

Carlos Cortez Minchillo.

Erico Verissimo, escritor do mundo: circulação literária, cosmopolitismo e relações interamericanas.

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What actually is a literary system? The problems and powers involved in dealing with the literary system as a critical phenomenon suggest that what we inevitably struggle with is that which mathematicians call the “chaotic system.” If we have more, or, even worse, if we have many, many more variables than equations, how can we figure them out? Examples of the chaotic system are the weather forecast and traffic management in large cities. It is even commonplace to think that when worthy predictions cannot be made, a system appears random, but it is not. Likewise, the retrospective analysis of a subject’s performance within one of these kinds of systems may also cause effects of apparent randomness. At least, a sense of mystery about why and how things turned out the way they did is a plausible result.

No matter how taxing the enterprise may seem, many scholars, such as Carlos Cortez Minchillo, embark on cultural studies that reserve room for reflections on the field of culture at large, undeniably a chaotic system, while addressing the links between works and the private lives of authors, or their intellectual growth and the ideologies around them; the zigzagging of aesthetic trends, such as the trajectory of realism-to-vanguard-to-neorealism; the links between private publishers and institutional agencies; or even the tug-of-war between national and international radical transformations, such as wars and political radicalisms.

In this multifaceted study on Brazilian novelist Erico Verissimo (1905-1975), Minchillo, a professor at Dartmouth College, employs a wide variety of approaches to a vast field of variables that have led to Verissimo’s development as a writer of very high credentials in Brazil and, at the same time, as an author with little following in the United States or elsewhere outside his native country, despite the fact that a considerable number of his titles have been translated into English and Spanish, despite the point made that he had innumerable friends in the

international publishing world, and despite the argument advanced that he held, for several years, a post of substantial intellectual influence in Washington over Pan-American cultural affairs.

In his preface, Minchillo explains that he writes his book at the confluence of intellectual history, the study of critical practices, and literary analysis (21). He has set out to focus on the relationships between Verissimo's international path, particularly within the United States, and the make-up and reception of three of his novels (*Saga*, *O Senhor Embaixador*, and *O prisioneiro*), including the thematic, formalist and ideological changes that resulted from his deep sense of cosmopolitanism and humanism.

Minchillo shows us how, for three long decades (1940s-1960s), strong winds and mighty air masses have mingled and shifted—in and out of the clouds—the traces of Verissimo's moving portrait as author, editor, lecturer, professor, and director of the Cultural Affairs Office of the Pan-American Union. Likewise, there has also been the unfolding narrative of his ups and downs crossing through the high, intercontinental scenario of literature and cultural politics. Verissimo's sui generis case in Latin American literature is indeed one of substantial popular success in Brazil and had caused a significant rise in international recognition and expectations. That is followed, though, by a slide into anonymity among contemporary readers and critics alike, argues Minchillo (21).

What one learns, Minchillo contends, is that “the success or failure of a given work or an author, or else, their greater or lesser insertion into the national or international markets, are not determined exclusively by the lines of the literary text” (21). They derive, actually, from a streak of actions and discourses of multiple natures, whether it is political, economic, market-oriented, diplomatic, or ideological—it is, in a nutshell, “a history written by many hands that echoes many voices” (22).

In order to shed light on Verissimo's circumstances and outcomes, Minchillo investigates the Gaúcho writer's fiction through close reading and ideological analysis, while combining the insight provided by other critics and theoreticians, and by an abundance of archival materials, such as private letters, institutional reports, mass print news media clips and interviews. Apart from the preface, penned by Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais historian Kátia Gerab Baggio, and an introductory essay, *Erico Verissimo: escritor do mundo* has four chapters chronologically and thematically organized. A concluding section offers syntheses and openings for further inquiries.

The first chapter covers Verissimo's young life and early career. The second takes stock of his advances on the concept of universal humanism and explores the identity duality of local tenets vs. cosmopolitan life panaches by highlighting the novel *Saga* (1940). The discussion also dialogues with another three fictional books of his, *Clarissa* (1933), *Música ao longe* (1935), and *Um lugar ao sol* (1936). The third chapter intertwines Verissimo's travel narratives written about his exploits in the United States with a book he wrote on the history of Brazilian literature. In the same chapter Minchillo talks about several issues associated with decisions and consequences of cultural politics between Latin America and the United States over editing and translation projects, and the book market as a whole. The fourth chapter compares and contrasts Verissimo's metamorphosis in terms of how he perceives a cosmopolitan and humanist order in these major works, *México* (1957), *O senhor embaixador* (1965), and *O prisioneiro* (1967).

All things considered, Minchillo's book underscores Verissimo's "relatively eccentric" standing in the Brazilian literary map (22). Minchillo summarizes that assessment: Verissimo was a Gaúcho who was not a "regionalist," a modern writer who distanced himself from the folkloric trend of Brazilian modernism; an experimental writer, at times, without breaking up an easy communication conduit with his readers; a politicized but nonpartisan intellectual; a socialist against communist regimes; a novelist concerned with social reality but never a spokesperson for the working class; and, finally, a writer preoccupied with his nation, but without any concern for literary nationalism, who eventually sought out an international outlet for growth and appreciation (22).

Minchillo's book, which results from his doctoral research at the Universidade de São Paulo, is profound and wide-scoped. Unlike so many academic studies, its language is clear and neutral. Devoid of bias or jargon, it appeals to readers within and beyond high school and college campuses. It undoubtedly constitutes a seminal work on a single author of the utmost importance in the spectrum of Brazilian literature. It offers much more, however. Among other roles, it contributes to the understanding of a particularly complex and intense period of cultural exchanges and ideological manipulations between the United States and Latin America: the heights of the Cold War and the deceptive goals of the Good Neighbor Policy.

Ultimately, Minchillo's book helps us understand considerably better many of the intricacies and hidden factors playing a part in the chaotic systems of literature and cultural politics. At last, here is a teaser for curious reader: while

traveling through the pages of *Erico Veríssimo, escritor do mundo*, do not rush, but make sure you reach the “Final Remarks” section and learn how, in 1953, Erico Verissimo, Jorge Amado and Pablo Neruda once faced together an elucidating but embarrassing crossroads of art, ideology, and their own symbolic capitals as prominent writers and influential intellectuals.

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