

A-1

J. C. NELSON
PRINCIPAL EMERITUS
HEAD OF SOCIAL SCIENCE DEPT.
SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL
SALEM, OREGON

104 E. Wilson St.
Nov. 7, 1936

Dear Mr. Salles:

I am greatly indebted to you for your kindness in sending me the copy of José Verissimo's posthumous essays on literary subjects, which I have read with deep interest. Even in these rather sketchy pieces he shows a very sound judgment and a keen appreciation of Brazilian literature without ever descending into meaningless eulogy. I really prefer his work to that of the sr. Agrippino Grieco--or of the young men who write for the Boletim de Ariel. I am particularly impressed by his idea that literature in Brazil is too much the work of young men(moços), and therefore lacks maturity. How many Brazilian poets have died young!--or have stopped writing poetry before reaching middle age. It seems to be the ambition of every Brazilian youth with any pretensions to culture to produce a volume of poetry; but most of it will remain ephemeral. I have just been reading a book of poems (Poemas Concentricos) by a youth named Correa de Sa--a privately printed and very expensive edition; but it will never make him famous.

Permit me to ask if you have not yourself written considerable poetry in earlier years? My friend Coelho sent me a sonnet of yours on the death of Beethoven that was undeniably beautiful, and showed the same distinction of style that is so marked in the Aves; but have you ever published any poems in book form?

I am also considerably impressed by the sr. Verissimo's criticism of the "regionalist" novelists, who obtain their local color mainly by inserting lists of plants and animals, but fail to reproduce the spirit of the people. This is one reason why the Aves is so superior; we not only have the local background faithfully presented, but are given a profound insight into the psychology of the characters. It seems to me that in the matter of feminine psychology you might have done for Brazilian fiction what Paul Bourget and Marcel Prévost have done for French. I have just been reading for the first time Prévost's Le Jardin Secret, and I am impressed with the resemblance of his method to yours. Permit ^{me to ask} if you had read either Bourget or Prévost before you wrote the Aves? And if it would not be impertinent, permit me to ask who has been your master among the novelists? Not I imagine Eça de Queiroz; his temperament is very different from yours; he could not have written the Aves, nor could you have written A Reliquia.

If you will permit the criticism, so much of the literature in Portuguese is disfigured by an unnecessary brutality--though this is no doubt the expression of a real element in the Portuguese character--perhaps a Moorish strain. An excellent example of this is the work of Rodolpho Theophilo, who writes with undeniable vigor, but with an almost monotonous accumulation of horror. Andin Graça Aranha's Chanaan, do you remember the gratuitous introduction of the scene where the new-born infant is devoured by the hogs? Have you ever read Abel Botelho's Amanhã? If so, you will recall that he brings the story to a climax by having the hero blow himself up, and his severed head flies through the window into the room of his sweetheart? Surely this is not in the best taste? Now in the Aves there is none of this violence; you have carefully avoided an external tragedy. Even in Taunay's Innocencia, admirable as it

is, we are treated to a very painful scene of the assassination of the hero which spares none of the gory details. Mr. Julio Ribeiro finds it necessary to end A Carne with one of the most ghastly suicides on record; and Mr. Odilon Azevedo finds it impossible to end A Mulher do Promotor without a bloody assassination. Apparently most Portuguese novelists have forgotten the Horatian maxim that "the old man is not to be butchered in the sight of the audience". To be sure, there seems to be an inherent melancholy in the Iberian soul that results in much more tragic note than in our Anglo-Saxon fiction; but it is much to be regretted that more of the writers have not resisted the tendency to exaggerate it. Now the concluding pages of the Aves are magnificent in the note of solemn and sustained melancholy that they strike; but ~~in~~ you never allow it to degenerate into external horror.

Perhaps there will be no one to agree with me; but I think that the author who has most nearly approached you in the ability to express in sonorous and powerful prose this note of deep melancholy is the sr. Alberto Rangel in his Inferno Verde. Are you and he by any chance acquainted?—and have you ever corresponded on literary subjects? I should be glad to have your judgment on his work. And I must not neglect to say that there are passages in D. Rachel de Queiroz's "O Quinze" that will remain unexcelled this side of Camoës—for instance, her "Seria um élo partido na imensa cadeia da immortalidade"—perhaps the finest sentence that has ever been written in Brazil. What a pity she did not devote herself wholly to literature instead of following the ignis fatuus of Communism! Does she ever appear in Fortaleza?—and is there any prospect that she will bring out another novel?

My friend Coelho has done me the honor to send me a portrait of yourself, evidently cut out of some newspaper. I am surprised at your youthful appearance—Coelho tells me that you were at least sixty when the picture was taken. I wonder if you have another copy of it that you could spare?—I want to give it to a young girl who is an enthusiastic reader of the Aves, and wishes to have your picture to paste in the front of the book. And I should be most happy to read any appreciations of your work, if your modesty will permit you to send them. What did the critics say about the Aves when it first appeared?—have you ever had a really adequate treatment?

Will you permit me to send you in this mail a book with which you may already be perfectly familiar, but which represents perhaps the finest prose which has appeared in America: Hawthorne's "Twice-Told Tales"? I specially want you to read the first story, "The Gray Champion". The notes will perhaps be necessary to enable you to understand the historical background. Have you ever read Hawthorne's "The Scarlet Letter"—still our greatest novel? If not, I should be most happy to send it to you.

I must express my gratitude for the copy of "Espelho" with your very sprightly article on the grammarians. Yes, they are sometimes a great nuisance; and yet there is such a tendency at present, and especially here in the U. S., to write formless and disjointed prose, that it might ~~not~~ be a complete calamity to have a revival of interest in grammar. In Brazil, your Latin sense of form preserves you from the worst of such excesses.

I should be glad to see the sr. Monteiro Lobato's article referring to you. He is a valued correspondent of mine. But he seems to be getting himself into trouble; will you read the enclosed clippings? Is he in any real danger?.. Thank you for the numbers of the historical review—very excellent work. Are you a member of the Society? There is a similar Society in Pernambuco which Dr. Mario Mello tells me about—he is the Sec'y.

Let me hope for another of your charming letters soon, and believe me, with the deepest respect,

Very sincerely yours,

J. C. Nelson