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**THE BRAZILIAN GOTHIC IN *THRESHOLD* (1935)  
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**Abstract:** In the last two decades, numerous researchers have reinterpreted Brazilian literature in light of negative poetics—a set of works in which literary strategies and devices are employed to represent the darkest aspects of the human experience and produce negative aesthetic effects. As the Gothic is the most important of these poetics, there appeared studies proposing the existence of a Brazilian strand. This article aims to contribute to the conception of the Brazilian Gothic by developing the ideas of scholars Fernando Monteiro de Barros (2014; 2020), Justin D. Edwards and Sandra Vasconcelos (2016), and João Pedro Bellas (2021). To this end, the text is divided into four sections: in the first one, we review the

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1 Título em língua estrangeira: “O gótico brasileiro em *Fronteira* (1935), de Cornélio Penna”.

main trends in Brazilian literary historiography and criticism, which have always stifled representations and expressions differing from the implemented realist-naturalist perspective; in the next section, we indicate the canon placed Cornélio Penna Brazilian literature; finally, in the two last parts, we elaborate on the question of the Brazilian Gothic and its formal and thematic elements in Penna's *Threshold* (1935).

**Keywords:** Brazilian Gothic. Cornélio Penna. *Threshold*. Brazilian postmodernist literature. 1930s novel.

**Resumo:** Nas últimas duas décadas, inúmeros pesquisadores têm reinterpretado a literatura brasileira à luz das poéticas negativas – um conjunto de obras em que o uso de estratégias e métodos de composição literária são utilizados para a representação dos aspectos mais sombrios da experiência humana e a produção de efeitos estéticos negativos. Como o Gótico é a mais importante de tais poéticas, surgiram diversos estudos que propõem a existência de uma vertente brasileira. Este artigo procura contribuir para a concepção do Gótico brasileiro, desenvolvendo as ideias de Fernando Monteiro de Barros (2014; 2020), Justin D. Edwards e Sandra Vasconcelos (2016), and João Pedro Bellas (2021). Para tal fim, dividimos nosso texto em três seções: na primeira, revisamos as tendências das historiografia e crítica literárias brasileiras, que procuraram recalcar representações e expressões diferentes da perspectiva realista-naturalista hegemônica; na segunda seção, indicamos o lugar reservado a Cornélio Penna na historiografia; na última seção, elaboramos a questão do Gótico brasileiro e seus elementos formais e temáticos em *Frenteira* (1935).

**Palavras-chave:** Gótico brasileiro. Cornélio Penna. *Frenteira*. Literatura brasileira pós-modernista. Romance de 30.

## INTRODUCTION

In the last two decades, numerous researchers have reinterpreted Brazilian literature in the light of what has become known as negative poetics – *i.e.*, a set of works in which the use of literary strategies and devices are employed to represent the darkest aspects of the human experience and produce negative aesthetic effects. The most important of these poetics is certainly the Gothic. Dating back to the mid-eighteenth century British literary environment, Gothic has consolidated as an artistic mode that bears a pessimistic or skeptical worldview and provides thematic and stylistic conventions to figure and express societies' fears and anxieties (FRANÇA; SENA, 2020). Since the early twentieth century, criticism has understood Gothic fiction not merely as “a historically delimited genre”, but as “a more wide-ranging and persistent tendency within fiction as a whole” (PUNTER, 2013, p. 12), a tradition that has been changing and adapting itself while incorporated into the literature of different nations for more than three centuries.

In Brazilian literature, we can trace the presence of Gothic from the nation's first novels at the beginning of the nineteenth century (SÁ, 2010; CUNHA, 2016; VASCONCELOS, 2016) to the postmodernist fiction of the 1930s (BARROS, 2014). As for the latter, Cornélio Penna<sup>2</sup> is one of the authors whose works are significant exemplars of this lineage. Even though most of the

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2 Before turning to literature, Cornélio Penna (1896-1958) was an illustrator and painter during the 1920s, known for his eccentric, dark style. His oeuvre consists of a small number of novels, yet highly influent in Brazilian literature: *Fronreira* (1935) – translated into English in 1975 by Tona and Edward Riggio –, *Dois romances de Nico Horta* (1939), *Repouso* (1949), and his *magnus opus*, *A Menina Morta* (1954).

literary criticism has labeled him as a writer of the “psychological,” “intimate,” or even “Catholic” novels, Penna’s texts present a consistent set of Gothic elements, namely: i) the figuration of *loci horribiles*, which are terrifying and oppressive narrative spaces; ii) a lacunar and labyrinthine narrative structure, interwoven with suspense and mystery effects; iii) the theme of the past returning to haunt the present, and iv) morally monstrous characters (FRANÇA, 2018). In *Fronteira [Threshold]* (1935), Penna applies such elements to compose a particular picture of Brazil in which the gloomiest and most ominous aspects of the nation’s culture prevail. This use of the Gothic stock, which presents distinctly Brazilian characteristics, consists of a specific strand – the Brazilian Gothic.

In this article, I will discuss how the Gothic tradition can unveil events and features of Brazil’s history and culture that the hegemonic, “official” historiography has repressed and points to the cracks in the construction of the image of a hegemonic nation. To this end, I divided my text into four sections: in the first one, I review the main trends in Brazilian literary historiography and criticism, which have always stifled representations and expressions differing from the implemented realist-naturalist perspective; in the next section, I offer a glimpse of the position the canonical criticism placed Cornélio Penna’s work in Brazilian literature and try to identify in its literary discourse the very elements of the Gothic mode; in the third section, I elaborate on the topic of the Brazilian Gothic based on theories of scholars and researchers as Fernando Monteiro de Barros (2014; 2020), João Pedro Bellas (2021), and Justin D. Edwards (2016) in order

to demonstrate, in the last part of the article, how we can find its main aspects in Penna's first novel, *Threshold*.

### THE REALIST-NATURALIST TREND IN BRAZILIAN HISTORIOGRAPHY

Once Brazilian scholars began to identify the Gothic in much of the nation's literature, it was necessary to analyze the reasons our literary criticism has shunned it. Many studies have offered insightful responses (BELLAS, 2021; BARROS, 2020), but I will focus on Júlio França's (2017) work due to space reasons. França enlists the following factors to what he calls the "abduction of Gothic" in Brazilian literature: a mistaken conception of this literary tradition; the literary historiography's tendency to privilege the documental and realistic features in literature rather than the elements of imagination and fantasy; and a literary project highly focused on the idea of the nationality. França comments that the marginalization of the Gothic by the hegemonic literary trend is "a consequence of an imbalance between the perspectives of criticism in the literary studies in Brazil and the fictional productions of the country's literature"<sup>3</sup> (FRANÇA, 2017, p. 115).

However, before turning to França's observations, it is vital to point out that the literary production not only in Brazil but also in overall Latin America has nurtured, since its onset, what Luiz Costa Lima calls the "veto to the fictional" and "cult of the documental", elements strongly encouraged by the European literati of the nineteenth century and strictly followed by the Brazilian men of letters. Although the presumed aspiration was for features that asserted the essence of the Latin American nations in their

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3 All the excerpts in Portuguese were translated into the English language by me.

emancipation from the European countries that had colonized them and for an authentic expression of this essence in literature, Latin American authors never lost sight of the foreign expectations and instructions: it was essential to exalt the countries' physical nature and indigenous people, for example, and not to fear showing ourselves as Latin or South-Americans (LIMA, 1986, p. 204).

Alongside Lima, Flora Süssekind (1984) and Maria Helena Rouanet (1991) scrutinize the ironic genealogy of our literary program and the construction of the "official" image and narrative of Brazilian nationality. Rouanet explores the crucial role of French historian and writer Jean-Ferdinand Denis, whose texts were among the first to raise the issue of talking about Brazilian nature – here in both its both meaning – in literature. Denis's deep enchantment with the natural beauties of Brazil and the influence of travel literature made him export a differentiated Romanticism: following the French model, which "preached and tried to accomplish – at least ideally – a return on itself, in a movement of recovery of that 'state of nature' that was lost with the emergence of the 'state of society' (ROUANET, 1991, p. 246), the Brazilian Romanticism was going to meet an impracticable situation, due to the nation's idiosyncrasies:

The nature which the authors try to transpose into literature is neither that original inner feeling postulated by Rousseau nor the German Romantics' starting point for a journey. What we have here is nature itself, a literal nature [...]. That is the nature to be pictured, a picture-to-be-painted nature, as Denis himself saw it in practice in his particular predilection for the descriptive poets of the late eighteenth century. (ROUANET, 1987, p. 247)

Rouanet's and Lima's considerations lead us to the idea that the Romantic project in Brazil, unifying the processes of political and literary independence, turned to the reproduction of physical nature and immediate Brazilian customs as its distinguishing elements, remaining on the surface of the issue of the nationality: one expressed in literature what was directly observed in the natural and social dimensions. This priority of the documental and observational characters reached and shaped the naturalist aesthetic – strongly developed in Brazil from the 1870s on –, so that these elements become even “more restricted, because freed from the [Romanticism's] overemotional cult of tears and directed by a ‘scientific’ knowledge” (LIMA, 1987, p. 213).

In an analogy between family and literary aesthetics, Süssekind highlights the aspects of similarity, continuity, and repetition as the rules of the Brazilian literary game; in order to continue the production of a unique and “true portrait” of the nation (SÜSSEKIND, 1984, p. 29), it was primordial to pay attention to verisimilitude and give preference to a “transparent” literary language which reproduced as faithfully as possible the country's reality. There occurred thus a process of domestication of the strange and different, in which any writer or text that somehow eluded this grand narrative of the nation, that did not present “clear traces of Brazilianness” (p. 30), was submitted to a homogenization procedure so that it could be included in a type of cultural identity.

The construction of literary history, like that of a family tree, is done by hiding the differences and discontinuities. Anything that could dull, ridicule, or undo the profile of its greatest authors is

emphasized. Anything that disputes such literature's characterization as a continuous and evolutionary improvement process [is emphasized]. Anything seeking to sever such a continuum risks finding itself violently or euphemistically outcast or condemned by this history. (SÜSSEKIND, 1984, p. 33)

Hence, these early moments of the Brazilian literary system established what the scholar João Adolfo Hansen calls the political and biographical reading protocols (HANSEN, 1998, p. 10). Returning to Júlio França's study, the scholar links Hansen's considerations to the theories of M. H. Abrams, helping us to form a more coherent picture of the Brazilian critical tradition. França recalls the four elements pointed out by Abrams as essential to the artistic work: its relation to (i) the world, (ii) the author, (iii) the audience, and (iv) the work itself in its textual and linguistic materiality (FRANÇA, 2017, p. 115). Such elements are related to each critical tendency, respectively: the mimetic, the expressive, the pragmatic, and the objective. Analyses such as those by Lima, Rouanet, and Sússekind confirm that criticism in Brazil is inclined towards the mimetic and expressive approaches, emphasizing the political and biographical properties of literary productions. For this reason, the Gothic poetics in Brazilian fiction was interpreted as indications of psychological or emotional disorders of the authors who employed it since this literary tradition focuses on different strategies and forms of expressions to symbolize political, social, and cultural issues.

Although the mimetic and expressive approaches can provide adequate instruments to address the Gothic literature – after all, most of its critical fortune is composed by works based on Marxist and/or psychoanalytic assumptions –,



it was the little attention given to the other two critical perspectives that first made impossible to recognize the role of the Gothic tradition in our literature. On the other hand, a pragmatic approach, based on the understanding that the literary work is a cultural artifact that produces sensorial reception effects, would have allowed us to pay attention to and value a set of texts that is characterized precisely by producing horror, terror, and repulsion as an aesthetic pleasure. On the other hand, an objective approach would have allowed us to realize that such works, although not in tune with the Romantic nationalist program, were not necessarily alien and alienated but constituted from other literary conventions. (FRANÇA, 2017, p. 115-16)

Moreover, the comprehension of Gothic in Brazil was still very limited<sup>4</sup> – our literati understood it as a literary style exclusive of eighteenth-century British fiction – and there still persisted the ideas about a mandatory relationship between the literature of a people and its geographical location and temperament, mainly disseminated by Madame de Staël’s treatises. Thus, many believed Gothic could not be cultivated in cultures outside the northern hemisphere, as we can see in a text published in 1896 by Araripe Junior, a well-known Brazilian writer, critic, and politician.

We Brazilians have no Middle Ages, Celtic antiquities, nor Eastern mysteries within our reach. The splendor of our lands does not allow us certain fancies; the demands of the tropics annul all efforts in that direction. We lack the weariness

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4 A search through the main vehicles of literary criticism and historiographical works of the nineteenth century shows that even the Portuguese term *gótico* was barely used in relation to literature; critics tended to use expressions like *Byronismo* [“Byronism”] to refer to the Gothic elements in some Brazilian authors’ works. (FRANÇA, 2021).

of the present, especially the spectacles of ruins and the suggestions of museums [...]. The Atlantic and a glorious life of sun and light have interposed between our myths and the myths that come immediately out of the soil in which the French, the English, the Germans, the Italians, and their ancestors lived. (ARARIPE JUNIOR, 1896, p. 132-134)

All these notions contributed to the conception of a particular art expectation “that demands from our literature an explicit and continuous reflection on the issues of the Brazilian reality” (FRANÇA, 2017, p. 115). In the next section, we will demonstrate how this tradition of Brazilian historiography and criticism has interpreted Cornélio Penna’s work mostly as representations of the inner world of unusual characters, without any or minor relation with the national reality – except for *A Menina Morta*<sup>5</sup> (1954). The Gothic elements were considered authorial idiosyncrasy or mere reproductions of foreign influence.

## THE CANONICAL PICTURE OF CORNÉLIO PENNA

When *Threshold* was published, much of the literary criticism highlighted the “strangeness” of its narrative. Simone Rossinetti Rufinoni (2015) elucidates that because Cornélio Penna’s novel so blatantly differed from the mainstream Brazilian Northeast fiction – which was directly oriented to the political and sociological problems of this region of the country and employed the bluntness and straightness of the naturalist language –, it was placed in a different position in the literature of the time:

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5 In English, *The Dead Girl*, Cornélio Penna’s most celebrated work by Brazilian literary studies precisely because it deals openly with issues related to Brazil’s history, such as the slave system and the coffee economy. For this book, Penna received an important Brazilian literary award in 1955.

It was not only [*Threshold's*] plot that generated discomfort but also the [author's] means of presenting the narrative since the text follows the paths inherent to the novel of introversion which marks are rather the vagueness arising from personal memory and reflection than the verisimilitude in dealing with reality. (RUFINONI, 2015, p. 220)

The hegemonic literary criticism maintained their biographical and political tendencies to deal not only with Cornélio Penna's first novel but his whole body of work. Whereas his fiction did not present outspoken political motifs, the critics turned to Penna's reserved, eccentric personality and Catholicism to explain his texts. In the introduction to the collected works of the author, one of his foremost critics points to the "homogeneity" as the most prominent characteristic of his novels: Adonias Filho affirms that Penna articulates "a single true panel" from his first to last books, and all his novels are "a convergence of the novelist's *vocation* and *temperament*" (ADONIAS FILHO, 1958, p. XIII, emphasis added). As for the elements that permeate Penna's fiction, he mentions "the somber world, the mystical background, the anguish, the catholicity guiding the eschatological inquiry", and a great "existential nucleus" giving the novels their coherence and unity (p. XIII).

Brazilian literary historiography generally resorted to similar perceptions to deal with Penna's production. He was constantly included in the strand directly opposed to the Northeast fiction, into categories such as the psychological or Catholic novel<sup>6</sup>, which

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6 Literary criticism has conventionally called Catholic novels the literary works of the first decades of the twentieth century that combined religious elements – such as the ideas of sin, sacrilege, and profanation – with moral and existential issues, as the fiction of French authors Georges Bernanos, François Mauriac, and Julien Green. In Brazil,

supposedly dealt with more universal topics or themes relating to the inner life of individuals. As an example, we have the readings of Alfredo Bosi (1978), one of the most influential scholars in Brazil. In the scheme, he proposes for the four main trends in the national fiction from the 1930s on – which takes into account the tension between the “hero” of the plots and her world –, he locates Cornélio Penna’s novels in the group of works that present an “internalized tension” (BOSI, 1978, p. 440). In Bosi’s words, Penna’s fiction radiates “the strangeness of relationships among humankind, the uncertain border between the normal and the aberrant, the wide margin of mystery that can subsist in the banality of family routines” (p. 448).

If Bosi credits the high “dose of secrecy” (BOSI, 1978, p. 468) in Penna’s novels to the strong subjectivation of the hero’s conflict, another critic, Mário de Andrade, reprimands the use of such mystery effects. In a review of the second novel published by Cornélio Penna in 1939 – *Dois Romances de Nico Horta* –, Andrade states that the new work “insists on the same novelistic climate and aesthetic attitude we see in *Threshold*, clearly engrossing in its author literary personality” (ANDRADE, 1958, p. 171). The critic also calls attention to “the exaggerations and nebulosities” in Penna’s books, his “taste for the study of the abnormal and even of the

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critics also employed this label to categorize the novels by Penna and other writers, such as Lúcio Cardoso, Octávio de Faria, and Adonias Filho, for the similarities with the French authors’ style. It is important to remark that studies such as Malcom Scott’s (1989) identify the Gothic literature in the origins of the Catholic novel, dating back to some works of Barbey d’Aurevilly. According to Scott, “Barbey’s interest in the fantastic drew him to the gothic novel and tale of terror of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries [...]. The horror element of gothic fiction had been a feature of Barbey’s writing since his first published story, *Le Cachet d’onyx* (1831 [...])” (SCOTT, 1989, p. 66-67). The Gothic mode continued to present itself in the writings of Bernanos and Green (SCOTT, 1989, p. 74; 212).

metapsychic”, and the “cheap tricks that sometimes even reach the irritation of ghost stories” (p. 175). Yet he still recognizes a set of qualities in Penna’s works:

Mr. Penna has remarkable strength in creating the somber, the tenebrous, the anguished. His evocations of old-fashioned environments, strange or abnormal people, dead cities where families slowly degenerate and madness is always “on the prowl for new victims” – all this is admirable and perfectly accomplished. A collector’s soul living among old objects, Mr. Penna knows how to translate the flavor of beauty mixed with that of secret, degeneration, and mystery like no one else among us. [...]

[...] Mr. Penna achieves exciting pages where he plays with the unease, the somber, the unfathomable of inner lives and the threshold of madness. (ANDRADE, 1958, p. 174-75)

We notice that Mário de Andrade extracts from Cornélio Penna’s personality and lifestyle – it was well known that he lived in houses full of antique furniture and objects inherited from his family – the essence for the picturesque feature of his fiction, and even entitles the review as “Novels of an antiquarian”. Some mechanisms of the Gothic novels that permeate his work are understood as “cheap tricks [...] of ghost stories” precisely because they stray too far from the rules of observation and representation of reality.

We can also see the emphasis on the elements of religion and introspection in another of Brazil’s most significant literary historians, Antonio Candido: he inserts Penna in the same group

of 1930s authors as Lúcio Cardoso<sup>7</sup> and Octávio de Faria and speaks of a “search for a spiritualist tone of tension and mystery, which suggests, on the one hand, the ineffable and, on the other, the [religious] fervor” (CANDIDO, 1987, p. 188), and Penna’s “phantasmagoric universes as a framework for intimate tensions” (p. 204). In another of his work, Candido and José Aderaldo Castello place the author in a “remarkable position in [Brazilian] contemporary fiction [...] by the relative thematic originality and [...] the new way of apprehending it” (CANDIDO; CASTELLO, 2012, p. 378). However, at the end of the short text about the writer, the critics reproduce Mário de Andrade’s opinion, recognizing “a certain abuse in the processes he uses, especially to suggest mystery” (p. 379).

Up to this point, I have tried to highlight the homogeneous view of Brazilian historiography on Cornélio Penna’s body of work and how a misconception about Gothic literature undermined the recognition of its presence and contributions to our fiction. Yet relatively varied ideas began to circulate in the latter 1960s, with the insertion of the fantastic as a possibility in our reading of Penna’s work. The first one I found is an article from 1964 by scholar Maria Aparecida Santilli, in which she discusses the topic of anguish and the fantastic elements in Cornélio Penna’s novels:

Placed in a nativist and social ambiance, [Penna’s] protagonists engage in the drama of [...] our old

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<sup>7</sup> Brazilian novelist, poet, and playwright, also known for his “introspective”, “somber” style. As Cornélio Penna, his works present a set of Gothic elements, and some of them can also be included in the Brazilian Gothic. One of his most famous novels, *Crônica da casa assassinada* [*Chronicle of the Murdered House*] (1959), was translated into English by Margaret Jull Costa and Robin Patterson, published in 20116. Cardoso was also a translator, responsible for the Portuguese versions of Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* in 1943 and Gaston Leroux’s *The Phantom of the Opera* in 1944.

cities, in the constitution of what the writer himself called “a palpitating humanity very much ours”. [...] The fantastic in Cornélio Penna’s novel cannot be confused with the fantastic in adventure novels because it does not come from the drama as an external fact but from the fears and uncertainties of the human consciousness, generated or not by the external fact. Therefore, it is a novel of anguish led to its maximum tension, but also of a mystical, spiritual order. [...] The nebulosity and the fantastic are nothing more than a consequence of this anguish, its own atmosphere, and constitute the strength of Penna’s novel, not its negative point. (SANTILLI, 1964, p. 164-65)

Such words confirm a rising circulation of counterpoint ideas in the literary studies of the period. Over ten years later, Luiz Costa Lima’s (1976) published his classic study about Cornélio Penna. Although contingent, his comment that Penna’s work could be understood “as the rare epigone of some preceding current – the Gothic novel, perhaps” (LIMA, 1976, p. 56) inserted the Gothic into the interpretations to be considered.

The 1970s was a period of new ideas since we can find similar studies during those years. Three years after Lima’s publication, the literary supplement of a prominent newspaper in São Paulo issued a series of analyses on the work of modernist authors written by different scholars. Opening the set of texts, Cecília de Lara followed Maria Aparecida Santilli’s ideas. She proposed the presence of the fantastic in Brazilian literature “as early as the 1920s and 1930s”, not as mere cases of “European- or Latin-American-authors’ influence” but as a genuine “line of creation” in our fiction (LARA, 1979, p. 10). She credits the oblivion of this

fact to both the minor dissemination of the books by particular writers and the monopolization of neorealist literature during the 1930s.

A whole line of fiction from the 1930s has been left in ostracism and has not drawn the attention of scholars and readers in general. I am talking about elaborated works and not mere experiments, such as Cornélio Pena's and Joaquim Lúcio Cardoso's books [...]. It is not a matter of underestimating or overvaluing one or another line of creation – but pointing out the neglect of works that analyze man's internal problems in such a way that, for the unaware reader, the novel of the 1930s seems reduced to a single kind of regionalist character. (LARA, 1979, p. 10)

There is also Carolina Maia Gouvêa's article, in which she affirmed that “the homogeneity that transpires from Cornélio Penna's work comes above all from the permanence of the Gothic” (GOUVÊA, 1979, p. 10). The Gothic elements employed by the authors begin to be identified as an “artistic awareness” (GOUVÊA, 1979, p. 11) to the representation of distinctively Brazilian landscapes and themes, such as the “popular Catholicism and its syncretic forms” (p. 11) so characteristic of the Brazilian hinterlands.

Still, these perspectives were in a small number. For example, in 1989, in an article about the fiftieth anniversary of H. P. Lovecraft's death and the importance of the author's work for the horror genre, scholar Fausto Cunha recognized a Gothic feature in Cornélio Penna's *Threshold* that much reminisces Lovecraft's style, saying, nevertheless, that the first produces



“a Gothic mimicry, of course” (CUNHA, 1989, p. 6). Once again, there remained the notion that Brazilian authors could only use narrative modes as diverse as the Gothic to deal with more superficial aspects – in Penna’s case, to create a somber physical space. Using Gothic elements in a Brazilian context would result in a mere “mimicry” – we can indeed perceive a dismissive tone here – for our lands and society would be incompatible with this kind of literature. Nonetheless, the similarities between Lovecraft’s and Penna’s sceneries were unmistakable: “nothing could be clearer to the Brazilian reader. There is even, in this style, something familiar: Cornélio Penna’s novel” (p. 6). As an illustration, Cunha transcribed the translated opening lines of Lovecraft’s “The color out of space” and Penna’s *Threshold*:

West of Arkham the hills rise wild, and there are valleys with deep woods that no axe has ever cut. There are dark narrow glens where the trees slope fantastically, and where thin brooklets trickle without ever having caught the glint of sunlight. On the gentler slopes there are farms, ancient and rocky, with squat, moss-coated cottages brooding eternally over old New England secrets in the lee of great ledges; but these are all vacant now, the wide chimneys crumbling and the shingled sides bulging perilously beneath low gambrel roofs. (LOVECRAFT, 2015, p. 61)

The black mountains, yielding their rainfall and obscured in the dense fog rising from the ground; and the railway, also black, meet my gaze slowly as in a suffocating dream.

I make out in my sluggish memory a large poster with English words written upon it. It appears to me suddenly out of the darkness, indicating abandoned gold mines.

The stony valley, devoid of trees, seems swallowed by the menacing night. No vitality gives life to that mysterious place. (PENNA, 1975, p. 1)

With a narrow view of the Gothic literature, Fausto Cunha missed what scholars like Maria Aparecida Santilli, Cecília de Lara, and Carolina Maia Gouvêa had not failed to notice: this mode provided literary devices for writers such as Cornélio Penna to represent a particular state of affairs in a particular region of Brazil. Unlike the “blasted heath” to the West of Lovecraft’s fictional Arkham, Cornélio Penna’s hinterlands are not devastated by the mysterious, poisonous substances of a meteorite; instead, the town in *Threshold* is the depraved product of a long exploitation process – dating back to the *Bandeirantes*<sup>8</sup> times and reaching the most recent period of the coming of foreign mining companies. In Penna’s novel, this historical background is directly linked to the nature of his characters, contributing to the feelings of guilt and anguishing detachment they sense in themselves, as it will be shown in the last section.

As I seek to point out in this article, I understand the Gothic as a literary tradition, poetics, or mode, that holds a pessimistic worldview and provides a set of aesthetic-formal elements to both entertain and provoke fear into its readers. Moreover, it can address cultural and political issues through its “figurations, symbolic resources and other processes of artistic creation”

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8 In a literal translation to English, “flag-carriers”. The *bandeirantes* were a group of men who participated in the project of expansion westward in Brazilian colonial times. Although the majority of these explorers were second- or third-generation descendants of Portuguese settlers – that is, technically Brazilians – or *mamelucos* – descending both from European and Indigenous people –, they helped to enhance Portugal’s power, being responsible for the capture and enslavement of a significant number of native populations, settlement of the hinterlands, and the exploration of their gold and silver deposits.

(FRANÇA; SENA, 2020, p. 14). Finally, as Júlio França, I aim to undertake a comparative study among different literatures while understanding that “certain worldviews generate corresponding artistic views” (FRANÇA, 2017, p. 122). Cornélio Penna’s perspective considerably approached to that of Gothic fiction. In many of his writings and interviews, he made known his bleak standpoint about modern life and the directions taken by humanity: “the world has rotted, it poisoned itself with civilization” (PENNA, 1958, p. XLVI). In a text in which he comments on a tragic event during the invasion of Hungary in 1957, Penna states that “humankind seems assailed by the most terrible itch of degradation, as it is far-fetched and voluntary, and not the consequence of a ‘crisis of character’, as they say” (PENNA, 2020, p. 47). Furthermore, the author was open to any literary modes that would allow him to vent his stories without committing himself to pursue the writing mode considered “ideal” for the Brazilian reality according to the literary criticism.

## **THE BRAZILIAN GOTHIC**

In the last two decades, there has been a marked increase in the number of studies that identify and explore national or regional forms of Gothic to reassess the relevance of this literary tradition to the literature of the most diverse nations. In the introduction to the work that addresses the presence of the Gothic in Spain, Xavier Aldana Reyes (2017) appropriately comments on the misconceptions about the Gothic in a country whose cultural environment does not resemble that of the British and American nations. Although his remarks regard a European

state and its specificities, there are some similarities with the Brazilian case:

In this country, the Gothic has, until recently, been thought of as an imported imaginative impossibility peremptorily censored by the zealous self-righteousness of Christian Catholicism [...]. The Spanish Gothic [...] has often been perceived in intellectual circles to have a touch of the frivolous, and even of the impure: there is no value to it, and its effects might even be pernicious if left unpoliced. The logical resulting critical approach has been to ignore the Gothic, to bury it and, when uncovered, denigrate or belittle it. When compared to social realism, the Gothic has always been on the losing end of debates around artistic merit and nationality. (ALDANA REYES, 2017, p. 1-2)

The Spanish literary system has elected the social realism “the country’s intrinsic writing mode”, explains Aldana Reyes (2017, p. 3), and even “actively avoided using the term Gothic to describe its literature” – as we have been demonstrating in this article, the same has been occurring since the earlier ages of Brazilian literature. However, the scholar points out the dissemination of the notion of the Gothic as a “transmedia, transnational and transhistorical ‘mode’” (p. 5) and mentions the important contribution of the Global Gothic network (2008-2009), led by Glennis Byron, which results may be reckoned in the vast number of publications in the last decade, including Byron’s *Globalgothic* (2013).

In the case of Latin America, numerous studies have been unfolding the ways the Gothic tradition served to fictionalize much of the turbulent issues of this territory’s history. As examples, we have the works of Enrique Ajuria Ibarra (2014), Justin D. Edwards

and Sandra Guardini Vasconcelos (2016), all of them addressing Latin American forms of Gothic to attend to a legacy of traumas and fears. Dismissing the idea that Gothic motifs do not conform to the region's tropical, luminous image, Ibarra comments on the Latin American nation's potentiality to reconcile local and foreign elements of belief and expressions. Also, the scholar states that the usual association of some Latin American fiction with magic realism cannot encompass Gothic writing since the latter focuses on terror and, eventually, horror (IBARRA, 2014, p. 7).

[...] a Gothic fascination may enact its influence in order to understand how even the warmest and luxurious locations can also hide disturbing monstrosities. The wonder of the tropic can also be seen as a danger and may drive humans mad, as Joseph Conrad elaborates in *The Heart of Darkness*. What is more valuable for critical inquiry is to examine how this tropical darkness is perceived by the very people who inhabit this domain. This way, Latin American narrative forms may reveal a consistent Gothic use that evidences intertextual fictional motifs and plots. On the other hand, it may also reveal a more localized and consistent Gothic form that may be inherent to the area. (IBARRA, 2014, p. 7)

Justin D. Edwards and Sandra Guardini Vasconcelos (2016) explore the topic in terms of the idea of a Tropical Gothic<sup>9</sup>, taking into view the notion of transculturation – the product of a combination of the processes of acculturation and deculturation.

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9 In his dissertation, Daniel Serravalle de Sá employed the term *Gótico tropical* [Tropical Gothic] to refer to a Gothic form in early Brazilian literature, focusing on the famous novel *O Guarani* (1857), by José de Alencar. Sá's work was later published in book form (SÁ, 2010).

Edwards and Vasconcelos explain that this cultural phenomenon “gives the power of transformative cultural agency to the colonized subject by transforming, appropriating, adapting and re-writing the modes and genres from the North Atlantic” (EDWARDS; VASCONCELOS, 2016, p. 1-2). According to the scholars, the cultural, economic, and geographical complexities of postcolonial Latin America engendered a specific Gothic form: to the ghosts and legends peculiar to the indigenous groups, Europeans would add the violence of the colonizing process, originating a “haunted history, often incorporated into Tropical Gothic texts” (p. 2). In his article, Edwards (2016) relates the topics of transnationalism, multiculturalism, syncretism, and mongrelization<sup>10</sup> as the components for the Tropical Gothic, developing the metaphors of cultural cannibalism and tropicalization: he understands them as anti-colonialist projects that are both critical and devouring of a transcultural tradition of hegemonic countries. He comments that any attempt to understand the Gothic in a given culture must consider the “migrations and displacements that have, in some cases, engendered social dislocations, cultural changes, traveling ideas and narrative shifts” (EDWARDS, 2016, p. 18).

Many Brazilian scholars took these considerations into account to build the conception of the Brazilian Gothic. Fernando

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10 Edwards explains the term’s usage that the term is used not in a pejorative meaning, which implies something not genuine, inferior, or a text deviating from a pre-established standard norm. Rather, the word draws attention to “problematic readings” of texts that may contemplate the elements of genuineness, norms, or origin: “The mongrel text is a multiply constituted work, as every text is, but it also includes an unsettled negotiation that cannot be easily resolved” (EDWARDS, 2016, p. 16). Edwards also explains that it is complicated to classify these works as “hybrids” since it would imply “an originality or uniqueness that erases the mixed characters of all cultures”, suggesting that a ‘pure’ and ‘untainted’ culture might exist outside of an imaginary nation, region or place” (p. 16).

Monteiro de Barros (2014; 2020) initially developed the first notions turning to the fictional fiction of Cornélio Penna and Lúcio Cardoso and the influential sociological study of Gilberto Freyre, *Casa-Grande e Senzala* – published in English as *The Masters and the Slaves* (1946) – and proposing that the Brazilian strand would portray the patriarchal and slaveholding tradition under the signs of ruin and melancholy. According to Barros, the *casa-grande* – the “big house” of the Portuguese families in Brazil during the colonial and imperial periods, with its structures comparable to the plantations in the United States – would substitute for the European castle as an image of allegoric ruin in the Brazilian setting (BARROS, 2020, p. 83-84): the phantoms of a terrible past of enslavement would continue to haunt Brazil’s present.

In the same manner that in the English Gothic novels the imagery of tradition appears in a phantasmatic way, with the ruined castle as an allegory for the medieval past overthrown by modernity, the ruined plantation Big Houses of Brazil’s colonial and monarchic times that are so recurring in Lúcio Cardoso’s [and Cornélio Penna’s] novels allegorically stand for the country’s tradition supplanted by the Republic, which brought about the industrialization and the growth of the Brazilian bourgeoisie and its values. (BARROS, 2014, p. 215-16)

Pondering upon the processes that allowed for the development of Brazilian Gothic, Barros considered the theories of different scholars: Edwards and Vasconcellos’s ideas on transculturation, Octavio Paz’s concept of transplanted literature, Antonio Candido’s considerations on the European cultural and literary influence in Latin American nations, Silviano Santiago’s view of this region as an

“in-between” space, and Oswald de Andrade’s concept of cultural anthropophagy – the latter also considered in Justin D. Edwards’s *Tropical Gothic*. Ultimately, Barros understood that “before being a mere importation or literary fad, Gothic may be in the core of our Brazilian anthropophagic vocation” (BARROS, 2020, p. 94). However, by emphasizing the allegorical ruin of an aristocratic class – sometimes European, sometimes Brazilian – the scholar seems to point more to a mimicking, or mere transposition, of the Gothic in Brazilian letters than to a particular national strand.

One of the works that sought to complement Barros’s theories was João Pedro Bellas’s (2021). Returning to Antonio Candido’s analyses on the inevitability of the European influences in Latin America – also discussed by Uruguayan literary critic Ángel Rama –, Bellas suggests that there had been a reciprocal process of influxes between both cultures and that Brazilian Gothic is an association between the main aesthetic elements of Gothic fiction and the themes proper to Brazil’s realities (BELLAS, 2021, p. 7 and 9). The researcher also calls attention to the usefulness of further reflections about Brazilian Gothic so that we understand “why our writers turned to this discursive mode to describe certain themes, and what are the implications of the contact of the Gothic poetics with particular elements of our cultural context” (p. 13).

The studies enlisted and briefly presented above have made the conception of Brazilian Gothic possible. I believe that the specificities of Brazil’s culture – especially the sociocultural contexts of the country’s inland – generate themes that, addressed under the Gothic perspective and with the use of its literary devices, provide the means for a distinct national form. Having these ideas



in mind, I consider it is profitable to examine the Brazilian Gothic in Cornélio Penna's *Threshold* since the author employed a set of structural elements of Gothic poetics to depict typical Brazilian matters. The author's comments seem to confirm both his desire to write about the Minas Gerais cities in which he was raised and the struggles between past and present, so crucial to Gothic fiction: in Penna's words, the soul of those cities "summed up the soul of Brazil, which so fiercely destroys themselves, letting a most precious treasure to be lost" (PENNA, 2020, p. 71) and the story of Maria Santa – *Threshold's* female protagonist, based on a deceased cousin of Penna's to whose funeral he witnessed when a little boy – "seems to me to be the story also of the core of Brazil" (p. 75). In the next section, I present some of the themes of a "Brazilian essence" observed in the writer's work.

### **THE BRAZILIAN GOTHIC IN *THRESHOLD***

It is not an easy task to summarize *Threshold's* plot, but we can say that the story is presented as the diary account of a mysterious narrator – whose gender is never specified – who returns, for unknown reasons, to his hometown in the interior of Minas Gerais. In his family home, he resumes an old relationship with the mystical and enigmatic Maria Santa, supposedly his cousin – as much of the content of *Threshold*, the diarist does not elucidate whether there is, in fact, an actual kinship between him and Maria, but it is evident that they once had been very closed and shared profound, long-lasting experiences together in the past. As words of Maria Santa's annual miracles traveled through the region, Emiliana, an old, Catholic-devotee aunt of hers, also arrives at the house to

assume the role of spiritual mentor on her niece's journey towards sainthood. There are made constant allusions to the crimes of Maria's family, and what is known about her is that she had been engaged and her fiancé had left the manor dead. Throughout the story, secondary characters suddenly appear – and soon disappear – to add mystery and suspicion to the plot, which unfolds mainly through the characters' psychological conflicts.

In a first analysis of *Threshold*, Júlio França (2018) identified a set of Gothic formal and thematic elements employed by Cornélio Penna:

- (a) The lacunar-structured plot producing suspense and mystery effects on the reader;
- (b) The stream-of-consciousness narrative mode filtered through the narrator's guilt, remorse, and regrets, creating a veil of phantasmagoria that unrealizes and distorts even the most ordinary phenomena;
- (c) A paranoid, unreliable first-person narrator with a morbid sensibility;
- (d) The semantic field linked to the darkness, phantasmagoria, gloominess, and death;
- (e) The *locus horribilis*, which manifests itself in various degrees [...];
- (f) The ghostly past manifesting itself in frequent allusions to past crimes and transgressions, conditioning the protagonists' existences, and causing an effect of seclusion, which paralyzes the subjects both levels of space and time;
- (g) An immanent Evil diffused through almost all the characters and narrative spaces. (FRANÇA, 2018, p. 1100-101)

Nonetheless, França states that none of these elements evinces an authentic Brazilianness that can allow for a Brazilian Gothic

and suggests that the seek for identification and understanding of a Brazilian strand may not lead to a deeper comprehension of Gothic but, instead, of the reality of Brazil. (FRANÇA, 2018, p. 1101). The scholar concludes that this approach would accord to the hegemonic trends of our literary criticism, “the one that regards literature as a document to access the most important issues of the country’s reality” (p. 1102).

In his aforementioned article, João Pedro Bellas (2021) responds to Júlio França’s ideas attributing his pessimistic conclusions to a rigorous methodological perspective in which França’s focus is directed, in its majority, to formal aspects (BELLAS, 2021, p. 4). Furthermore, an exam on the Brazilian features in a Gothic strand, Bellas states, could contribute to both Gothic and Brazilian literature studies since it would shed light to the national authors’ preference for certain modes to stand for particular issues (p. 6).

It is less a question of identifying the changes the Gothic structure underwent in its formal scope; it is rather a question of understanding how the structuring elements of what we know as “gothic” are re-signified by the specific issues and fears of the Brazilian context. The essential features – the return of the past, the monstrous characters, and the *locus horribilis* – are still present, but they are adapted to represent themes specifically concerning the national reality [...] (BELLAS, 2021, p. 9)

As I mentioned before, my ideas on the Brazilian Gothic follows João Pedro Bellas’s notion that the strand is better understood under the consideration of specific national themes diffused through the Gothic formal structure. I believe that Cornélio Penna’s *Threshold* presents numerous themes that

account for a Brazilian Gothic experience, which I enlisted and comment on in the following lines, illustrating with excerpts from the novel, translated by Tona and Edward A. Riggio, and published in the United States in 1975. In this edition, the Riggios – scholars who specialized in Portuguese, Hispanic, and Brazilian literature – classify *Threshold* as a Gothic novel, stating that “[r]eaders of both the modern Gothic romance and the modern psychological thriller will find much to intrigue and fascinate them” in Penna’s work (PENNA, 1975, front flap). Furthermore, in the epilogue, Edward Riggio observes that the author applies Gothic motifs and devices – such as “first-person narrative, mysterious ambiance, allusions to [a] dark past, an occasional digression, mysteriously undelineated characters” (RIGGIO, 1975, p. 100) and “yet the work is undeniably Brazilian to the core and provides a troubled, lonely image of its Minas Gerais setting” (p. 100). I intend to show that such Brazilian essence can be noticed in the characters’ figuration and the narrative space of the novel.

### **MONSTROUS CHARACTERS: MARIA SANTA**

The two main female characters in *Threshold* present monstrous features relating to their moral and psychological behaviors and expose issues such as the condition of women in a patriarchal Brazilian hinterland, in which the official Catholic religion clashes with popular religiosity. The “female gallery” mentioned by Brazilian literary critic Tristão de Athayde (1972), although referring to the characters of José Lins do Rego’s work – an author of the Brazilian northeastern social novel – also suits Cornélio Pena’s since it illustrates the social panorama of the nation’s interior:

[W]hat we see is the presence, the non-absence, of man, whose word rules. It is the female servitude, the “submissive woman” [...], the daughters driven mad by loneliness or paternal rudeness – the marriages of convenience, the silent sacrifice of women to the law of man. And amid this herd of sacrificed women, the hysterical or satanic daughters, also daughters to the marginal condition of this violent sexism that our *sertão* secretes as the acid harvest of insecurity and the primitivism of the passions. (TRISTÃO DE ATHAYDE, 1972, p. xxxiv)

Describing Maria Santa’s profile, the narrator mentions her origins “harked back to proud and avaricious adventurers<sup>11</sup>, [...] and to silent, suffering women who accompanied their husbands and lovers” across Minas Gerais lands and their “endless woods, exposed to fevers and wild beasts and snakes of the Backlands which they traversed” (PENNA, 1975, p. 15). Such features of a “crossbred” ancestry can be linked to the Brazilian indigenous women who joined – in most cases, forcibly – with the white, European, or Brazilian *bandeirantes* to a life of hardships, difficulties, and silencing.

Throughout the novel, it becomes increasingly apparent that Maria’s status as a “saint” woman is much less a personal choice or vocation and more an obligation imposed by her family as a purge of their sins – the ones from the distant past, with the violation of the native women’s lives, and the ones from the more recent past, related to her fiancé’s death – and her own transgressions. Contrary

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11 I believe that these specific lines of the translated version do not transmit the whole idea of the nature of Maria Santa’s origins as the original text does; therefore, I provide my version of this excerpt: “her *crossbred* origins, decanted through the miseries and pride of men of adventure [...]” (PENNA, 1975, p. 15, emphasis added).

to her supposed holiness, strongly believed by the local population, Maria Santa feels intense carnal instincts and displays a strong, almost predatory, sexuality. Her physical features and movements are frequently described from a perspective that approaches her to the animal: “Suddenly her fingers became curved, transforming her hands into tremulous claws, while her face became alarmingly agitated” (PENNA, 1975, p. 14).

Maria Santa has a similar perception of herself and uses it to express her inner conflicts. Her desire for self-knowledge and her anguish about the lack of purpose in her life are reasons for deep anxiety and anguish: under the harsh control of that patriarchal society, she finds herself completely deprived of governing her own life and deciding her future. In one of her few moments of confessions, she tells the narrator:

“[...] – I don’t know if I told you that when I was young, I used to rave and pace about the house like a panther in its cage (yes, that was the way I felt), and I used to ask myself repeatedly, insistently, and with anguish, ‘What am I doing? Just what am I doing?’”

“Listen now”, she proceeded, [...] “even today I am that way, but I have never found anyone who could understand me or my madness, which has become for me a prison in which I debate with myself all alone, each time more alone, fearing my very self. None of the women I have known ever became bored for a lack of purpose, for that general and absolute lack which I sense confusedly and which makes me think and say things that frighten me and seem as if said by another person. I used to see that same fear in the faces of those to whom I tried to explain that I had not yet found, that I still have not

found, a meaning, a purpose to, a definition of my very self. (PENNA, 1975, p. 24)

The association Maria makes is interesting to mention since the panthers – or, in the original form, *onças*, “jaguars” – are also totemic animals for many indigenous cultures in Brazil and the Americas (BELLAS, 2021, p. 10). Trapped among the massive walls of the family’s house, the protagonist displays the same restless and tense behavior as the jaguar when caged and manifests her recurrent dissatisfaction in a society that, besides offering limited options to women, has a past of disintegration and spoilage of the native people. Maria Santa’s saintliness issues conflict with the indigenous portion of her lineage, which is perceived in both her physical features and lapses of personality that occasionally escape her control. In her constrained world, she can neither make sense of her sufferings nor find female acquaintances who understand her questions. She attributes her split personality – the saint and the carnal woman – solely to her physical and sexual appetites and urges, with the more profound issues laying deep in unconscious or subconscious levels.

Besides Maria Santa, it would also be possible to talk about Emiliana, whose figure is fundamental to the construction of the evil atmosphere in *Fronteira* and who can also be seen as a monstrous character. Since her first appearance in the novel, Emiliana’s image is related to the ideas of perfidy and deception: she is the one who “sanctions” Maria’s sanctity and takes advantage of the faith of the region’s devotees to obtain financial gains, notoriety and influence in the town. In her portion of the story, the issues of Brazilian popular religiosity – also known as *fanatismo*, “fanaticism”, or

*carolismo* (FACÓ, 1976) – come to light. I intend to discuss these matters in a future text.

## LOCUS HORRIBILIS

We can now develop the aspect of the setting in *Threshold*, stating that Cornélio Penna creates many levels of *loci horribiles*, as pointed out by Júlio França (2018), to deal with both the characters' personal lives and memories and the more general, socio-historical angle. For example, the house in which the characters live bears in its structures the echoes of the process of settlement of the most inner regions of Minas Gerais:

The spacious, clumsy rooms were furnished with large, holly wood pieces, stiff and rough in design, which gave the impression that the ancient possessors of the house, Maria's ancestors, have lived as phantoms, facing life standing and only sitting or reclining when ill or about to die. The house has been built to harmonize with the mountain scenery that surrounded it; it did not seem suited to serve as shelter and haven to the people who had erected it with their own hands. (PENNA, 1975, p. 5)

Moving to the surroundings of the town, another human construction display a piece of history of the region: “the house of the bexigentos” (PENNA, 1975, p. 45), whose construction reveals not only the brutality of the slave system in Brazil but also the terrible occurrence of the smallpox epidemic in the interior of Minas Gerais, serving as a tomb for all its previous – and doomed – occupants. As with Maria Santa, the memories of the narrator are interwoven with the image of the house, as we can notice in the following excerpt:



Many old tales circulated concerning the house. The slaves who had built it worked day and night, beaten by the steel whips of the foremen, and the blood that ran from their wounds became mixed with the cement and plaster in larger pools.

My childish imagination enabled me to see, in the somber stains of the walls, enormous clotted plaques still bloody; and the rain, falling in heavy drops, took on a reddish caste and formed small brooks that would putrefy later on, slowly, for days and days in the nearby swamps, miraculously preserved in those heights, [...]

But in addition to its ancient legend, involving a tormented, martyred woman and a strong and amorous administrator (the latter with his feeling of timid inferiority), cut into tiny bits by the fury of many a minor vengeance, there was another story, and this one much more recent and quiet real, which impressed one much more intensely than the others for its simplicity devoid of romance. (PENNA, 1975, p. 45-46)

The popular tales about the house and the construction itself infused fear into the narrator since his early years and continued to impress him when he returns to the town: “And no one ever again entered the [...] House of the Smallpocked – [only] my childhood imagination that accompanied many times and for many years [...] the wretched anguish of those agonies” (PENNA, 1975, p. 47).

In an ampler perspective, the physical setting also portrays the social and cultural themes of the settlement of Minas Gerais’ towns by the *bandeirantes*, as we already mentioned. In another scene, the narrator and a priest with whom he develops an intimate relationship observe the mountainous landscape.

From the height the mountains revealed themselves in all their pomp and majesty, becoming lost in the enormous horizon.

Whichever way I turned they ran along in vertiginous flight, disappearing into the sky far away, blending into the immense blueness.

Seven villages were lost in an immense cloud of dust. Some held closely to the mountainside; others followed hurriedly, in long meanders, the old pathways of the *bandeirantes*, of the enslavers of precious ores and of the mysterious Indians [...]. [...]

“I’m jealous of the Indians,” I continued, “who in this very place looked without fear upon all of this... They were the best part of it all, and their morality was one alone. In a great rhythmic march we destroyed them, we brought them death and lechery; for me, all this monstrous panorama represents only a strange and hostile motive that frightens me, terrifies me, by its excesses and by its magic of death. (PENNA, 1975, p. 47-48)

As it was already mentioned, centuries before the foreign mining companies, his ancestors – also Maria’s ancestors – had usurped the land of native peoples for a never-ending process of exploitation and degradation. The sense of guilt that haunts the narrator throughout his whole life, blending in with issues of his personal history, is also connected with this “monstrous panorama” of a history of social destruction.

There are other themes intrinsically related to the history of this portion of Brazil that we can find in Cornélio Penna’s *Threshold*, which we intend to evolve in future texts. Our studies on the Brazilian Gothic have shown that this category is not easy to discern from the other strands precisely due to the intimate amalgamation

of personal and social issues presented by the filtered minds of narrators and/or tormented characters. However, we can state that in the Brazilian Gothic, the turmoil of the human minds is strongly connected to the exterior, general issues of the particular society in which they are immersed.

Besides the local transformations the Gothic had gone through when migrating and settling in the literature of different nations, the modernist trends also contributed to the changes of this literary tradition. Gothic fiction has appeared more diffusively, ingrained in countless narrative forms, and adapted to new social, cultural, religious, and political contexts from the beginning of the twentieth century on. In this panorama, different ideas on the nature of evil arose, as Júlio França and Marina Sena (2020) observed: the supernatural beings, physical monsters, and purely-evil villains gave even more space to ordinary individuals and their violent potential in public and private relationships (FRANÇA; SENA, 2020, p. 21).

I sought to demonstrate how this new state of affairs was represented by a Brazilian author through a national perspective. Cornélio Penna resorted to the Gothic devices for symbolizing and expressing some interdictions, anxieties, and disturbances of a part of the nation dear to him but immersed in a complex, contradictory history. Like other Brazilian writers, he pictured a portrait of Brazil far distant from the homogeneous image, supposedly immune to contradictions, that mainstream literary criticism has endeavored to build since the conception of our literature.

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