

# The cerrado of Goiás in the literature of Bernardo Élis, from a viewpoint of environmental history

*Sandro Dutra e Silva*

Professor, Programa de Pós-graduação em Território e Expressão Cultural do Cerrado/Universidade Estadual de Goiás; Programa de Pós-graduação em Sociedade, Tecnologia e Meio Ambiente (PPSTMA)/Centro Universitário de Anápolis.  
Avenida Juscelino Kubitschek, 146  
75110-390 – Anápolis – GO – Brasil  
sandroutr@hotmail.com

*Aurea Marchetti Bandeira*

Professor, Faculdade de Direito/Centro Universitário de Anápolis.  
Avenida Universitária, Km 3,5  
75083-515 – Anápolis – GO – Brasil  
aureamarchetti@hotmail.com

*Giovana Galvão Tavares*

Professor, PPSTMA/Centro Universitário de Anápolis.  
Avenida Universitária, Km 3,5  
75083-515 – Anápolis – GO – Brasil  
gio.tavares@gmail.com

*Luciana Murari*

Professor, Programa de Pós-graduação em História/Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio Grande do Sul.  
Avenida Ipiranga, 6681, prédio 5, sala 407  
95070-560 – Porto Alegre – RS – Brasil  
luciana.murari@puccrs.br

Received for publication in July 2014.  
Approved for publication in January 2015.

Translated by Tracy Miyake.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/S0104-59702016005000024>

DUTRA E SILVA, Sandro et al. The cerrado of Goiás in the literature of Bernardo Élis, from a viewpoint of environmental history. *História, Ciências, Saúde – Manguinhos*, Rio de Janeiro, v.24, n.1, jan.-mar. 2017. Available at: <http://www.scielo.br/hcsm>.

## Abstract

This article analyzes the representations of nature in the literature of Bernardo Élis based on the theoretical and methodological assumptions of environmental history. Élis was part of a group of intellectuals whose literature presented the living conditions in the frontier of Goiás and the human relationships occurring in these landscapes. In these scrublands, the dramas of their characters are mixed with the physical environment of the *cerrado* region in a realistic narrative denouncing the living conditions in this isolated frontier area. In their dialog with literature, the fundamentals of this field of historiographic research can be adopted as analytical instruments, combined with concepts related to the integration between society and nature, such as the frontier and wilderness.

Keywords: frontier; nature; *cerrado*/ environmental history; Bernardo Élis (1915-1997).

*It began to get dark, neurotically. A night that came slowly, inevitably, like the progress of a fatal disease.*

Bernardo Élis (2005, p.4)<sup>1</sup>

A significant number of studies in different areas of historiography have promoted dialog with literary studies. In this work, we reflect specifically on the literature of the Goianian writer Bernardo Élis using concepts of environmental history. We seek to understand the role that nature assumes in his literature, and the author's perceptions of the dramas people experience in their relationship with the natural environment, through the fictional representation of living conditions on the western frontier during the twentieth century. To do so, we used the author's terms that name their space of reference as "ermos e gerais" (badlands and wilds), colloquial terms for wilderness, and the *cerrado*, a category we define as "anthropo-phyto-geographic" which will be connected to the concepts of the domains of nature (Ab'Saber, 2003), the frontier (Turner, 2010; Martins, 1997), and wilderness (Nash, 1982; Cronon, 1996). We believe that Élis's fiction features several moments when the narrator, the narrative, the natural setting, the real, and the hyper-real fuse in the dramatization of life on the frontier, on the banks of the Corumbá river.

When *Ermos e gerais* (2005) was published in 1944, Mário de Andrade defined the literature of Bernardo Élis as the reverberation of orality and Goianian landscapes (Marchezan, 2005). This observation, lent credence by one of the founders of modernist literature in Brazil, demonstrates the impact of the passages describing the landscape of Goiás and Élis's efforts to reproduce the sound of popular regional expressions. Consequently, his work stands out for both transporting a way of speaking, of positioning oneself in the world, as well as a way of understanding the *cerrado* scrubland areas in the western frontier of Brazil's Central Plateau. The landscapes, sociability, and sensitivity characteristic of man's relationship with nature are present in the worldview Élis composes and expresses in his stories, which value the environment as a setting for the human dramas in the far reaches of Brazil. It is from this place of isolation presented by Élis that we propose to conduct an analysis that brings together environmental history and literature.

### **Domains of nature, frontier, and wilderness**

The scenes set in the landscape Élis describes feature fields, rivers, farms, pastures, fields of *buriti* palms, and forests that express experiences in the Goianian *sertão* (hinterland) in the frontier of that state: "Corumbá has always been a gateway to the *sertão*, where distant residents came to resupply themselves with metal, barbed wire, salt, and some manufactured or factory-made articles, and a little wheat flour, coffee, and medicine" (Élis, 1997, p.21-22). In the early nineteenth century, the naturalist Saint-Hilaire recorded his perceptions of the village of Corumbá during his visits to the province of Goiás; he described the poverty inherited from mining, the economic reorganization agriculture provided, and the women's work spinning cotton, which was traded for goods. He highlighted the production of high-quality tobacco, one of the province's most valued products, in the Pirineus highlands.

This product was transported along the *sertão* routes and distributed throughout Brazil and abroad (McGreery, 2006). With regard to the village, the traveler wrote: “The small village of Corumbá is shaped like a triangle, situated on the slope of a hill with the river that gives it its name at its feet. Its streets are wide, and the houses small and extremely low” (Saint-Hilaire, 1975, p.32). The description of the Goianian *sertão* in Saint-Hilaire’s observations portrays nature that is externalized and highlighted as a physical environment.

The concept of natural domains can assume the meaning of landscape, according to Ab’Saber (2003). However, this concept transcends purely scenic representations that generally characterize biomes and can be understood as “a legacy in every sense of the word: it is the legacy of physiographic and biological processes, and the collective heritage of the peoples who historically inherited them, as the territory of their communities” (Ab’Saber, 2003, p.9). Understood as natural territory and as a space for interactions and cultural inheritance, the concept of natural domains converges with the ideas defended by Frederick Jackson Turner (2010) in his classic essay *The frontier in American history*, originally published in 1893. The frontier, understood to be a space of the expansion of human presence into the territory, meant the meeting between the colonializing force and the reality of an externalized nature, nature itself, composing a new landscape. Referenced by Turner’s work, a duality was established between the notions of frontier and border (or boundary). Border described the line demarcating the political boundaries of a country, while frontier referred to a zone, a strip of a territorial domain that expanded along with the expansion of the American population; it was the limit of the populated zone, the so-called pioneer zone, although this meaning was limited to the United States (Magnoli, 1996). There, the literature of the frontier was linked to the construction of identity and of a lifestyle constructed from the relationship between the pioneer, the frontier, and the natural setting, the wilderness (Turner, 2010; Cronon, 1996; Nash, 1982). The origins of the American lifestyle are identified in the frontier, which generated a feeling of uncertainty about the country’s future after the depletion of wild territories. In this article, we use the term frontier specifically in this sense.

In Brazilian historiography, Sérgio Buarque de Holanda spoke to Turner’s work from his studies on the seventeenth-century displacement of populations from the village of São Paulo to land that was still unoccupied, where they founded new urban centers. This need stemmed from the progressive saturation of the villages, particularly as fertile lands began to be used up under the pressure of predatory cultivation techniques. As this author wrote in his classic *Raízes do Brasil*, “the truth is that farming of large tracts, as it has been and is still practiced in Brazil, by its wasteful nature is almost as much mining as it is agriculture” (Holanda, 1976, p.18). The new villages acted as a “safety valve” when overpopulation could become a threat to the maintenance of the social structure. Sérgio Buarque himself noted the similarity between these population dynamics and the process described by Turner, although in his own studies the Brazilian historian observed lower intensity and constancy than in the American case (Wegner, 2000).

Connecting the categories of border and nature, Nash (1982) reinforces the notion that wilderness was the basic ingredient for the formation of American culture. Nash’s work was precisely to seek out the meaning of wilderness for the construction of American identity and the transformations of this concept throughout history, as cultural invention subject to a set

of variations guided by a theological conception of the term. These variations resulted from temporalities in which the meanings moved: wilderness considered the domain of evil, of the devil, or alternatively the space of the sublime or the glory of the creator. According to Cronon (1996), in the culture of the United States, the juncture of the terms wilderness and frontier assumes a new set of moral, cultural, and symbolic meanings. Certainly, the colonization of the United States was founded on Puritan principles that nurtured a theological vision of nature in its raw state, the “wilderness” (Stoll, 2007). This theological content, derived from a missionary sense of spiritual construction, maintains a deep-rooted Protestant morality. This perception is shared by Lucia Lippi (2000, p.127), who states:

The wilderness is represented by two antithetical images that are present in Greek, Roman, and medieval myths. One is of happiness, of the island of the blessed, the island of paradise, the place and time before sin. The other is of hell, obscurity, death, of a place empty of men, of solitude, of the world of darkness.

A theological perception of the wilderness as a potential paradise, a garden of Eden that could be rebuilt in America, guided the Puritan worldview and was enhanced by an Arcadian conception of the territory, which would be dominated by the work ethic and the liberal and individualistic sense of self-sufficiency. In this way, Turner’s grand thesis (2010) is understood to address the effect of the frontier on American history.

Reflection on nature has always been a concern in cultural debate in the West. However, environmental history is a relatively new field in historiography; this area emerged in the United States in the 1970s, although it was influenced by debates dating back to the nineteenth century related to the impact human societies have on the environment (Pádua, 2012). The very object of study in this historiographic field must be questioned, since the “concept of nature and terms that are associated with it are, in many senses, historical. Their meanings, and the very words, are historically constructed, at the same time reflecting and constituting social change” (Barca, 2012, p.7). Natural landscapes obey the cycles of transformation that govern the laws of nature, implying a need to observe temporalities which is as decisive as the perception of space. The human relationship with the physical environment, in its varied conceptual units (landscapes, territories, regions), grants nature a necessarily historical sense. Consequently, environmental history seeks to establish a new narrative that can innovatively connect the dimensions of humans, space, and time. According to Worster (1991, p.199), who sought to establish the theoretical assumptions of this new field of historical research:

In short, environmental history is part of a revisionist effort to make the discipline of history much more inclusive in its narratives than it has traditionally been. Above all, environmental history rejects the conventional assumption that the human experience developed without natural restrictions, that humans are a distinct and ‘supernatural’ species, that the ecological consequences of their past deeds can be ignored.

In this way, the historical dimension of nature goes beyond the territorial sense of human actions, since according to this proposal environmental history is based on three levels of analysis of the interactive process between culture and nature.<sup>2</sup> In Worster’s conception, the first level describes the relationship between humans and ecosystems, in other words, nature understood through its organic and inorganic features. At a second level are the

socio-economic conditions in their interaction with the geography. The third level addresses the interactional processes that are cultural, in relation to the universe of the senses. As a result, this third level works in the context of a more intangible interaction, one that is “purely mental or intellectual, in which perceptions, ethical values, laws, myths, and other structures of meaning become part of an individual’s or a group’s dialog with nature” (Worster, 1991, p.202).

We can apply concepts like these and the ones cited previously to the literature of Bernardo Élis, who used the observation of nature as a scenario and as an agent in a continuous process of interaction with man as the central theme of his narratives.

### **The literature of Bernardo Élis and representations of the cerrado**

In Brazil, a country that spans a continent, the conquest of territory was linked to the enchanted vision of wealth in the frontier regions. The many areas that were not yet dominated by “civilization” were the scene of colonizing expeditions that glimpsed great opportunities within the territory. Not only in the literary narratives but also in discourse on this topic, colonization was understood as a movement toward “Eldorado.” This representation was present at various times in the country’s history, such as the occupation of the mining regions in the Southeast and Midwest in the eighteenth century, the expansion of coffee cultivation from the last decades of the nineteenth century, and migrations to pursue Amazonian rubber extraction in the early twentieth century. Other movements toward expansion identified the imagination of prosperity in the frontier, the driving force of territorial occupation in its different stages. The expansion of Portuguese domains in the Americas from the coast made it possible to raise the sixteenth century *bandeirante*<sup>3</sup> movement to the status of founding myth, one consecrated by Cassiano Ricardo (1959) in *Marcha para Oeste*, which was originally published in 1940.

In the vision of contemporary sociologist José de Souza Martins (1997, p.16), nothing could contradict this imaginary “Eldorado” more than that the objective meaning of the frontier as the “territory of death and the place of rebirth and covering up more dehumanizing archaisms.” For this author, the true representation of the frontier, and what really defines it, is the situation of conflict, since this singular reality promotes the meeting of subjects that are essentially different from each other. In this place of meetings and missed meetings of historical temporalities, conceptions of life, and different worldviews, time is a temporary dimension that ceases to exist when conflicts disappear, and the political and institutional order of territory is established. From this arises the perception of “frontier times” which is characteristic of the processes of territorial expansion that can be identified at specific moments in the history of Goiás. In this context, nature presents itself as somber, unrelated to human dramas, a reality that is at times dramatic, at times tragic.

The historical process that characterizes the Goianian frontier was irregular, discontinuous, and marked by different stages, which led McGreery (2006) to define it as a “Swiss cheese” frontier in which the spaces for occupation are interspersed with large spaces of empty land. The geographic conquest of the Goianian territory originated in the *bandeirante* expeditions that began at the end of the sixteenth century. In the eighteenth century, a new and

short-lived movement was seen, in which cities were formed in the mining areas. The occupation of the territory after that period was characterized by the expansion of cattle ranches and planted fields (*roças*) for subsistence and market value.

In his study of the economic development of the state of Goiás, Francisco Itami Campos (1985) emphasized that historically, livestock ranching was responsible for placing the Goianian economy on the national stage. It was responsible for opening new fronts in territorial expansion, promoted occupation of these areas, and became the main economic activity of Goiás after the mining crisis. This can be explained by conditions that favored extensive ranching, which required little capital and labor and benefited from abundant and unpopulated lands. Moreover, the favorable topography and the mobility of the merchandise favored development in this region far from the consumer market, compensating for the lack of roads and railways for transport and expansion of cattle ranching. In this way the frontiers of Goiás expanded, propelling the conquest of new territories through the clearing of forests and scrublands for ranching. Consequently, the occupation of large tracts of land, mainly in *cerrado* scrubland areas, was promoted since the end of the nineteenth century by the expansion of cattle raising (Borges, 2000, p.107).

The Brazilian *cerrado* experienced several processes of human intervention over time. Considering the different temporalities in the eco-history of the Central Plateau, we attempted to focus on the processes of frontier expansion toward the incorporation of the *cerrado* into the territory, starting from the eighteenth century. To this end, we made use of the work of a fiction writer who adopted this scenario and its history as the space-time reference system for construction of his literary universe, centered on the relationships between man and nature and the processes of social formation that are characteristic of Brazil's western frontier.

The fiction of Bernardo Élis can be read as an expression of this human advancement into the frontier territory, but an advancement that coexists with the natural spaces that define the isolated and obscure "empty land." Bernardo Élis Fleury de Campos Curado was born on November 15, 1915 in what he himself called the "boondocks" and "the wilderness" of distant Goiás. Best known for *Veranico de janeiro* (Indian summer in January) and *Caminhos e descaminhos* (Ups and downs), his first book was *Ermos e gerais* (Badlands and wilds), released in 1944. This writer achieved considerable success and was very well regarded by critics of his time, strengthening the presence of Goiás on the Brazilian fiction scene (Almeida, 1985). His literature refers to the concept of natural domains because it integrates the representation of the landscape, a literary resource used intensely in his narratives, cultural elements, and environmental processes, prizing man's relationship with the environment in the dynamics of his interactions, whether harmonious or conflicting.

When Élis entered the Brazilian literary scene, the northeastern *sertão* had already been incorporated into the country's culture, from the romantic regionalism of José Alencar's *O sertanejo* (*The sertanejo*) to the social romance of the 1930s as well as the crude naturalism of Rodolfo Teófilo. The work of Bernardo Élis, preceded by Hugo de Carvalho Ramos's 1917 work *Tropas e boiadas* (Troops and herds), continues the realistic and naturalist tendency that is already a feature of Brazilian regionalism in a broad sense, participating in the construction of a "Goiás-Minas" narrative.

After publishing *Ermos e gerais* in 1944, Bernardo Élis was in the vanguard of a new cycle of Brazilian fiction: the *sertanismo*<sup>4</sup> of Goiás and Minas Gerais. Chronologically, he was the first. Next came Guimarães Rosa (*Sagarana* in 1946 [Like a saga]), Mário Palmério (with *Vila dos Confins* in 1956) and José J. Veiga (*Os cavalinhos de Platiplanto* in 1959 [The horses of Platiplanto]). The literature of the Brazilian West went on to compete in terms of prestige and national significance with the literature of the Northeast, which had taken a leading role after the group of great social novels beginning with *A bagaceira* [Trash] by José Américo de Almeida. The literature of the Northeast was connected to the 1930 Revolution (Barbosa, 2008, p.XI-XIV).

Élis's works contain language that demonstrates agility and brevity as well as a peculiar interest in the detailed composition of the physical universe in which the characters move, bringing together realist language and a tenuous separation between the real and the imaginary. With the author a participant in that cultural universe, the fictional game that he leads is often powered by the vision of the characters, in their beliefs and values. In relating the lifestyles, daily practices, and social dynamics of the countryside of Goiás, the author simultaneously dedicates himself to recording the expressive features characteristic of the region and maintaining the linguistic variations characteristic of the state's popular speech. In this way, his literature attains a significant organic level by integrating regional linguistic expression, descriptions of the landscape, and the dynamics of narrative prose.

As a result, the writings of Bernardo Élis occupy the experiences, the social arrangements, and the practices of people, whether they dwell in the countryside or in the small towns, in the Brazilian West. The title *Ermos e gerais* is an eloquent expression of the centrality of the physical environment in the dramas his characters experience: *ermos* defines the distant "wilds" that are still largely uninhabited wastelands, and is combined with *gerais*, a colloquial way of referring to the *cerrado*. Both speak to a landscape as well a human condition. Yet the diversity of characters belonging to different social strata does not erase the imposition of the natural environment over all of them.

This despotic pressure that the environment has over humans denotes a condition that Henry Thomas Buckle, one of the most influential authors in the formation of Brazilian scientific thought, would define as a precarious "maneuverability of nature," in other words, a condition in which rather than serving the purposes of men, the strength of the environment defines itself as powerful obstacle to the development of civilization. This was the main theoretical support from the first section of *Os sertões* (Rebellion in the backlands) by Euclides da Cunha, a fundamental work for the educated Brazilian elite to understand the obsolete realities in the rural areas of the country and the challenge of effectively incorporating them into nationhood (Murari, 2007, Murari, 2009). In this case, nature would wield a dissolving and irresistible force of domination and subjugation through both its concrete effects of grandiose manifestations as well as its impact on the imagination, which would make man overly impressionable. In the work of Bernardo Élis, the despotism of nature defines some of the fundamental dramas experienced by his characters, who are dominated by the precarious conditions of survival amid a generalized poverty of knowledge and technological means. This state of inability to cope with natural forces, much less convert them into material wealth, reveals widespread hardship.

But the authoritarian presence of nature cannot be dissociated from an equivalent social condition of violence and pillaging, defining a situation in which the heavy hand of “the wilderness and the *cerrado*” joins a symmetrical despotism exercised by the regulation of collective life, which in a context of restricted access to land ownership, is marked by the arbitrary exercise of power by “colonels” over their dependents. The social world, internalized as an objective reality, integrates into the writer’s subjectivity in creating a fictional universe that accompanies the individuals in their relationship with the environment and society, which implies the reciprocal “interactions, displacements, and modifications” between the characters and the world in which they move (Veloso, 1988, p.240).

In the work of Bernardo Élis, observation of nature assumes a poetic function that endorses the fictional themes based on dramatic narratives which highlight the drama of the backcountry dweller in the wilds of the frontier. The hyperbolic and expressionist realism shows the forms of coercion exerted on the characters, who experience abandonment and dehumanization. Nocturnal, somber, and supernatural imagery is part of the composition of an atmosphere populated by the fears that characterized coexistence with the ruthless environment of the wilds of Goiás. Night emerges in the economy of the narrative as a set of scenographic effects dramatizing human anguish and sorrows, symbolizing the unknown and the imagined. In the absence of light, a universe of signs that seems beyond the reach of reason is created: false appearances, indistinct identities, and generalized elimination of boundaries create suggestions for impressionable spirits that indicate an amazing world of mystery and horror.

In the memoir-like narratives, night is also associated with a sublime condition that belongs to nature alone, in contrast with the grotesque repertoire of human weaknesses and miseries revealed by the dynamic between individuals and groups of people. In the writer’s memoirs, the superimposition of these dimensions is revealed by the influence of Rosa, a maid in the *sertão* who served in Élis’s childhood home; Rosa was descended from a branch of the traditional Fleury-Curado family which fell into decline. This character, taken in after a family tragedy, positions herself face-to-face with life and its dramas in order to highlight what in the author’s view were the weaknesses of the upbringing she received from her parents. Although an example of bravery and determination can be seen in this character despite her own dramas, the strength of the relationship Rosa has with the tragic and wonderful world of the wilderness defines the writer’s estrangement in the face of the supernatural aspects of the backwoods imagination: “I composed my own song, telling fabulous and often tragic stories like those Rosa told, of death and hauntings, of witches and miraculous fairies, the countless ghosts that lived in every spot of the house, in every alley, on every corner, that we were threatened with at all times” (Élis, 1997, p.42).

The boy thus grew up in a universe populated by fears: the terrifying hints of supernatural entities were joined by wild animals, untamed cattle, and especially among children, fanciful reports of abductions, mutilations, and murders perpetrated by gypsies and Indians. In Élis’s fiction, Rosa lends her name to the country girl exiled to a small village who is characterized by her inability to adapt to the new space, leading the people around her to completely misunderstand her ways. Unlike the character in the writer’s memoirs, the strangeness of the fictional Rosa does not lie in her communication with the supernatural world, but instead

with nature, with which it is confused, capable of summoning its strength to transform the domestic environment according to the codes of the wilderness (Élis, 1966, p.81-102).

If we consider the levels of analysis of the interaction between culture and nature proposed by Worster (1991), we can see the relevance of studying Bernardo Élis's work from the theoretical framework of environmental history. An example we can highlight from the point of view of the interaction between man and the environment is "Nhola dos Anjos e a cheia do Corumbá" (Nhola dos Anjos and the Corumbá flood). This tale recounts the history of a family of migrants from Minas Gerais who came to the Goianian frontier in the second half of the nineteenth century, a period specified by the reference to the family's arrival "at the time of the Lopes War, or even before" (Élis, 2005, p.5). These frontier dwellers settled on the banks of the Corumbá river, and began raising cattle (cattle frontiers),<sup>5</sup> settling in the vicinity of the old gold prospecting areas in Corumbá and Meia Ponte (Pirenópolis).

The text discusses the precariousness of survival in the Goianian outback during the years when waves of migration pushed to the frontier, presenting a parallel in the constantly threatening presence of the river and the passive situation in which the family finds itself after not finding alternatives and simply staying, despite their desire to settle on land in barren areas of the Goianian *sertão*. This leads to the annihilation of many of the family's members and their material resources through limited productive conditions and diseases contracted due to proximity to the river, which are generally defined as "afflictions". The tale recounts a night of destruction caused by the sudden flooding of the river, which in turn leads to the extermination of the last remnants of the family: Nhola (the aged matriarch), Quelemente<sup>6</sup> (the son), and the grandson, who is not named in the text, as well as the dog Chulinho.

'This year, God willing, we move.' For forty years old Nhola has heard this line. First from her husband: 'We need to move, if not the water will carry us away.' He died of the affliction and the others remained. Next it was her son who said it, but he never moved. He married there, had a son; his wife, Nhola's daughter-in-law, died of the affliction. Remaining were old Nhola, her son Quelemente, and her grandson, a sickly little boy (Élis, 2005, p.6).

There is thus an immediate correlation between nature's power of annihilation and the family's inability to mount any resistance to it, to the extent that their destiny is imposed as an announced disgrace, one that is perfectly predictable and foreseen by the victims themselves. The force of nature adds to the low level of rationalization by the characters, in relation to which the narrator does not show a posture of easy condescension: besides settling in a location that is known to be threatening, they react to the imminent danger of the flood with superstitions like drawing three concentric circles in the dirt, and with ineffective traditional practices: "He hung a dowsing rod from the cart, which is the most illiterate way of hiding from the rain" (Élis, 2005, p.4).<sup>7</sup>

Consequently, the power of nature in the work of Bernardo Élis goes far beyond its symbolic meaning: its strength is often objective and devastating, although this condition is not seen as necessary but instead a reflection of social, technological, and mental limitations. In the story mentioned above, the author describes a scene in which the paralyzed grandmother, the indolent son, and the sickly grandson represent the three generations of residents who survive precariously in the unhealthy environment. In the most dramatic scene, the three

float on a makeshift raft constructed from a door made of woven *buriti* palm straw, fighting the violent waters that move toward the waterfall on the Corumbá river. The old matriarch falls into the river and is tangled in the raft, trying to hold on, but as danger looms imminent the son faces the dilemma of choosing to help his aged mother or protect his child and himself amid the fury of the waters near the deadly falls. Finally, Quelemente kicks desperately to release her, pushing her into the dark water. But upon realizing the moral violence of his action, he lets the current carry her away. "It was the river that claimed another victim," emphasizes the narrator (Élis, 2005, p.10).

Once again, the drama is enhanced by the metaphorical power of the nocturnal scenery, associated with death: "The night was a great cadaver, with open and hazy eyes." The combination of the images of the river and the dark sky, both of which are seen as infinite, demonstrates the evocative strength of Élis's prose: "The waters roared and tumbled foaming in the dark night that blinded the eyes, swept by a cold and hissing wind. ... gushing, roaring waters, foaming, cynically reflecting the shadows of the dark sky, the dead sky, the grey and stuporous sky" (Élis, 2005, p.10-12). While the river is the active element that drives events, the story's characters do little more than react, which until that point only permitted a miserable and risky survival existence. In the end, the family's trajectory is divided between the fatalism of those who remain prisoner to the nefarious circumstances of the environment and the drama of the moment when the river imposes its ultimatum. In Élis's metaphorical universe (2005, p.12), while the family is dragged passively away by the current, the river is associated with human images reflecting experiences of drama, terror, and death: "The muddy and furious water had nightmare voices, grumblings of ghosts, the voices of mothers nursing sick children, the raspy yelps of stray dogs. Strange panting throats opened in the crazy swirls and foam like a bride was floating on top, like flowers on graves."

Among the natural elements, the image of the river waters without a doubt was particularly terrifying to those brought up in the universe of *sertão* fears, whether these were diseases from the marshes, deep wells that swallowed the surrounding ground, or the force of the current, especially in the rainy season. Once again, the author's biography suggests analogies with his fictional creation, which returns to the representation of fear. In the short story "O menino que morreu afogado" (The boy who drowned), the narrator's hesitant emotions can be perceived when he observes the body of a child being removed from the river's waters. On one hand, we find the discomfort aroused by the presence of death and the feeling of helplessness among the children who lived on the banks of the river, who in its waters found their school, their diversions, "the affection that their mothers' work wouldn't let them give. The waters gave them toys that the lack of cash denied" (Élis, 2005, p.140). On the other hand, this view seems a bit shaken by the perception of the freedom experienced by the poor children, who got no Christmas toys but lived in dangerous complicity with the river, expecting the dramatic movements of its waters. In the end, the death of the child, a cook's daughter, ends up being treated like just another small everyday tragedy of the frontier, but leaves strong impressions on the terrorized imagination that inspires the narrator.

Therefore, in spite of the determining function of nature exerted on human tragedy, its power is not absolute and unevenly affects the rich and the poor. The violence of water – first the rain, and then the rivers – of course did not exclusively affect the poor, but this group

was far more susceptible to the rain's consequences, affected by how the rains limited their productive resources, by the fragility and unhealthiness of their homes, and by their inability to resist the pressures of the environment or to work to improve them.

In the story "Nhola dos Anjos e a cheia do Corumbá," the author adopts a perspective opposing the observation of nomadism that characterized the insertion of the poor population into Brazilian lands. The Land Act of 1850<sup>8</sup> created the land market in Brazil as a reaction to the eradication of the slave trade, which occurred in that same year. The law continued the tendency to form large estates and made it difficult for poor workers to have access to land, consequently holding them in a persistent state of dependency. The concentration of land along with events such as the War of Paraguay, the abolition of slavery, the Canudos War, the Federalist Revolution, and the Contestado War imposed an imperative of mobility on poor field workers (Wissenbach, 1999).

Additionally, the scarcity of technological measures made the use of natural resources take on a destructive character, which obliged this population to move constantly, whether because of pressure from the land owners or depletion of the immediately-available wealth such as fertile land and hunting (Murari, 2004). In Bernardo Élis's narrative, the poor living conditions have the opposite effect: they keep the family trapped in unhealthy and threatening territory. If, in the case of nomadic populations, mobility is a condition for survival in the context of scarce possibilities for improvement, for the Anjos family remaining by the river is not a sign of any form of attachment to the land signifying constancy, continuity, or improvement, but only inertia, passivity, or fear.

In Élis's work, the destructive presence of natural elements is far more notable than any suggestion of resource abundance or prosperity. The floods offer some of the most dramatic moments of this literature and can be taken as symbols of nature that is excessive and disturbing, which sets up a range of obstacles to its use. In addition to the beautiful landscape, which offers the most evident poetic tones of the writer's prose, the natural scenes we see rarely convey representations that could suggest prosperity or harmony: the "fight for life" between doves and a hawk (in "O padre e um sujeitinho metido a rabequista" [The priest and an insolent character]), the invariable presence of Tocantins as a metaphor for a stagnant region ("Ontem, como hoje, como amanhã, como depois" [Yesterday, like today, like tomorrow, like after]), the unbearable heat and insects ("Veranico de janeiro" and "Ah, se chovesse!" [If only it would rain!]).

If we consider the double meaning of the term "wilderness" (hostile nature and dark/Edenlike nature and divine creation), we see that in Élis's realism, the image of terrifying nature is much more of a constant presence than dreams of prosperity on the frontier. For example, Corporal Sulivero, a character in one of tales in *Caminhos e descaminhos*, leaves for the gold mines in hopes of making his fortune, but failure ends up moving his dreams to the south of the country, to the coffee state of Paraná that is equally heavenlike. In another tale, the delirium of fortune leads one character, Lucindo, to murder, and another, Josafá, to lose his job, his family, and his possessions, which unfortunately does not convince him of the futility of his efforts.

The destiny of Bernardo Élis's dreamers inevitably comes without glory, because in the frontier, barbarism not only prevails in nature but also characterizes human behavior.

In fiction, the precariousness of the institutional order is seen in the lack of distinction between the alleged agents of order and the criminals, since as noted by Martins (1997), the frontier is a place of conflict: between man and nature, and among men. In several stories, soldiers are belligerent, guaranteeing the domination of the dispossessed population, in collusion with or in parallel to those in power: “the local political chief had an exclusive monopoly on these acts of violence and was furious with the competition from the soldier. He immediately sent two guys after him” (Élis, 2005, p.120).

Nature is a fundamental dimension of Élis’s dramatic universe, but its impact should always also be examined from the point of view of the material, technical, and social conditions for the survival of the country’s poor populations, particularly in regions far from the more productive economic centers. The second level of analysis of the relationship between society and natural environment proposed by Worster should also be observed, in other words, the social circumstances of man’s insertion into geographical space; we can then see how they affect the first level. In the case of the story of the Corumbá river flood, the suffering of the riverbank residents and their difficulty in relocating can be related to the political and institutional conditions at the time which limited access to land, creating a marginal condition that spans three generations hostage to the dangers of the floods and the unhealthy conditions of the river.

In other narratives, the social mediation of the relationship between man and nature is sharper, especially through the value given to social differences and power relations. Among the poor, the extremely limited resources are shown in the complete dependence on nature, as seen in the story “Moagem” (Milling): “there was no clock there. Time was estimated by the whistles of birds, by the look of the sky, the position of the sun, the moon, and the stars. It could be one in the morning at most” (Élis, 1965, p.86-87). The low educational level, the dependency of the household, and the precarious nature of productive means create a scenario where, despite strict discipline and vigorous effort, extreme poverty is present, which Élis (1965, p.85-86) depicts without mincing words:

But despite the weariness, Totinha couldn’t sleep. The children were crying, squirming in their urine-soaked diapers, protesting the icy wind that sliced the flesh, entering through the crevices of the wattle and daub that made up the barn wall, and through the poorly joined tiles. ... Finally, the woman squatted on the side of the hearth and began to scratch the lice from her filthy mess of hair, with the children crying from the cold around her. The crying and wailing drove the sleep from her companion, who also got up to warm the miserable children with his own heatless body, in this resignation that is the lack of resources. What to do?

The natural environment appears in this story not as a repertoire of potential resources, but as a succession of troubles, like the cold and the lice of the passage above, in addition to mud, ticks, and floods. Although the story is set in a relatively prosperous farm where they raised cattle, planted sugar cane, and produced sugar, the workers and their families lived in “filthy and cold ranches lost in the distant deep valleys” when they were not on the farm (Élis, 1965, p.81). Since the social organization of ownership and of work restricted the poor’s ability to create wealth – this group held hostage to extreme exploitation and material constraints – the relationship with nature is not virtuous. Add to this the precariousness of

the old milling technique, still powered by oxen, which demanded additional effort and sacrificed workers like Totinha in the story. Furthermore, the craftsmanship and the social abilities demonstrated by Casemiro's relatives were not valued; for example, they made "clay vessels, wove cloth, sewed," without any expectations of improvement, because the father had moved to the farm in order to take his children out of school (Élis, 1965, p.83).

Worster's third level of analysis, which encompasses the mental representations of the relationship between man and nature, could be analyzed based on the story "Pelo sim, pelo não," (Just to be safe) from *Caminhos e descaminhos*, for example, in which we find a lyrical vision of nature that benefits from the first-person narrative voice. This is an account that is based on the memories of the narrator, who reports the sexual awakening of a young man of 18 years during holidays spent on his godfather's farm. The images with which he recalls the sensations aroused by the presence of the farm owner's niece, with whom he falls in love, are taken from nature: "dreaming of her, the smell of every flower, the smell of every fruit, was her smell; the shape of a cloud was her shape; the sad call of a partridge, the pained coo of a thrush, that are so common around the water, were the song of her voice" (Élis, 1965, p.75). The narrator himself, who compares himself to an alligator because of the way he watches the girl, translates his passionate feelings with an affection that extends to all of nature and all people. After the physical effort of hard work on the farm, a swim in the river brings an exhaustion to the body that awakens an excitement which sparks the young man's fantasies.

The water running through the rocks with its tender song, the white sand, the flowers, the birds, a sweet smell of vanilla lost in a thicket. In all this mystery of the blood moving deep in the body, the confusing noise of a thousand creatures biting, gnawing, carrying, moving about under tree bark, on the floor that was soft and warm from their fertile fermentation on that humid morning with too much sun. Lying on the sun-heated sand, my wandering thought was a serene butterfly that did not land on anything; without realizing it, I felt the presence of desire for my godfather's relative in my nerves, my guts, my blood and skin and hair and nails. She was the river, and I plunged the desire of my flesh into her; she was the sand, and I sprawled into her in a long, mineral, and warm touch. She was the flower that so delicately imitated genitalia; she was the perfume that put the breath of someone terrorized by the greatest fear in the world into my nose, she was the sun distilling this languor of sin and abandonment (Élis, 1965, p.76-77).

At this moment, the murky anthropomorphized waters of the river take on the shape of a woman – perhaps the *mãe-d'água*,<sup>9</sup> he thinks, falling back on local folklore to define the powerful delusion justified by the pressure of his age. The magical universe that flourishes there belongs to the set of cultural intermediations which cause the man to take ownership of nature, modifying it and letting him be changed by it, building the symbolic universe that literature translates into dramatic dynamics and poetic images.

One of the theoretical contributions that can help illustrate the possibilities for study on this topic is the phenomenology of Gaston Bachelard, a reflection that is sensitive to images of the material world. In it, water is defined as the more feminine and more constant element, precisely related to what is deep and remains hidden; consequently, it contains a kind of intimacy. At the same time, water suggests a type of destiny, the incessant transformation

of beings which indicates the transition to adulthood, with the maturation of desire that Élis's character experiences. In the same way, the philosophical and literary language of Bachelard (1942) can help understand the masculine version of the image of the water, its violent, spiteful, and irascible form, which was expressed by the force of the floodwaters described by Bernardo Élis in some of the most dramatic moments of his prose, for example.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, in Bachelard's reading of poetry, the sound of the water of rivers and streams is the human word, the song of birds and men, since it produces what the author defines as the sound of the natural setting, as we read in Bernardo Élis (2005, p.234): "The river was that singer with the guitar, whose soul reflected the drumming of the naked stars, lost in space's icy vacuum of a thousand years, the greenness of the grass, the beauty of the morning, and the sadness of the afternoon. After he went singing it from riverbank to riverbank, from waterfall to waterfall, in the white swirls of foam."

This third level of analysis proposed by Worster can accommodate yet another dimension of Élis's literature: the representation of the landscape, considered to be the aesthetic organization of nature, an image translated into words in the most poetic passages of this writer's work. In his *Landscape and memory*, Simon Schama (1996) referred to the myths and rituals celebrating nature, which, despite appearing to be absent from technological and materialistic society, manifest themselves in full force in various forms of worship. Traversing different spatial and temporal contexts, Schama shows how nature remains a fundamental foundation of culture, populating our imagination with symbols, scenes, and impressions of the physical world through which we grant meaning to our experiences. The landscape simultaneously in both space and time enters into the memories of individuals and the collective memory, not just as a space for contemplation, but also as a representation of the tensions and damage that mark the trajectory of social groups and plant lasting images of the physical world into the sensibility of men.

It is in this sense that we can consider the observation of natural scenes in the works of Bernardo Élis, who was undoubtedly one of the greatest portrayers of landscapes in Brazilian regionalism, by making the description of nature a perfect counterpoint to the often disenchanted universe of human interactions. In the nature of Goiás we see nothing that reminds us of the monotony of routine and the limited possibilities of his characters, who are generally trapped by their lack of mental and material resources. In Élis's prose, observation of nature is often a form of redemption for man in the face of large and small tragedies experienced in the fields and villages of the hinterland. An example of this is found in the short story "O padre e um sujeitinho metido a rabequista," where the saucy tone of the first part, chronicling the adventures of a scoundrel who fools a priest by selling him a lazy mule, is replaced in the last lines by lyric tones resulting from the description of the natural setting where the priest takes his first trip with the mule. This description begins with an overview which is so broad that to the observer it conjures up an image resembling a map. The description ends with the affectionate gaze of man toward the boundless:

The priest didn't feel his body, didn't feel his gaze, in absolute enjoyment of the most perfect euphoria. In front of him stretched that expanse without end that is the broad horizon of the central plateau, stretching from the base of the Pirineus to the border with Bahia, from the Tocantins watershed to here, from São Francisco to there

and from Paraná hurrying back. Far off, the 'grey outlines' of mountain ranges, 'one plateau after another, plains upon plains.' Even the Veadeiros mountain range, in that never-ending horizon, was 'a blue-grey brush stroke, so far off that it was maybe erased and maybe present.'

Closer, the feminine curves of the hills, 'the delicate painting' of hillock *capões*<sup>11</sup> showing the patches of fertile land in that ocean of green meadows.

– Hey, what a big world without gates. (Élis, 1966, p.126; emphasis ours).

The landscape, in this passage, will resume one of its narrower meanings, the pictorial representation of a natural setting in accordance with perceptual models that allow it to be implemented as an aesthetic object, according to certain artistic conventions (Roger, 2000).<sup>12</sup> At the same time, writing values the setting for its ability to arouse sensations, emotions, and sensual suggestions. These in turn are alternated with the existential speculations that are aroused by an article that called on priests to commit themselves to alleviating poverty. But inevitably, the mule refuses to move, and the priest patiently waits: "The priest took his breviary from the saddlebag, opened it, and began to read. Occasionally, he raised his eyes and observed the landscape" (Élis, 1966, p.129).

Again, the scene switches between reflection and contemplation of nature, the senses, and the intellect, comprising a deep moment that is unusual in the routine of religious life, which up to this point he had become comfortably accustomed to without concern: "The landscape, the scents, the vastness of the horizons, the loneliness, that article, all this instilled some strange and dangerous feelings in the heart of the old priest" (Élis, 1966, p.131). Nature, in this moment, is not only the object of his passive contemplation, but also a fundamental component of the succession of emotions that disturb him, overlapping in the various planes where the priest's gaze wanders, in his restless conscience: the distant horizon, the scenery of the surroundings, the birds he can glimpse, the scene in which the plants, animals, and objects around them participate. After the moment of upsurge brought about by the images of nature and by his own conscience, the priest slips back down into tranquility again. His mule never again refuses to move, suggesting the change which appears to have been brought about by that unusual moment. One of the meanings of the landscape in the prose of Bernardo Élis becomes clear: the image correlated with the notion of transcendence, inviting broader perspectives from observing the real, making room for the opportunity to transform.

## Final considerations

We realize, from the categories of analysis developed from environmental history, the relevance of conceptual resources for this field of research in studying the literary representation of the relationships between man and nature. The geographical context of the Goianian *cerrado* represented in the work of Bernardo Élis assumes the confrontation characteristic of frontier regions where expansion of the human presence in the territory implies facing natural obstacles, which in this case are symbolized by the diseases caused by the wetlands and the flooding of the Corumbá river.

At the same time, in the world of the Goianian frontier, the relationship with nature has other dimensions that should be linked to this fundamental conflict. One of these

is the necessary observance of the social order that perpetuates the precarious living conditions of the poor population. This marginalized group, devoid of knowledge and technical means and denied access to land ownership, is particularly subject to violence from the elements and from the established political forces – another necessary dimension of the conflict in the frontier and the evil version of the wilderness.

As we have seen, based on Worster's proposal, this intersection between environmental history and literature permits us to describe man's relationship with nature, as we did in this text by exploring the living conditions and the circumstances surrounding the death of the dos Anjos family in their interaction with the environment of the Corumbá river. At the second level described by this author, the story "Moagem" in *Caminhos e descaminhos* is an unvarnished portrait of the misery of workers on a sugar cane plantation, describing their subordinate conditions in society, which in turn make them particularly fragile in their interaction with the environment, upon which they remain strictly dependent. The dry and realistic approach to the reality of the poor in the countryside of Goiás turns Élis's narratives into a special documentation of their material life, techniques, and daily practices, and allows us to glimpse the technological conditions and productive processes of a specific socio-economic context. On the third level of Worster's scheme, we can look at the symbolism of nature and the cultural significance of the landscape as a culturally enshrined means of aesthetic perception. At the same time, pieces of literature such as the short story "Pelo sim, pelo não" allow us to understand the physical environment as a participating dimension of the rich social substrate that houses the memories, images, and narratives through which nature feeds our beliefs and sensitivities.

This allows us to observe that environmental history can be enriched by the dialog with literature, which not only is able to bear witness to the interaction between human societies and nature, but also communicates with the social imagination, the context in which the physical environment is affirmed as the material for a broad universe of representations, myths, and symbols. In this study, we see that even a brief reading of Bernardo Élis demonstrates that the convergence of knowledge perspectives offered by environmental history with an expression in literary language can lead to fruitful pathways for both fields. If, on the one hand, environmental history can benefit from the world of the text as a cultural creation that is simultaneously informative and poetic, literature can also enrich its ability to debate on issues involving materiality. This juncture would permit an opening of the way toward an integrative vision of reality, one that is able to jointly host the objective conditions of the experience and the corresponding mental and emotional aspects which define the human universe in its exchange with nature.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Authors Sandro Dutra e Silva and Luciana Murari would like to thank the National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq) for their research grant.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> In this and other citations of texts from Portuguese, a free translation has been provided.

<sup>2</sup> In our view, these levels reflect a conceptual triad developed by Henri Lefèbvre (1991, p.33-38) in his classic 1974 work *The production of space*: the “perceived”, the “conceived,” and the “lived”.

<sup>3</sup> Translator’s note: The *Bandeirantes* (“flag-bearers”) were bands of settlers and fortune hunters who braved the wilds of seventeenth-century Brazil, extending Portuguese control into the wilderness. Besides hunting for precious stones and gold they also enslaved the native populations.

<sup>4</sup> Translator’s note: *Sertanismo* a literary movement focusing on the backlands regionalism of Brazil’s northeast.

<sup>5</sup> With regard to the role of cattle frontiers in the expansion and history of the frontier in Latin America and in Goiás, see Hennessy (1978) and McCreery (2006).

<sup>6</sup> Bernardo Élis commonly calls the characters in his stories by popular corruptions of their given names. Besides Sulivero, we find Supriano, Quelemente, Reimundo, as well as words written “coipo” (*corpo/body*), “corgo,” (*córrego/stream*) and “comerço” (*começo/beginning*). Orality is an important aspect of the prose of Bernardo Élis, although his use of spelling variations is very selective. In one of his short stories, he writes in references to the speech of a backcountry dweller: “The words were eaten almost completely, leaving only the cores. To anyone who wasn’t a farmer, the words would be unintelligible” (Élis, 1965, p.66).

<sup>7</sup> At various times, Bernardo Élis explicitly calls attention to the extreme cultural and material limitations of the Goianian outback: some examples are the low educational level of the population, making illiteracy widespread, poor health and hygiene conditions, and the unavailability of basic products such as salt.

<sup>8</sup> In the view of Martins (1981), by imprisoning workers, the slavery regime maintained open access to land. With the imminent end of this regime, the liberation of workers demanded the “prison” of the land in order to guarantee the creation of a free labor market and prevent the formation of a society of small independent producers.

<sup>9</sup> Translator’s note: This term can be used to denote not only a spring but also a mythical half-woman half-fish that inhabits rivers and lakes.

<sup>10</sup> Gaston Bachelard’s main works on the imagination of elements of nature are: *Water and dreams*, *Earth and reveries of repose*, *Earth and reveries of will*, *The air and dreams*, and *The psychoanalysis of fire*.

<sup>11</sup> Translator’s note: *Capões* are “islands” of forest and trees standing out among ecosystems such as grasslands and scrublands.

<sup>12</sup> For a theory of landscape, see also Cosgrove (1998), Roger (1991), and Simon (1991).

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