

## Voices from the Beyond: A Poetics of Dead Protagonism in Brazilian Literature<sup>1</sup>

It goes without saying that death is a classic theme in literature and literary studies. From the medieval dance of death to the personified death as a typical Vanitas allegory of the Baroque period to the mystical longing for death of the lyrical ego in romanticism – speculative fiction, as well, is populated by ghosts, the dead and revenants, and the medium of film is hardly imaginable without the appearance of death and those who have awakened from the dead. Fascination with death links the various epochs, media, genres and cultures, and death as the most extreme borderline experience offers grounds for pondering metaphysical meaning as well as literary transgressions on the threshold between fiction and reality. But what about the case of the recalcitrant dead, i.e. those who violate the border between life and death? No less universal than the topic of death itself, the contradictory figure of the living dead is present in all cultures, inspiring fantasy, populating ghost and scary stories and haunting all literary genres whose contours it thus simultaneously challenges.

In literary studies and cultural theory, at the latest since the so-called “spectral turn” of the 1990s, the topic of apparitions has led to downright furor. Yet, although one of the most notorious voices already rang out from beyond the grave with Brás Cubas in 1881, the illustrious repertoire of undead figures which Brazilian literature hosts has scarcely been received by poststructuralist *hauntology*, the theory of ghosts, but rather seems condemned to haunt research. The present dossier of *Brasiliانا* “Voices from the Beyond” is dedicated to dead figures and phantasmal phenomena in Brazilian literature and inquires into the protagonism and poetry of the particular figures on the border of the genres realism and the fantastic.

We therefore begin by considering the narratological premises of dead figures: which implications in particular do dead figures have for the plot lines of fictional texts? Which narratological perspectives do the paradoxical protagonism of dead figures and the stories told by deceased narrators open up, and how could a poetics conceptualizing fictional resurrections be formulated?

First, it is important to distinguish between dead narrators and the narrating dead. As Frédéric Weinmann states, dead narrators challenge the principle of mimesis much more radically than do merely dead figures. To let a deceased individual live or speak does not present a serious literary problem; to entrust him with narration itself and thus

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<sup>1</sup> English translation by Clay Johnson, Berlin.

to assign him the responsibility for the entire story, however, seems to be incompatible with the principles of realistic narration, and thus represents a literary-historical situation of exception (Weinmann 2018, 129). Yet, it is this breach of taboo that is administered by this figure's self-deemed "autothanatographical" narrations, that is, stories that have as their subject the death of a certain person and that are told by the deceased individual himself (Weinmann 2018, 21). As Weinmann argues, the statement "I am dead" is grammatically possible in empirical reality. Yet, at the same time, unless it is pronounced in the metaphorical sense, it presents a performative contradiction because its content is incompatible with the conditions of successfully producing speech (Weinmann 2018, 11). Hence, according to Weinmann, it is literally impossible to say, "I am dead" (Weinmann 2018, 12). Consequently, one can assume a highly antirealistic paradox. In contrast to every-day life, a dead instance of narration is not a literary impossibility, given that nothing in fiction is impossible. Indeed, one could contend that a dead narrator or protagonist is hardly evaluated any differently than a thinking tree trunk or a speaking porcupine; accordingly, this narrator has a position, focalization, and even a certain (most likely limited) credibility. Yet by violating the rule of probability, the figure of the dead narrator creates a specific aesthetic surplus which deserves particular interest: by making the impossible possible, the narrator makes visible the generally invisible artificiality of literature which is denied by the effects of realism. In demonstrating the dyad *impossible seeming-seemingly impossible*, the figure in a metafictional way refers to itself as a text of unlimited possibilities, that is, to the actual boundlessness of fiction.

Yet even as intradiegetic protagonists, ghostly figures and the returning dead are highly metapoetic appearances who bear an incontestably large degree of potential for transgression due to their liminality and their aesthetic surplus of meaning, though they should not be elevated *a priori* to progressive bearers of subversive significance. Indeed, in their characteristic as unholy border crossers, undead figures are notoriously unreliable: being bound to both this world and the one beyond, they might let ideas and associations float freely in order to withdraw themselves from an absolute control of sense, yet they are still constrained by historical contexts. One moment, they may allow extravagant interventions in a plot in order to autonomously (and ghoulishly) flout interpretations – and even the author's own intentions – in the next. After all, spectral phenomena are also the uncanny expression of disturbing purport which readers and authors alike exclude from texts.

As transgressional figures, these apparitions also invite us to question the traditional borders of genre, for which reason definitions of the fantastic and realism reach their limits when it comes to figures awakening from the dead. This is shown in particular by ghostly *dramatis personae* in Brazilian literature. According to Todorov, the fantastic is determined by its indecisiveness with regard to the apparent reality of an event. As soon as clarity is produced, the fantastic is dissolved, leading either to an uncanny or a marvelous outcome.<sup>2</sup> Yet the consequence of Todorov's minimalistic definition of the fantastic is that Brazilian literature in fact displays no elements of the fantastic whatsoever. From this point of view, Cardoso's family saga about the fall of the Meneses family would be nothing but uncanny, Machado de Assis' dead narrator Brás Cubas by contrast would be considered marvelous, as would Jorge Amado's Vadinho, while it would still not be possible to properly account for the disparateness of Vadinho and Brás Cubas using the three terms the fantastic, the uncanny and the marvelous.

A too restrictive view of the fantastic obviously also entails that the majority of antirealistic effects are subsumed under the category of the marvelous, causing the term marvelous itself to become blurry due to overstretching. In fact, Brazilian literature, in analogy to Hispano-American literature, is thrown into one pot with marvelous or magical realism, the *real maravilhoso*, whenever it is not clearly realistic. As such, the presence of the dead, ghosts, specters, undead and revenants are usually interpreted as a paradigmatic indication for "magical thinking" and thus are contrasted with realism.<sup>3</sup> In this general understanding, Latin-American texts are seen as magical or marvelous whenever they turn to "prelogical myths" that are attributed to indigenous or African cultures, and by doing so leading to a supposed autonomous aesthetic independent of European models. Indeed, not only does the literary invention of mythical structures and elements prove itself to be the cultural-essentialist construction of mostly white authors: the argument of an opposition between irrational thought patterns and Western *logos* is in and of itself based on a hierarchical opposition that feeds racism.

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<sup>2</sup> "Celui qui perçoit l'événement doit opter pour l'une des deux solutions possibles : ou bien il s'agit d'une illusion des sens, d'un produit de l'imagination et les lois du monde restent alors ce qu'elles sont ; ou bien l'événement a véritablement eu lieu, il est partie intégrante de la réalité, mais alors cette réalité est régie par des lois inconnues de nous. [...]"

Le fantastique occupe le temps de cette incertitude ; dès qu'on choisit l'une ou l'autre réponse, on quitte le fantastique pour entrer dans un genre voisin, l'étrange ou le merveilleux. Le fantastique, c'est l'hésitation éprouvée par un être qui ne connaît que les lois naturelles, face à un événement en apparence surnaturel." Todorov 2001, 29.

<sup>3</sup> "Ghosts in their many guises abound in magical realist fiction [...] and they are crucial to any definition of magical realism [...]" Parkinson 1997, 77.

Yet already the spectral figures and forms of Brazilian literature demonstrate that the differentiation between an ostensibly cerebral fantastic in accordance with a European model and an indigenous thinking bound to magical realism cannot be fulfilled on a narratological level: assuming that in magical realism, prelogical indigenous thought patterns are active on the level of the narrative perspective, then entirely rational narrators – even though dead as a doornail – like Brás Cubas or the *Pirotécnico* Zacarias prove the exact opposite by effectively unfolding their aesthetic goal of irrupting the inexplicable right in the middle of the rational world.

In view of the inadequacy of established definitions of the fantastic, Alazraki attempted to assert a neofantastic poetics which, though seemingly fantastic, is nonetheless radically different from the fantastic of the nineteenth century (Alazraki 1990, 26) inasmuch as it takes a different approach to integrating the unexpected, the empirical reality-challenging, into the superordinate realistic manner of presentation. Correspondingly, Alazraki quotes Cortázar, who says about the particularity of his own short stories the following: „La irrupción de *lo otro* ocurre en mi caso de una manera marcadamente trivial y prosaica, sin advertencias premonitorias, tramas *ad hoc* y atmosferas apropiadas como en la literatura gótica [...]” (Cortázar 1983, 66-67, in Alazraki 1990, 26). In contrast to the highly stylized European ghost literature of the nineteenth century, Cortázar continues, his own texts dispense with the genre-typical fantastic atmosphere and have a knack for localizing the unexpected in every-day life: „Para mí, lo fantástico es algo muy simple, que puede suceder en plena realidad cotidiana, en este mediodía de sol, ahora entre Ud. y yo, o en el Métró, mientras Ud. venia a esta entrevista.” (Cortázar 1983, 24, in Alazraki 1990, 27). In other words, while the existence of realistic principles such as rationalism and natural laws was still necessary for the fantastic of a closely Todorovian understanding, to be able to challenge it, the neofantastic may no longer possess the certainties of a rationalistic world view, but rather assumes a non-guaranteed, illusory reality behind which a second reality is concealed (Alazraki 1990, 29). It is thus clear that the already problematic – because hierarchical – distinction between magical realism and the fantastic which structures literature, literary studies and reality, is constantly destabilized by the poetics of dead figures. Thus, the dead narrator or protagonist in literature is in fact a decentrally interwoven structure that shows neither an end nor a beginning, but rather has spread over Latin America, Europe and Africa between Machado de Assis’ 1881 *Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas* and Juan Rulfo’s *Pedro Páramo*, between Murilo Rubião’s *O*

*Pirotécnico Zacarias*, José Saramago's *As intermitências da morte* and Mia Couto's *A varanda do frangipani*, between Jorge Amado's *A Morte e a Morte de Quincas Berro D'Água* and Pepetela's *Sua Excelência, de Corpo presente*, and is not limited in its multifacetedness by culturalising categorial ascriptions such as fantastic or magical realism, but rather challenges these theoretical delimitations. Indeed, ghostly aspects of Brazilian literature are more diverse and heterogeneous than traditional definitions of magical realism or the fantastic. These spectral phenomena are per se difficult to classify and require alternative theoretical approaches that adequately take into account their floating-fluctuating character, their constant refusal of objectification.

This condition has been given attention to within cultural studies, in particular in *hauntology*, which understands ghosts and the undead as liminal metaphors and often paradoxical figures which inhabit the border areas between life and dead, visibility and invisibility, materiality and immateriality (Pilar Blanco and Peeren 2013, 2). Their highly figurative potential makes haunting figures the ideal signifiers to be able to represent psychological, societal or political conflicts. While Derrida revalues and mobilizes the spectral capability of haunting as a deconstructivist way of acquiring knowledge, utilizing the ghost to inquire into "haunting" as something excluded from the area of knowledge and perception and viewed as irrelevant, the phantasmal has been interpreted differently both in gender studies as well as in trauma studies, namely as a metaphor for violent social processes of invisibilisation, disappearance and extermination. The characteristic ambivalence of the phantasmal, equally able to fulfil enlightening and obscuring functions, clearly comes to light here.

A remarkable role within ghost research is played by the idea of *cultural haunting*, a metaphor with which Kathleen Brogan could analyze recurrent haunting plots within the literary production of ethnic minorities in the United States and in doing so prove that ghost stories imaginatively reconstruct an erased or fragmented collective history in order to reconstitute ethnic identity. In view of ethnic conflicts, Brazil also has a story of cultural haunting to tell about suffered and continual oppression.

In this sense, in her short story "Guarde Segredo" (1991), the Afro-Brazilian author and member of the literary group Quilombhoje, Esmeralda Ribeiro falls back on uncanny and spectral elements such as Lima Barreto's return from the dead. In rewriting *Clara dos Anjos* (1948) from a female perspective, she radicalizes Lima Barreto's critique of race, class and gender relations and simultaneously reflects the historical, political and literary invisibility of Afro-Brazilian women (Martins 2015). Yet, as suitable as the

metaphor of cultural haunting may be for Ribeiro's short story, when applying it to Brazilian literature, one must not overlook the fact that the overwhelming majority of all Brazilian authors represent the dominant white minority (Dalcastagnè 2012, 14) and that Afro-Brazilian literature, due to its continued marginalization, has not achieved a visibility comparable with that of Afro-American literature in the USA.

For this reason, it may be equally worthwhile to shift the search for the uncanny haunting presence of disastrous race relations back to the literary production of the dominant white minority and – as Toni Morrison did in her influential essay *Playing in the Dark* (1992) – to ask how the literary imagination of white authors has been haunted by centuries of racial oppression (cf. Villares 2002). A considerable attempt in literary anthropology to theoretically approach the figure of the living dead in Brazilian literature is presented by *The Carnavalesque Defunto. Death and the Dead in Modern Brazilian Literature* by Robert H. Moser (2008). In light of the observation that in the works of Machado de Assis, Jorge Amado and Érico Veríssimo figures from the beyond distinguish themselves more through their irony and their buoyant gaiety than eerie chain rattling, Moser ascribes to them a subversive-carnavalesque function that creates chaos within the current order, one which makes social conflicts visible in the process. Moser further argues that the mischievous behaviour of these illustrious literary *defuntos* can only be understood against the backdrop of a specifically Brazilian cult of ghosts and the dead which has been penetrated in the course of the centuries by Afro-Brazilian imaginaries, Catholic mysticism and Kardecist spiritism (Moser 2008, 7 and 10-33). By all means convincingly, Moser interprets Brás Cubas' voice from beyond the grave as a national allegory of the Brazilian Empire which dies an unpleasant death in its transition to the Republic and is haunted by its colonial past inasmuch as the dead narrator represents the restless souls of the Brazilian elite (Moser 2008, 140-141). Just as insightful is his interpretation of the revenant Quincas Berro D'Água as a figure in which Amado celebrates his own literary resurrection as an artistic-ideological liberation after his break with the communist party (Moser 2008, 187). Yet his culturalizing attempt to connect the numerous undead literary figures with an allegedly specific Brazilian affinity to ghosts, as well as his interpretation of the belief in ghosts as genuinely Brazilian remain problematic (Moser 2008, 12). By unintentionally constructing a binary and essentialist opposition between homogeneous cultural entities – the mystical-spiritist Brazil on one side, and the rational and allegedly anti-ghost Europe on the other – his argumentation tends to explain the cultural pattern of the living dead, which is found in all cultures, as a

distinctive characteristic of Brazilian literature, a *Brazilian* belief in ghosts. What is more, Moser mostly underpins his argumentation anthropologically by referring to the more essayistic than empirically grounded writings of Gilberto Freyre and correspondingly reproduces the symbolic relation of dominance that already distinguished Freyre's presentation of Brazilian customs in the nineteenth century. Although plausible within Freyre or Hollanda's idea of society, Moser's culturalizing interpretation of Brazilian voices from beyond the grave seems simplifying and essentialist, all the more as it is unable to grasp anti-carnavalesque, entirely prosaic voices like that of the *Pirotécnico* Zacarias or the obsessed revenant Das Dores in Nelson Rodrigues' farce *Doroteia*.

Given the considerable heterogeneity of the protagonism of dead or spectral figures, the great diversity of their socio-cultural functions, their widely varying significance as well as the eminent contextual dependence of their appearances, there is a high risk of theoretically appropriating them. This danger, however, may be counteracted by pragmatic approaches, ones which ask what the respective figures are doing or rather what is done with them or done in texts through them. In consideration of the finding of *hauntology* that the powerful conceptual metaphor of the ghost does not simply refer to something else, that is, another idea, but rather sets discourses, even entire systems of knowledge production into interaction (Pilar Blanco and Peeren 2013, 1), when it comes to the living, acting or narrating dead, analyzed in the following dossier, theory is produced in the performative implementation of the contradiction that constitutes them. As with Barthes' proclamation of the "death of the author" (2002), which presents a theoretical performance whose aim is to overcome the positivist understanding of the author, the declaration of the death of the narrator is a statement against the narrative conventions. Through this declaration, theory is conducted, and we are invited to carry out theoretical work ourselves and to ask why this particular artifice has been used. This "why" is tackled by the analyses in the present dossier in very different ways. These are pragmatic approaches which at first leave out the question of genre in order to focus on the effects which are evoked by the almost self-evident appearance of dead figures.

**Sarah Burnautzki** opens the dossier with her critical analysis of two texts which at first, both concerning literary genre and the time of their writing, seem to be divergent: Nelson Rodrigues' *Doroteia* and João Paulo Cuenca's *Descobri que estava morto*. Both authors are male, white and come from the Brazilian middle class – thus Burnautzki seeks out in her hauntological reading ghostly breaches of illusion and uncovers in them

a form of sensationalism which does not challenge societal structures, but instead reproduces existing unequal relations, and in the process reactivates and strengthens them. This reactionary play with misogynous and racializing clichés was often received in the past as parodistic, yet the nullification of the referential function of language is not entirely successful – undesired meanings, historical contexts and political-societal referential relations haunt the texts between the lines, and therefore continue to express an inferiorization of the societally marginalized.

Ghosts, revenants, cultural haunting – these are the theoretical cornerstones upon which **Jobst Welge** bases his analysis of Lúcio Cardoso's text *Crônica da Casa Assassinada*. The deterioration of the house stands for the deterioration of the family, which for its part stands for the deterioration of certain societal structures, namely the patriarchal society, which is founded upon the exploitation of human labor. Welge discusses these links both on the macro-level of Brazilian cultural history as well as on the micro-level of Cardoso's literary works. The *Casa Assassinada* in a specific way stands for Brazilian "Belatedness", illustrating how societal change was nipped in the bud early on by the paternalistic family structure as a nucleus of social organization. The protagonists Timóteo and Nina symbolize this conflict between the striving for progress and regression in a special way: the former resurrects the past and the paradoxical relations between progress and stillstand that belong to it, while the latter, as the representative of a new societal order, visits the house and in the end haunts it by stirring up the residents of the house from beyond the grave. By linking precisely the subversive characters of the story to the rigid past, the narration makes the family conflict – standing in for Brazilian society as a whole – especially clear.

This – by all means critical – evocation of the past is what **Petra Schumm** primarily inquires into in her text about Brás Cubas. In Schumm's opinion, Brás Cubas appears as a revenant in the sense of cultural haunting as the ghost of a traumatic, yet-to-be-processed past. Allegorical interventions accompany his memory of personal life events to emphatically illustrate the accusatory function of the text. The palimpsestic aspect of memory – newer copies are laid stalwartly over the past ones – eventually leads to a fiction whose aspiration to truth is hardly verifiable anymore, since the source fades increasingly into the dark. Authorship in Machado's text is thus consciously blurred in order to make the statements more generalizable and give its societal critique singular force. Truth and lie come into constant dialogue with another, so that a clearly defined partisanship in the context of the conjured stage of Brazilian history is nearly impossible.



The fact that – referring to dead narrators – the *Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas* are a central text in Brazilian literature is made clear by the following article as well. Using Machado's text as a springboard, **Irenísia Oliveira** discusses the *lugar social* of the dead narrator and establishes at the same time a class consciousness for Brás Cubas which can be heard even beyond the grave. Oliveira analyzes the discursive elements used by the narrator in a method based on Bakhtin's theory of the utterance to conclude that the dead author, simultaneously the narrator of the story, comes into dialogue with his audience, who moreover belong to the same social group as he does. His narration sometimes appears compliant, yet he finds himself in a sort of field of tension with another narrator, whom he occasionally contradicts. In this apparent play with narrator voices, the differentiation between critique and praise, between truth and lie is no longer clear. However, in that Brás Cubas conjures up and generalizes the past, one which is already in a deep, crisis-ridden process of change, his social critique eventually comes to light, which grants the dead narrator a similar accusatory function as the one Jobst Welge observes in Cardoso's text.

Another female voice that also continues to loom over a house beyond the grave can be discerned in the filming of Nelson Rodrigues' *Toda Nudez será castigada* (Arnaldo Jabor). In her article, **Ute Hermanns** analyses three literary film adaptations with particular focus on the laughing of the dead. The fact that two of the analyzed films are based on *Memórias póstumas* hardly seems surprising considering that Brás Cubas is the most prominent representative of dead narrators in Brazilian literature. The laughing of the dead is of central importance both in the Brás Cubas adaptations by André Klotzel and Júlio Bressane and in *Toda Nudez será castigada*. Hermanns notes in it a distancing from the hypocritical, middle-class lifestyle of the living. Laughing wipes away wounds and disappointments, however, in this case, it can only unfold after the death of the protagonists. Film techniques such as off-camera voices or the retrospective playback of a tape recording give the dead narrators further opportunities to comment on the events and allow the narrators' voices to maintain their sovereignty over their story even in death.

The power to interpret a story/stories and the danger of a retrospective appropriation or authorization is discussed by **Janek Scholz** in his analysis of Murilo Rubião's story *O Pirotécnico Zacarias* and Jorge Amado's *A Morte e a Morte de Quincas Berro d'Água*. By means of death, the protagonists overcome the guilt in being *thrown* and can theoretically act and exist freely. This freedom, however, brings with it social

exclusion – a situation which Zacarias struggles against desperately and which Amado's protagonist resists through his baptism as Quincas Berro d'Água, since this makes him a full member of a – self-chosen – social group. By self-confidently (re-)narrating his own story, Zacarias regains a voice that allows him to inscribe himself into collective consciousness, and Quincas hinders the retrospective appropriation of his biography by his biological family. Scholz sees in the appearance of a dead narrator a chance for the respective figure to inscribe himself into the memory of the living, and thus to actively co-shape the act of remembering and consequently to counteract mechanisms of social exclusion.

Bearing this in mind, one could say that the astonishing recurrence of paranormal and postmortal protagonists in Brazilian literature can be understood as a metaphorization of the peripheral, and thus "otherworldly" position of Brazilian authors within the globalized literary world. From this perspective, the living dead and dead narrators can be interpreted as a metaphor for the lacking acknowledgement of a literature which, through the repeated presentation of the return from the dead, does not undermine just any literary element, but death as a centrally signifying and plot-structuring element of the classical bildungsroman, as it were. If this is true, allowing the dead to speak from beyond the grave is not only a spectral aesthetic device which draws attention to the unheard, but is simultaneously a literary strategy for surmounting structural marginalization at the periphery of world literature.

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