

## *Introduction*

Eu sei que o perna-de-pau era apenas um perna-de-pau. . . . Ainda assim. Qualquer morto é um César.  
[I know that the peg-legged player was just a peg leg. . . . Even so, in death each of us becomes a caesar.]

—Nelson Rodrigues, *Crônicas de futebol*

MY INTEREST IN the figure of the dead in Brazilian literature was sparked while reading the memoirs of Nelson Rodrigues, Brazil's greatest modern playwright. As admirers of Rodrigues's innovative and frequently lurid plays might expect, the topic of death forms a leit-motif throughout his *Memórias* [Memoirs] (1967). For example, death left an indelible mark on Rodrigues's childhood when, in October of 1918, an influenza epidemic ravaged the city of Rio de Janeiro, killing approximately fifteen thousand people in a two-week period. Rodrigues, six years old at the time, later described the funeral processions, wakes, and profound grieving that became daily spectacles in the Zona Norte neighborhood, where his family lived. It was also at this early age that he discovered that people actually die. (He and his family, of course, would never die, but others could.) Reflecting on this discovery, Rodrigues writes: "Às vezes, tento fazer uma antologia de mortos, dos meus mortos" [Sometimes I try to write an anthology of the dead, of my dead] (33). In fact, that is precisely what his memoirs are.

In Rodrigues's "anthology of the dead," one event eclipses the rest, however. At approximately two o'clock in the afternoon on December 26, 1929, a young woman named Sylvia Seraphim walked into the press

office of the Rodrigues family newspaper, *Crítica*, and asked to speak with its editor in chief, Mário Rodrigues. Mário was unavailable, so she asked if one of his sons could attend to her. It was Roberto, Nelson's charismatic younger brother, who politely answered her request. In his *Memórias* Nelson recalls hearing, just moments later, the sound of a revolver being fired and his brother's instantaneous scream. Offended by a story that the newspaper had covered involving her supposed adulterous affair with a local doctor, Ms. Seraphim sought revenge, and when she was unable to find the owner, she settled for his son. Roberto died in a hospital two days later. Nelson would be scarred forever by the experience: "Roberto estava morto, mas ficara comigo seu grito, para sempre" [Robert was dead, but his scream would stay with me forever] (139).

What interested me initially, while reading Rodrigues's memoirs, was not so much the playwright's obsession with death per se, but rather the attitudes he expressed with respect to how the dead (in Portuguese, the *defunto* or *morto*) should be mourned and remembered. Specifically, Rodrigues laments the disappearance of those traditional mourning rituals that were so common during his youth and that, he felt, endowed the dead, as well as mourners, with true pathos and sanctity. Gone were the days, for example, when Brazilians regardless of their social class would tip their hats in the streets when a funeral procession passed by. Rodrigues places most of the blame for this loss on the introduction of the *capelinha*, or chapel, as the primary site for holding a wake, in place of the traditional home setting, with its familiar faces, smells, furniture, portraits, and so on (32). In the cold, impersonal walls of the chapel, those who come to pay their last respects act and feel like strangers, while the deceased are equally estranged.

Rodrigues's despair over the loss of traditional mourning rituals in Brazilian society is crystallized in his sentiments regarding *luto*, the custom of wearing black while grieving:

Hoje, a dor não justifica nem uma gravata preta. Ninguém põe luto. Ainda outro dia, eu ouvia uma mocinha:—"O sentimento não está na

## Introduction

côr.” Está. O sentimento está, sim, no terno chegado da tinturaria. E no vestido negro. Em 1929, minha família vestiu-se pesadamente de luto. Meu pai, minha mãe, todos os meus irmãos. Cheguei a pensar em nunca mais tirar o luto, nunca mais.

[Today the pain of losing a loved one doesn’t even merit a black tie. No one puts on mourning clothes anymore. Just the other day, I heard a young woman say, “The feeling is not in the color.” But it is. Yes, the feeling is in the dye of the black suit. And in the black dress. In 1929 my family always dressed in mourning. My father, my mother, all my siblings. I began to think that I would never again wear clothing that wasn’t black.] (143–44)

The Rodrigues family’s strong affirmation here of the luto tradition, in contrast to the comment of the young woman—“the feeling is not in the color”—exposes a widening gulf in Brazilian society between traditional and modern value systems, especially as they relate to death. The woman’s comment reflects a quintessentially modern sentiment, that one’s response to death is best expressed individually and internally. However, for Nelson the feeling resides precisely in the black tones of the mourner’s jacket or dress, that is, in those external manifestations of grief that are part of the elaborate rituals designed to observe the death of a loved one. When divorced of such rituals, according to Rodrigues, both the deceased and death lose the serene dignity that is so intrinsic to them.

Rodrigues’s preoccupation with the loss of traditional modes of relating to the dead in Brazilian society is encompassed within a larger discussion concerning the highly conflicted and largely unresolved interrelation between premodern and modern values systems concurrent in Brazil throughout the twentieth century. Rodrigues’s sentiments are a microcosm of this dissidence because they articulate the position of both systems so succinctly. Written in the 1960s, his memoirs also express the power and persistence of cultural anachronisms in Brazilian society. By *cultural anachronism* I mean any cultural expression, value, custom, institution, object, and so forth that continues to reinsert itself

in contemporary society, long after its form and function are determined to be, at least from a modern perspective, not only regressive but historically erroneous.

Of course, in any given society, on any given day, cultural anachronisms appear. Indeed, we are constantly confronted by reminders of our personal and collective histories, without which the present would be meaningless. Rather, it is the frequency and tenacity with which certain cultural anachronisms have invaded modern Brazilian society that is of primary interest in this study, particularly as they relate to the evolving relationship of the living to the dead. It may be said that ghosts, the dead who return, are anachronistic figures par excellence. As Jacques Derrida reminds us in *Specters of Marx*, the revenant breaks down rigid spatial and temporal boundaries when it makes its ethereal and untimely apparitions (10–11). Indeed, since classical times, ghosts have appeared in religious and secular literature as emblems of social unrest and unresolved pasts. Generally, they speak to the figurative or literal need for properly burying someone or something.

Upon reading Nelson Rodrigues's *Memórias*, however, I was primarily interested in his curiously intense *saudade* [longing, nostalgia] for traditional wakes and other mourning customs, and what that sentiment might tell us about Brazilian attitudes toward death and the dead. It was not until after rereading Machado de Assis's *Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas* [The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas] (1880) that I began to gather evidence for the image of the dead as a recurring motif in modern Brazilian literature. Though *Memórias póstumas* was published forty-two years before the cultural watershed of Brazil's Modern Art Week in 1922, I subscribe to Enylton de Sá Rego's acknowledgment—shared by many other Machadian critics—that “these posthumous memoirs are a remarkably modern book” (“Warning,” xiv), and it is in this spirit that I am including it in my study of “modern” Brazilian fiction.

While Brás Cubas undoubtedly lacks the quiet dignity of Rodrigues's idealized and august mortos (instead he is a rather noisy, vain, and indecorous defunto), he does possess, as a deceased narrator, a uniquely

privileged position from which to view the world and reminisce about his life. Numerous critics, since the publication of *Memórias póstumas* in 1880, have offered explanations for the significance of deceased narration in Machado's peculiar dead man's tale. Yet, to my knowledge, none have begun their inquiry by first asking: What role did the dead actually play in the lives of the living in late-nineteenth-century Brazil? How would a dead man's voice resonate with the average Brazilian reader during this historical period? These questions, rooted in a sociohistorical analysis of mourning rituals and attitudes toward death and the dead in Brazil, allowed me to envision a broader scope of research, one that traced the image of the defunto over a longer period of Brazilian literary history.

The respective merits and limitations of diverse critical interpretations on deceased narration in *Memórias póstumas* will be considered in depth in chapter 3. The undeniable significance of Roberto Schwarz's work on Machado de Assis, and in particular that of his study *Um mestre na periferia do capitalismo* [*A Master on the Periphery of Capitalism*] as a reference for understanding *Memórias póstumas*, warrants a few preliminary words, however. According to Schwarz, Brás Cubas's posthumous claim to personal unaccountability and utter frankness in the afterlife is a mere reflection of the sociopolitical unaccountability he enjoyed in life as a member of the ruling class in mid-nineteenth-century Brazil. The novel's humor is manifested precisely in the "earthly passions" of its *defunto autor* [a writer who happens to be dead] who, to all intents and purposes, remains "vivíssimo" (*Mestre*, 58) ["very much alive" (*Master*, 38)]. For Schwarz there is no relevant distinction between Brás Cubas's terrestrial and posthumous positions.

Nevertheless, by insisting that Brás Cubas's posthumous, and therefore unrealistic, status is nothing more than a "finta do espírito" (24) ["witty fraud" (12)] Schwarz glosses over the very real connotations and expectations embedded in discourses with the spirit world in nineteenth-century Brazil (12). The precise nature of these discourses will be discussed in chapter 1. It is worth noting here that, even within the Brazilian intelligentsia of Machado's time, the dead were routinely

summoned, and their messages seen to possess considerable credibility. For the lower classes, dialogue with the supernatural was a given. I am not proposing that *Memórias póstumas* be read as an elaborate literary séance in which the dead are conjured up, nor do I believe Machado de Assis intended that, or his contemporaries perceived it as such. Rather, I am suggesting that both the author and nineteenth-century reader of *Memórias póstumas* brought with them a deeply rooted and complex assemblage of expectations, experiences, beliefs, and disbeliefs concerning the role of spirits in everyday life. I contend that essentially the same holds true, with varying degrees and manifestations, for the twentieth-century works explored in this study. Indeed, as voices of a modern, secular age these nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers employ the defunto both as a rhetorical strategy and a device for sociopolitical commentary. By the same token, each author shares an appreciation for the profound, enduring resonance of this figure in Brazilian culture and, through narrative that perpetuates the symbolic force of the defunto, establishes their own particular, metaphorical dialogue with the dead.

That this dialogue might occur, in a modified and constantly evolving sense, during later historical periods was confirmed for me by the recurring motif of the resurrected defunto in twentieth-century Brazilian literature. As with the return of Brás Cubas from beyond the grave, the resurgence of otherworldly figures created by Jorge Amado and Érico Veríssimo, for example, are similarly riotous affairs, sharing very little in common with the chain-rattling, somber hauntings of the gothic literary tradition. The novels discussed in the following chapters are ghost stories of a different sort, whose revenants are more carnivalesque than phantasmal, more carnal than discarnate. This study will attempt to identify what is uniquely Brazilian about these carnivalesque defuntos by examining both the artistic and sociohistorical significance of this posthumous literary figure.

I argue that these otherwise chronologically and aesthetically disparate works are ultimately linked by the irrepressible force of the carnivalesque defunto as a living cultural anachronism in modern Brazilian

## Introduction

society. Beyond this basic premise, and following the Bakhtinian tradition of viewing carnival as a ritual inversion of the prevailing social order, I am interested in how these carnivalesque defuntos manage to wreak havoc on the status quo and, in so doing, expose certain fissures, or points of tension, within Brazilian society. Complementary to my first premise is a second one, which argues that these subversive defuntos would be incapable of performing the functions I have outlined here, if they did not already enjoy an unusual degree of prestige and leverage within Brazilian society. For this reason, I have gone to considerable length in the first two chapters to provide both a sociohistorical and a literary justification for the presence of these figures in Brazilian literature.

Given that one of the primary roles of the dead in Brazil has been to intervene on behalf of the living, particularly in times of crisis, we can then ask the following basic questions as springboards into understanding the unique function of this topos in the context of each novel: In what way are these figures intervening in worldly affairs? And why are they intervening? In response to these questions I will be focusing on three primary objectives in this study: (1) to propose a rereading of those novels in which this topos emerges and, subsequently, to explore rhetorical strategies and sociohistorical problems linking these different works; (2) to consider how, in these works, coming to terms with the dead constitutes a metaphor for reconciling the past with the present and future; (3) to outline the historical development of a Brazilian relationship with death, and particularly the dead, and to explore the links between this relationship and the treatment that the topos receives in the literature.

In the following chapters I examine the evolving historical relationship between the living and the dead in Brazilian society, and establish a justification for the persistence of an underlying “spirit idiom,” borrowing David Hess’s term, even in modern times (*Spirits and Scientists*, 210). Special focus is given to the growth of Kardecian Spiritism in Brazil during the latter half of the nineteenth century. I also trace the image of the dead, and particularly the renascent dead, briefly within

a Western literary tradition, then more specifically as a recurrent and salient figure within Brazilian literary history, and finally within the broader comparative context of the literature of the Americas. The relative significance of carnival and its ethos of *malandragem* [roguey] in Brazilian culture and literature will also be explored in this section.

I focus on the question of deceased narration in *Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas* and the implications of Brás Cubas's intrinsically "bad death" and "wandering soul" within the context of Brazil's problematic transition from a slavocratic monarchy to a modern republic. Furthermore, I explore the relationship of Spiritism to Machado de Assis's novel, as well as the reemergence of posthumous narratives and figures in Machado's subsequent novels and short stories. Brás Cubas's "bad death" is juxtaposed to the relatively "good deaths" imagined by Jorge Amado for Quincas in *A morte e a morte de Quincas Berro Dágua* [The Two Deaths of Quincas Wateryell] (1961) and Vadinho in *Dona Flor e seus dois maridos* [Dona Flor and Her Two Husbands] (1966). Carnivalesque undercurrents and the role of popular culture in the author's critique of modern life are considered in the context of each novel. Finally, I examine the reappearance of the defunto topos in Érico Veríssimo's *Incidente em Antares* [Incident in Antares] (1971) and Autran Dourado's *Ópera dos mortos* [The Voices of the Dead] (1967), a novel which, while it does not share the carnivalesque features of the aforementioned works, does evoke a particularly intransigent veneration of the dead in Brazilian, and particularly *mineiro*, culture. Special attention is given to how both Veríssimo and Dourado make use of the unburied dead as a metaphor for Brazil's problematic relationship with both its past and the outdated sociopolitical institutions that continue to haunt it.

One literary critic who has explored ghostly figures comparatively in magical realist fiction of the Americas is Lois Parkinson Zamora. In *The Usable Past: The Imagination of History in Recent Fiction of the Americas*, she devotes a chapter to the subject, arguing that magical realist ghosts form part of what she calls an "ancestral impulse," whereby

## Introduction

the “necrogeographies” of indigenous cultures are traced by the activities of these counterrealist apparitions (79). Zamora’s comparative discussion of literary ghosts and historical imagination is brought into focus through a dialogue with some of the most influential writers of the Western Hemisphere—Octavio Paz, Jorge Luis Borges, Carlos Fuentes, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Gabriel García Márquez, Flannery O’Connor, William Faulkner, Juan Rulfo, among other American writers and intellectuals whose work is infused with the supernatural on one level or another. While the forms that ghosts assume, within the parameters of counterrealist fiction, and the messages they embody, are certainly multifarious, they are also linked by their ability to “make absence present” and, in so doing, to question Western modernity’s basis for reality (77). As Zamora points out, “Ghosts embody the fundamental magical realist sense that reality always exceeds our capacities to describe or understand or prove, and that the function of literature is to engage this excessive reality, to honor that which we may grasp intuitively but never fully or finally define. Magical realist texts ask us to look beyond the limits of the knowable, and ghosts are often our guides” (77).

While the Brazilian literary ghosts discussed in this book do fulfill this oppositional role of looking “beyond the knowable” and engaging “this excessive reality,” they do so in a way, as we shall see, that defies easy categorization within either a gothic mode or a Latin American “ancestral impulse.” This raises a larger, related question. Despite the comparative breadth of Zamora’s study, no mention is made of Brazil’s own fantastic/counterrealist tradition, nor of its own literary ghosts, despite ample opportunity to do so in both instances. Brazil’s omission from the comparative framework established by Zamora is by no means exclusive to her study but, rather, is symptomatic of a consistent tendency in literary criticism and historiography purporting to encompass “Latin American” reality. The following chapters aim to fill this lacuna by bringing to light the cultural, aesthetic, and sociohistorical complexities of Brazil’s literary revenant.