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The Law of the Living: On Clarice Lispector

A Breath of Life, by Clarice Lispector. New York, New York: New Directions, 2012.

Água Viva, by Clarice Lispector. New York, New York: New Directions, 2012.

Near to the Wild Heart, by Clarice Lispector. New York, New York: New Directions, 2012.

The Hour of the Star, by Clarice Lispector. New York, New York: New Directions, 2011.

The Passion According to G.H., by Clarice Lispector. New York, New York: New Directions, 2012.

It is easy to become enamored by Clarice Lispector, be it for her sphinx-like beauty, her youthful genius (*Near to The Wild Heart* was published and received the prestigious Graça Aranha Prize when she was only 23), or her feisty journalisms, later anthologized in *Cronicas*. It is also, no doubt, intriguing to get caught up in her short but complex life: her family's violent exile from the Ukraine and experience of pogroms in the 1920s, her marriage to a Brazilian diplomat and subsequent travel to postwar Europe, her rise first to literary celebrity and then cult-beckoned mythos while living utterly isolated in a small apartment close to the Copacabana. Her near-death experience through a fire and the permanent injury of her writing hand, or the prophetic lines in her last, posthumously published book *A Breath of Life*, which seem to foretell her own death caused by an incurable disease. Clearly, it is easy to link her life and work, and, predictably, I have, but what makes Clarice Lispector a true gem (and thus New Directions' re-release a noble and brave move), is her fearless plunge into the epic and mystical questions of our existence. In *The Passion According to G.H.* she writes: "I had found the enigma itself. Since the thing can never really be touched. The vital node is a finger pointing at it and the thing being pointed at, wakens like a milligram of radium in the tranquil dark."

Hélène Cixous, an early proponent of Lispector's version of literature, suggests that most of her work can be understood to deal centrally with what she calls "the law of the living," which suggests that the boundaries between the author's consciousness and created text are fragile and transparent. In order to enter "the law of the living," the one who authors has to be in a state of open receptivity and guided by the text itself without any preconceived notions of how the story will take shape.

The Hour of The Star, a book that opens with a list of thirteen titles between which Lispector places her own signature, immediately suspends the illusion of most novels that the author is off stage. Instead a very reluctant crossbreed of author/narrator/character descends into the text, and as "he" lays out his intentions, is written into existence. The interpolated male "author" not only continues to interrupt the narrative but also points towards his own fictionality: "Forgive me but I'm going to talk to myself, and as I write I'm a bit surprised because I discover I have a destiny . . . Existing isn't logical. The action of this story will end up with my transfiguration into somebody else and my materialization finally as an object."

The interruptions at once break the spell of fiction but also ask who is truly authoring this book. The reader faces the various degrees of limitation that all members of the narrative essentially bump up against. On the lowest rung is the main character Macabea, who is pushed around not only by the world she was born into but also by S.M. Rodriguez her supposed author. Although he can halt the narrative with his "ruffle-of-the drum," he is helpless when it comes to changing the outcome of the story and eventually has to admit his authorial restrictions. "I am going to do everything I can to keep her from dying . . . I fear nakedness for it is the last word." Both reader and "author" follow these helpless prolongations until her death suddenly descends without any further warning. Lispector "decreates" (in Simone Weil's sense) the gesture of authoring, interrupting both her own and her creations' impulse to dominate the text.

Few other writers in the twentieth century have so fearlessly and unapologetically abandoned reader expectations, plot conventions and roles of authorship as Clarice Lispector. She instead focused her entire vision on what Hélène Cixous calls "little sensations of trembling." These offer readers endless fragments of philosophical ruminations (she drew both from the Kabbalah and Spinoza), as well as revealing the books' stake in coming to life in the form of dialogue between author and characters, characters and language and the narrator's internal musings as s/he leaps in and out of the world of the book and beyond.

In *Agua Viva* she confesses, "I don't know what I am writing about: I am obscure to myself. This is not a message of ideas that I am transmitting to you but an instinctive ecstasy of whatever is hidden in nature and that I foretell." In the *Hour of the Star* the interpolated author wonders, "Could it be by entering the seed of her life I'm violating the secret of the pharaohs? Will I get the death penalty for speaking of a life that contains like all our lives an inviolable secret?" In *A Breath of Life*, the climactic high point of Lispector's internal dialogues flushed into a barely visible narrative, she asks, "Does 'writing' exist in and of itself? No. It is merely the reflection of a thing that questions."

A thing that questions might be a potent guiding principle through Lispector's work, which approaches the enigma without ever daring to fully capture it. Lispector weaves and tears at a symbiotic web of radical statements interrupted by even starker questions: "I lose the identity of the world inside myself and exist without guarantees. Is God a form of being? The abstraction that materializes in the nature of all that exists? My roots are in the divine shadows. Drowsy roots. Wavering in the dark shadows." Especially her last four books *The Passion According to G.H.*, *Agua Viva*, *The Hour of the Star*, and *A Breath of Life*, which were recently published by New Directions with fancy new book covers, retranslations and charming introductions by the likes of Colm Tóibín, Pedro Almodóvar and Jonathan Franzen, all professing Lispector's profound influence on their work, are dedicated to this structure and vein of intensity.

"The law of the living," which is different from the law constructed by civilization, unmasking life outside of imitation and familiarity. In *The Passion According to G.H.*, the book that most violently confronts "all the lies that have helped us live," a languid middle-class woman discovers upon entering her former maid's room the vile presence of a well known literary beast, the cockroach, already immortalized by Lispector's literary counterpart Franz Kafka. "The roach's face was sticking straight out, at the height of my head and my eyes. I had never seen a cockroach. I had just been repulsed by its ancient and ever present existence- but had never actually come face to face with one, not even in thought." The death that occurs in the book is not only that of the roach (slow and agonizing), but also that of civilization and language. It is a seemingly direct transcription of mystical experience and recalls Moses' destruction of the tablets of law, the breaking of the book in order for the book to become human. This breaking occurs in the moment G.H. faces the cockroach, which to her horror is not repulsive, as she was told and believed, but "primally alive."

The room was the opposite of what I had created in my home, the opposite of the soft beauty I'd made from my talent of arrangement, my talent for living, the opposite of my serene irony, of my sweet and absent-minded irony: it was a violation of my quotation marks, the quotation marks that made me a citation of myself. The room was a portrait of an empty stomach. . . . I'd looked at the living roach and was discovering inside it the identity of my deepest life. Because rising to the surface like pus was my truest matter—and with fright and loathing I was feeling that "I-being" was coming from a source far prior to the human source and, with horror, much greater than human.

Or later:

Because the naked thing is so tedious. So that was why I had a kind of love for tedium and a continual hatred of it. Because tedium is saltless and resembles the thing itself. My old constructions had consisted continually trying to transform the atonal to the tonal. But tedium-tedium was the only way I could feel the atonal.

The act of writing, for Lispector, is not simply a mode of expression or the imagination, but rather an existential tool, a process towards the enigma, the unfamiliar, the strange substance of the "thing" itself. G.H. experiences a source greater than her own human language form and is returned to the immemorial root of existence.

Lispector's emphasis on preterhuman consciousness, such as vegetal and animal realities (i.e. a biography of flowers in *Agua Viva*, conversations with the sea in *Near to the Wild Heart*, or the metamorphoses through ancient forms such as cockroaches in *The Passion According to G.H.*) not only invoke our earliest origins but also infer primordial strangeness upon language. An explanation as to why her translators may feel challenged by "weird word choice, awkward syntax, and lack of interest in conventional grammar [which] produces—often fragments of sentences—that veer towards abstraction without ever quite reaching it."¹ However, the question of Lispector's unique syntax, her "foreign prose style" may also be a result of her attempt to strip the book and its contents of all artifice and to expose the fictions

1. Moser in his Afterword to *The Hour of the Star*.

of life and writing. G.H. experiences the death of her civilized self and its ability to linguistically dominate experience.

In *A Breath of Life* a brief anecdote further elucidates Lispector's artistic and mystic concern. The author recounts a dream, in which she saw how people on a stage were killed but did not truly die, "they only died as actors . . . May this be eternity, when we die, only the actor in us perishes." While it is problematic to discern with absolute authority what lies at the heart of Lispector's disquisitions, her last four books all affirm "Reality is the raw material; language is the way I go in search of it and the way I do not find it. Giving up is a revelation." It may also explain "how she [Lispector]—injured and burned . . . afflicted with a lethal disease and facing death—becomes more and more alive in her writing."² As her own life grew increasingly fragile, eye-to-eye with death, she was able to transmit a prose free of "lies" and constraints, ultimately lucid and transcendent.

Her books feel timeless, even eternal as the ancient and becoming are held at equal distance. Lispector suspends her subjects midair, moving between the moment they were written, the present moment of reading and a non-locatable space of an infinite end and a beginning that started long before the book or its author. A beginning whose root is lost but nonetheless present. She attempts to write water, breath, the savage heart. Literally a wordsmith, she breaks open words to move beyond their guarded meanings.

She is in this sense much closer to the work of Edmond Jabès than the Modernists, writing in the lineage of "the book" rather than the novel. Her prose circles, begets question after question but continually affirms its territory: to see clearly is to see beauty. Her paratactical syntax allow for an ever-shifting meaning to emerge, each leap produces discovery. The descent into the depths of language and consciousness, existence and death momentarily distract the reader's need for closure. And so "[her] chant of the *it* never ends. Everything comes to an end but what I am writing to you goes on." The ongoing, undiminished urgency of her work is to learn that one is holding the impossible between one's hands.

2. quarterlyconversation.com