

TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

This philosophical Brazilian novel of our time by one of Rio de Janeiro's leading Catholic intellectuals is an elaboration in fictional form of a theme to be found in one of the author's earlier works. In the book that recounts his conversion to Catholicism, *A Descoberta do Outro* (translated under the title *My Neighbor as Myself*) Senhor Corção divides man's life span into two periods, childhood and adolescence. "In childhood," he says, "we live *ludus*, the germ of eternity, in adolescence, we live a pseudo-*ludus*, vertigo, and the first shuddering notion of mortality. . . . After the first plunge into adolescence life continues to leap and sway; now erect, now fallen in the depths of abysses; now pregnant with eternity, now poisoned by the awareness of death. . . . and all that is left of our hope of eternity is despair. . . . And all this because of the constant nearness of death."

"Here is material for another book," the writer observed, and thus suggested what might be the subject of a subsequent work. This work was indeed to appear some time later as the thoughtful novel, *Lições de Abismo* (Abysmal Lessons), whose title we have changed, since a literal rendition is not felicitous in English.

The novel's protagonist, José Maria, dying of leukemia, does indeed fall into an abyss of despair and bewilderment. His awareness heightened by the imminence of death, he communes with his soul (it too an abyss, an "abyss of subjectivity") and strives to enlighten his spirit in its gropings through the darkness toward the Absolute. Here, as in so many instances, is evinced the Brazilian writer's close affinity with the German poet, Rainer Maria Rilke, who, in a letter written in his youth, asserted: "I believe it is the duty of every artist to penetrate the fog of arid materialism and

attain that lucidity of soul which throws out a golden bridge into limitless eternities." It is precisely such an enlightenment of soul that José Maria is seeking.

Man's perplexity and anguish in the face of death is but one of many of this deeply sensitive novel's Existentialist themes. The solitude of the individual, his anonymity, the impermanence of life and its apparent absurdity, all are poignantly expressed with a beauty of style that is often lyrical.

"Who if I cry out will hear me from among the ranks of the angels?" wonders José Maria, as he identifies with the poet, and, peering into the depths of a "dream Adriatic," repeats that passionate cry of the first of Rilke's *Duinese Elegies*, proclaiming the loneliness of the soul and questioning the enigma of life and death.