

Remembrance

by Luiza Franco Moreira (Binghamton University)

In 1976, I took the course “Teoria Literária I” with Antonio Candido. I was an undergraduate in the *curso de Letras* at the Universidade de São Paulo. His course focused on the poetry and society of Brazil at the time: the avant-garde practice of the *poesia concreta* and our cultural life under the military dictatorship. But what I remember most about the course are the reading assignments in literary theory. Antonio Candido had us read fundamental (if unorthodox) texts of the Marxist tradition: Lukács’ essays on the novel; Adorno’s essay on lyric poetry and society, and Lucien Goldmann’s *The Hidden God*. In those years, the university was suffering the effects of political repression very directly. It took courage to teach such a syllabus -- but you wouldn’t be able to tell that from sitting in in Antonio Candido’s class. He seemed to take it all in stride. He was an engaging *professor*, lively, approachable, and attentive to his students. His lectures were quite fun. His classroom felt like a space where intelligence was to be exercised freely and, always, critically. He made his students feel that that they could live up to his fearless standards, and that indeed we should strive to. Antonio Candido made it all look easy.

But then of course it was not easy. In 1974, Antonio Candido gave an interview to the academic journal *Trans/Form/Ação* (from Marília) in which he reflected on the Brazilian university in the 1970s, in the aftermath of the political tightening of 1968. Here is his description of the erosion of academic autonomy in

this period: “We know well not only that the presence of spies and informers is pervasive at all levels of the university, but further that there are security officers overtly and calmly installed in the university, offering opinions, overseeing hiring, vetoing the hiring of certain professors, forbidding conferences and meetings, as if they were themselves academic officers (that is, as if they were those academic officers through whom they seek to act). It is cause for the gravest concern that security officers are close to being considered part of the body of the university, for the institution accepts them or at least does not reject them.” In 1974, it took courage to be so clear and specific in criticizing the dictatorship and its impact on academic life -- not just to say something in private, but to speak to the issues in public and in print. For Antonio Candido’s students, this interview and others like it were an inspiration. When we juxtapose my recollection of his undergraduate course and this interview, we glimpse Antonio Candido’s fundamental coherence as an intellectual: his activity in the classroom was continuous with the positions he took in a public forum.

A lot of water has gone under the bridge from the 1970s to 2018. In Brazil, the military dictatorship was to end some ten years later, in 1985. But before that, in 1980, Antonio Candido was among the founders of the Partido dos Trabalhadores, where he remained active until 2002, when Lula was first elected President. For 13 years, from 2003 to 2016, the PT held the Presidency of Brazil, as we know. But now we are living through a conservative reaction, quite virulent at times, not just in Brazil, but here too, and elsewhere in the world. Last summer, when I learned that Antonio Candido had passed, I was shocked by the sudden loss, as so many of us

were. We knew it had to happen some time. It was still very sad to come to the realization that Candido was no longer with us, and that he will no longer be there when we need him. I looked to Candido's works to help me work through the emotions and the memories. I found a passage in his essay on Kafka's "The Great Wall of China" that seemed to me to speak quite directly to the times we are living now. I'd like to close these remarks by reading this passage from Candido's work:

The complex organization of the empire, expressed in the immense effort of building a wall, rests on reasons that cannot be known. Life does not go beyond daily existence, restricted to the small scope of the village. Beyond the village, total irresponsibility reigns. The cyclopean project makes that all too clear. This wall full of gaps, built to orders that come from an unknown power, is meant to defend a civilization devoid of meaning from invaders who are in fact inoffensive.

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