

“Of pearls and stars, he made the verse”: the literary career of the founders of Brazilian Neurology

“De pérolas e estrelas ele fez o verso”: a carreira literária dos fundadores da Neurologia brasileira

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ABSTRACT

In the beginning of modern Neurology, between the 19th and the 20th centuries, neurologists often assumed simultaneous positions of intellectual prominence and gained significant cultural credentials. Not only observers and admirers of music, literature, and the fine arts, many neurologists and neuroscientists worldwide developed significant cultural careers. When studying the careers and lives of the founders of Brazilian Neurology, one finds only sparse information on their cultural activities, which are often relegated to side notes. Therefore, the author aims to focus on the literary output of some of the most important early Brazilian neurologists, who excelled in poetry or longer written forms and were eventually immortalized by the *Academia Brasileira de Letras*: Antônio Austregésilo, Aloysio de Castro, Deolindo Couto, and Miguel Couto, contextualizing their artistic production in their respective academic lives.

Keywords: Deolindo Couto; Aloysio de Castro; Antônio Austregésilo; History of Neurology; Neurology and Literature.

RESUMO

No princípio da Neurologia moderna, entre os séculos XIX e XX, neurologistas frequentemente assumiam simultaneamente posições de destaque intelectual e ganhavam credenciais intelectuais significativas. Não meros observadores e admiradores de música, literatura e artes visuais, muitos neurologistas e neurocientistas do mundo todo desenvolveram carreiras culturais paralelas. Ao estudar a vida e a carreira dos fundadores da Neurologia Brasileira, encontra-se apenas informação esparsa sobre suas atividades culturais, frequentemente relegadas a notas de rodapé. Logo, o autor objetiva focar na produção literária de alguns dos mais importantes neurologistas brasileiros, que se destacaram em poesia ou formas escritas em prosa e foram eventualmente imortalizados pela Academia Brasileira de Letras: Antônio Austregésilo, Aloysio de Castro, Deolindo Couto e Miguel Couto, contextualizando suas produções literárias em suas vidas respectivas.

Palavras-chave: Deolindo Couto; Aloysio de Castro; Antônio Austregésilo; História da Neurologia; Neurologia e Literatura.

INTRODUCTION

In the early days of modern Neurology, in the transition between the 19th and the 20th centuries, physicians and scientists often assumed positions of intellectual prominence. Not relegated to the confines of a hospital or laboratory, they soon became members of the cultural *élite* – not only as observers and admirers of music, literature, and the visual arts, but also as musicians, writers, poets, and artists themselves. This was due to their social and economic context: as educated and wealthier professionals, they had the cultural apparatus and economic means to be dedicated part-time to other, non-medical activities. Alexander Borodin became one

of Russia's most celebrated composers¹; William Somerset Maugham, one of the most famous writers of his generation²; Thomas Monro not only painted but also sponsored artists, including William Turner³. Neurology was no exception: Santiago Ramón y Cajal wrote short stories under the pseudonym “Doctor Bacteria”⁴; Charles Foix wrote poetry and plays⁵. There is sparse literature focused on the artistic activities of the founders of Brazilian Neurology, often relegating these efforts to sidenotes. Therefore, the author focuses on the literary production of four of the most important early Brazilian neurologists: Antônio Austregésilo, Aloysio de Castro, Deolindo Couto, and Miguel Couto.

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ANTÔNIO AUSTREGÉSILO RODRIGUES LIMA (1873-1960)

From Recife, Antônio Austregésilo (Figure 1A) rose from an impoverished background to the position of “Father of Brazilian Neurology”. While a student at the *Colégio das Artes*, in Recife, he fell under the spell of Tobias Barreto, father of the “Condorism”, before moving to Rio de Janeiro. A student of Francisco de Castro, he first devoted his studies to

alienism, writing a thesis on the clinical features of delusions. He progressively gravitated towards Neurology and eventually became its first professor at *Universidade do Brasil*, as *the Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro* was then called⁶. The Austregésilo-Esposel sign, described with his assistant Faustino Esposel (1888-1931), consolidated his position in the collective conscience of aspiring neurologists⁷.

Simultaneously, he developed a distinctive literary voice, influenced by Symbolism; still in medical school, he



Figure 1. Portraits of Antônio Austregésilo (A), Aloysio de Castro (B), Deolindo Couto (C), and Miguel Couto (D).
Source: *Academia Brasileira de Letras*.

composed poetry, often published under the pseudonym Antônio Zilo. Essays and literary critics soon followed: his clique, “*Os novos*”, severely criticized Realism, Romanticism, and Parnasianism, and vigorously defended French Symbolists and Decadents, including Arthur Rimbaud, Paul Verlaine, and Stéphane Mallarmé. He wrote essays on Medicine and other subjects, poetic prose (*Manchas*, from 1898)⁸, poetry, and a novel, *Almas desgraçadas* (1950)⁹; furthermore, many of his speeches were collected¹⁰. He was elected to the *Academia Brasileira de Letras* in 1914, as the third holder of the 30th chair¹¹. However, his style was controversial, often considered convoluted, which led to snobbish comments by literary critics.

ALOYSIO DE CASTRO (1882-1959)

Son of Francisco de Castro (1857-1901), the aforementioned professor of Medicine at *Universidade do Brasil*, Aloysio de Castro (Figure 1B) studied under his father and graduated with honors with a thesis on gait disorders; he also inherited the taste for the letters, art, and music from his father. After a season in the great Parisian neurological hospitals, he launched an outstanding career culminating in a chair at the *Academia Nacional de Medicina*⁶. Due to his contributions to the development of the discipline in Brazil, he became acknowledged as the “Father of Brazilian Neurological Semiology”¹².

Nevertheless, his artistic production, often overshadowed by his magnificent academic career, is also impressive: poet, composer, and music critic¹, he eventually became the third immortal of the 5th chair of the *Academia Brasileira de Letras*, inheriting the position from Oswaldo Cruz in 1919. The discipline in which he excelled the most was poetry; his works include *Rimário* (1926)¹³, *Os carmes* (1928)¹⁴, *Tendresse* (1932, in French) and *Caminhos* (1945)¹⁵. One easily notes his esthetic conservatism and penchant for older forms, such as the sonnet.

DEOLINDO AUGUSTO NUNES COUTO (1902-1980)

From Piauí, Deolindo Couto (Figure 1C) also developed most of his career in Rio de Janeiro, becoming closely connected to the *Universidade do Brasil*, where he would establish in 1946 the institute of Neurology that today bears his name. One of the founders of the *Academia Brasileira de Neurologia*, he was patron and president of the institution as well, and eventually became dean of the university and president of the *Academia Nacional de Medicina*^{6,16}. The sixth occupant of the 11th chair of the *Academia Brasileira de Letras*, Couto, unlike the aforementioned physicians, didn't devote himself to poetry. Instead, his literary accomplishments lie

in collected essays and speeches. *Vultos e Idéias* (1961)¹⁷, for instance, combines keen insights into the nature of Medicine and Neurology with biographical anecdotes¹⁸. Other late writings are biographical analyses of scientists and physicians, such as Afrânio Peixoto (1976)¹⁹ and Clementino Fraga (1980).

MIGUEL COUTO (1865-1934)

Miguel Couto (Figure 1D), from Rio de Janeiro, became notable as the successor of Francisco de Castro at the university⁶. His dedication to Neurology and vigorous defense of education²⁰, excitedly supported in notable orations that led him to the 40th chair of the *Academia Brasileira de Letras* as its third occupant, are fondly remembered²¹. Coincidentally, Couto became physician to Machado de Assis, who struggled with epilepsy; as a sign of respect to the magnitude of the writer, Couto never accepted pay for his services²².

The many names that built Brazilian Neurology have laid a solid literary foundation as well. From poetry to essays and autobiographical texts, many are the contributions to our letters given by those who, first and foremost, were physicians and scientists. As Aloysio de Castro wrote:

*Este, nos duros mármore polidos,
Dos deuses animou a efigie augusta
E aos monumentos deu a linha justa,
No bronze que memora os tempos idos.
Este no escrínio pôs a arte que ajusta
Paciente as gemas, este áureos tecidos
Broslou, este da taça os esculpídos
Relevos rebruniu, este venusta
Imagem nos painéis, em obras-primas,
A cores debuxou no molde terso;
Mas este, o sumo artista, este as opimas
Formas lavrou, na inspiração diverso,
E perfeito, elegendo as pulcras rimas,
De pérolas e estrelas fez o verso.*

[He, in hardened, polished marble,
From gods animated the august effigy
And to monuments gave the fair line,
In brass that remembers times gone by.
He, on the desk, laid the art that
Patiently adjusts the stones, these golden fabrics
Sewed, He, from the cup, the sculpted
Reliefs resewed, this gracious
Image in panels, in masterpieces,
In colors delineated in the polished mold;
But He, the supreme artist, He the excellent
Forms carved, in inspiration diverse,
Of pearls and stars, he made the verse.]

(*Ars Suprema, Rimários*, 1926, translated by the author)¹³

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