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104 E. Wilson St.
Oct. 29, 1938

Dear Friend:

A few days ago I was delighted to receive your charming letter of Sept. 27, and yesterday came the volume which you have so kindly sent me--please accept my very sincere thanks. I read about a hundred pages of it last night, and will not wait to finish it before writing, as I think I understand its general scope and spirit. It is a very delightful little book--entirely free from any attempt at "fine writing", tolerant and cordial in tone, and permeated with a delightful humor which never degenerates into buffoonery. I am tempted to contrast with the recent book by W. Somerset Maugham, the English author, "The Summing Up", which I have just completed. Maugham you will remember is the author of the famous novel "Of Human Bondage". This last book is a sort of autobiography of his mind rather than of his life; he tells us what conclusions he has arrived at on life and letters. The general tone is rather somber, and he is wholly devoid of humor. The general effect is rather cynical, though not intolerant, and you would probably approve his conclusions about religion. But it is not a pleasant book, and to read your book after his is like coming out of rain and fog into bright sunshine.

The two portraits I have most enjoyed in your book are those of Taunay and Arthur Azevedo. Taunay's "Innocencia" was the first Brazilian book I ever read--though it was in a somewhat abridged edition for the use of schools; and very soon after I read it, a friend sent me from Paris a copy of Arthur's "Contos Ephemeros" which he had picked at a second-hand book-stall. Never in any language have I read such devilishly clever little sketches--such urbanity coupled with such devastating humor. Do you recall the story "Incruento"? Could that ever be surpassed? Let me ask if Arthur was a brother of the Aluizio Azevedo who wrote "O Mulato"? I understand that he too was from Maranhão. There is an Azevedo who has been recently visiting in this country--Odilon, whose novel "A Mulher do Promotor" I have read with much enjoyment. It contains a picture of a small town in the interior which reminds me of your study of a similar community in the "Aves".

I was very glad to get the story of the "Padaria Espiritual", of which I had often heard. What amazes me is the intense literary activity in a town no larger than Fortaleza. I cannot imagine such a society in a town of similar size in the U. S.; one would have to go a metropolis like Chicago or New York to find such an atmosphere. Our young men do not have the instinctive feeling for literature that seems to prevail in Brazil; their interests are all connected with business in some way, and a youth who should show an inclination to write poetry would be regarded by his fellows as a "high-brow"--a term distinctly pejorative.

I have had very little trouble with your language, though my dictionary is far from satisfactory. But I should like to know what you mean when you call the "Padaria" an "academia-mirim"--the word "mirim" I do not find. Evidently you do not regard it as a high compliment!

I feel deeply grateful to Rachel for persuading you to write to me; and I am happy to know that you and she are in communication with each other. It

would be singularly unfortunate if Brazil's two greatest novelists did not know each other. Strange that both of them should reside in the same town!--Fortaleza can well regard itself as "the Athens of Brazil".

Rachel was kind enough to send me a copy of Prof. Olivio Montenegro's "O Romance Brasileiro", with its very favorable chapter on her own work. But, as I have explained to her--perhaps she has shown you the letter--I do not think that the Sr. Montenegro has done her full justice; one would not know from his essay that she^{has} written anything but "Caminho de Pedras", or that she has applied herself to any other problem than that of the relations of man and woman: whereas we have in "O Quinz^{to}" man against nature, and in Joe "João Miguel" man against society. I hope Rachel is enjoying her present work--she seems to be employed with an importing house; and I trust she is not wasting her energies on Communism--Pegasus should never forget that his wings forbid him to come to earth and put himself in harness.

I am looking forward with impatience for the publication of her novel "As Tres Marias". It will be difficult to construct a definite plot out of the narrative of three separate lives without sacrificing the essential unity of the story. But I place no limits to Rachel's genius, and have no doubt but that she will rise triumphant over all obstacles.

I wonder if you have seen the Spanish translation of "OS SERTÕES" by Don Benjamin de Garay of Buenos Aires? He was kind enough to send me a copy, having heard through Monteiro Lobato of my interest in Brazilian literature. He has done a good piece of work, having had the good sense not to attempt a paraphrase or "free" translation--it is translated almost word for word, though somehow he doesn't seem to get the effect of Euclides's style. But I find myself wondering why it was necessary to translate it at all--the two languages are so similar that I should think any educated Spanish-speaking reader could make it out with only occasional recourse to the dictionary.

The Sr. Garay contemplates the publication of a series of translations of Brazilian novels--among which I do not find the "Aves"--an omission to which I have forcibly called his attention. Neither does he include "Chanaan" nor "Innocencia". He sends me a novel of Argentina entitled "Zogoibi" by Henrique Larreta, and also a life of S^{an} Martin by Ricardo Rojas--this latter a very elaborate piece of work. Personally I should like to read a life of Mitre--do you know if one has been written? The Sr. Garay evidently assumes that I can read Spanish; he does not know that I have never studied the language, and can only make it out from its resemblance to Portuguese. But I have taken up the study of the grammar in real earnest, and hope to be able to read these books after a fashion.

You will be amused to know that the Sr. Garay has invited me to write a preface for the new one-volume edition of "OS SERTÕES" that he is planning to bring out. He seems not to understand that I am not a literary man, but merely a humble reader, and that I have very little literary gift. But I have sent him a few paragraphs, and perhaps he can put some life into them if he translates them into Spanish. Are you familiar with the literature of Argentina? I have always wanted to read Sarmiento's "Facundo", which I am told is a very fine piece of work. The only novel in Spanish I have ever read is "Maria", by the Colombian Jorge Isaacs, which forcibly reminds me of Innocencia, though I believe really a better piece of work. Taunay tries too hard to be "regional"--a fault of most Brazilian writers, who tend to subordinate their figures to their landscape--a mistake which neither you nor Rach^a has made.

I regret deeply to learn that you propose to abandon the "Estrada de Damasco", though your judgment may be sound in this. Perhaps it is wiser to let your fame rest solely on the "Aves"; and it is of course possible that you might have the experience of Walter Scott, whose later novels showed a sad decline from those he first wrote; but I had hoped great things of this second novel, and feel deeply disappointed. Perhaps you will change your mind. In any case,

I should be happy if you would tell me what the general idea of the book was to be. The title suggests Rachel's "Caminho de Pedras"; is the general problem in any way similar to hers?

The only Brazilian novel that I have recently read is the Sr. Graciliano Ramos's "Angustia"; but I am hardly able to join in the chorus of praise with which it has been received. It has undeniable power, but little serenity; and in order to give the impression of power he drags in so much that is gratuitously ugly and sordid: if I had to express it in a word, the book lacks distinction, and his insight into human nature falls far short of either yours or Rachel's. I suppose I should read his "S. Bernardo", which Prof. Montehegro seems to find superior to "Angustia".

Now will you permit me to ask you a question? An acquaintance of mine at the University of Wisconsin is trying to compile a complete bibliography of Baudelaire; but has almost nothing in Portuguese. Now was there not a translation of B. published by Felix Pacheco? My friend Arthur Coelho tells me that it did not meet much success, and he thinks the printed copies are almost all unsold. If you have a second-hand book-shop in Fortaleza, would you mind looking to see if they have a copy of this book, and then inform me of the price? And do you know of anything else that has been written in Brazil on Baudelaire--either translations or criticism?

Let me tell me how much I appreciated the charming little poem on the occasion of your wife's birthday which you enclose. Do you know, I know almost nothing of your work along this line; Coelho has sent me a few sonnets which he knows by heart, but beyond this I am in total ignorance. Of your poetic works, which one do you think best expresses you? In my family, all the poetry is written by my wife, who possesses considerable facility in verse-writing, and is an active member of a "Writers' Club". In this country, it is only the women who have the courage to devote themselves to literature! But there were no women-members of the "Padaria", if I correctly understand; they seem to have devoted themselves to the more congenial attitude of visitors and inspirers.

But I must afflict you further with my rambling comments; you will have little interest in replying, and I certainly want to have the pleasure of further correspondence with you. Convey to Rachel to assure of my deep affection, and believe me always, with deepest regard,

Very sincerely yours,

James C. Nelson