

# The Dry and the Wet: Cultural Configurations in Clarice Lispector's Novels

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Clarice Lispector has been acclaimed as one of the two greatest mid-century literary revelations in Brazilian literature. Her national equal can perhaps be found only in João Guimarães Rosa, her contemporary and revolutionary fellow artist. Virtually no Brazilian critic of note has failed to write about her: Gilda de Mello e Souza, Antonio Candido, Haroldo de Campos, Assis Brasil, Wilson Martins, José Guilherme Merquior, Roberto Schwartz, Eduardo Portela, Luiz Costa Lima, Sérgio Buarque de Holanda... The list tends to grow longer by the day. A sample of this already vast body of criticism, incorporating a number of essayists outside Brazil, can be found in the collections issued between 1987 and 1989, to honour the tenth anniversary of her early death. For all their diversity, the essays - including new contributions as well as reprints of significant earlier works - share a common feature: they deal mostly with stylistic and philosophical aspects of the novelist's *œuvre*, while its cultural and social aspects, when mentioned at all, are looked at *en passant*. We may take, for instance, the 1987 *Minas Gerais Literary Supplement* ('Lembrando Clarice'), edited by Nádia Battella Gotlib. The *Supplement* starts with 'No Raiar de Clarice Lispector' ('At the Rise of Clarice Lispector'), Antonio Candido's prophetic 1943 essay. Candido praises Lispector's first novel, *Perto do Coração Selvagem* (*Near to the Wild Heart*) written at seventeen, mainly for her innovative use of language. In a florid style, most uncharacteristic of this critic, a former sociologist, he praises her 'impressive attempt to lead our awkward language into unexplored realms, forcing it to fit a world laden with mystery, making us feel that fiction is not an emotional exercise or adventure, but a real tool of the spirit, capable of penetrating some of the most intricate labyrinths of the mind'. Following in Candido's footsteps, another reprint, Sérgio Milliet's 'Diário Crítico' ('Critical Diary') underscores the unique style and psychological penetration of what strikes the critic as a 'most serious attempt at an introspective novel'. Similarly, in 'Passeando entre a Literatura e a Psicanálise' ('Strolling between Literature and Psychoanalysis'), Miriam Chnaiderman offers a mainly psychoanalytic reading of Lispector's last novel, *A Hora da Estrela* (*The Hour of the Star*), her most overtly 'social' novel. So also Lúcia Helena de Oliveira Vianna de Carvalho, in 'Clarice Lispector - um Exercício de Decifração' ('Clarice Lispector - an Exercise in Decoding')

concentrates on a Lacanian reading of *Uma Aprendizagem, ou O Livro dos Prazeres* (*An Apprenticeship - or the Book of Delights*), ignoring the apparent social bent of the novel. Only Vilma Arêas's 'A Moralidade da Forma' ('The Morality of the Form') stresses the socio-political implications of Lispector's works. Maybe to refute criticism of Lispector's allegedly alienated stance, the essay is illustrated by a 1966 photo of the novelist walking among a group of intellectuals on a protest march against the military dictatorship then ruling Brazil. However, Arêas's main concern is with literary craftsmanship, with Lispector's curious methods of composition - putting together pieces of writing scribbled on unlikely writing materials, such as cheque books and odd bits of paper. (Lispector later re-wrote her work painstakingly, as Nadia Batella Gotlib's recent literary biography demonstrates). *Mutatis mutandis*, the pattern is repeated in *Remate de Males 9*, a much more ambitious and varied anniversary collection, edited by Vilma Arêas and Berta Waldman at the University of Campinas in 1989. Though allusions to the social implications of Lispector's fiction - especially in reference to *The Hour of the Star* - pop up intermittently here and there, the general tone remains roughly similar to that of *The Minas Gerais Supplement*. The introspective and philosophical aspects of Lispector's output, including possible interrelations with phenomenological-existential thought, previously investigated by Benedito Nunes in *O Dorso do Tigre* (*The Tiger's Back*) and *Leitura de Clarice Lispector* (*A Reading of Clarice Lispector*) remain uppermost. Nunes himself contributes an essay to the Campinas anniversary collection. Nonetheless, even though he writes about two novels audibly reverberating with social reflections - *The Passion according to G. H.* and *The Hour of the Star* - Nunes focuses chiefly on what he calls Lispector's 'transposition of the mystical expression' and 'schizoid approach to writing', recalling Barthes's 'vertiginous cision of the subject' (68).

Other essays in the *Travessia 9* anthology are not a far cry from Nunes's. Carlos Felipe Moisés studies Lispector's writing as an instance of the crisis of fiction, representative of the human division, 'in permanent anxiety before the impenetrability of the interior world, while simultaneously fascinated by objects and by the surrounding physical world' (153). This recalls Lispector's maddening complexity, which dooms any attempt at a comprehensive view of her work. The reprint of Alexandre Eulálio's 1961 interview with the novelist briefly mentions the national dimension of her writing, but then goes on to stress her 'supranational' interest in subjective experience. Similarly, Luciana Stegagno Picchio writes about what she considers to be the outcome of most critical attempts to apprehend Lispector's work as a whole: a perception centred on the notion of epiphany - *écriture* as the revelation of 'something essential (...) an instantaneous and transfiguring apparition (...) which unexpectedly becomes visible' (17). Plínio Prado Júnior's analysis in 'O Impronunciável' ('The Unpronounceable') comes out in terms of the Kantian sublime... Earl E. Fitz,

from Pennsylvania State University, writes in another vein. He tries to place Lispector on the international scene. He associates her with the stream of lyrical narrative - along with Virginia Woolf, Djuna Barnes, André Gide, Katherine Mansfield and Herman Hesse - as well as with the phenomenological tradition, shared by such diverse writers as Sartre, Camus, Beckett, Genet, Borges and Robbe-Grillet. Fitz stresses Lispector's kinship with Woolf, claiming that they both construct texts organized by means of images and of moments of psychic perception. He ends up by endorsing Hélène Cixous's representation of the Brazilian novelist in *Vivre l'orange* as an instance of a 'peculiarly female attentiveness to objects, the ability to perceive and represent them in a nurturing rather than in a dominating way' (35). Cixous's own views - including her evaluation of Lispector as 'the greatest writer in the twentieth century' (43) - are likewise represented by her essay 'Reaching the Point of Wheat, or A Portrait of the Artist as a Maturing Woman'. Lispector's relationship with the Jewish mystical tradition in the short story 'O Búfalo' (recalling Nelson H. Vieira's earlier interest in Lispector's 'Jewish expression'), and her painstaking rewriting of *Água Viva* (*The Stream of Life*) - which the author describes as a cyclical narrative, 'yearning to penetrate into the primary, universal flux' - make up the gist of Gilda Salém Szklo's and Alexandro Severino's essays. Three other articles - by Glenda A. Hudson, Nádia Batella Gotlib and Eduardo Prado Coelho - sketch Lispector's affinities with, respectively, Katherine Mansfield, Fernando Pessoa and Marguerite Duras, the latter in the light of Deleuzian insights. Moving back to Lispector's use of language, Berta Waldman and Vilma Arêas' *Eppur Se Muove* study her appropriation of aphorisms and clichés to signal the failure of the male protagonist in challenging capitalist society in *A Maçã no Escuro* (*The Apple in the Dark*). Again, a sidelong glance is thrown at the socio-cultural background, without, however, making it the focus of attention.

Occasionally, interest in cultural facets becomes less tangential in the *Travessia 9* collection. In 'La Narradora: Imágenes de la Transgresión en Clarice Lispector' ('Women Storytellers: Images of Transgression in Clarice Lispector'), Márgara Russotto, from Universidad Central de Venezuela, investigates Lispector's treatment of 'feminine misery, woman's hopeless marginalization' (89). The essayist traces the path of Lispector's women narrators as engaged in discourses closely linked with woman's evolution. According to Russotto, Lispector starts with 'a youthful, ambitious attempt at a global interpretation of the world and of the subject', then moves on to the 'micro-universe of the family and its heavy conflicts' until, shortly before her death, she 'assumes the anonymous, strident voice of the old women storytellers of popular tradition' - a gradual change towards socialization and collectivization. Nelson H. Vieira, from Brown University, in 'The Stations of the Body, Clarice Lispector's Abertura and Renewal' writes about the 'seemingly simple, concrete and realistic' 'short stories collected in *A Via Crucis do Corpo* (*The Stations of the Body*), where

Lispector surprises her readers with a sudden concern with sex. Vieira comments on the 'shift in her narrative approach', in the late seventies, revealing 'a sociological consciousness' (76, 78) which the critic does not seem to discern in her previous fiction. However, he refers to remarks by other critics: Lispector's new 'naturalist tendencies', noted by Cristina Miguez, and to 'a very different Clarice from the one readers had come to know', from Earl Fitz's study of 1985, *Clarice Lispector*. Vieira also quotes Eduardo Portella's reference to the last novel, *The Hour of the Star*, as the heralding of 'a new Clarice Lispector, exterior and explicit, the savage heart Northeasternly aligned with Brazilian progress'. However, what mainly engages Vieira's attention is still Lispector's 'relentless search for a hidden truth', her use of language as 'a vehicle for consciousness-raising about such concepts as being and nothingness' (71). Not surprisingly, Vieira's essay ends up with a quotation from Benedito Nunes, interpreting Lispector's notion of literature as a 'vehicle for self-knowledge' (83). If we interpret this conclusion as typical of most critical writing about Lispector - a risk I am willing to take here - we may tentatively gather that, even when noting the concern with social and cultural life as an important undercurrent in Lispector's extremely rich and ever puzzling text, critics usually prefer to address its existential, psychological or stylistic intricacies. They thus neglect a cultural approach, which would prove interesting in many ways, including the fact that it falls in well with a Brazilian critical tradition going back to writers like Euclides da Cunha, Sílvio Romero and Machado de Assis in the nineteenth century, and Sérgio Buarque de Hollanda, Antonio Candido, Alfredo Bosi and Roberto Schwartz in our own.

Why should it be so? An easy explanation might, perhaps, be found in Brazil's alleged cultural dependency, in the continuous importation of ideas and of knowledge generated abroad, a not easily deletable stamp of our colonial inheritance. This notion has not remained unchallenged. Machado de Assis, one of our greatest creative artists and critics, a towering nineteenth-century figure still unparalleled in our literary and cultural history, has proved one of the first to voice the idea that the Brazilian mind resembles a 'ruminant stomach', whose chewing of foreign intellectual cud can in itself be creative. Machado's notion has lain at the heart of an endless debate among our intellectuals (as discussed, for instance, by Antonio Candido in 'Literatura e Subdesenvolvimento' or by Renato Ortiz in *A Moderna Tradição Brasileira*) and reaches its climax in the concept of Anthropophagy, developed by our Modernist Movement starting in 1922. The same notion partly underlies Paulo Emílio Salles Gomes' picturesque allusion to 'our creative incompetence for copying' foreign movements, as discussed in his 1980 *Cinema: Trajetória do Sub-Desenvolvimento*. More recently, Roberto Schwartz, one of our leading present-day critics, resumes the discussion. In 'Nacional por Subtração', he lists a series of fashionable critical trends borrowed by Brazilian literary scholars in the last decades: impressionism,

positivist historiography, new criticism, stylistics, Marxism, phenomenology, structuralism, poststructuralism, reader response criticism... This opening up to current international trends is not bad in itself, Schwartz implies, except when it leads to the abandonment of our own national theorists. Like Machado himself and Sílvio Romero in the last century, followed by Oswald and Mário de Andrade, in the nineteen forties, and more recently, by Antonio Candido, the Campos brothers and others, the theorists praised by Schwartz have found no difficulty in dealing with both the local and the international cultural dimension. In the case of critical work on Lispector's fiction, at least in the collections cited, this has hardly been the case: the tendency has been to make her a universal rather than a Brazilian writer.

My attempt at an explanation for this fact cannot ignore the debate over cultural dependency sketched above. However, I would like to add that the philosophical, psychological and stylistic aspects of Lispector's *œuvre* are indeed so conspicuous that this may partly explain their predominance in most of the criticism: the cultural features of her fiction have been outshone by its discourse – so densely poetic if seldom obscure – and by its subjective and philosophical probings. The association of these features seems to have obscured what I see as no less innovative in Lispector: her oblique representation of Brazilian culture. This feature is made all the more original for the fact that it proves inextricable from the mystically introspective world-view implicit in all her writing.

In fact, Lispector's social and existential interests are inseparable, like differently coloured threads, whose contrast makes them no less a part of the same fabric. Her treatment of cultural elements merges with her metaphysical preoccupations, her obsession with the mysterious and the uncanny. This amalgam, couched in a style that keeps defying analysis, simultaneously opposes and juxtaposes such usually dispersed themes as the shocking contradictions of Brazilian social life, women's fight for the construction of a free subjectivity and the broader issue of the human existential condition. Like most artistic artefacts, the dizzying complexity of such a discourse proves almost impenetrable. A few crannies and fissures can, however, be found, which may serve as tiny entrances into the largely impervious fortress of her aesthetic achievement. I propose, as one such entrance, the tracing of two clusters of recurring images, which somehow condense Lispector's imaginative projection of her multiple concerns: the play of meaning around the opposition dryness/wetness and the intriguing, sometimes implicit, image of a woman centaur, riding towards life's 'wild heart'.

The coalescence of Lispector's existential and social concerns recalls an unusual blend of thematic and stylistic traits which we could call 'transubstantiation of regionalism', in the wake of Alfredo Bosi's expression, 'novels of transfigured tension' (442). For Bosi the hallmark of Guimarães Rosa's fiction is the novelist's representation of his native country state, Minas

Gerais, coupled with mythical apprehensions and with a remarkably innovative style, frequently likened to Joyce's. I would like to add that Rosa does not stand alone in this kind of regionalism. A comparable transubstantiation can be discerned in all of Lispector's novels, excepting her first, *Near to the Wild Heart* (1943). Lispector's transfigured regionalism proves, of course, all her own, linked, as it is, with a constant burrowing into epistemological questions and with an initially implicit denunciation of the traditional novel, which is finally made explicit in her parodic tour de force, *The Hour of the Star* (1977). This novel overtly exposes the startling opposition between the extremes of wealth and deprivation, both literal and figurative, which, in the Brazilian novel, has traditionally crystallised in the contrast between poor, 'black' northern Brazil, and the rich, 'white' southern part of the country. This opposition somehow sums up the historical development of the Brazilian economy. The Brazilian system of production, initially merely exploratory, really started with the rich northeastern sugar plantations, crucially dependent on slave labour. Eventually, the economy moved southward, looking for new sources of wealth. These were first found in the gold mines of the central states, then in big coffee plantations, which in turn spread southward. The decadence of the northern states, accentuated after the emancipation of slaves in 1888, contributed to the rise, in the Brazilian imaginary, of a sort of national cultural stereotype, a basic, high-voltage semiotic configuration, with a powerful appeal for the national mind: the mythical contrast between penury and riches, scarcity and abundance, life-repelling desert and birth-propitious water. In the popular as in the artistic mind, the opposition has coalesced in the representation of north-eastern Brazil as a scalding hell set against the luscious green paradise of the south, sought by the starving populations which regularly move there, especially after severe draughts. (Incidentally, the novelist herself followed a similar route: the daughter of a Jewish Russian immigrant, Lispector moved from Recife, in the north-east, to south-eastern Rio de Janeiro. There she entered Law school and started her career as a journalist and novelist.) Braving the risk of creating my own *grand récit*, I venture to suggest that the opposition needy northeast /prosperous south, nuanced, of course, by all sorts of intermediary stages, may provide a frame for a comprehensive reading of Brazilian literature. This configuration has such deep roots that it may be considered a kind of cultural archetype, in the sense of a powerful net of meanings which take on a mythical quality for Brazilian culture. The net, even if sometimes subliminally, enfolds nearly all of Lispector's novels. The conflation of the archetype poor dry north/rich humid south with metaphysical and metafictional concerns contributes to give her fiction its unique position in Brazilian literature.

The metamorphosis of the regional into the metaphysical is associated, especially in *The Hour of the Star*, with metafictional discourse, and, in virtually all the novels, with a singular representation of the construction of feminine

subjectivity. This semiotic conflation allows for a classification of Lispector's fiction into three, interconnected groups. The first one includes *O Lustre* (*The Chandelier*), *A Cidade Sitiada* (*The Town under Siege*), *A Maçã no Escuro*, (*The Apple in the Dark*) and *A Paixão segundo G.H.* (*The Passion according to G.H.*), four novels where the movement southward, not immediately apparent, takes up the shape of urban migration and proves inseparable from the contemplation of man's existential anguish. At the other extreme, I would place *A Hora da Estrela* (*The Hour of the Star*). In this novel, the last one published in Lispector's lifetime, the opposition poor north-east/wealthy south becomes the central concern. The cultural archetype fuses with a parody of the traditional novel, an explicit refusal to endorse conventional narrative forms. Metafictional comment, a metaphor for social protest, projects the need for social as well as formal renovation. In between the two groups, and as evidence of their connection, I would include *Um Aprendizado, ou O Livro dos Prazeres* (*An Apprenticeship, or The Book of Delights*). Only two of the novels, *Perto do Coração Selvagem* (*Near to the Wild Heart*) and *Água Viva* (*The Stream of Life*) would thus fail to highlight the mythical Brazilian opposition starving northeast/affluent south and its unique Lispectorian association with metaphysical and metafictional musings.

A preoccupation with gender questions likewise colours these features. All the protagonists of the novels classed in the first group are young women who, trying to escape the material and spiritual deprivation of small country towns, move to big urban centres, or, living in the big towns, face their socially excluded, symbolically 'northeastern' sisters. The provincial protagonists launch on a process which amalgamates the quest for social mobility, for independent subjectivity and for ultimate existential 'reality', crystallized in immanence. Curiously, in the early novels *O Lustre* (1946), *A Cidade Sitiada* (1949), and *A Maçã no Escuro* (1961), geographical location is vague; only the female protagonists' moving from the country to metropolitan centres is generally clear. But location becomes gradually more precise, which coincides with the increasing explicitness of social concerns, merged with the great metaphysical plunge of *A Paixão segundo G.H.* (1964). In this novel, which I consider Lispector's masterpiece, location could hardly be more precise. Whatever 'action' there is takes place in the elegant Ipanema district of Rio de Janeiro, in the sophisticated surroundings of an upper middle class terrace apartment on the top floor of a luxurious building. The matter of gender, particularly of woman's oppression in a patriarchal society, does not exclude broadly human issues. Woman and man join in the confrontation of social and of spiritual dilemmas. Clarice's undeniable feminism, evident in spite of her refusal to join any specific movement in her lifetime, proves part of a concern with all-encompassing anxieties, which are not woman-bound, but belong to humankind. For Lispector, woman's and the philosopher's condition do not exclude each other.

The merging of the opposition north/south, of poverty/affluence, with woman's quest for free subjectivity is nowhere more apparent than in Lispector's last novel, *A Hora da Estrela*, published in 1977. The protagonist Macabea moves from her native northeastern state to Rio. The character's name recalls the Jewish Maccabees' long fight to defend their temple and their culture, ending with the establishment of their descendants as the Hasmonean dynasty. The name suits the character's struggle to survive as an underpaid typist in the hostile surroundings of Brazil's former capital. There Macabea, the northern migrant, confronts southern Brazil, a technological society where she is 'a dispensable screw' (a mere cog in the machine, 29) (um parafuso dispensável, 36). The riches of the south stare back at her from glittering fashion shop-windows. The protagonist's fantasies about the prosperous south crystallize in her ingenuous appreciation of Gloria, her colleague in the third-class office where she vainly tries to attain a minimum standard of efficiency. Gloria's name, like Macabea's, is obviously symbolic. In her friend's ingenuous eyes, Gloria stands for the 'glories' of the rich south. She fascinates poor dark underfed Macabea with her mentholated breath, her peroxide blonde hair, and well-fed figure. In fact, Gloria is a butcher's daughter, thriving on the tepid comfort of a third-class suburban bourgeoisie who spend most of their money on food. An attractive mulatto girl with a 'merry behind', which she wiggled in an inviting way, she tries to disguise her negroid looks by dyeing her hair, of which the black roots give ample evidence. Like Macabea, Gloria has been trying to reach the northern migrants' goal: to go up in the world and join the envied clan of southern Brazil. She starts by 'going white', a move silently encouraged by a society still haunted by the suppressed racial memories of slavery. With her exaggerated make-up, her bright red lips and her peroxide blondness, Gloria is one of the caricatures of Marilyn Monroe - 'the star' in the title of the novel. All female characters, somehow dreaming of looking like her, turn out as grotesque caricatures of Marilyn: Macabea herself, her friend Gloria and also Madame Carlota, the fortune-teller. A former prostitute, Madame Carlota promises Macabea happiness and riches. The poor young woman will meet a rich man, a gringo, who will give her love and every luxury she may dream of... Were this dream to come true, Macabea would become a northeastern Cinderella, meeting her southern prince. But the dream turns into a nightmare. The plot swerves ironically away from the repeatedly announced happy end - one of the many ways in which the text self-consciously deconstructs traditional fiction shaped on the melodrama model. The announced gringo does come. He passes by driving a luxury car just outside Madame Carlota's shabby flat. Only, instead of meeting the poor typist and falling in love with her, he brutally runs her over, and does not even stop to assist her. Macabea's death hints at her obsession with Marilyn: as she lies dying alone on the street pavement, her lips are reddened by 'an unexpectedly crimson' blood. Her dream flashes by as she

dies. For a moment, she becomes a star, finds love and riches, and reaches the subjectivity that had eluded her.

For, like so many of Lispector's women, Macabea was engaged in this quest. This is implied in her search for role models - Marilyn, Gloria - and for her constant awkward attempts at constructing a desirable face with make-up. The text leaves no doubt about her failure to create this mask for subjectivity: when she peers into the mirror, it seems to remain empty. Personal identity, the novel implies, is impossible without support in a collective counterpart. Macabea's fatal meeting with the gringo foregrounds the futility of the going-south fantasy, in a way which reaches beyond the individual and the national level to point to the new asymmetries of a globalized world. The opposition poor northeast, affluent Brazilian south, geographically inverted, recurs in the meeting of Macabea with the gringo and in the fetichised Marilyn image. They face each other as representations of the global structure which pits the hegemonic cultures of the so-called First World in the northern hemisphere against the technologically underdeveloped, southern 'colonized' Third World. From the standpoint of this study, this seems a suitable conclusion for the last work published in Lispector's lifetime.

Especially in the novelist's feminine *Bildungsromane*, all other female protagonists symbolically reproduce Macabea's quest, her journey southward, to a world of economic, psychological and spiritual plenty. They all migrate from the country to the big metropolitan centre, Rio de Janeiro, the former Brazilian capital, which Alfredo Bosi considers a sort of 'literary province'. Haunted by Machado de Assis, our greatest novelist, the 'province' obsesses other representative Brazilian novelists, like Joaquim Macedo and Lima Barreto. Rio is also where Lispectorean heroines end up: Virginia (*O Lustre*), Lucrecia (*A Cidade Sitiada*), Loreley (*Um Aprendizado*). In *A Paixão segundo G.H.*, the symbolic meeting of north and south - like the coalition, at the philosophical level, of immanence and transcendence - also takes place in Rio. Here the narrator/protagonist G.H., an upper-class woman sculptor, symbolically faces her mulatto maid. All these texts resonate with the echoes of a triple search: for feminine subjectivity, for social growth and for ultimate reality. They all recall Joana, the central character in the first novel. The protagonist of *Perto do Coração Selvagem* engages in repeated attempts at reaching ultimate reality, 'the immanent sculpture'. Like Virginia in *O Lustre*, they have 'an outline in expectation of an essence'. They long, not for 'grace only, but for reality itself'. In *A Cidade Sitiada*, Lucrecia's housewifely care of her living room, trying to find the best arrangement for her bric-à-brac, suggests the mental struggle to apprehend and mould a 'monstrously shapeless' reality, a sort of Kantian thing-in-itself, 'the thing only'. So also, in *O Lustre*, the young Virginia plays at making clay objects, 'extracting forms'. She proves a first sketch of G.H., the sculptor, creating

mystical geometric shapes - the triangle, the cube, the sphere - out of bread crumbs at the breakfast table. The three prongs of the protagonists' search - for subjective, social and spiritual fulfilment - once come together. This happens when G.H., the sophisticated woman sculptor, sets about to clean up the bedroom of her maid, an attractive mulatto girl named Janair. The maid has left. In accordance with upper-class representations of the 'northern', 'primitive' working class, G.H. expects to find her room dirty and messy, and is surprised by its impeccable cleanliness. However, a cockroach emerges from a closet. The sculptor tries to kill it, but only manages to mangle the cockroach. It dangles from the door of a closet, with a white mass oozing from its body. G.H. falls into a kind of trance as she contemplates it. To her disgusted but increasingly fascinated eyes, the dying cockroach takes up forms which she successively identifies with the maid, with a man she has been in love with, a child she had aborted and, finally, with herself and with ultimate reality. Accordingly, the bedroom in turn becomes an Egyptian chamber, a mosque, a crypt, a religious space for a sort of initiation experience. The multiple layering of meaning links up with baroque images of many-layered objects, such as an onion, the several floors of G.H.'s building and the geological strata of the earth. Several levels of consciousness are thus evoked, where the sculptor plunges, in her gradual awakening to subjective, social, and then spiritual, identity. For the first time, overcoming racial and social barriers, the artist sees her maid as a human being. She also realizes her own ambiguous position in a patriarchal society, where she belongs to the upper class, but to the inferior sex. G.H. comes to feel that her condition as an artist places her 'in an area between man and woman, socially speaking' (18), ('uma zona que fica entre homem e mulher', 64). Her new gender and class consciousness manifests itself most clearly in her reading of vertical space. The thirteen floors of the building where she lives, with the cabalistic associations of the number, become emblematic of a phallogocentric class society. As in Lefebvre's semiotics of space, the vertical shape signals what he describes as 'arrogance, will-to-power, the exhibition of military and police virility, the spatial analogue of male brutality' (169).

The opposition poor northeastern versus wealthy southern Brazil comes out in the repeatedly contrasted images of dryness and humidity, corresponding to the different climatic conditions of the 'two Brazils'. 'Dryness' points to Janair's world, the world of the oppressed, which the novel reveals as that of immanence. The maid and her double - the crushed cockroach - live in a space presented as a dry emptiness. In the maid's 'dry' room, even the mattress displays cloth 'so dry it was rotten' (34) ('um colchão podre de tão seco', 39) and the apparition of the insect is announced by a dry 'annunciatory flutter of the antennae' (44) ('um tremor de fios secos', 39). Conversely, 'humidity' marks the protagonist's upper middle-class surroundings. Her apartment is 'fresh, cozy,

moist' (30) ('fresco, aconchegado e úmido', 33). The sculptor calls herself 'a creature of great moist depths' (106) ('bicho de grandes profundidades úmidas', 180), who does not know 'the dust of dry cisterns' (106) ('a poeira de cisternas secas', 180) - an allusion to the desolate expanses of the Brazilian northeast.

A utopic hope of the meeting of north and south, with the erasing of all contradictions, is finally hinted at, starting with G.H.'s comments on the unsuspected potentialities of water in the desert: 'geologists now know that in the Sahara's subsoil there is a huge lake of potable water (...) The desert has a humidity that must be found again' (101) ('Os geólogos já sabem que no subsolo do Saara há um imenso lago de água potável (...) O deserto tem uma umidade que é preciso encontrar de novo', 105). The protagonist also hints at the mystic implications of this fusion of opposites: 'God is what exists, and all the contradictions are within God, and therefore they don't contradict Him' (153) ('Deus é o que existe, e todos os contraditórios são dentro do Deus e por isso não o contradizem', 55). The meeting of opposites is dramatically concretized in the Lispectorian transposition of the Last Supper. G.H., the representative of the humid water world, forces herself to swallow the white mass oozing from the cockroach, the incarnation of the dry desert. At this stage, the text has amply signalled the possibility of reading subjective, social and spiritual representations as interpretants for one another. G.H., associated with the longing for transcendence, comes to terms with the otherness in her cockroach/maid and learns to accept the immanence embodied in the mulatto girl. The sculptor finishes up by identifying the cockroach with several images for immanence: 'the neuter', 'the tasteless', 'the thing', 'inherent presence', 'the inherence of the neuter', all of which hint at G.H.'s ideal: 'to be able to look without having the color of my eyes matter' (19), ('olhar sem que a cor de meus olhos importe', 23). As the images suggest, the cockroach has neither positive nor negative attributes, is neither sweet nor salty. It has 'the taste of the neuter', of that which comes from the cockroach's belly and which is not 'transcendable': 'I knew that when I didn't call things salty or sweet, sad or happy, painful or use even subtler shadings - only then would I not be transcending anymore and would I be staying within the thing itself' (78) ('eu estava sabendo que se não chamasse as coisas de salgadas ou doces, de tristes ou dolorosas, ou mesmo com entretons de maior sutileza - que só então eu não estaria transcendendo e ficaria na própria coisa', 82). Thus does G.H. talk about the cockroach, in the world of immanence, glimpsed at in her epiphany.

The contemplation of the immanence/transcendence conflict permeates the whole of Lispector's fiction. Typically, Joana, her first heroine, identifies woman's subjectivity with the ideal of immanence. For her, women truly exist: more than others, they are a symbol of 'the thing in the thing itself'. But Joana finds it difficult to reconcile a woman's free existence in immanence with

marriage. The protagonist escapes the dilemma by allowing her husband to leave her. She also gives up her new lover and runs alone towards immanence, which is 'life's wild heart'. The protagonists of the following novels feel similarly hindered by the men in their lives. In *O Lustre*, Virginia reflects that as soon as her father went out, the house became less cramped. She feels the same about her brother Daniel, who constantly calls her 'stupid' and 'ignorant', an evaluation she tends to internalize. To react against it, she runs away to the hoped for freedom of the big city. There, however, her lover Vicente repeats the father/brother pattern of behaviour. Comparable flights by other female characters are similarly related to negative masculine evaluations: Otávio calls Joana a viper (the madonna's traditional enemy) in *Perto do Coração Selvagem*. Martim, the male protagonist of *A Maçã no Escuro*, labels Ermelinda 'a shrew, like the others'. Adriano, in *O Lustre*, likewise calls Virginia a prostitute. In *A Cidade Sitiada*, Perseus's simplistic version of the madonna/whore dichotomy comes out in his statement that all women can be divided into two groups, those that are good and those that are no good. The male protagonist of *Uma Aprendizagem* comes close to this judgement, as he remembers that his newly won mistress Lori is no longer a virgin.

Probably in reaction against these evaluations, several of Lispector's protagonists bear names resonating with historical or biblical associations, suggestive of cold virginity, violated womanhood, armed struggle or regal severity: Virginia (*O Lustre*), Lucrecia (*A Cidade Sitiada*), Joana (*Perto do Coração Selvagem*), Victoria (*A Maçã no Escuro*).

Another response against the conventional dichotomy madonna/whore shows up in Lispector's representations of motherhood, which can hardly be called flattering. Joana renounces it altogether. Like G.H. in *A Paixão*, the protagonist of *Perto do Coração Selvagem* would like to have a child, but she ends up by leaving her husband free to have one with his mistress. Likewise, G.H. regretfully has an abortion. Women who do have children are always secondary characters, and never fit the madonna stereotype. In *O Lustre*, Virginia sums up her mother's fate: 'getting married, becoming pregnant, caring for children, becoming a merry failure'. Living in symbiosis with her stay-at-home daughter Esmeralda, Virginia's mother roams like a ghost about the house, impotent, 'lazy, weary and vague', an anticipation of Ana Neves, another symbiotic mother from *A Cidade Sitiada*. Otherwise, the representation of motherhood is restricted to the animal country world and permeated by unpleasant perceptions of filth. In *A Maçã no Escuro* the stable, a place redolent of new life, 'where cows are made', conspicuously lacks Mary's mythical presence. Replete with manure and rubbish, it looks like an 'open wound' and has a 'filthy fragrance'. Birth seems disgusting, sub-human, the result of the automatic functioning of blind nature. In this strange inverted Eden, where an apple gleams in the dark, the only human

maternal presence is a mulatto woman. She has a little girl always in tow, but seems closer to the animal than to the human world. There is something of a cow about this woman ; her laughter is 'like lowing' and she has 'the eyes of a beast'. Similarly, in *A Paixão*, the unattractive cockroach, a prolific insect, embodies the narrator's idea of motherhood. The white mass oozing from its body recalls foetal material, suggesting the embryo aborted by G.H. The insect replaces Mary in the protagonist's grotesque version of the *Hail Mary*, addressed to the cockroach: 'from the inside of the husk a heart that is thick and white and living, like pus, comes out. Mother, blessed be you among cockroaches, now and in the hour of this, my death of yours, cockroach and jewel' (86) ('De dentro do invólucro está saindo um coração branco e grosso como pus, mãe, bendita sois vós entre as baratas, agora e na hora desta tua minha morte, barata e jóia' (90)).

Rejecting the traditional stereotype of the madonna, Lispector's heroines strive for a free subjectivity which includes the metaphysical quest, and takes the form of the journey to the big city. They are willing to pay a price for their freedom: the impossibility of motherhood and of permanent union with the men they love. An analysis of these protagonists also argues for the absence, in Lispector's fiction, of another phallogentric stereotype, the siren, man's seductive destroyer. In a way, *Uma Aprendizagem* thematizes the dropping of the siren's mask, her metamorphosis into a free woman, who, rid of traditional gender roles, starts on the road to freedom. The opposition dry/wet, north/south, poverty/affluence is also emblematically present in this novel. The protagonist, a young teacher significantly named Loreley (Lori), leaves her provincial town for Rio. However, the road taken by Lori reverses the trajectory of Lispector's other female protagonists. For her, as for her lover and mentor Ulysses, social, revolutionary awareness must precede the construction of an independent subjectivity, and not the other way round. Being 'a woman, a marginal member of Brazilian society's middle class' (115), ('uma mulher desintegrada na sociedade brasileira de hoje, na burguesia da classe média', 172), Lori must learn how to cope with this society. Then 'sex and love aren't forbidden any more' (115). ('O sexo e o amor não são proibidos', 171). But the quest of ultimate reality, crystallised in immanence, is never a long way off. Lori's search is for 'the nonhuman world to enter into contact with the living neutrality of things' (89) ('uma pesquisa do mundo não humano, para entrar em contacto com o neutro vivo das coisas', 136). Here the protagonist is back at the 'dry' world reached for by G. H. , lost in her trance before the dying cockroach. However, contrary to the pattern established by all the other Lispectorean protagonists, freedom for the heroine of *Uma Aprendizagem* includes the prospect of marriage and motherhood - a traditional happy ending. Coupled with a didactic tone, this has contributed to the almost universal critical evaluation of the novel as an artistic failure.

In the other novels, virtually free from traditional stereotypes, the Charybdis and Scylla of madonna and whore, Lispector's fiction offers a new, idiosyncratic, recurring representation, which I identify as a woman - centaur. Like the opposition dry/wet, with its Brazilian cultural resonances, it contributes to give her novels their characteristic stamp and to explain certain otherwise puzzling stylistic turns. Woman and horse often come together in Lispector's text, simultaneously recalling and subverting associations with the wild, lawless centaurs of classical mythology, and, incidentally, reminding the reader that Lispector was born in December 14, under the sign of Sagittarius. The conflation of woman and horse calls up a transgressively female version of the mythical creatures, often depicted in classical mythology as pulling Dionysius' chariot, or carrying Cupid on their backs, in allusion to their erotic, drunken escapades.

The image of the woman centaur, which I had the chance to study in more detail in the *Remate de Males* collection, briefly appears in Lispector's first two novels, *Perto do Coração Selvagem* and *O Lustre*. It takes up a central position in the next two, *A Cidade Sitiada* and *A Maçã no Escuro*, to make an occasional re-entry in *Um Aprendizado*. Riding, Joana, the protagonist of *Perto do Coração Selvagem*, feels so close to her horse that their bodies seem to form a single creature - a first hint at something later to be developed as an organic image. Once this connection between woman and horse has been drawn, the reader can move, prospectively and retrospectively, to certain references to animals as so many allusions to the woman-centaur. This happens, for instance, when Joana talks of 'a perfect animal, full of inconsequence, selfishness and vitality' inside herself, or when, at the end of the novel, she sings her hymn to freedom: 'I'll be as strong as the soul of an animal (...) and nothing will prevent my going towards the death-without-fear, I'll rise from any struggle or rest strong and beautiful like a young animal'. The woman centaur rides lightly through *O Lustre*. After her experience in the big town, Virginia dreams of her return to Granja Quieta, a small farm, 'the place where she had been happy'. She feels that, 'like a horse, her legs had gained nervous strength, joyful and lucid'. However, it is in the third and fourth novels, *A Cidade Sitiada* and *A Maçã no Escuro* that the image stands out most clearly. In the former, Vitória, the 'equestrian woman', almost invariably shows up riding a horse, which explains why Martim thinks her strange when she is not wearing her riding habit. Consistently, their first meeting is foreshadowed by the sight of 'a monstrous equestrian ant'. Inverting traditional gender roles, the strange Vitória tyrannises over Martim and the farm hands, 'manages the farm with a man's hand'. She also reverses conventional phrases, as she calls herself 'queen of animals' and 'nature's queen'.

*A Cidade Sitiada* is the comedy of manners in Lispector's fiction. The heroine, Lucrecia, also undermines traditional discourse. She makes her husband

feel less than 'master of the house'. Associated with Lucrecia, the image of the woman centaur acquires comic, grotesque strokes. Movements and even parts of a horse's body are often attributed to the protagonist. The text abounds with sentences like 'Lucrecia was trotting, attentive'; she 'softly moved her hoofs', 'dashed about her big animal body'. 'Now and then she would throw her leg against her missing tail' or 'rise up and walk the room on her four feet, smelling darkness'. The character's constant identification with horses relates to the large number of allusions to an equestrian statue dominating the town square. It is herself that the protagonist seems to project when, through the window, she believes she sees 'troops of centaurs rush through the clouds, dragging their majestic behinds'. The grotesque turn taken by the image of the centaur in this novel contrasts with the lyrical undertones in the others. Writing in the late forties, Lispector seems to anticipate grotesque representations of feminine identity in recent North-American women's fiction.

This is one more unexpected feature of Lispector's remarkable text, marked by the unusual condensation of a triple opposition, man/woman, oppressor/oppressed, the nostalgia for essence and the search of immanence. These oppositions alchemically combine to create the kind of fiction the critic Alfredo Bosi calls novels of 'transfigured tension'. Bosi explains that in this kind of novel protagonists 'seek to overcome the conflicts that existentially constitute them by the mythic or metaphysical transmutation of reality' (442). Lispector shares this trait with Guimarães Rosa, her great contemporary. However, Lispector's fiction stands apart from his in her distinctive fusion of the dry/wet world with her own curious representation of woman's search for subjectivity. This amalgam lends her novels an imaginative unity which somehow belies the celebrated fluidity and openness of her style.

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