

The Sea Was Ever a *Sertão*: *Terra Incognita* in *Moby-Dick* and *Grande sertão: veredas*

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In Glauber Rocha's classic 1964 film *Deus e o diabo na terra do sol* (English title: *Black God, White Devil*), the priest character, Sebastião, prophesies that in the future "the *sertão* will turn into the sea and the sea will turn into the *sertão*!"¹ This statement is a clear echo (and slight modification) of the prophecy of 19th-century mystic Antônio Conselheiro, leader of the Canudos community in rural Bahia, a state in the northeast of Brazil. The story of Conselheiro and the tragic end of his community of *sertanejos*² was recorded by Euclides da Cunha in his 1902 book *Os sertões* (*Rebellion in the Backlands*). In it, Cunha records these prophetic words from Conselheiro: "the backlands will turn into seacoast and the seacoast into backlands" (CUNHA, 1944, p. 135).³

Rocha's film, which was inspired by *Os sertões*, and which maintains a steady intertextual dialogue with João Guimarães Rosa's 1956 novel *Grande sertão: veredas* (*The Devil to Pay in the Backlands*), portrays the dangers and hardships of life in the backlands region known as the *sertão*. The film ends with an extended shot in which the camera continuously tracks right, keeping pace with and finally outstripping two characters as they sprint across the arid landscape. In the background, vocalists repeatedly sing "the *sertão* will turn into the sea and the sea will turn into the *sertão*"⁴, and just before the end of the film the *sertão* suddenly gives way to images of the sea, waves crashing endlessly along the beach. This swift, almost indistinguishable transition from *sertão* to sea is a loose fulfillment of the prophecies of both religious leaders. This article presents an additional fulfillment of the prophecies of Sebastião and Conselheiro by reading *Grande sertão: veredas* as an extended contemplation of the *sertão* and comparing it with Her-

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¹ For the benefit of readers who do not speak Portuguese, English translations of quotes are used in the body of the article; the original Portuguese wording is reproduced in the footnotes. Unless otherwise noted, quotes in English come from the published translations listed in the References section. The original wording of the quote in question is as follows: "o sertão vai virar mar e o mar vai virar sertão!" (The translation of this quote is my own).

² Inhabitants of the *sertão*, a semi-arid region that will be discussed in more detail further on.

³ "o sertão virará praia e a praia virará sertão" (CUNHA, 1984, p. 75). *Os sertões* was translated into English by Samuel Putnam and published in 1944.

⁴ "O sertão vai virar mar e o mar virar sertão."

man Melville's timeless novel *Moby-Dick; or, the Whale* (1851), read in a similar vein. In doing so, this text also comments on the importance of the way in which we conceive of nature in general, and of sea and *sertão* specifically.

Before embarking on the analysis of these two seminal works of literature, it will be helpful to introduce a few theoretical ideas. In *After nature: a politics for the Anthropocene* (2015), scholar Jedediah Purdy describes what he calls the *environmental imagination*, which he posits as “how we see and how we learn to see, how we suppose the world works, how we suppose that it matters, and what we feel we have at stake in it. It is an implicit, everyday metaphysics, the bold speculations buried in our ordinary lives” (PURDY, 2015, p. 6-7). In short, the environmental imagination comprises how we view the world and our position in it, which inevitably affects our beliefs and actions in relation to nature and the world at large. In his text, Purdy considers the connections between the environmental imagination and “ways of acting, personally, politically, and legally, that have shaped the world in concrete ways” (PURDY, 2015, p. 7). By extension, the aggregated environmental imaginations of the world's inhabitants determine their actions in defense (or to the detriment) of the environment. For this reason, shaping the global environmental imagination, which must occur at an individual level and which is informed in part by literature and culture, is crucial to addressing the environmental challenges present in today's world.

In another 2015 text about the environment, *Thinking like a mall: environmental philosophy after the end of Nature*, author Steven Vogel questions traditional divisions between the natural and the human, asserting that the idea of pristine, untouched wilderness spaces in today's world is a myth, since human actions necessarily permeate the rest of the world even if they are not physically present in every inch of the globe. Vogel asserts his purpose to underscore “the importance of acknowledging nature's mystery and transcendent power and to caution against a human arrogance that thinks nature could ever be mastered or even fully understood” (VOGEL, 2015, p. 130). He dedicates a significant portion of his book to distinguishing between such terms as *nature*, *Nature*, *postnaturalism*, the *built environment*, and so on. My purpose is not to debate these ontological differentiations, but rather to explore Vogel's and Purdy's larger ideas. In essence, Purdy and Vogel are both interested in our view of the world and of traditional distinctions between humans and their environment. This article explores Purdy's idea of the environmental imagination and Vogel's concept of humility before nature as they relate to perceptions of the environment (and the world) through a literary lens. In short, the article explores how literary representations of nature can condition readers' attitudes and behaviors toward it.

In 1851, Herman Melville published *Moby-Dick; or, the Whale*. This book, which has become a landmark work of North American literature, represents a defense and enthusiastic celebration of the life and industry of whalers from Nantucket (and other places). More importantly for this article, Melville devotes much of his

text to describing the sea. Over the course of its seemingly innumerable pages, the famous narrator Ishmael presents the sea as a symbol of the unknown and of the infinite, at one point calling it “an everlasting *terra incognita*” (MELVILLE, 2021, p. 259; emphasis added). The attitude Ishmael adopts toward the sea is very similar to that held by Riobaldo (the narrator of Rosa’s famous novel) about the *sertão*, a space which is presented as mystical and unknowable. Although *Moby-Dick* was written more than a century before *Grande sertão: veredas*, the two books are similar in that the main events transpire in a boundless, indeterminate space - seen and described as a “*terra ignota*,” in the case of the *sertão* - to borrow the term Euclides da Cunha used when describing the *sertão* (CUNHA, 1984, p. 6; 1944, p. 9), and as a “*terra incognita*,” as mentioned above in reference to *Moby-Dick*. Embedded in these terms is a clear indication of what Vogel is proposing: reminding humans of their weakness in the face of incomparable, incomprehensible nature.

Within these domains of the unknown, the protagonists undergo a process of self-discovery, and as they reconstruct these experiences via narration, readers are invited to tag along and participate vicariously. In the pages that follow, this article shows how both sea and *sertão* are viewed, and presented to readers, as *terras incognitas*⁵ in which it is possible to arrive at a deeper understanding of oneself. After detailing the similarities between both narrators’ attitudes, this text discusses the implications of these narratives’ effects on readers in relation to the world in which they live.

While readers will need no physical description of the sea, the *sertão* may be an unfamiliar space to them. The term *sertão* is often translated into English as *backlands* or *hinterlands*, and it connotes an untamed and uncivilized region, far removed from urban centers. In an article entitled “The Unmappable Sertão”, scholar Rex Nielson explains that the term was used by early Portuguese travelers to describe unexplored locations in Brazil, Africa, and Asia and was often used “to denote unknown space” (NIELSON, 2014, p. 8). In the Brazilian context, over the years the term has narrowed in its geographical focus and is often paired with one of two descriptors: the *sertão nordestino* refers to the arid northeastern region of Brazil, which includes the state of Bahia (where *Os sertões* is set); the *sertão mineiro* refers to parts of the southeastern state of Minas Gerais, which borders the states of Bahia, Rio de Janeiro, and São Paulo. It is in the *sertão mineiro* that most of the events in *Grande sertão: veredas* take place. There are climatic differences between the two regions, but most important for this article are the metaphorical conceptions of the *sertão* in general, which can apply equally to both areas described and which often focus on wildness and seeming limitlessness.

In reading Melville’s and Rosa’s books, it becomes abundantly clear that nature cannot be comprehended by humans, much less controlled. The *sertão* and the sea are unconquerable, challenging spaces. In *Moby-Dick*, the infamous story of Ahab and his pursuit of the white whale, the narrator Ishmael philosophizes about

⁵ The terms *terra incognita* and *terra ignota* are used interchangeably throughout this text.

innumerable things, but the most recurring theme in his writing is that of the sea. According to him, in every ocean and river we see an image: “it is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life” (MELVILLE, 2021, p. 20). He contrasts the sea, “which will permit no records”, with the gouges and marks left by feet and hooves that disfigure the land (MELVILLE, 2021, p. 68). This lack of records is similar to Euclides da Cunha’s comment about the *sertão*, explaining why it is no wonder that “until now, the data or exact details concerning this vast tract of territory have been so very scarce” (CUNHA, 1944, p. 9).⁶ Ishmael also attests to the consternation that comes when trying to comprehend the sea: “to grope down into the bottom of the sea [...] to have one’s hands among the unspeakable foundations, ribs, and very pelvis of the world; this is a fearful thing” (MELVILLE, 2021, p. 133). He states further that the secrets of ocean currents “have never yet been divulged, even to the most erudite research” (MELVILLE, 2021, p. 174).

In this manner, Ishmael presents the sea as an unknown and mysterious space in which man can travel but which he can never completely understand, no matter how educated. In various moments Ishmael or other characters describe the sea using the terms “masterless ocean” (MELVILLE, 2021, p. 259), “secret seas” (MELVILLE, 2021, p. 262), “unsounded ocean” (MELVILLE, 2021, p. 303), “loveliness unfathomable” (MELVILLE, 2021, p. 450), and “unshored, harbourless immensities” (MELVILLE, 2021, p. 132). With these comments in mind, it is natural for Ishmael to call the sea “an everlasting *terra incognita*” (MELVILLE, 2021, p. 259; emphasis added). For his part, Riobaldo compares the *sertão* to “oceans of heat” (ROSA, 1971, p. 250)⁷ and explains that “the *sertão* was too big a hiding place” (ROSA, 1971, p. 410);⁸ he states that “the *sertão* is always in commotion, it’s just that you don’t see it” (ROSA, 1971, p. 533).⁹ While Ishmael explicitly compares the sea to land, Riobaldo compares the *sertão* lands to the sea, in which things are hidden beneath the surface and it is impossible to decipher all that goes on under its deceptively placid outward appearance. Once again, we can easily append to these descriptions Vogel’s warnings against “human arrogance” and his campaign for recognition of “nature’s mystery and transcendent power” (VOGEL, 2015, p. 130). Indeed, as Captain Ahab doggedly pursues the white whale, he rages against God and nature and in so doing seals his own tragic fate, along with that of his crew. There is ample evidence in Ishmael’s retelling of the story that it is arrogance before nature that leads Ahab’s ship to its ghastly end, and that things would have gone differently if they had more fully appreciated their delicate position on the open seas.

⁶ “até hoje escassei[a]m sobre tão grande trato de território notícias exatas ou pormenorizadas” (CUNHA, 1984, p. 6).

⁷ “mares de calor” (ROSA, 2001, p. 316).

⁸ “o *sertão* é grande ocultado demais” (ROSA, 2001, p. 521).

⁹ “o *sertão* está movimentante todo-tempo – salvo que o senhor não vê” (ROSA, 2001, p. 533). For reasons unexplained by the translators, many passages of Rosa’s novel were entirely omitted from the translation. This excerpt is one of them, and the English translation provided is my own.

Having briefly provided some points of contact between *Moby-Dick* and *Grande sertão: veredas* it is perhaps time to point out some of the contrasts between the two. Written more than a hundred years apart, the tales are obviously set in different spaces and feature different protagonists and antagonists. Both tales are portrayals of hunts and contain too many events and tangents to mention here; a quick summary of the most salient plot points will suffice. In *Moby-Dick*, Captain Ahab uses a whaling voyage as a front to gather a crew and then, once they are in the open ocean, he strong-arms them into joining him in his hell-bent quest to kill Moby Dick, the giant white whale responsible for the loss of Ahab's leg and the demise of dozens of sailors and ships. After escaping several failed attempts to kill him, the white whale (purported to be the devil incarnate) finally attacks and scuttles the whalers' ship, causing all but Ishmael (who had been thrown from a smaller boat into the ocean during the confusion) to drown.

Grande sertão: veredas, on the other hand, chronicles the saga of two *jagunços* (hired guns), Riobaldo and his best friend, Diadorim, who vow to avenge their fallen leader, Joca Ramiro, after his betrayal and murder at the hands of Hermógenes. As they crisscross the *sertão* in pursuit of their enemy, Riobaldo attempts to make a pact with the devil (we never learn for sure whether or not he is successful), later rises in the ranks to become a respected leader, and leads his band to a final battle in which Diadorim is mortally wounded before killing Hermógenes in a knife fight. After Diadorim's death, Riobaldo learns that his best friend was in fact a woman in disguise (Joca Ramiro's daughter) and that Riobaldo's erstwhile troubling and apparently homosexual attraction was in fact a romantic, heterosexual love that can now never be consummated.

While the stories both describe journeys stimulated by revenge, Ishmael's journey has an ostensibly commercial purpose – to collect whale oil (indeed, the crew do not learn Ahab's true intent until it seems too late to turn back). Furthermore, there is no love story in *Moby-Dick*, as there is in *Grande sertão: veredas*; at the end of Rosa's novel justice is served to Hermógenes, but Riobaldo is robbed of his potential future with Diadorim, due to her death. *Moby-Dick*, on the other hand, ends with the death of dozens due to Ahab's stubbornness. While readers may feel Ahab deserves to die, there is no feeling of justice when contemplating the deaths of his crew. Other significant differences could surely be added to this list, such as the contrast in narration (Riobaldo speaks directly to an unnamed interlocutor sitting before him, while Ishmael writes to an unspecified reader absent from view). Because the article's focus is on how the two texts overlap, however, we will return to the comparison of the narrators' descriptions of sea and *sertão* as monumental spaces.

Just like the sea in *Moby-Dick*, the *sertão* in *Grande sertão: veredas* is described as an immense, unfathomable area. Riobaldo explains that "the *sertão* is as big as the world" (ROSA, 1971, p. 60).¹⁰ He later affirms that, in discussing this space,

¹⁰ "O *sertão* é do tamanho do mundo" (ROSA, 2001, p. 89).

he speaks “about what I do not know. The vast sertão! I do not know it. Nobody knows it yet” (ROSA, 1971, p. 83).¹¹ Like Riobaldo, who spent years there, no one succeeds entirely in comprehending the *sertão* – no one knows all the secrets of this boundless space. Furthermore, while in the *sertão* “you can keep going ten, fifteen leagues without coming upon a single house” (ROSA, 1971, p. 4),¹² in the sea, “though you sailed a thousand miles, and passed a thousand shores, you would not come to any chiseled hearth-stone, or aught hospitable beneath that part of the sun” (MELVILLE, 2021, p. 173). In both places, encountering no other human beings for vast stretches (except for those one is traveling with) – being isolated in the middle of nature – is the norm and is a constant reminder to both narrator and reader of human vulnerability.

In addition to being similarly boundless, both spaces seem to be exempt from traditional laws. Indeed, Ishmael explicitly calls the sea “lawless” (MELVILLE, 2021, p. 140), and Ahab’s manipulation of his crew is successful in large measure because, if they wish to withdraw from his crazed scheme, they have no option other than to literally jump ship. When discussing the genealogy of the term *sertão*, beginning with its first uses in the Portuguese language, Rex Nielson affirms that it “served as a foil to European knowledge by signifying precisely that which stood outside of the defining influence of Europe” (NIELSON, 2014, p. 5). In other words, the *sertão* represents that which “civilized” people cannot grasp. Nielson compares the *sertão* to the sea, quoting Luís Adão da Fonseca’s observation about the Portuguese conception of the ocean in the Age of Discoveries: “the Ocean emerges as that which is *beyond the world*; in fact, it is *beyond the land*, because it is outside inhabitable space. It is the space of the unknown that is beyond the frontiers of the known world, where the horizon of the uninhabitable is drawn, understood as an inhuman space. In sum, it is *savage and immeasurable*” (FONSECA, 2001, p. 57).¹³ This comparison applies perfectly to Melville’s ocean, which is a perpetual *terra incognita* that is inherently non-human and therefore resists categorization or control by human actors.

Aside from being unknown and savage spaces, both sea and *sertão* are places in which time is unstable and slippery, and in which the conventional logic and knowledge of the “civilized” world are not worth as much as may have been supposed. This is made abundantly clear in Ishmael’s comment that the sea is so often a place of missed opportunities and constant errancy that “most letters never reach their mark; and many are only received after attaining an age of two or three years or more” (MELVILLE, 2021, p. 300). The same is true of Riobaldo’s *sertão*; he

¹¹ “do que não sei. Um grande sertão! Não sei. Ninguém ainda não sabe” (ROSA, 2001, p. 116).

¹² “um pode torar dez, quinze léguas, sem topar com casa de morador” (ROSA, 2001, p. 24).

¹³ “O Oceano surge como o que está para *além do mundo*; de facto, está *para além da terra*, porque está fora do espaço habitável. É o espaço do desconhecido que está para além das fronteiras do mundo conhecido, onde se desenha o horizonte do inabitável, entendido como espaço do não-humano. Em última análise, é o *selvagem e o incomensurável*” (FONSECA, 2001, p. 57; translated in NIELSON, 2014, p. 11).

explains to his interlocutor about a letter he received from Nhorinhá (a prostitute with whom he had relations for a time) years after she had sent it:

[I]t took about eight years for it to reach me, and when I received it, I was already married. A letter that wandered from one far end to the other of these backlands, these plains, through the kindness of so many hands, in so many pockets and knapsacks [...] I love my wife, always did, and today more than ever. When I knew that Nhorinhá with my eyes and hands, I loved her only for that trivial moment [...] When I received the letter, it stirred in me a feeling of love for her, a great flaming love [...] Eight years had slipped by. They did not exist. Do you grasp the inner meaning of that? The truth is that, in my memory, she had grown in beauty. Undoubtedly, she no longer cared for me; who knows, she might even be dead. (ROSA, 1971, p. 82)¹⁴

For Riobaldo, the delayed letter symbolizes what could have been but is no longer possible. It recalls a reality which has ceased to be and circumstances that have long since changed. Nevertheless, Riobaldo cannot help wondering about the possibility of what might have been but was impeded by the vastness of the *sertão* and by the flow of time there, which differs so much from time on the outside. Perhaps it is in part for this reason that Riobaldo retells his story: he wishes to take advantage of the malleable time of the *sertão*, immersing himself (even if only in memory) once more in his previous relationships, most notably his relationship with Diadorim, enlightened as he now is about her true identity. We can also follow this line of reasoning in the case of Ishmael, who perhaps relives his voyage with Ahab in an attempt to justify his former blindness and exculpate himself for not having seen the omens portending his shipmates' grim fate.

While correspondence from the outside world arrives only after a significant delay, the same is also true in reverse: accounts of what happens in the ocean and in the *sertão* many times do not make it to the outside world, and the reality and logic of these spaces are not understood by those distanced from them. As Ishmael notes, "so ignorant are most landsmen of some of the plainest and most palpable wonders of the world, that without some hints touching the plain facts, historical and otherwise, of the fishery, they might scout at Moby Dick as a monstrous fable, or still worse and more detestable, a hideous and intolerable allegory" (MELVILLE, 2021, p. 196). Ishmael continues his explanation:

¹⁴ "Mas a carta gastou uns oito anos para me chegar; quando eu recebi, eu já estava casado. Carta que se zanzou, para um lado longe e para o outro, nesses sertões, nesses gerais, por tantos bons préstimos, em tantas algibeiras e capangas [...] Gosto de minha mulher, sempre gostei, e hoje mais. Quando conheci de olhos e mãos essa Nhorinhá, gostei dela só o trivial do momento. [...] Quando recebi a carta, vi que estava gostando dela, de grande amor em lavaredas. [...] De lá para lá, os oito anos se baldavam. Nem estavam. Senhor subentende o que isso é? A verdade que, em minha memória, mesmo, ela tinha aumentado de ser mais linda. De certo, agora não gostasse mais de mim, quem sabe até tivesse morrido" (ROSA, 2001, p. 115-116).

Though most men have some vague flitting ideas of the general perils of the grand fishery, yet they have nothing like a fixed, vivid conception of those perils, and the frequency with which they recur. One reason perhaps is, that not one in fifty of the actual disasters and deaths by casualties in the fishery, ever finds a public record at home, however transient and immediately forgotten that record. Do you suppose that that poor fellow there, who this moment perhaps caught by the whale-line off the coast of New Guinea, is being carried down to the bottom of the sea by the sounding leviathan – do you suppose that that poor fellow’s name will appear in the newspaper obituary you will read tomorrow at your breakfast? (MELVILLE, 2021, p. 196).

To Ishmael, landlubbers, including (presumably) the vast majority of his readers, are woefully ignorant of the realities of the ocean and of the perils lurking there. The same is true of those unfamiliar with the *sertão*. Riobaldo puts it simply: “the sertão never makes news” (ROSA, 1971, p. 254).¹⁵ In this respect, Ishmael and Riobaldo act as guides who allow readers to accompany them on their reconstructions of the events that transpired inside the unknown. Having taken on this role, they become primarily responsible for shaping the environmental imagination of readers, since most are likely unfamiliar with how things operate in these spaces and what it is like to spend years there. The awe and confusion the narrators feel is transmitted to readers, who are called on to experience the same sensations as if they themselves were present during the events recounted.

Though Ishmael and Riobaldo both act as pilots conducting readers through these immeasurable spaces, there are significant differences in their narrations, as briefly mentioned earlier. Firstly, Ishmael is addressing a reader who is physically absent. From his first words – “Call me Ishmael” (MELVILLE, 2021, p. 19) – it is clear he is addressing someone directly; it is later in the novel, when we read statements like “I desire to remind the reader” (MELVILLE, 2021, p. 420) and “what are you, reader, but a Loose-Fish and a Fast-Fish, too?” (MELVILLE, 2021, p. 368) that it becomes clear Ishmael is writing to a reader (or readers) not physically present before him. In Riobaldo’s case, there is an explicit interlocutor to whom he tells his story. The fact that this interlocutor’s words never appear in the text can be confusing, but Riobaldo’s words throughout the text – including his opening explanation: “It’s nothing. Those shots you heard” (ROSA, 1971, p. 3)¹⁶ – make it clear that he is speaking to someone sitting before him. Despite these differences in medium and audience, however, the fact remains that both narrators guide readers through spaces they are unlikely to ever visit (or at least spend extended periods of time in) themselves. As the narrators take their audience on a vicarious journey, they attempt to reconstruct the pieces of what happened and decipher the meaning of things that still haunt them. Speaking of Riobaldo, Paulo Rónai explains that in reconstructing the past he wishes to “feel that he actually

¹⁵ “O sertão nunca dá notícia” (ROSA, 2001, p. 322).

¹⁶ “Nonada. Tiros que o senhor ouviu” (ROSA, 2001, p. 23).

played some active role in the vicissitudes of his own existence” (RÓNAI, 2001, p. 18).¹⁷ He may also be reliving his experience with Diadorim, as noted earlier.

For Ishmael’s part, Tara Robbins Fee asserts that his narrative is “the account of a traumatized subject” (FEE, 2012, p. 138) who is attempting “to explain the ignorance that shielded him during the time of the voyage” (FEE, 2012, p. 142) and to make sense of his survival when everyone else perished. Though Fee is skeptical of Ishmael’s having undergone any healing by telling the story, she makes it clear that this is his goal. One final point: throughout *Grande sertão: veredas* Riobaldo looks primarily inside himself with his narration, reflecting on his own experience and actions to make sense of things, whereas Ishmael examines himself and other whalers equally, fusing personal reflections with observations of others’ speech and behavior and piggybacking on their efforts to make sense of their world in order to find meaning in his own (e.g. Starbuck’s musings about life and the ocean, which will be discussed later on).

Returning to the letters described in *Grande sertão: veredas* and in *Moby-Dick*, in both cases the narrators receive news that is no longer worth anything in the outside world. It is as if there is a time lag between the outside world and the middle of the sea/*sertão*. In his text *Time and the Other: how Anthropology makes its object*, Johannes Fabian asserts that anthropologists have “spatialized Time” (FABIAN, 2014, p. 15), explaining that in their efforts to portray the Other, they have placed all societies “on a temporal slope, a stream of Time – some upstream, others downstream” (FABIAN, 2014, p. 17). In other words, some civilizations (or subsets of a civilization) are seen as belonging to the past, while others belong to the present. For early writers describing the *sertão*, Nielson explains that “the *sertão* signified not only unknown interior space but even more broadly non-European, uncivilized and even barbarous human presence” (NIELSON, 2014, p. 8). The pervasiveness of this depiction of the *sertão* is demonstrated in Euclides da Cunha’s comment in *Os sertões*, in which he contrasts the *sertanejos* with those living in the city: “For it was not an ocean which separated us from them but three whole centuries” (CUNHA, 1944, p. 161).¹⁸ While it is perhaps overreaching to suggest that Ishmael and Riobaldo believe the sea or *sertão* to be inherently retrograde environments centuries behind their urban counterparts, Guimarães Rosa himself was certainly aware that previous depictions of the *sertão* were not overwhelmingly positive, and his character Riobaldo clearly understands that time operates differently there (as does Ishmael about the sea).

It is not only time that functions differently in these places, however; readers’ knowledge of the outside world often avails them little in their imaginative forays into sea and *sertão*. As Riobaldo’s leader Joca Ramiro explains, once you arrive in the *sertão*, “[t]he knowledge you gained [is] no help at all” (ROSA, 1971,

¹⁷ “Sentir que efetivamente desempenhou algum papel ativo nas vicissitudes da própria existência” (ROSA, 2001, p. 18). The English translation of this quote is my own.

¹⁸ “Porque não no-los separa um mar, separam-no-los três séculos” (CUNHA, 1984, p. 131).

p. 217).¹⁹ Or, as Riobaldo himself remarks at another moment of the book, “ah, but in the middle of the sertão, madness may at times be the best of good sense and judgment!” (ROSA, 1971, p. 237).²⁰ Ishmael gives an illustration of this kind of backwards logic when he explains that, while ordinarily a port represents “safety, comfort, hearthstone, supper, warm blankets, friends, all that’s kind to our mortalities,” in a storm the port becomes

that ship’s direst jeopardy; she must fly all hospitality; one touch of land, though it but graze the keel, would make her shudder through and through. With all her might she crowds all sail off shore; in so doing, fights ’gainst the very winds that fain would blow her homeward; seeks all the lashed sea’s landlessness again; for refuge’s sake forlornly rushing into peril; her only friend her bitterest foe! (MELVILLE, 2021, p. 110)

Thus, in these *terras incognitas* one must at times abandon traditional logic and actively work against it to survive. In the sea one’s spirit “becomes diffused through time and space” (MELVILLE, 2021, p. 155), disoriented by the lack of landmarks and possessed of a “mystical vibration” when told that the ship is “now out of sight of land” (MELVILLE, 2021, p. 20). Furthermore, when embarked on a ship a whaler “knows not the land; so that when he comes to it at last, it smells like another world, more strangely than the moon would to an Earthsman” (MELVILLE, 2021, p. 72).

As in the sea, in the *sertão* there is another system of logic and thought that is foreign to the urban world and that takes time to understand: “Until you have learned this, you get mixed up, and it makes you mad” (ROSA, 1971, p. 60).²¹ The longer individuals stay in these environments, the longer it takes them to adjust to civilization upon their return. For readers, who are unlikely to have spent months or years at a time in these environments, reading or hearing their narratives is as close as they get to immersing themselves in the sea or *sertão*. As stated earlier, to the degree they sincerely engage with these narrators, we can expect that readers’ environmental imaginations will be significantly affected. They are likely to emerge from the experience and look upon their normal circumstances as unfamiliar, echoing to some degree the experience of whalers arriving on land after years aboard a ship. As Ishmael and Riobaldo spend time in the unknown and learn to think differently and to understand the logic of the *terra ignota*, and as they teach their readers to do so as well, they begin to understand more about themselves and about humanity’s relationship to nature. As they do so, they increasingly realize how much they do not know about these spaces.

¹⁹ “Sabença aprendida não adiant[a] para nada” (ROSA, 2001, p. 276).

²⁰ “No centro do sertão, o que é doideira às vezes pode ser a razão mais certa e de mais juízo!” (ROSA, 2001, p. 301).

²¹ “Quando um ainda não aprendeu, se atrapalha, faz raiva” (ROSA, 2001, p. 89).

In addition to the *sertão* and ocean being unknowable in their entirety, neither zone can be controlled by man. Trying to conquer the *sertão* – whether through *jagunçagem* (gunslinging) or through government authority (as the character Zé Bebelo seeks to accomplish) – is an impossible undertaking, since the *sertão* has no master. Riobaldo explains: “to stir up the *sertão*, as if I were its master? But the *sertão* is not subdued by force; on the contrary, little by little, it does the subduing. All who ride high and handsome in the *sertão* hold the reins for a short time only: they find *they are riding a tiger*” (ROSA, 1971, p. 307; emphasis added).²² Similarly, Ishmael describes the sea thus: “no mercy, no power but its own controls it. Panting and snorting like a mad battle steed that has lost its rider, the masterless ocean overruns the globe” (MELVILLE, 2021, p. 259). He continues: “[H]owever baby man may brag of his science and skill, and however much, in a flattering future, that science and skill may augment; yet for ever and for ever, to the crack of doom, the sea will insult and murder him, and pulverize the stateliest, stiffest frigate he can make” (MELVILLE, 2021, p. 259). The tragic end of Ahab and his crew shows how those who provoke the sea and that which belongs to it discover too late that they are “riding a tiger.” The narrators assert in no uncertain terms that these spaces are simply too vast and too unpredictable for humans to impose their authority for long. Embedded in these descriptions, once again, are admonitions to be humble in the face of nature, so as not to be crushed by it.

While it may be impossible to conquer these *terras ignotas*, both narrators demonstrate that it is possible to learn more about oneself by passing through them. In the very beginning of *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael observes that, “as every one knows, meditation and water are wedded for ever” (MELVILLE, 2021, p. 20). Riobaldo echoes this sentiment: “Sertão. You know, sir, it is in the *sertão* that one’s thoughts have to rise above the power of the place” (ROSA, 1971, p. 19).²³ How is it that these spaces invite people to reflection? Literary critic Antonio Candido’s analysis is helpful here:

Compressed by curiosity, the map disjoins and scatters. Here, an emptiness; there, an impossible combination of places; farther on a mysterious route, unreal names. And certain decisive points seem only to exist as inventions. We begin, then, to feel that the flora and the topography frequently obey the needs of composition; that *the desert is above all a projection of the soul* (CANDIDO, 1971, p. 124; emphasis added).²⁴

²² “Rebulir com o sertão, como dono? Mas o sertão era para, aos poucos e poucos, se ir obedecendo a ele; não era para à força se compor. Todos que malmontam no sertão só alcançam de reger em rédea por uns trechos; que sorrateiro o sertão vai *virando tigre debaixo da sela*” (ROSA, 2001, p. 391; emphasis added).

²³ “Sertão. Sabe o senhor: sertão é onde o pensamento da gente se forma mais forte do que o poder do lugar” (ROSA, 2001, p. 41).

²⁴ “Premido pela curiosidade o mapa se desarticula e foge. Aqui, um vazio; ali, uma impossível combinação de lugares; mais longe uma rota misteriosa, nomes irreais. E certos pontos decisivos só parecem existir como invenções. Começamos então a sentir que a flora e a topografia obedecem frequentemente a necessidades da composição; que *o deserto é sobretudo projeção da alma*.”

Perhaps because of its size or the great vacuums that exist in the *sertão* and in the sea, the two spaces allow the soul to project itself onto them and thereby invite reflections on life. This type of thinking requires effort and a certain relinquishing of prior knowledge, since, as noted earlier, knowledge from the outside world must often be discarded in order to survive and arrive at self-discovery.

For Ishmael, the ocean embodies the constant volatility – or at least the ever-present contradictions – of life; it becomes an external symbol of the internal human condition. In describing his time in the center of a “grand armada” of whales he and his companions are hunting, Ishmael explains, “we were now in that enchanted calm which they say lurks at the heart of every commotion” (MELVILLE, 2021, p. 358). He recognizes the tenuousness of the tranquil moment in which he finds himself and understands that at any moment it can erupt into lethal violence. Or, to invert this concept using the words of “seo” Ornelas in *Grande sertão: veredas*, “the sertão is a confusion which has become bogged down in too much peace” (ROSA, 1971, p. 369).²⁵ This “peace” and “confusion” are ever present in these *terras ignotas*. For Ishmael, the link between the physical environment and the inside of the soul is very clear: “but even so, amid the tornadoed Atlantic of my being, do I myself still for ever centrally disport in mute calm” (MELVILLE, 2021, p. 360). Equating the Atlantic to his own spirit allows Ishmael to externalize his internal struggle; that is, he can see in the ocean – now calm, now raging in a storm – a reflection of his inner turmoil or peace. For him, both sea and land can assume this role:

[C]onsider them both, the sea and the land; and do you not find a strange analogy to something in yourself? For as this appalling ocean surrounds the verdant land, so in the soul of man there lies one insular Tahiti, full of peace and joy, but encompassed by all the horrors of the half known life. God keep thee! Push not off from that isle, thou canst never return! (MELVILLE, 2021, p. 260)

To Ishmael, the sea is a place where individuals can find or lose themselves, depending on how they navigate this space. This is dramatically manifested in the case of Pip, a young boy who finds himself thrown from a whaling boat, floating alone in the ocean for hours before finally being rescued. When he is brought aboard, the crew finds that the ocean “had jeeringly kept his finite body up, but drowned the infinite of his soul” (MELVILLE, 2021, p. 383). Though Ishmael claims Pip saw the infinite and received the wisdom of heaven, which his fellow sailors are unable to understand, the narrator concedes that “his shipmates called him mad” (MELVILLE, 2021, p. 384). Something similar doubtless happens with Ahab, who is so obsessed with vengeance against Moby Dick that his mind becomes

(CANDIDO, 1971, p. 124; emphasis added). The translation of this passage and of all other quotes from Antonio Candido are my own

²⁵ “O sertão é confusão em grande demasiado sossego” (ROSA, 2001, p. 470).

unhinged. The search for the white whale, who Ahab considers to be the devil, leads him to sail his ship and all of its crew (with the exception of Ishmael) into a maelstrom, which carries them to the bottom of the sea. Here we see another similarity between Melville's and Rosa's texts: in both, the devil can be found in the roiling elements. For Riobaldo, the devil is found "in the street, in the middle of the whirlwind" (ROSA, 1971, p. 6);²⁶ for Ahab, the devil is found in the ocean, in the middle of the whirlpool. Ishmael goes beyond simply comparing the ocean to the human soul; he declares that they are the same: "that unsounded ocean you gasp in, is Life" (MELVILLE, 2021, p. 303). And in this ocean, there is constant oscillation between peace and confusion:

But the mingled, mingling threads of life are woven by warp and woof: calms crossed by storms, a storm for every calm. There is no steady untracing progress in this life; we do not advance through fixed gradations, and at the last one pause: through infancy's unconscious spell, boyhood's thoughtless faith, adolescence' doubt (the common doom), then scepticism, then disbelief, resting at last in manhood's pondering repose of If. But once gone through, we trace the round again; and are infants, boys, and men, and ifs eternally. Where lies the final harbor, whence we unmoor no more? In what rapt ether sails the world, of which the weariest will never weary? Where is the foundling's father hidden? Our souls are like those orphans whose unwedded mothers die in bearing them: the secret of our paternity lies in their grave, and we must there to learn it (MELVILLE, 2021, p. 450).

In this exquisite passage, Ishmael declares that a ship's course in the ocean reflects an individual's course in life: moving in circles along wandering paths, without understanding everything he or she passes through. Indeed, Ishmael affirms that we will never understand everything until after death. Or, as Riobaldo puts it, "a journey through [the *sertão*] is dangerous, as is the journey through life" (ROSA, 1971, p. 439).²⁷ With this understanding, Ishmael is able to arrive closer to the self-discovery he seeks. He understands that coming to know himself is not a linear process; all his life there are twists and turns that can impede or aid the development of self-knowledge. There is a contradiction in this concept, but Ishmael learns to embrace the incongruity. For Ishmael, he who truly contemplates the sea "*loses his identity*; takes the mystic ocean at his feet for the visible image of that deep, blue, bottomless soul, pervading mankind and nature" (MELVILLE, 2021, p. 155; emphasis added). In Ishmael's mind, then, it is necessary to lose oneself in order to really understand the true essence of things and one's relationship to them.

Amidst this contemplation, however, caution is paramount, so that one does not become lost indefinitely in the "Descartian vortices" and "drop into the summer sea, no more to rise for ever" (MELVILLE, 2021, p. 155). In other words, the

²⁶ "Na rua, do meio do redemunho" (ROSA, 2001, p. 27).

²⁷ "Travessia perigosa, mas é a da vida" (ROSA, 2001, p. 558).

ocean is at once the place in which individuals can contemplate life and a place of grave peril, where death is ever present. Without maintaining a “fixed, vivid conception” of the dangers embedded in the sea (MELVILLE, 2021, p. 196), it is possible – indeed, probable – that individuals become irretrievably lost, physically or spiritually. Despite the great danger of throwing oneself into the ocean, however, according to the logic of the sea, facing danger may be the best way to overcome it (as in Ishmael’s explanation about ships fleeing land in a storm to avoid being crushed against the rocks). This space of the high seas, far from the safety and logic of land, represents the epicenter of *Moby-Dick* and of Ishmael’s reflections.

While the high seas are a crucial space in *Moby-Dick*, according to Antonio Candido the São Francisco River assumes a similar role in *Grande sertão: veredas*. He explains that it is at once “a topographical feature and a magical reality, a waterway and a river god, the axis of the Sertão” (CANDIDO, 1971, p. 124).²⁸ Candido observes that it is there that one of the most important events of the book transpires: the moment Riobaldo meets the Menino (boy), who is later revealed to be Diadorim. In addition to being the birthplace of the narrator’s relationship with Diadorim, Candido writes, the river divides the world of the book in two. Moving beyond the right bank “the topography seems clearer; the relationships, more normal”²⁹ while beyond the left bank the topography is fleeting (“fugidia”) and represents the mixture of the real with the imaginary (CANDIDO, 1971, p. 124-25). On these two sides of the river, Riobaldo engages in the process of self-discovery, it is there that he contemplates everything: his life, his relationship with the devil and with God, his feelings for Diadorim, and his multiple identities as Riobaldo, Tatarana, and Urutú-Branco (“the White Rattler”). All of the vicissitudes of Riobaldo’s spiritual journey occur in the *terra ignota* of the *sertão*, where danger is always present despite passing moments of peace and respite. Similarly, we could say that the *Pequod*, the ship Ahab captains and whose calamitous end Ishmael relates, is the axis of the sea in Ishmael’s perspective, and the sea in turn is the axis of his spiritual journey. And, like the *sertão*, the sea is full of dangers that threaten the safety of those traveling through it.

It is precisely this constant danger of the *terra incognita*, always lurking furtively beneath the surface, that leads these characters to take stock of their lives. Such is the case of the first mate, Starbuck, who in a calm sea is inspired to reflect on his life and spirituality: “loveliness unfathomable, as ever lover saw in his young bride’s eye! Tell me not of thy teeth-tiered sharks, and thy kidnapping cannibal ways. Let faith oust fact; let fancy oust memory; I look deep down and do believe” (MELVILLE, 2021, p. 450). Knowing that death is always near, this moment of reflection leads him to better self-understanding. His muttered words (to which Ishmael inexplicably has access) are a source of wisdom for the narrator.

²⁸ “acidente físico e realidade mágica, curso d’água e deus fluvial, eixo do Sertão” (CANDIDO, 1971, p. 124).

²⁹ “a topografia parece mais nítida; as relações, mais normais” (CANDIDO, 1971, p. 124-25).

They can be viewed as a touchstone to which Ishmael returns, emulating Starbuck's example by telling his prolonged narrative in an attempt to philosophize about life, the sea, and the constant threats found there, and in so doing discover more about himself.

The quest for identity – especially the search prompted by living in the face of danger – is also a central theme in *Grande sertão: veredas*. In the beginning of the book, we learn that Riobaldo never met his father: “I mean, I never knew for sure what his name was” (ROSA, 1971, p. 33).³⁰ Though Riobaldo's desire to understand his origins is surely part of his search, he devotes much more attention to puzzling out who he is and was as a man and a friend, especially with respect to Diadorim. While Ishmael declares that the sea is the externalized soul of man, Riobaldo expresses the same idea in an opposite way: “a crossing, with God in the middle. When did I acquire my guilt? Here we are in Minas, yonder is Bahia. I was in those high old towns and villages. The sertão is secluded. [...] The sertão – it is inside of [us]” (ROSA, 1971, p. 257).³¹ While for Ishmael the soul emanates outward and occupies the entire ocean, for Riobaldo the *sertão* enters inside him and expands to inhabit the furthest reaches of his soul. Though phrased slightly differently, the link between the two narrators' logic is clear. And, like Ishmael's sea, Riobaldo's *sertão* contains constant contradictions: “the sertão is like that, you know: everything uncertain, everything certain. The moon bright as day. Moonlight filling the night” (ROSA, 1971, p. 132).³² Invoking the words of Ornelas once more, Riobaldo explains: “the sertão is good. Everything is lost here, and everything is found here” (ROSA, 1971, 369).³³ Just as in *Moby-Dick*, in *Grande sertão: veredas* Riobaldo learns that he must surrender to the *terra incognita* and lose himself in order to find his true identity.

It is worth noting here what Antonio Candido observes about Guimarães Rosa's *sertão*: “in truth the Sertão is the World” (CANDIDO, 1971, p. 122).³⁴ With this in mind, we can see that, in addition to being a search for self-discovery, wandering through the *sertão* is an attempt to find meaning in the world. In an article analyzing the concept of time in the works of Rosa and Melville, James Seay Dean affirms that “[t]he Yankee and the Brazilian use their travessias or passages across oceans and rivers to sound and chart the progress of the soul” (DEAN, 1983, p. 200). Applying the same concept to the *terra ignota* of the *sertão*, we can posit that the route Riobaldo follows through the *sertão* reflects his internal process of self-discovery. Recalling Ishmael's description of how in our errant navigation through life “we do

³⁰ “Nem eu nunca soube autorizado o nome dele” (ROSA, 2001, p. 57).

³¹ “Travessia, Deus no meio. Quando foi que eu tive minha culpa? Aqui é Minas; lá já é a Bahia? Estive nessas vilas, velhas, altas cidades... Sertão é o sozinho. [...] Sertão: é dentro da gente” (ROSA, 2001, p. 325).

³² “Sertão é isto, o senhor sabe: tudo incerto, tudo certo. Dia da lua. O luar que põe a noite inchada” (ROSA, 2001, p. 172).

³³ “O sertão é bom. Tudo aqui é perdido, tudo aqui é achado” (ROSA, 2001, p. 470).

³⁴ “Na verdade, o Sertão é o Mundo” (CANDIDO, 1971, p. 122).

not advance through fixed gradations” (MELVILLE, 2021, p. 450), it becomes clear how this matches up with Riobaldo’s description of his path through the *sertão*:

Small streams. Not a living soul. Then whole days, nothing – not a thing – no game, no birds, no partridge. Do you know what it is like to traverse the endless sertão, awaking each morning in a different place? There is nothing to which to accustom the eyes, all substance dissolves. [That’s how it is. From the first beam at sunrise, the sertão disorients you. Its size. Their soul] (ROSA, 1971, p. 261).³⁵

For a long time, Riobaldo wanders through the *sertão* without quite knowing what he is looking for. He is unable to triangulate his location and becomes disoriented – sometimes physically and often spiritually. It is only at the end of his life that he is able to identify his progress and the wandering paths that have led him to the place he now occupies. During his time as a *jagunço* the *sertão* calls to him, but not “openly”; rather, it “hides and beckons” (ROSA, 1971, p. 423).³⁶ Because the meaning he seeks is hidden, he is only able to grasp it later. Riobaldo explains it like this:

Ah, it was a repetition of what has so often happened to me on other occasions. I go through an experience, and in the very midst of it I am blind. I can only see the beginning and the end. You know how it is: a person wants to swim across a river and does, but comes out on the other side at a point lower down, not at all where he expected. Isn’t life really a dangerous business? (ROSA, 1971, p. 27-28)³⁷

It is significant that Riobaldo points to this process of only discerning things in hindsight as something that repeats itself over and over again in his life. This lack of understanding in the moment can have disastrous consequences and can lead to missed opportunities (the most dramatic of which is that Riobaldo does not recognize Diadorim for who she really is and their relationship remains forever frustrated). For Riobaldo and for Ishmael, living is dangerous because crossing through *terra ignota* can have contrasting results: as Dean explains, “for some,

³⁵ “Veredas. No mais, nem mortalma. Dias inteiros, nada, tudo ou nada – nem caça, nem pássaro, nem codorniz. O senhor sabe o mais que é, de se navegar sertão num rumo sem termo, amanhecendo cada manhã num pouso diferente, sem juízo de raiz? Não se tem onde se acostumar os olhos, toda firmeza se dissolve. Isto é assim. Desde o raiar da aurora, o sertão tonteia. Os tamanhos. A alma deles” (ROSA, 2001, p. 331). The words in brackets were omitted from the 1971 edition and are my own translation.

³⁶ “às claras; mais, porém, se esconde e acena” (ROSA, 2001, p. 538).

³⁷ “Ah, tem uma repetição, que sempre outras vezes em minha vida acontece. Eu atravesso as coisas – e no meio da travessia não vejo! – só estava era entretido na idéia dos lugares de saída e de chegada. Assaz o senhor sabe: a gente quer passar um rio a nado, e passa; mas vai dar na outra banda é num ponto muito mais embaixo, bem diverso do em que primeiro se pensou. Viver nem não é muito perigoso?” (ROSA, 2001, p. 51).

depending on their vision of the world, the outcome is life; for others, death in body, spirit, or both. Forging the stream or river can lead to revelation, as it does time and time again for Riobaldo” (DEAN, 1983, p. 208). The different outcomes (revelation or death) depend on the individuals’ capacity to surrender to the *terra incognita* and pay attention to the flashes of self-discovery that come and go suddenly. Even if they are unable to interpret these moments of illumination at the time, by continuing to ponder and reflect on their trajectory through life they arrive at a partial understanding of them. In Riobaldo’s case, his delay in interpreting these revelations ends up haunting him his whole life, since he is blind to the true nature of his relationship with Diadorim until after her death. However, he finally arrives at a full understanding of his love for Diadorim, and it is crossing the *sertão* (and looking back on that crossing) that makes this discovery possible.

Just as happens with Ishmael, for Riobaldo the process of journeying through the *terra ignota* changes him, and he arrives at the end of the journey a very different man than the one who started it. Or, as he puts it, “because learning-to-live is living itself. The *sertão* produced me, then it swallowed me, then it spat me from its hot mouth” (ROSA, 1971, p. 474).³⁸ The *sertão* produces Riobaldo, just as the sea produces Ishmael: “a whale-ship was my Yale College and my Harvard” (MELVILLE, 2021, p. 114). With their journeys through these *terras ignotas* complete and their perspectives enlarged, the only thing left for Ishmael and Riobaldo to face is death. Both narrators have seen death close up; in Riobaldo’s case, he himself has killed many people and witnessed the tragic death of Diadorim, while in Ishmael’s case he has witnessed the bloody deaths of many whales and seen Ahab, the *Pequod*, and its crew – including his beloved friend Queequeg – pulled down to the depths of the sea. Despite their previous experience with the deaths of many living beings, however, Ishmael and Riobaldo have yet to understand death fully. Their lack of a complete understanding of death does not trouble them, however; both seem at peace with death and do not fear it. Riobaldo explains, “I move toward old age with serenity and work” (ROSA, 1971, p. 492).³⁹ This comment reveals a measure of peace found in the face of old age and what comes after. Ishmael explains it more eloquently: “death is only a launching into the region of the strange Untried; it is but the first salutation to the possibilities of the immense Remote, the Wild, the Watery, the Unshored” (MELVILLE, 2021, p. 445). For both Ishmael and Riobaldo, death is the *terra ignota* par excellence, which nobody can understand before arriving at it; it is only in the *travessia* – the crossing – that they will be able to contemplate it fully.

Had they not entered the respective *terras incognitas* described, these two narrators would not arrive at a deeper knowledge of themselves and of the world. It is their expeditions through these spaces, surrendering to the unknown, that al-

³⁸ “Porque aprender-a-viver é que é o viver, mesmo. O *sertão* me produz, depois me enguliu, depois me cuspiu do quente da boca...” (ROSA, 2001, p. 601).

³⁹ “Para a velhice vou, com ordem e trabalho” (ROSA, 2001, p. 623).

lows them to gain some insight and then share it with their readers. The *terra ignota* continues to be unknown and unconquerable in its entirety, but they gain a partial knowledge of its particulars and become guides to others unfamiliar with it. For them, what is true – what is real – “is not in the setting out nor in the arriving: it comes to us in the middle of the journey” (ROSA, 1971, p. 52).⁴⁰ Although readers may be unlikely to inhabit the ocean and the *sertão* in the same way Ishmael and Riobaldo did, reading their narratives becomes a mental *travessia* (crossing) of sea and *sertão*, through which they arrive at an altered perspective about the environment and their relationship to it.

With these representations of sea and *sertão* as analogous unknown spaces, Antônio Conselheiro’s and Sebastião’s prophecies (mentioned in the beginning of this article) are fulfilled anew. That is, it becomes clear that the sea – Herman Melville’s *terra incognita* – was ever a *sertão* – Euclides da Cunha and João Guimarães Rosa’s *terra ignota* – and the *sertão* was ever a sea of sorts. This process of transformation, which began in 1851 with the publication of *Moby-Dick* and was renewed in 1956 with the publication of *Grande sertão: veredas*, is activated each time a reader engages with either or both of these works. As alluded to earlier, studying the way in which Riobaldo and Ishmael conceive of and describe the sea and the *sertão* enables readers to identify perspectives that, whether explicitly or implicitly, are impressed upon them. Melville’s text can help reshape attitudes and behaviors toward the sea, just as Rosa’s novel can do with regard to the *sertão*. In both cases, most readers encounter something that is largely new to them, and they must lean heavily on their guides in the process.

In discussing readers’ experiences with texts, literary theorist Hans Robert Jauss explains that a literary work “does not present itself as something absolutely new in an informational vacuum” (JAUSS, 1982, p. 23). His point is that all texts interact to some degree with texts that have come before, and that when someone reads a text, he or she is actually engaging with countless other texts whose echoes can be identified in that one. While this is true to a degree, it stands to reason that the less familiar a reader is with a particular topic, the greater the influence a specific text will have on their attitude toward that topic. In other words, if *Grande sertão: veredas* represents readers’ first encounter with the *sertão*, the novel is likely to have a large impact on their understanding of this wild space, on the portion of their environmental imagination that pertains to the *sertão*. Likewise, if *Moby-Dick* is one of only a few texts readers have encountered that deal extensively with life on the open ocean, it is likely to move them more significantly toward matching Ishmael’s conception of it in the way they perceive the sea. With this in mind, we turn to Purdy’s explanation about the environmental imagination:

⁴⁰ “Não está na saída nem na chegada: ele se dispõe para a gente é no meio da travessia” (ROSA, 2001, p. 80).

[F]ar from being frivolous make-believe, imagination is intensely practical. What we become conscious of, how we see it, and what we believe it means – and everything we leave out – are keys to navigating the world. [...] Imagination also enables us to do things together politically: a new way of seeing the world can be a way of valuing it – a map of things worth saving, or of a future worth creating (PURDY, 2015, p. 7).

As Purdy asserts, the way in which we conceive of the world has highly practical implications. Clearly, our beliefs about the environment shape our actions or inaction. Melville and Rosa, in their seminal texts set in the sea and in the *sertão*, respectively, help create that “map of things worth saving” and implicitly (and at times explicitly) appeal to readers to view them in new ways. In both texts, the overall portrayal of these spaces is that they are unknowable, dangerous, beautiful spaces in which reflection and revelation is possible. The result of such an environmental imagination has very real implications for readers’ individual and collective actions, which in turn help shape our environment and those who live in specific areas of it.

While literature is far from being the only vehicle through which people’s environmental imaginations are shaped, it can be a powerful force in helping people appreciate the environment and work to preserve it. To give a concrete example, Rex Nielson explains that “the history and symbolic appropriation of the *sertão* as idealized Other suggest the scope of the difficulties that residents of the *sertão* continue to face today as they seek greater political representation and inclusion within Brazilian society” (NIELSON, 2014, p. 20). Put simply, those living in the *sertão* have historically been marginalized, in large part because of how Brazilians in general perceive the *sertão*. Because most Brazilians have never been there themselves, their perception of the region is shaped by literature (among other things). Understanding how this region has been portrayed in the past – most famously, perhaps, in Euclides da Cunha’s *Os sertões* (1902), Graciliano Ramos’s *Veredas secas* (*Barren Lives*; 1938), and *Grande sertão: veredas* (1956) – helps us understand how works portraying this region borrow from or depart from previous representations.

By studying how these portrayals have or have not changed over time, we are better able to understand how literature can shape our understanding of the environment and our attitudes toward it. Another important connection illustrating the impact of Rosa’s novel on the Brazilian environmental imagination is Grande Sertão Veredas National Park, created in 1989 and expanded in 2004 to encompass roughly 230,000 hectares (about 570,000 acres) in the *sertão mineiro* (PEÑA, 2019). To say that Rosa’s novel alone was responsible for the creation of this park would be overreaching, but the park’s name makes it clear that *Grande sertão: veredas* undoubtedly influences perceptions of the *sertão* and shows how literature can contribute to real decisions and changes regarding humans and their relationship to the environment.

Vogel puts it this way: “landscapes change over time because of the actions of the animals that inhabit them – and, of course, among those animals we must also count ourselves” (VOGEL, 2015, p. 110). We know beyond question that our actions as a species have an impact on the world in which we live. It is also increasingly clear that political solutions are not enough by themselves to address environmental issues. As Purdy argues, “all serious responses to global climate change face the same basic problem: there is no political body that could adopt and enforce them” (PURDY, 2015, p. 20). Legislation can do much, but it cannot do everything to address the environmental issues we face. Literature and culture – films, music, art, and other media – can help fill that void by stimulating wonder and humility toward nature, which can galvanize individual actions to preserve it. In the case of readers who engage with *Moby-Dick* and *Grande sertão: veredas*, both sea and sertão – two spaces that are central to the identity and environmental health of the Americas and the world – are elevated and made more awe-inspiring in their eyes, pushing readers to shift their environmental imagination and that of those around them in meaningful ways, so as to preserve these spaces in literature and in reality.

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Recebido em 11 de julho de 2020.

Aprovado em 8 de abril de 2021.

Resumo

The Sea Was Ever a Sertão: Terra Incognita in *Moby-Dick* and *Grande sertão: veredas*

Jordan B. Jones

In this article, I read João Guimarães Rosa's *Grande sertão: veredas* as an extended contemplation of the Brazilian backlands region known as the *sertão*, comparing it with Herman Melville's timeless novel *Moby-Dick; or, the Whale*, which I read in a similar vein (but with regard to the sea). In this analysis, sea and *sertão* overlap and become largely interchangeable. In doing so, I also comment on the importance of the way in which we conceive of nature in general, and of the sea and the *sertão* specifically. The article employs J. J. Purdy's idea of the *environmental imagination* and Steven Vogel's concept of humility before nature as they relate to perceptions of the environment (and the world) through a literary lens.

In short, my focus is on exploring how literary representations of nature can condition readers' attitudes and behaviors toward it. After detailing the similarities between both narrators' perceptions and descriptions of sea/*sertão* as incomprehensible spaces that invite narrators (and readers) to self-discovery, I discuss the potential effects these narratives can have in shaping readers' perceptions of the environment and their relation to the world in which they live.

Palavras-chave: João Guimarães Rosa, Herman Melville, sertão, sea, environmental imagination.

O mar sempre foi sertão: *Terra Incognita* em *Moby-Dick* e *Grande sertão: veredas*

Jordan B. Jones

Neste artigo, leio *Grande sertão: veredas* de João Guimarães Rosa como uma contemplação prolongada do sertão brasileiro e o comparo ao romance clássico de Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick; or, the Whale*. Nesta análise, mar e sertão se sobrepõem e tornam-se intercambiáveis. Ao fazer isto, também comento sobre a importância da maneira pela qual concebemos a natureza no geral e, mais especificamente, o mar e o sertão. O artigo se baseia na ideia da "imaginação ambiental", de Jedediah Purdy, e do conceito de Steven Vogel de se ter humildade perante a natureza. O texto investiga como estes conceitos se relacionam com percepções do ambiente (e do mundo) por uma ótica literária. Em suma, o enfoque está na exploração de como representações literárias da natureza podem modificar as atitudes e os comportamentos dos leitores em relação a ela. Depois de descrever as semelhanças entre as perspectivas e descrições que ambos os narradores oferecem referente ao mar/sertão como espaços incompreensíveis que convidam os narradores (e os leitores) ao autodescobrimento, discuto os potenciais efeitos que estas narrativas podem ter em moldar as percepções dos leitores sobre o ambiente e seu relacionamento com o mundo em que vivem.

Palavras-chave: João Guimarães Rosa, Herman Melville, sertão, mar, imaginação ambiental.