the unfortunate *Prisoner*) (...)".

Wright also noted a fictional aspect absorbed by the epic and by the oral tradition: "the theme of exiled and reinstated heroes," which assumes varied forms, such as the return of a long-lost husband from foreign wars; the "long-lost prince" rediscovered by the sailors sent to look for him ("Conde Arnaldos"); the royal twin cast into the sea after his birth, who rescues his rightful inheritance ("Romance de Espinelo"); or the banished champion who returns to royal favour at the end (*El Poema del Mio Cid*). In the version

of "El prisionero" translated by Wright (2007, p. 7), the final lines evoke the theme of the "exiled and reinstated heroe": "The King heard this cry/ And has freed him again".

Manuel da Costa Fontes's *O Romanceiro português e brasileiro* (1997), Rossini Tavares de Lima's *Romanceiro Folclórico do Brasil* (1971), and Leite de Vasconcellos's *Romanceiro Português* (1958) record similar versions of "O prisioneiro." Its opening and ending stanzas differ from Spanish versions, but the prisoner's lament is preserved, as reported by Fontes (1997, p. 116): "But I, because of my crime, have been locked up in this prison, I only know when the day breaks and the sun comes out thanks to a small bird, the singing nightingale". The poem is linked to the religious festivities of St. John:

> Manhanhas de S. João, pelas manhãs do alvor,
> todos os criados vão visitar o seu senhor.
> Só eu sou um triste, coitado, que aqui estou aqui nesta prisão:
> não sei quando é de dia, nem quando arraia o sol,
> se não são três passarinhos que me cantam no alvor.
> Uma era a calhandrinha, outra era o rouxinol,
> outra era o pintassirgo, que'inda canta melhor. (FONTES, 1997, p. 114)

José Manuel Pedrosa (2001) defined "El prisionero" as one of the most beautiful, popular and influential *romances* of the Pan-Hispanic repertoire, with Catalan, Galician, Portuguese, Spanish and Sephardic versions. He identified motifs of the *romance* in oral tradition and literate culture. Priego's (2013) comparative work also highlighted cultural variations and themes of "El prisioneiro" recorded in both prose and poetry. Intended for performance, the story of a ballad may be told in an alternation of prose and verse.

## "El prisionero" in "Quadrinho de estória"

> "Sei onde, em maio, em Minas, o céu se vê azul."
> *Sota e barla*, João Guimarães Rosa

The work of the Brazilian physician, diplomat and novelist João Guimarães Rosa (1908-1967) is unique among Latin American writers. His prose fiction employs a wide

range of rethorical devices, poetic analogies, narrative techniques and prosodic systems. The prefaces of *Tutaméia* explain the effects of such stylistic appropriations of popular and vernacular elements, derived in part from traditional creations orally transmitted.

Gregory Rabassa (1970) has analysed Guimarães Rosa's work in connection with a tendency to returning to the roots of medieval tradition and Renaissance Iberian culture. At the second half of the 20th century, the modern novel in both Portugal and Brazil may be considered "more inventive and at the same time more faithful to peninsular roots." From this point of view, *The Devil to Pay in the Backlands* (*Grande Sertão:* Veredas, 1956) as well as *Tutaméia*, in some degree reproduce Iberian ancient ballads, Arthurian and Carolingean legends that the first settlers brought as part of their cultural baggage:

> Thus we have a combination of the archaisms that have survived in the backlands along with so much folklore and legendary material from medieval Portugal, as well as neologisms that are invented with great care in order to enhance the description of objects and states of mind. (RABASSA, 1970, p. 33)

Candace Slater (1982, p. xiii-xiv) also confirmed in Guimarães Rosa's work the use of popular narrative poems or "stories in verse" inherited from the Iberian ballad tradition. From another angle, however, as remembered by Slater (1982, p. 3-4): "The term *romance* (...) may be applied to either oral or printed compositions. It means not only 'ballad' but also 'novel,' 'tale,' 'fable,' and 'story,' (...) the ballad, though often recorded in writing and cultivated as a literary genre, retains such oral roots." One of the prefaces of *Tutaméia* presents a passage illustrative of Rabassa and Slater's arguments.

During a trip with local cowboys ("os vaqueiros dos Gerais") through the interior of the State of Minas Gerais in May 1952, Guimarães Rosa (1976, p. 162-163) recorded that they recited *trovas* and *quadras* according to the conventional way employed by the *cancioneiros* (song books) and *segréis* "[...] consoante módulo convencional, que nem o dos cancioneiros e segréis[1]." The passage is comparable to Menéndez Pidal's (1968,

1 On the term *segrel*, the philologist Frede Jensen (1978, p. 28-30) wrote: "Exclusively characteristic of Galician-Portuguese is the existence of an intermediate class between the *trovador* and the *jogral*: the *segrel* (or *segrer*) (...) He differs from the trovador in that his public performances also include the works of other poets, and above all, in that he expects to be paid for his songs while the *trovador* is an independent *fidalgo*. As a compromisse solution, we may define the *segrel* as a paid *trovador*."

p. 166) allusion to a scene in Lope de Vega's *Santiago the Green* (1620) when, thinking on the romance "El prisionero" that begins with the invocation of the month of May as the month of love, the *caballero* Don Rodrigo and his servant, invaded by the spring joy that reigns in Soto de Manzanares, recall verses[2] "[...] 'de los antigos romances/ con que nos criamos todos.' Y ese exordio primaveral aprendido en la niñez afloraba a cada passo en la conversación." Menéndez Pidal also points to Lope de Vega and Vélez de Guevara's frequent use of popular verses as phraseological elements in stage dialogues. The device is common to Guimarães Rosa's tales as "Melim-Meloso," where dialogues are interspersed with verses (that evoke a ballad) and allusions to popular poetry, as the reference to "Senhora Dona Sancha," a traditional nursery rhyme of Portuguese origin.

The term romance is referred in *Tutaméia* as a genre that accommodates distinct concepts and compositional styles: the Kafkian formula excludes the burlesque element from the narrative in the "romance kafkaesco;" the "romance do espírito" is defined in a commentary on Voltaire and Charles Bowen's critique of methaphysics[3]; the romance "em prol de tropel de ideal" is characterized by ideological discourses; and there is the "romance a escrever" whose story has yet to be written in the realm of art and creation.

In this respect, according to Ezra Pound's concept of poetic "condensation" in *The ABC of Reading* (1934), "Quadrinho de estória" presupposes an imaginative reader. As a prose poem, the tale presents the lyrical features identified by McGrady

2 Beatriz Mariscal de Rhett records and translates a short version of "El prisionero," which verses of the May song, as noted by Priego (2013, p. 265), were fused with versions of the *romances* "Gerineldo" and "Fontefrida;" the same verses were employed as *exordio* and setting for other *romances* and narratives:

| | |
|---|---|
| Mes de mayo, mes de mayo, | Month of May, month of May, |
| mes de las fuertes calores, | month of severe heat, |
| cuando los toritos bravos, | when the brave bulls, |
| los caballos corredores, | the running horses, |
| cuando los enamorados | when lovers |
| gozaban de sus amores. | where enjoyng their love. (RHETT, 1987, p. 651). |

Priego adds that the motive of the prisoner was also fused to other narrative structures, in a Gipsy version of "Bernardo del Carpio," poem of the Carolingian cycle, the *romance* is sung by Bernardo's father.

3 The British writer Lionel Arthur Tolemache (1908, p. 160) recorded both critiques in his memoirs "[...] Bowen defined a metaphysician as 'a blind man groping in a dark room for a black cat which is not there' (...) Voltaire defined metaphysics as 'Beaucoup de grands mots qu'on ne peut pas expliquer, pour ce qu'on ne les comprend pas.'" Tollemache published in 1911 a collection of anecdotes entitled *Nuts and Chestnuts*. His works alternates philosophic discussion with humorous anecdotes.

(1992, p. 273-274) in "El prisionero:" brevity and absence of an effective action or express anecdote.

Jon Stephen Vincent translated the title "Quadrinho de estória" as "Sketch of a Story," in his notable work *João Guimarães Rosa* (1978), including the narrative in the chapter "*Tutaméia*: Anecdotes of Separation." The plot can be summarized as follows:

> A young man in prison ruminates on life, love, and liberty when he sees a woman in blue pass by. (...) Several different kinds and degrees of alienation are apparent in this group of tales, but in each the process of losing communication with others is an essential part of narrative's effect. Isolation may be voluntary or semivoluntary, as it is in "Arroyo of the Tapirs," ["Arroio das Antas"] "Orientation," ["Orientação"], "Mrs. Withered," ["Sinhá Secada"] and "Disentanglement" ["Desenredo"]. It may be altogether involuntary, as the case of the prisoner in "Sketch of a Story." (VINCENT, 1978, p. 115)

One of the most remarkable features of Guimarães Rosa's narratives is the way of portraying characters as storytellers, in order to explore their internal world and inner conflicts. The idea of alienation in "Quadrinho de estória" and "El prisioneiro" is related to the themes of incommunicability, isolation and solitute expressed in the soliloquies.

In longer versions of "El prisionero," the soliloquy can also be interpreted as self-adressed speech pronounced aloud, because "The King heard this cry/ And has freed him again" (WRIGTH, 2007, p. 7); but a possible interior monologue establishes an internal experience, mediated by sensory perceptions ("the summer's beginning, / the clear nightingale/ and lark are both singing"); thoughts ("The month is now May"); assumptions ("young people in love/ with their loving are busy,"); feelings ("but I am alone/ and sad in this prison;"); recollections ("a bird used to sing/ and announce it was dawning, / but an archer has killed it"); wishes ("may God harshly reward him!"); and reveries ("if the King has decreed this/ his decision he's made"). Using poetic devices of traditional ballad and proverbial expressions, as: facts are uninterrupted, hence things are doomed ("fatos não interrompidos; as coisas é que estão condenadas") or the night, the time and the world, rotate with legitimate machine precision ("A noite, o tempo, o mundo, rodam com precisão legítima de aparelho"), Guimarães Rosa (1976, p. 123-125)

intensifies the theme of alienation and the proleptic effect of fatalism of "El prisionero."

Guimarães Rosa uses eight repetitive expressions that evoke a refrain to refer to "the woman in blue," such as: it is one in blue dress ("é uma do vestido azul," "a do vestido azul"); likewise, the one with the blue dress, in relief ("Assim a do vestido azul, em relevo"); the one in blue dress hovers within him ("A do vestido azul nele entrepaira"); now, the one in blue dress, this ("Agora, a do vestido azul, esta"); the one in blue, here ("A de azul, aqui"); the one in blue, now ("A de azul, agora"); these women, the one in blue ("Essas mulheres, a de azul,"); and lastly, recalling the ideas of nonsense and anti-meaning in response to a pre-given meaning proposed in "Aletria e hermenêutica," there is a negative definition: she, in format, in not blue ("ela, em formato, em não azul").

Such repetitions may suggest the shift from self-reflection to auto-alienation, from soliloquy to storytelling. Reflections and reminicences turn into a state of reverie. The image of the woman in blue reminds him of the story of another woman, demarcated by imaginary compartment ("demarcada por imaginário compartimento"). Her brief story, according to the condensed language of the author's prose poetry, is not structured as a linear narrative, but sketched in the whole theather ("o todo teatro") of vivid images ("imagens criaturas"), memories ("é só memória") and glimpses of the woman in blue's distant image ("de fato se apresse, para distância"). For Gaston Bachelard (1971, p. 174, author's italics): "The communication between the dreamer and his world is very close in reverie; it has no 'distance,' not that distance which marks the *perceived world*, the world fragmented by perception." The repetitions expand core motifs of the ballad. But if in longer versions of the ballad the prisoner's extended *rêverie* looks to an imaginary future, as explains Shields (1991, p. 56), in "Quadrinho de estória" he looks to the past.

The bird symbolism implicit in a sequence of chiasmus involves antithetic pairs: birds flying, face glued against the window bars; a prision is the opposite of a dovecot; swallows with long wings, the roof of the perched vulture; landscape of pain ("pássaros voando, cara colada às grades;" "uma cadeia é o contrário de um pombal;" "andorinhas asas compridas, o telhado do urubu pousado; dor de paisagem"). But Guimarães Rosa (1976, p. 122) also replaces the bird motive of the *romance* by the

woman in blue: from his stone and iron window frame the man's gaze holds her, for equilibrium and rest, centered, in a frame ("De seu caixilho de pedra e ferro o olhar do homem a detém, para equilíbrio e repouso, encentrada, em moldura"). The justaposition of motifs evokes the Greek myth of sirens as bird-women, double symbol of delight and doom for the prisoner.

Both unnamed protagonists of the *romance* and the tale are portrayed in a similar way: "alone and sad in this prison;" very imprisoned, invited to disenchantment ("muito prisioneiro, convidado ao desengano"). Moreover, if the woman in blue can be linked to the bird motive, the man who murdered his beloved can represent the archer motive. He didn't murder the woman in blue, because of jealousy, but the other, which no longer exists, he released her, like a sudden bird ("Ele não a matou, por ciúme... À outra — que não existe mais — soltou-a: como a um brusco pássaro") (ROSA, 1976, p. 124).

"Quadrinho de estória" reveals how Guimarães Rosa uses themes and motives of "El prisionero" to explore images of freedom, solitude, atonement and self-reclusion as philosophycal topics for poetic *correspondances* between literature and oral tradition.

## Conclusion

Defined as traces of historical chronicles and epics, ballads are memorial poems, allusive to remarkable facts or exemplary deeds of men and women, thus verses of "El prisionero" were related to the past of Spanish nobility or absorbed by other *romances*, even though these versions and its performances do not have a fixed form. This aspect of creative permeability allows ballads to integrate features of different narrative forms, cultural traditions and ethnographic elements of a region. João Guimarães Rosa explores exploits the pluralism of oral tradition, reframing it with an exuberant prose in *Tutaméia*. Tales as "Melim-Meloso" or "Quadrinho de estória" present echoes of the Iberian *romancero*.

It is possible to identify the universal human themes of love, loss and loneliness as well as the major motifs of "El prisioneiro" in "Quadrinho de estória." The lyric theme of the prisoner's lamentation is closely associated with soliloquy and speculative reverie as stages of alienation, and its repetitive expressions resonate as a refrain in the story.

Guimarães Rosa (1976, p. 122-123) stresses the ballad's underlying fatalism with concise and nihilistic axioms: life as we don't have it ("A vida, como não a temos"); life has no scape ("A vida, sem escapatória"); people do not free themselves ("As pessoas não se libertam"); then there is no liberty ("então não há liberdade"); or liberty can only be a lie ("A liberdade só pode ser de mentira"). The archer, the prison, the cycle of life, the outside world, and the exploration of the prisoner's inner life are motifs preserved in the tale. The bird motif is thematized in many poetic ways, as the woman in blue or the prisoner's weariness spreading immensurable wings over him ("Só o cansaço — feito sobre si mesmo estivesse ele abrindo desmedidas asas"). Then motifs and themes of "El prisionero" reverberate in "Quadrinho de estória" as components of a philosophical tale.


"El prisionero": un romance en un cuento de João Guimarães Rosa

Resumen

Registrado desde el siglo XVI por tradiciones orales y escritas, el romance "El prisionero" fue transmitido por distintos grupos étnicos, desde la Península Ibérica hasta las colonias españolas y portuguesas del Nuevo Mundo. Este vasto repertorio de tradiciones fue reformulado en prosa de ficción por el escritor brasileño João Guimarães Rosa. Considerando esta premisa y obras de referencia sobre el romance ibérico, este estudio analiza la posible influencia de "El prisionero" en "Quadrinho de Estória" (1967), examinando temas y motivos del cuento y del romance.


Palabras clave: Romancero Pan-Ibérico. Literatura Brasileña. João Guimarães Rosa.



"El prisionero": um romance em uma estória de João Guimarães Rosa

Resumo

Registrado desde o século XVI por tradicões orais e escritas, o romance "El prisionero" foi transmitido por distintos grupos étnicos, da Península Ibérica às colônias espanholas e

portuguesas do Novo Mundo. Este vasto repertório de tradições foi reformulado em prosa ficcional pelo escritor brasileiro João Guimarães Rosa. Considerando esta premissa e obras de referência sobre o romance ibérico, este estudo analisa a possível influência de "El prisionero" em "Quadrinho de Estória" (1967), examinando temas e motivos do conto e do romance.
Palavras chave: Romanceiro Pan-Ibérico. Literatura Brasileira. João Guimarães Rosa.

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