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Plunging In: “The Vision of a Universe and the Secret of a Soul.” Exploring Gaston Bachelard’s ‘poetic instant’ in Clarice Lispector’s *Água Viva*.

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宇宙のヴィジョンと魂の秘密

クラリス リスペクトールの *Água Viva* 中に見るガストンバシュラルの ‘poetic instant’ を探る

ケイト・ボウズ

ガストン バシュラルの時間に関する著述、すなわち彼の vertical time そして poetic instant は、クラリス リスペクトールの実験的な作品 *Água Viva* に光を投げかけている。例えばバシュラル、リスペクトール双方の瞬間の探究の根底に、水の隠喩が見られる。どちらの作家も、過去 - 現在 - 未来と続いている物の一部でない物としての瞬間が、その性質としてより創造的であると考えているようだ。時間をどう捉えるかは、私達が意識を、延いては物語の描写をどの様に考えるかに影響を与える。

キーワード：時間，実験的物語，同時性

If our hearts were large enough to love life in all its details, we would see that every instant is at once a giver and a plunderer . . . (Bachelard II 8).

‘In the poetic instant . . . the temporalizing horizons of “before” and “after” dissolve to reveal a bare inaugural moment’ (Kearney 42).

The late, great Brazilian writer, Clarice Lispector (1920-1977), published *Água Viva* three years before her premature death at 56 years of age. It shows a marked preoccupation with time: present time in the form of the ‘instant’, in particular. She aspired, she confessed to a friend, not to be ‘autobiographical’, but to occupy life more consciously and in a more passionate and unfiltered way. ‘I want to be bio,’ⁱ she said, to remove traces of the “auto”, the self, and the “graphy”, the written, in deference to the force of life as it manifested in the present moment. Her challenge, she wrote, was to find a means of representation that was ‘very close to the truth (which?) but not personal’ (Moser 314). ‘For Clarice, as she is known in Brazil, to write was to be’

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(Fitz 189), so “to be bio” does not mean to forgo writing; it means to attempt to go beyond literary artifice. It is, notably, the insertion of the parenthetical ‘which?’ in Clarice’s mission statement, that goes to the crux of the struggle for an artist: how to grasp, and share, what is true? Can fiction do it? (Or, is there a kind of fiction that can do it?) Is truth an individual matter, something static, waiting to be discovered? Or, is it communal, or multiple, even, and in some way, universal, something always in the process of being made? A parallel set of questions (whose connections I hope are later made clear) may be raised as to the nature of time: is time something that flows irrevocably onward (like a river, say), or is it punctiform, a collection, say, of instants (like natural springs)? Clarice drilled right down into the instant: occupied and intensified it, expanded it and exploded the continuum of the world’s time. Clarice’s ‘ability to arrest time, which itself has no beginning or end, is the most uncanny aspect of this book’ (320), her biographer, Benjamin Moser, wrote. In this essay I will attempt to put into conversation the understanding of time developed by Gaston Bachelard (1884-1962) and the experiment in writing the naked truth that Clarice Lispector was making in *Água Viva*.

Água Viva, when it finally came out in 1973, appeared as a condensed version of two prior attempts. The first version had been published in 1972 under the title *Beyond Thought: Monologue with Life*. With this title one begins to intuit something of the character of what Lispector was aiming to capture. She wrote that she was reaching for ‘an everyday voice utterly unrefined by literary or fictional artifice,’ a difficult balance that Moser observes is sometimes ‘as brilliant and inspired as the mature work of a great artist’ while at others ‘as dull and uninspired as a housewife’s neighbourly chitchat’ (315). It is a precarious project, truth telling, for even when it might sound like an ‘unfiltered conversational voice,’ the reality is, of course, that it is limited; a fiction. How does a writer tell the truth?

Something approaching an answer is to be found in the second attempt, curiously entitled *Loud Object*, a work which resembles a collage, a longer (185 pages compared to *Beyond Thought’s* 151 pages) self-plagiarizing mishmash that included, unmodified, some of her previously published newspaper columns. In this version of the work she began the ‘project of depersonalizing her personal experience’ by using less specific pronouns, for example, in place of proper names. Moser points out that Lispector’s doubts about how to use her personal experience to write something true led to repeated interrogations on the creative process itself: ‘What is this that I’m writing? As far as I know I never saw anybody write like this’ (317). There is, however, a statement in *Loud Object* that bears significant insight and seems to have opened a portal for the artist. ‘Art’ Lispector wrote, ‘is not purity: it is purification. Art is not liberty: it is liberation’ (317). These things, in other words are not static, perfect forms, instead they are processed, achieved forms. They are struggled towards, and however temporarily or imperfectly, crafted.

Where *Loud Object* is characterised as 'lumpy and chaotic', *Água Viva*, the third attempt, is recognised as 'the classic' (317). What had changed? For the first time ever, Clarice allowed herself to be assisted in the work of 'purification' by a sympathetic editor, a friend made late in life, by the name of Olga Borelli. A patchwork of written manuscripts and fragments needed to be structured, a task which Clarice called 'one of the hardest task[s] in writing,' something Borelli realised Lispector 'just didn't have the nerve to structure . . . ' (317). Borelli's editorial method she describes as a process of 'breathing together' with the writer, a fine cue to the sensitivity necessary to attend Lispector's work that was as philosophical and thought-provoking, as it was strongly physical, body-centred, life-giving, and in this sense, 'erotic'. Borelli seems to have been at home with the new style of writing Clarice was pioneering. ' . . . It's not difficult to structure Clarice, or it's infinitely difficult,' she remarked, paradoxically, 'unless you commune with her and already are in the habit of reading her.' As breath follows an order, so too does Borelli's method. She writes of a 'logic in life, in events, as there is in a book. They follow one another, they must' (318) and finds, and distils—amazingly—order in the puzzle of Clarice's fragments.

The writing in it is most often like the sea, 'all cresting' (320), 'all climax: I live on the edge' writes Clarice in *Água Viva* (6), the orgasmic instant, the pulse, the spring, the wave. Plumbing the depths, the writer puts language under pressure to see what it can reveal. This marks Clarice's effort to get to the truth, the 'isness' of 'it' in the absence of the literary conventions of plot or storytelling. 'Everything has an instant in which it is,' she writes, 'I want to grab hold of the *is* of the thing' (3). The jellyfish brought to the minds of Portuguese-speaking Brazilians hearing the words 'água viva', has lent itself to commentary on the likeness of the floating invertebrate sea creature and the plotless, storyless narrative Clarice was presenting. I see, rather, a relationship between horizontal (the sea) and vertical (the jellyfish) planes. Could it be that the tentacles of the jellyfish as well as its sudden sting suggest, at a subconscious level, the potential power of verticality, a depth charge?

Gaston Bachelard's beginning to explore the phenomenon of time also had watery beginnings. Reading *Siloë* (1927), an experimental, philosophical drama whose story wove together human and cosmic destiny with elements of microbiology, physics and metaphysics, written by his friend and colleague at the University of Dijon, the historian, Gaston Roupnel, enabled Bachelard to articulate a new understanding of the nature of time that went against the prevailing Bergsonian dogma of time as sheer continuous duration (*durée réelle*). In *Siloë*, time is reflected upon in the large-scale realm of organisms evolving, and special attention is given to the role of mutation, without which life could not continue to thrive. Hashizume hints that the renewal offered by mutation, a metamorphosis vital to human life, bears comparison with the world of art. She (translates from the French and) quotes Roupnel: 'As everybody

knows, art restores to . . . human thought the freshness of the original sensations from which it is produced. Art rejuvenates the sense and the strength of means of expression' (3). Bachelard recognised in *Siloe* intimations of the revolutionary potential of 'the instant', describing the 'decisive metaphysical proposition of Roupnel's book' as: 'Time has but one reality, the reality of the instant' (II 6)ⁱⁱ.

In 1932, *L'intuition de l'instant (Intuition of the Instant)* was published. Here Bachelard formally posited the instant as a 'shattering of the regnant Bergsonian model . . . and also provided a positive model whereby human experience more generally could be understood in its nonassured, often unanticipated turns' (ix). *Intuition of the Instant* heralded 'a new style and direction in philosophical thought, one that would become incredibly fecund in the practical domains of literary criticism and the philosophy of science, as well as in fields related to psychology, neurobiology, and the creative and healing arts' (ix). This revolutionary thesis on temporality, suggested Jean Lescure, a poet, close disciple and friend of Bachelard's, could best be understood in terms of a kind of 'poetic intuition.' In 1939, Bachelard responded to Lescure's idea of poetic intuition with the essay "*Instant poetique et instant métaphysique*" ("Poetic Instant and Metaphysical Instant") and, from that point on, Bachelard translator Eileen Rizo-Patron notes, 'Bachelard began to turn his attention, with increasing conviction and intensity, to the powers of poetic language and reverie' (x). The powers of poetic language and reverie call to mind the project Clarice was pioneering in *Água Viva*, a wholly new kind of writing that was emotionally charged, formally innovative and philosophically radical. Of time, Bachelard proclaimed: *Le temps ne coule pas. Il jaillit.* (Time does not flow. It sproutsⁱⁱⁱ). It is this sense of sprouting that most closely aligns with Lispector's vision for *Água Viva*. Lispector had actually intended that her title evoke the image of a spring, something that emerges from the depths, something that sprouts: 'a thing,' she wrote, 'that bubbles. At the source' (Moser, BT, xiii).

What is an instant? The instant is not a unit of time, nor a cut in time, nor a geometric point, nor a simple location. It is a creative source, the very originating essence, of time. 'There is something in the instant itself,' Bachelard wrote, 'generative of the new that is the basis of temporal ecstasy itself. This is a unique flashing-forth from within the experience of time itself in the instant.' Bachelard himself describes it as the "flare up" (*flambée*) of being in the imagination. (qtd in Casey 119). This eruption into the horizon of continuous time had its roots in Bachelard's work in the philosophy of science (his original profession), namely in the notion of the epistemological break.^{iv} The epistemological break showed that the discontinuous, whether in the form of error, or sudden, surprising or unpredicted occurrences, was neither an aberration nor a sign of regression, but was, in fact, intrinsic to the progress of science. The most striking insight Bachelard gained from *Siloe*^v was the abrupt, so-called 'brutal instant' (xii), a sometimes violent, always sudden and surprising event that breaks open an unexpected path beyond itself. Bachelard wrote: 'There is but one general law in truly creative

evolution—the law that an accident lies at the root of every evolutionary attempt' (II 13). Rizo-Patron writes that it is only 'such a tragic realization [that] may be capable of cutting deep into the heart of reason' and releasing 'a power capable at a given moment—if we only heed and assent to it—of absolving the élan that otherwise seems to drive existence onward, relentlessly hauling the cumulative detritus of our past' (xii).

It was just such a 'tragic realization', a shedding of the weight of tradition and convention, that Clarice grasped as necessary to her truth-telling project. The writing is innovative and different and Moser notes that for Clarice the 'knowledge of the novelty of her invention is sometimes thrilling [and] sometimes frightening' (317). *Água Viva* more closely resembles poetry than prose, especially because of its condensed and supercharged language. The frequency of the word 'instant' in *Água Viva* is striking. It shows the writer's struggle to express what it is to exist in time; what the experience, the sense-experience, in particular, is like. Clarice writes that it is like 'trying to photograph perfume' (47). It is supremely frustrating to re-present: 'How to reproduce the taste in words? The taste is one and the words are many' (39) and often occasions a 'despair that words take up more instants than the flash of a glance' (10).

We shall now turn our attention to Bachelard's "Poetic Instant and Metaphysical Instant" essay and examine how both Bachelard's and Lispector's texts shed light on one another.

Bachelard's essay opens: 'Poetry is instant metaphysics.' To know what an instant is know good poetry, for there is no better way to grasp and occupy the instant, the complex instant, 'brimming with simultaneities that . . . shatter the simple continuity of shackled time' (58). In the poetic instant, one opens to the experience of becoming disoriented by simultaneities because it is in this "all-at-once-here-and-now" instant that 'the most scattered and disjointed being attains unity' (PIMI 58). This unity can contain, in a trice, cutting across and dissolving the continuity of sequential time, 'the vision of a universe and the secret of a soul' (58). Prose, or 'prosodic time', he explains 'is horizontal', where 'poetic time is vertical'. Each plays different roles. The former organises 'successive sounds; it conducts cadences, orchestrating fervent passions and tensions' (as perhaps this essay does?). In contrast, poetic time aims at verticality, it rises or descends and attains height or depth.

'The instant,' writes philosopher Richard Kearney,

marks an inaugurating power, a gratuitous beginning where the sudden will to change is accompanied by a deep joy of decision. This instantaneous time is far removed from the clock of everyday life. It is the moment of the transformation of forms, of awakening to a sur-reality beneath and beyond ordinary notions of the real. It is the magic of metamorphosis in the abrupt emergence of a poetic image. (41)

The opening paragraph of *Água Viva* illustrates Kearney's description and gives a fine

example of a complex (poetic) instant, replete with simultaneities:

It's with such profound happiness. Such a hallelujah. Hallelujah, I shout, hallelujah merging with the darkest human howl of the pain of separation but a shout of diabolic joy. Because no one can hold me back now. I can still reason—I studied mathematics, which is the madness of reason—but now I want the plasma—I want to eat straight from the placenta. I am a little scared: scared of surrendering completely because the next instant is the unknown. The next instant, do I make it? or does it make itself? We make it together with our breath. And with the flair of the bullfighter in the ring. (3)

We enter the book with a non-sentence, as if we are overhearing something from afar and not quite catching the whole thing.^{vi} But there is little time to dwell on this as the transition transports the reader to a scene of rapture: three times the word 'hallelujah' is proclaimed; a word praising God, but in context, the word includes layers of darkness and pain and ends with a twist, a 'shout of diabolic joy.' Where we might expect a clause with the next line beginning with 'Because' we find instead a fragment which expresses a liberation, from what or whom is neither here nor there where reaching for a universal truth is concerned, though we might presume it to relate to energies connected with ultimate reality, i.e. the Divine. It is a 'bigging up', a claim of bravery, a statement of courage: 'no one can hold me back now.'

Plunging on, we are confronted with an astonishing antithesis: reason in the form of mathematics, contrasted with the deep bodily mysteries of a woman's blood and birthing, something that inhabits a realm beyond reason. These ravishing images are followed by a withdrawal from teetering on the brink, a change of pace, a confession, a humble, human sound: 'I am a little scared' of 'surrendering completely', of 'the unknown.' The penetrating intensity of the imagery, sublime and profane, gives way to a somewhat surprising pensiveness. The writer asks, perhaps staving off her fear: 'The next instant, do I make it? or does it make itself?'

The three ecstatic hallelujahs of the opening lines are met with three apparently earth-bound, quite rational and relatable instances of 'make', a notable ambivalence. The etymology of word, in the Greek *poiein*, to make, forms the root for the English word 'poetry.' This is further justification for seeing the writing in *Água Viva* as closer to poetry than prose, this and the simultaneity of widely divergent, 'immobilizing'^{vii} images, as well as the sentence that follows that calls to mind rhythm and song and communion: 'We make it together with our breath.' The instant here, truth, too by extension, is established as a collaborative, ongoing venture.^{viii}

The opening paragraph ends with the evocation of a bullfighter's flair, that signals the willingness to enter into a charged arena, thick with emotion, laden with risk, to enter the text as if entering a ritual that involves the collision between rational and irrational beings, a beautiful, violent seduction in the shadow of death.

Japanese calligraphers, masters of the poetic instant, teach that when facing the empty white page before beginning to write, the question that lies open is not how to fill it, but how best to activate it. The stroke or flicker of an inked brush may accomplish this and this is just what Clarice longed for, to ‘seize’, to ‘grab’, to ‘possess’ and to ‘capture’ what she recognised as ‘this untellable moment’ (3-4). She was impatient with the clunky medium of language and its inability to express the instant in all its plenitude^{ix}. Still, ‘Of all Clarice Lispector’s works, *Água Viva* gives the strongest impression of having been spontaneously committed to paper,’ Moser observes, but he also tellingly discloses, ‘Yet perhaps none was as painstakingly composed’ (317). She sought truth and in the living waters of *Água Viva* discovered ‘a means of writing about herself in a way that transformed her individual experience into a universal poetry’ (314) or, in Bachelard’s phrase delivered ‘the vision of a universe and the secret of a soul—an insight into being and objects’ (PIMI 58).

Endnotes

ⁱ See, *Água Viva*, 29. Also see, Moser, 314.

ⁱⁱ II here refers to ‘Intuitions of the Instant’

ⁱⁱⁱ ‘flares’, ‘flashes forth’ or ‘shoots up’ are alternate translations of *jaillit* variously used by different critics and translators.

^{iv} Developed in his doctoral thesis entitled *Essai sur la connaissance approchée*.

^v *Siloë* refers to the story in John’s gospel in which a blind man is healed and told to wash in the pool of Siloam (also, Shiloh). See John 9: 7-11.

^{vi} Moser, in “Breathing Together” writes of how Clarice’s writing had always pushed the limits of language and quotes from the letter Clarice wrote to her French publisher on the subject of translating her work. ‘I admit, if you like,’ she wrote, ‘that the sentences do not reflect the usual manner of speaking, but I assure you that it is the same in Portuguese. The punctuation I employed in the book is not accidental and does not result from an ignorance of the rules of grammar. . . I am fully aware of the reasons that led me to choose this punctuation and insist that it be respected’ (xi).

^{vii} ‘If [the poetic instant] only follows the time of life, it is less than life. It cannot be more than life unless it immobilizes life, evoking on the spot the dialectic of joy and suffering’ (II 58). Also, ‘It is in the vertical time of an immobilized instant that poetry finds its specific dynamism’ (PIMI 63).

^{viii} I suspect that Borelli’s insights on the ‘logic’ of her editorial methods might have been illuminated by an understanding of the theory of the poetic instant proposed by Bachelard. He writes: ‘Being rises or descends in a poetic instant without accepting world time, which would inevitably turn ambivalence back into antithesis, simultaneity into succession.

The affinity between antithesis and ambivalence can be easily verified *if we are*

willing to commune with a poet who keenly experiences the two terms of [her] antitheses in one and the same instant. The second term is not evoked by the first. Both terms are born together' (PIMI 59). (my emphases).

^{ix} At the end of PIMI Bachelard veers into Buddhist territory when he says that 'The poet . . . reveals . . . in a single instant, the solidarity of form and person. He proves that form is a person, and that a person is form.' This recalls "The Heart Sutra", a poem-prayer that meditates on 'form [as] emptiness, emptiness form' in which emptiness is 'not empty but fuller than the greatest fullness itself.' This, Kearney goes on to say, is 'another deep ambivalence conjured in the eternal instant.' The prayer ends in 'living waters' praising 'an insight that brings us to another shore.'

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