

ANTONIO CANDIDO, O MESTRE

Renata Wasserman (Wayne State University)

I was a student in Antonio Candido's course in Literary Theory in 1968, after I had finished revalidating my American undergraduate degree in English and American Literature and started graduate school at USP—still then on Maria Antonia Street. I was not there for the worst part of the dictatorship (I'd gone off to graduate school in the US), so I will let others speak about Antonio Candido's brave and principled resistance against the totalitarian noose. There had been student strikes at the university, demanding the end of the repression, of the Vietnam war, and of hunger in the Northeast; leftist USP had been invaded by rightist Mackenzie University students from across the street (after which a police cordon had been placed around Mackenzie, to protect them and maybe keep an eye on USP); the dictatorship was tightening its grip on the country, though the infamous Ato Institucional 5 was still almost a year in the future. But the class was an oasis of intelligence, scholarship, and civility.

Antonio Candido always presented himself formally and impeccably as if that were the most natural way of being. He treated the students with elaborate courtesy: they were Senhor Afonso or Dona Renata; he listened attentively when we had a question or observation and took them seriously but with a light touch.

The lectures were works of art, just as Aristotle recommended, with a beginning, a middle, and an end that tied up all the strands presented in the argument. No literary work, in Antonio Candido's view, stood alone, and we followed the strands that led them to their

predecessors in Brazilian literature, to their parallels in Spanish America—for Antonio Candido was then one of the few scholars of Brazilian literature who established bridges to the literature and literary scholarship of the Spanish-speaking nations (think Angel Rama)—as well as to European works that had served as models or foils. I remember the delight I felt at the end of his lecture on *Memórias de um sargento de milícias*, when everything he had talked about fell beautifully into place, even the pajamas that one of the characters wore in the middle of the day and before visitors. We can all now read “Dialética da malandragem,” and follow the argument for how the novel establishes itself as neither realistic-documentary nor European-picaresque, but as the place where the malandro asserts himself as characteristically Brazilian, urban, clever, not willingly heroic. And as I read “Dialética da malandragem,” years after that class, I was again delighted and also amazed at how perfect and ready for publication that lecture had been.

And who but Antonio Candido, with that courtesy that understood and respected those who were like him (if any) and those who were not, would have seen, as he did in his article on Zola’s *L’assomoir*, that the novel traces the places where the main character—Gervaise—and those around her did or did not feel welcomed and comfortable? For me at least, this idea that one should look at the specific places where characters move—not abstract “environments” or “circumstances,” but bars and tenements and avenues and museums and squares—opened up a whole new way of reading. (I wonder whether Roberto Schwarz’s *Os Pobres na literatura brasileira* does not owe something, in addition to his political leaning, to a nudge from some of Antonio Candido’s work.)

There was, however, a very frustrating aspect of having Antonio Candido’s work around: anytime I wanted to start a new project, I knew I’d first have to see whether he had

written about it; he always had, and it always meant that I had to gather any remaining pieces of my idea and see whether there was still anything I could say about it. Frustrating, yes, but also a wonderful treatment against mental laziness.

I think that the 20th century brought out a remarkable array of literary scholars and critics in Brazil. I think that Antonio Candido towered above all. What is remarkable, also, however, is that his prominence did not diminish anyone, but made the entire field smarter, sharper, and maybe even kinder. I would at times send him a copy of something I had published (I think teachers like to see their students doing good things like getting published) and I would conclude my note “Com admiração e afeto,” and this is how I would like to end now: “With admiration and affection.”

Thank you.

REMEMBERING ANTONIO CANDIDO
2018 MLA Convention – New York City
January 6, 2018; 7:15-8:30 PM