
In his famous essay “Literature and Underdevelopment” (1970), Antonio Candido affirms that while naturalist fiction sees the poor man as a refractory element in the march of progress, Brazilian regionalist writers of the 1930s “uncovered this situation in its complexity, turning against the dominant classes and seeing in the degradation of the man a consequence of the economic plunder, not of his individual fate” (Candido 138). Candido examines how economic circumstances determine literary characters’ lives. Brazilian writers of this period observed how events like the Great Depression and the ongoing draught in northeastern Brazil impacted people’s lives, and wrote novels about how these individuals were compelled to move from the country to large cities in order to find employment and to seek a better life. Such was the case with *O Quinze* (1930) by Rachel de Queiroz and *Vidas Secas* (1938) by Graciliano Ramos, which feature as characters “retirantes”, or people who migrated on foot from one place to another during prolonged periods of drought, and with *Os Corumbas* (1933) by Amando Fortes, *O Moleque Ricardo* (1935) by José Lins do Rego, and *Navios Iluminados* (1938) by Ranulfo Prata (1896-1942), which present characters who arrive in new homes, only to discover that misery and misfortune cannot be left behind.

*Navios Iluminados* was first published in 1938 and was reprinted several times. Although this is the fifth edition of Prata’s novel, neither this work nor its author has succeeded in becoming part of the Brazilian literary canon. While Prata was alive and publishing, critics and writers like Lima Barreto and Monteiro Lobato praised his novels but, after his death, his books did not meet the same fate as those mentioned above, which also
portrayed working class immigrants from the hinterlands who came to live in large cities. This relegation could have been due to his profession as a medical doctor, which kept him temporarily disconnected from the literary life of those years, as well as to the fact that his oeuvre is not as extensive as that of other authors.

The novel tells the story of José Severino, a young worker from the northeastern state of Sergipe, who moves south to Santos and tries to get a job at the Companhia Docas de Santos, a private company in charge of the area’s port operations and one of the region’s largest employers at the time. After two months, the Companhia finally hires him. Unfortunately, Severino’s dream job turns into a nightmare as his salary is barely sufficient to cover his rent and meals, and he is unable to help his family back home.

Money, as a manifestation of economic power, is a recurrent leitmotif in Navios Iluminados and ultimately determines Severino’s actions. Not only does it influence his decision to move to the city but it is also a critical factor in his daily choices. For instance, he constantly debates the cost of eating in the cafeteria, which is more convenient than the alternative of returning home for lunch. Money also functions as a tool for seeking revenge, as Marisa Midori Deacto points out in the book’s introduction (Deacto 10). This is the case for the character Pepe Riesco, a Spanish anarchist who has lived in Severino’s neighborhood for some time. After the suffering he experiences while traveling as a stowaway from New York to Rio de Janeiro, Pepe dreams of humiliating the sailors on the ship by one day being able to travel as a first class passenger though this fantasy runs counter to the anarchist views he outwardly promotes:

Desejava fazer economias, juntar muito dinheiro e viajar de novo no Southern Cross ... Compraria o camarote de luxo. O dinheiro nas suas mãos vingadoras se transformaria numa arma terrível... desde o comandante até o último foguista, todos seriam humilhados e rebaixados pelo metal miserável que tem poderes infinitos. (Prata 100-101)

In this instance, the fantasy of wealth does not consist in enjoying luxury, but rather in avenging one’s misfortune.

Throughout the novel, Severino is faced with the choice between a good income and a healthy life. For example, lack of money forces him to change jobs inside the Companhia.
He resorts to working in a department where he transports goods that arrive at the port. Although his salary and bonuses are higher, the new job entails greater effort, and affords him less rest and, consequently, it takes a toll on Severino's health. Nevertheless he never abandons his ambition to change his life even though nostalgia for his homeland, family and girlfriend haunts him. These thoughts about his past in Sergipe and the memories of his relatives emerge as flashbacks, interrupting the chronological narration of his life in the city, especially during the character's periods of crisis. Besides Severino's life in Santos, the novels presents other features of “Companhia” workers’ lives, such as the relationship between immigrants from different countries and regions, the high levels of unemployment in the years of global economic crisis during the 1930s, and the extreme working and living conditions that Severino and his co-workers endure.

Prata also addresses two important features largely neglected by other. Firstly, he focuses on Companhia de Docas workers like Severino and the impact this enterprise had on the region following its creation in 1892. While it is valid to claim that Agonia da Noite (1950) by Jorge Amado also narrates the story of an immigrant from the Northeast (Doroteu) who works at the Companhia, Amado’s novel focuses on the character’s activism in the Communist Party and his participation in a strike. Indeed, the prohibition of strikes during the Estado Novo in Brazil and the resulting repression are other important features of Amado’s book. In contrast, Navios Iluminados deals with the individuality of a single worker, focusing on his everyday work and on his personal incentives to change his life. Prata breaks the apparently monotonous routine of Severino with his discomfort with his present, his doubts about leaving his homeland and his plans for the future.

Secondly, and more importantly, Prata also deals with a more “collective” feature since, through Severino’s life, he describes diseases and physical ailments that affected port workers and especially those low-income workers who did not have access to medical care. As in his first novel, Dentro da Vida (1922), in Navios Iluminados Prata introduces several autobiographical experiences inspired by his own practice as a doctor. In his capacity as director of the Centro de Radiologia da Santa Casa e Beneficência Portuguesa in Santos, he looked after workers from the Companhia and witnessed how their working conditions led
to the gradual deterioration of their health. The doctor-patient relationship, their misunderstandings, and the diverging interests of doctors and the Companhia bosses (i.e., workers were urged to work while doctors recommended rest and care) are written into the plot and make the novel a vivid document of medical history. The importance of Severino being healthy in order to work and the reality of Santa Casa and Beneficência Portuguesa, which continuously admits workers from the Companhia, prove that Severino’s fate was not exclusively his. This relationship between the characters and health opens up a connection between literature and such emerging fields as ability and labor studies.

While composing his book, Prata was immersed in the world of dockworkers, and therefore was able to grasp their language and attitudes. These were valuable sources for creating this novel, which accurately portrays the colloquial expressions and spoken language of this area in the late 1930s. Helpfully, this new edition has updated the novel’s orthography, and its editors, José de Paula Ramos Jr. and Hugo Otávio Cruz Reis, have added footnotes that explain the meaning of old-fashioned words and expressions.

Despite its many strengths, the novel displays several flaws, including weak plot development. For instance, in the second half of the book, the port union chair is fired and replaced without further explanation about how this affects the characters and the story in general. Evidently, the author was not interested in the dockworkers’ union, one of the most important unions in Brazil at the time, and one with close ties to the Brazilian Communist Party and more than one thousand affiliates, and thus failed to develop secondary characters’ features and stories\(^1\). Instead, he used the union story and the firing of the chair as background information about the port union’s presence at the Companhia and to explain that several workers, like Severino, were not interested in engaging in political discussions.

Another weakness in the novel is the lack of elaboration on key themes such as education. For instance, Severino takes classes to be promoted in the Companhia, but the narrator fails to mention what happens afterwards. Readers are led to assume that Severino

\(^1\)The port of Santos was named the “porto vermelho” because of the communist militancy of its workers. For more information, see Moscouzinha brasileira: cenário e personagens do cotidiano operário de Santos, 1930-1954 (2006) by Rodrigo Rodrigues Tavares and Ventos do mar: trabalhadores do porto, movimento operário e cultura urbana em Santos, 1889-1914 (1992) by Maria Lucia Cairia Githahy.
drops out of the course he is taking because of health issues. It would have been interesting to develop this topic because, as the novel makes clear, Severino sees education as a way of making progress in his career and life, whereas some other characters, such as Simões, believe that books are like poison since they transmit “dangerous ideas” (Prata 92).

As its editors indicate, the main purpose of the Reserva Literária collection is to rescue from oblivion Brazilian literary works of cultural and artistic interest (De Paula Ramos and Cruz Reis 21). This aim seems to meet with the approval of Prata’s nephew and godson, Paulo de Carvalho Neto who, before this fifth edition claimed “um lugar para Ranulfo Prata” (“a place for Ranulfo Prata”) in the history of Brazilian literature.

A welcome addition to the Reserva Literária collection, this new edition of Navios Iluminados draws the reader’s attention to the study of Brazilian proletarian literature of the 1930s. Like other novels of the time, it shows how individuals’ fate is a product of social and economic relations. Readers and scholars will be able to compare it to other canonical and non-canonical works, both from Brazil specifically and from Latin America in general, thus enriching our understanding of the scope and variety the Brazilian novel of the 1930s.

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WORKS CITED


