

The Reception of Clarice Lispector via Hélène Cixous: Reading from the Whale's Belly

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The idiosyncratic readings of Clarice Lispector which French feminist Hélène Cixous has been offering to her readers and students since 1979 have not only had the important effect of calling international attention to the work of Brazil's most celebrated novelist, but have also raised questions about whether it is possible to read and be read by the other as other, in a non-appropriating way.¹ At a time when the continuity of Cixous's seminars at the University of Paris VIII-Vincennes and the Collège International de Philosophie is threatened, the name of Clarice, as Cixous has evoked it in her fortnightly public meditations year after year, still resonates in many diverse academic contexts through the three volumes of transcripts in English published by British and North American Universities.² The form of commentary practised by Cixous, a break from traditional literary criticism, has inspired academic readers to follow in her

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- 1 1979 is the year of the publication of the first two texts which Cixous dedicated to Lispector: *Vivre l'orange / To live the Orange* (English text based on a translation by Ann Liddle and Sarah Cornell), Paris, des femmes, 1979, reprinted in *L'Heure de Clarice Lispector*, Paris, des femmes, 1989, 8-113 (the edition to which I will refer); 'L'approche de Clarice Lispector: Se Laisser lire (par) Clarice Lispector. A Paixao segundo C. L.', in *Poétique: revue de théorie et d'analyse littéraires*, 40, 1979, 408-19, reprinted in *Entre l'écriture*, Paris, des femmes, 1986, and translated by Deborah Jensen as 'Clarice Lispector: the Approach', in *'Coming to Writing' and Other Essays*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1991, 59-77. Cixous's first reading of Lispector in English, 'Reading Clarice Lispector's Sunday before going to sleep', trans. Betsy Wing, appeared in a special issue of *Boundary 2* on Cixous edited by Verena Andermatt Conley, 12, 1984, 41-48.
 - 2 See *Writing Differences: readings from the Seminar of Hélène Cixous*, ed. Susan Sellers, Milton Keynes, Open University Press, 1988; see also *Reading with Clarice Lispector*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1990 (reprinted London, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990, consulted) and *Readings, The Poetics of Blanchot, Joyce, Kafka, Kleist, Lispector, and Tsvetayeva*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1991 (reprinted London, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992, consulted), transcripts of Cixous's seminars from 1980 to 1985 and 1986, respectively, both edited, translated and introduced by Verena A. Conley.

intuitive steps and to convey to other readers her passion for Lispector's work.³ Yet the position of power which Cixous has attained within academic contexts and the confidence with which she asserts the superiority of her own kind of discourse and her own form of reading may explain why her critics have tended to provide long quotations and paraphrases of her words, avoiding critical evaluation of her use of Lispector's texts as pre-texts for her own exploration of theoretical and ethical concerns. However, now that a number of Lispector's texts have become available in translation, French and Anglo-American readers no longer need to buy the very exclusive brand of Lispector which Cixous has chosen to import from Brazil, but, inspired by Cixous's example, can fashion their own readings of Lispector to suit their needs.⁴

In the next few pages I will attempt to illustrate how throughout the last nineteen years Lispector has provided Cixous with a frame, a name and a voice, an external authority, within which to speak of her own ideas, obsessions and dreams. I will also attempt to give an overview of Cixous's evolution as a reading subject from an autobiographical exploration of the other, the foreign, in her earlier texts on Lispector, to a dominant concern with human relations analysed in terms of giving and receiving in her later teaching.

3 For close, sympathetic readings of Cixous, see Verena A. Conley, *Hélène Cixous, Writing the Feminine*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1984 and *Hélène Cixous*, London, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992; see also Susan Sellers, *Hélène Cixous, Authorship, Autobiography and Love*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1996. Toril Moi provides a short critical discussion of Cixous's writing on Lispector in *Sexual/Textual Politics, Feminist Literary Theory*, London, Methuen, 1985, 102-26 (115). Teresa Brennan has made interesting remarks about Cixous's identification with Lispector in her introduction to *Between Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, London, Routledge, 1988. Particularly enlightening is Morag Shiach's critical study, *Hélène Cixous, A Politics of Writing*, London, Routledge, 1991.

4 The works of Lispector which exist in English translation are the following, *The Apple in the Dark* (*A maçã no escuro*, 1961), trans. Gregory Rabassa, New York, Knopf, 1967; *Family Ties* (*Laços de família*, 1960), trans. Giovanni Pontiero, Austin, Univ. of Texas Press, 1972; *The Foreign Legion, Stories and Chronicles* (*A legião estrangeira*, 1964), trans. Giovanni Pontiero, Manchester, Carcanet, 1986; *The Hour of the Star* (*A hora da estrela*, 1977), trans. Giovanni Pontiero, Manchester, Carcanet, 1986; *The Passion according to G. H.* (*A paixão segundo G. H.*, 1964), trans. Ronald W. Sousa, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1988; *Soulstorm* (contains *Where You Were at Night* and *The Stations of the Body: onde estivestes de noite*, 1974, and *A via crucis do corpo*, 1974, trans. Alexis Levitin, New York, New Directions, 1989; *The Stream of Life* (*Água viva*, 1963), trans. Elizabeth Lowe and Earl Fitz, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1989; *Near to the Wild Heart* (*Perto do coração selvagem*, 1944), trans. Giovanni Pontiero, New York, New Directions, 1990; *Discovering the World* (*A descoberta do mundo*, 1984), trans. Giovanni Pontiero, Manchester, Carcanet, 1992.

I

Cixous has claimed to have the greatest respect for Lispector's *oeuvre* because of the ways it explores 'all the possible positions of the subject in relation to what would be appropriation, use, abuse and owning in the finest, most delicate detail'.⁵ Before coming across Lispector's work Cixous had already been exploring the relation between subjectivity and writing both in her theoretical work, i. e. her discussions of Joyce or Hoffman, and in her own fiction, structured around semi-anonymous main characters. But in Lispector's name, she has been able to pursue her own exploration of various positions as a reading subject.

One has to bear in mind that Cixous found her public voice in a post-psychoanalytic academic context in which she was encouraged not only to relate her dreams, but to see them as more truthful than any logical discourse:

In a certain way I am a dreamer. So it is very complicated. I owe everything, almost everything to dream. What does that mean? It means that there is somebody else besides me, of course. I owe everything to somebody else, and in my innocence of times past, I felt guilty because when I started to write I wrote under pressure, under dictation, under the influence of the dream, which made me terribly ashamed. I was not the one who was writing. When I say I write during the day, that is to say that during the day I annotate, like a secretary of my unconscious. [...] The unconscious, as we know it, does not lie.⁶

Cixous's readings of Lispector defy logic to such an extent that they seem to rule out any scholar's efforts to try to establish cause-and-effect links between the 'Clarice' she evokes and the name which Lispector may have won for herself as a female author from a third world country writing in a little-known language.

Cixous is aware of the effect which her seminars have had on increasing Lispector's readership, but she has expressed dissatisfaction at the ways in which other readers have chosen to read her:

I would no longer continue with my seminar if I knew that a sufficiently

5 'Extreme Fidelity', in Susan Sellers, *Writing Differences*, 9-36 (18). This text first came out in French, 'Extrême fidélité', in the Brazilian periodical *Travessia*, 14, 1987, 11-45, an issue dedicated to Lispector on the tenth anniversary of her death. A slightly modified version of it, entitled 'L'auteur en vérité' ('The Author in Truth') was included two years later in *L'Heure de Clarice Lispector*, 123-68 (142), and appeared again in English two years later in 'Coming to Writing' and other Essays, 136-81.

6 See Conley, *Hélène Cixous, Writing the Feminine*, 155.

wide world was reading Clarice Lispector. A few years ago when her texts began to circulate here, I said to myself, I am no longer going to give a seminar, all that is left to do is to read her, everything is said, it is perfect. But as usual everything has been repressed, she has even been transformed in the most extraordinary way, they have embalmed her, had her stuffed as a Brazilian bourgeoisie with varnished fingernails. So I carry on my own vigil, accompanying her through my reading. ('Extreme Fidelity', 20)

Unable to accept readings of Lispector which are different from her own, Cixous can even make her perceptive form of reading sound preceptive:

One really has to make a big effort, and particularly one has to overrule the ego and the pretense of mastering things and knowing things. Then we reach the point when we can say as she says: it is only because I don't know anything in an appropriating way, 'because I don't know anything and because I remember nothing'.⁷

Fearing that someone might misunderstand Lispector, Cixous not only 'accompanies' her, but also puts words into her mouth. This gesture may seem daring, or at least surprising to those unfamiliar with the mythical narrative of Cixous's encounter with Lispector, *To live the Orange*.

II

To live the Orange offers a poetic account of how Cixous discovered Lispector: 'a woman's voice came to me from far away, like a voice from a birth-town, it brought me insights I once had, intimate insights, naïve and knowing, ancient and fresh like the yellow and violet color of freshias [sic.] rediscovered, this voice was unknown to me' (10). The date provided, 12 October, the date when Columbus discovered America, seems to be a symbolic choice on Cixous's part. The year, 1978, coincides with the year in which Cixous began to be published by *Éditions des femmes*.⁸ As she recounts elsewhere, she first came across Lispector

7 'Reaching the point of Wheat , or A Portrait of the Artist as a Maturing Woman', *New Literary History*, 19, 1987, 1-21 (20).

8 *Des femmes*, a new and relatively unknown but already controversial publishing house of women and for women, allowed Cixous the freedom to write her own kind of poetic fiction, avoiding the rigidity of genre categories of 'roman' or 'nouvelle poétique' imposed to her previously by Grasset Denoël and Gallimard.

when she glanced at some fragments of the book which *des femmes* was preparing for publication.⁹ At a time of great political tension between women's movements in France the writings of a Brazilian woman novelist came to Cixous as a breath of fresh air. But what Cixous chose to write was not so much an accurate account of historical circumstances, as her own subjective, dream-like version of her experience of reading Lispector:

And the singular name, unique, detached from the dark-green air in which the voice of Clarice went to gather an orange among all of the oranges to lay it young and sound on the toile of a text prepared for it: she called this one "Laranja".

It was almost a young girl. It was an orange regained. Through the fine skin of the word, I sensed that it was a blood-orange. By a fine vibration in the toile, I sensed that Clarice closed her eyes to touch the orange better, to hold it more lightly, let it weigh more freely upon her text, she noted eyes closed to hear more internally the secret song of the orange. (To live, 16, 18)

Cixous offers her readers a text, a tissue, a 'toile' in which she weaves Clarice's name and silent gestures. Lispector's texts are also evoked through gestures. No words are quoted, as if to enhance the intimacy of the scene. Cixous's reader may simply join in this silent meditation on Lispector's texts and accept Cixous's experience of them, or may prefer to pick up *Água viva*, for instance, and be also offered a 'tela', a canvas, a text woven with inscrutable lines and silent words:

Hoje acabei a tela de que te falei: linhas redondas que se interpenetram em traços finos e negros, e tu, que tens o hábito de querer saber por qué — e porque não me interessa, a causa é materia de pasado — perguntarás por que os traços negros e finos? é por causa do mesmo segredo que me faz escrever agora como se fosse a ti, escrevo redondo, enovelado e tépido, mas às vezes frígido como os instantes frescos, água do riacho que teme por si mesma. O que pintei nessa tela é passível de ser fraseado em palavras? Tanto quando possa ser implícita a palavra muda no som musical.¹⁰

9 Martine Motard-Noar, drawing on a personal interview from 8 June 1985, suggests that Cixous had first heard of Lispector from a young Brazilian woman who attended her seminars; see *Les fictions d'Hélène Cixous, Une autre langue de femme*, Lexington, Kentucky, French Forum, 1991, 142.

10 *Água viva*, 7th edn, Rio de Janeiro, Nova Fronteira, 1979 (1973), 11. I will refer to this edition and provide my own translations. I will also use the Portuguese title, as Cixous usually does for this book.

(Today I finished the canvas I had told you about: round lines penetrate each other in fine black lines, and you, who have the habit of wanting to know why — and because I am not interested, since it is a matter of the past — you will ask why black and fine lines? It is because of the very secret which makes me write now as if it were to you, my writing is round, rolled up and tepid, but at times frigid like fresh instants, water in a brook, fearing for itself. Can what I painted on this canvas be put into words? In so far as the mute word is implicit in musical sound. (My translation))

Clarice's voice placing an orange on the toile of a text (*To live*, 16) may then sound rather like Cixous's own projection, an intertextual re-elaboration of the image she had used very powerfully in *Portrait du soleil* (1973) to inscribe herself and her Algerian origin through sound, 'Oran-je'.¹¹ Placing herself in the position of a magician of words, Cixous plays with Lispector's toile/text and replaces her apple with a fruit of her own. She then confesses to having used Lispector's voice to 'amuse' herself daring to say what she could not say otherwise: 'in the translation of the apple (into orange) I try to denounce myself. A way of owning. My part. Of the fruit. Of the enjoyment. Of venturing to say that which I am not yet in a position to ensure by my own care' (*To live*, 40).

Cixous seems to be so preoccupied with herself that she can only speak in the first person and project her own subjectivity on to her reading. In *Água viva*, on the contrary, the use of the first person is justified as an attitude of humility: 'e se eu digo "eu" é porque não ousou dizer "tu", ou "nós" ou "uma pessoa". Sou obrigada à humildade de me personalizar me apequenando mas sou o és-tu' (13) ('if I say 'I' it is because I do not dare to say 'you', or 'we' or 'a person'. I am in duty bound to personalise myself by minimising myself, but I am the 'you-are'). The experience of the writing subject in *Água viva* appears to transcend its own subjectivity: 'venho do longe — de uma pesada ancestralidade. Eu que venho da dor de viver. E não a quero mais' (16) ('I come from afar — from a heavy ancestry. It is me who comes from the sorrow of living. And I do not want more'). Cixous recognises this movement toward selflessness: 'once emerged from the membrane of self, spread out unto all the ways, coming to dwell at the brink of all sources' (*To live*, 36). Her own experience of reading Lispector, however, does not help her transcend herself or move toward selflessness, but, on the contrary, brings her more in touch with herself: 'a woman's voice came to me from far away, [...] a writing came with an angel's

11 This is the sense in which Shiach reads the word-play, see *Hélène Cixous, A Politics of Writing*, 63.

footsteps, - when I was so far from myself, alone at the extremity of my finite being' (10); 'a writing came, with gleaming hands in the darkness, when I no longer dared to help myself, [...] a writing found me when I was unfindable to myself' (12). As a Jewess born and raised in Algeria, Cixous cannot avoid reading parts of herself in Lispector, also a Jewess from a third-world country: 'I sense Jews passing in the depths of my writing, singing ancient psalms in silence behind my memory, I feel women writing in my writing, giving birth, giving milk' (*To live*, 34). Reading herself in Lispector's texts, Cixous can escape from her 'finite being' and recognise her fragmented self in some of the languages in which she was brought up, as well as in the little-known language used by Lispector: 'jouis-je juive ou fuis-je femme? Jouis-je judia ou suis-je mulher? Joy I donna? ou fruo en filha? Fuis-je femme ou est-ce que je me ré-juive?' (*To live* 35).

In *To live the Orange* Cixous does not quote Lispector's texts, but incorporates her words and ideas into her own text through paraphrases. Rather than reading and writing on Lispector in a scholarly manner, she prefers to read and write with Lispector, in Lispector's way, not only using powerful visual imagery but also trying to appeal to the reader's senses of touch and hearing. Quoting Lispector would not only break the flow of the narration and would create separation, a duality of subject and object, but would also be rather out of place in a poetical fiction which tries to break away from academic writing. Thus, rather than letting Lispector speak through decontextualised fragments of her writing, Cixous prefers to speak of Lispector's voice and allow it to resonate through her own. She can do this since she feels she has been chosen as the recipient of a kind of mystical revelation of Lispector: 'I saw her face. My God. She showed me her face. I had my vision. [...] Revealed to me. It was the revelation' (*To live*, 48).

She then describes to her readers her vision of Clarice, her version of Lispector:

Clarice is the name of a woman capable of calling life by all of its warm and cool names. And life comes. She says: I am. And in the instant Clarice is. Clarice is entirely in the instant when she gives herself to being, alive, infinite, unlimited in her being. When I say: Clarice, it is not simply to speak to you of a person, it is to call Clarice a joy, — a fear, — a frightened joy. To tell you this joy, give you this fear, this joy in a fear.

[...] To have the fortune — little sister of joy — to have encountered the joy clarice, or the joy g h or l or anna, and since then to live in joy, in her infinitely great arms, her cosmic arms, dry and warm, tender, slim — The too great fortune? — (*To live*, 54)

What is left for Cixous then is to hope that her own readers can also share the fortune of receiving and accepting her vision.

III

The other text on Lispector which Cixous published in 1979, 'The Approach of Clarice Lispector' is also an example of Cixous's poetic rather than scholarly writing. This time, perhaps encouraged by the fact that she is writing for an academic journal, Cixous includes quotations of Lispector's *Água viva* and *A Paixão segundo G. H.*, and extends her play to erudite cross-references to the work of Hölderlin, Heidegger, Derrida and Rilke. Her mode of reading, however, is still based on the idea that readers can find themselves in the reading. She proposes that one should allow oneself to do that, as her subtitle indicates: 'Letting Oneself (be) Read (by) Clarice Lispector'. She may well succeed in encouraging her readers to read and be read by Lispector's texts, but her own text does not really leave much space for her readers' own subjectivities.

Despite the mirroring effect of her reading of Lispector, Cixous does not see her as a mirror for the self but as a window which gives access to the other side of the self:

This woman, our contemporary, Brazilian (born in the Ukraine, of Jewish origin), gives us not books but living saved from books, from narratives, repressive constructions. And through her writing-window we enter the awesome beauty of learning to read: going, by way of the body, to the other side of the self. ('Approach', 59)

Lispector is also seen as a mediator who teaches 'the approach that opens and leaves space for the other' (62). In a lavish phonetic play, Lispector is evoked as 'Clarice-window', 'Clarice-school' and 'Clarice-voice/way (voix/voie)'. She is praised for her careful attention to detail and her courage to explore beyond the accepted, beyond aesthetic conventions:

At Clarice Lispector's school, we learn how to approach. We follow courses in the general science of things. Courses in how to call, and how to let oneself be called. Courses in how to let things come, in how to receive. The two great lessons of living: slowness and ugliness. (60-61)

In contrast with other writers' ways 'of saying tulip which kills every tulip', Cixous acclaims Lispector's 'way of making-the-tulip' (72). But the dense metaphorical web in which Cixous tries to capture Lispector leaves the reader

with little more than a series of names with which to evoke her. Lispector is still known within some feminist academic circles as no more than a figurehead, the first example of a female author which Cixous was able to find since she had begun to explore the notion of *écriture féminine* in 1975.¹²

IV

In a 1982 interview Cixous insists on the idea that feminine libidinal economy is not linked to biological sex and can therefore be present in male writers, but this time she also emphasises that for historical reasons the feminine economy, characterised by spending, giving, risk and being more centered on the body, 'is more livable in women than in men'.¹³ In her eyes, Lispector, 'who arrives from the opposite side with her body, her torments, with her life, with her sorrows, and [...] says that to live is sufficient' (*Writing the Feminine*, 154), supersedes male writers like Rilke, Kafka and Joyce, whom she had previously seen as examples of feminine writing. While Kafka appears to her to be cut off from the source of life, Lispector stands for the source itself, continuity and affirmation of living (154). Lispector is, in sum, idealised by Cixous as 'a woman who says things as closely as possible to a feminine economy, that is to say, one of the greatest generosity possible, of the greatest virtue, of the greatest spending' (154). But then Cixous may be found guilty of not leaving much space for Lispector to be other than that.

There is, for instance, the opening passage of *Água viva*:

É com uma alegria tão profunda. É uma tal aleluia. Aleluia, grito eu, aleluia que se funde com o mais escuro uivo humano da dor de separação mas é grito de felicidade diabólica. Porque ninguém me prende mais. Continuo com capacidade de raciocínio —mas agora quero o plasma — quero me alimentar diretamente da placenta. Tenho um pouco de medo: medo ainda de me entregar pois o próximo instante é o desconhecido. (9)

(It is with such deep joy. It is such hallelujah. Hallelujah, I cry out, hallelujah which melts with the darkest human howl of sorrow of separation but it is a cry of diabolical bliss. Because no one ever captures me. I retain my faculty of reasoning —but now I want plasma— I want

12 All the previous examples used by Cixous simply happened to be male authors, Kleist, Rilke, Joyce, Kafka, Genet, and even Shakespeare; see *La Jeune Née* (written in collaboration with Catherine Clément) Paris, Union Générale d'Éditions, 1975; trans. Betsy Wing as *The Newly Born Woman*, Manchester, University of Manchester Press, 1986.

13 See Conley, *Hélène Cixous, Writing the Feminine*, 133.

to be nourished directly from the placenta. I have a slight fear: fear of giving myself up since the next instant is the unknown.)

This gesture of leaving behind rational discourse in order to explore life from the position of a foetus finds parallels in Cixous's earlier proclamation of writing with the body and her re-valorisation of maternal metaphors in *The Newly Born Woman*. *Água viva* then seems to have offered itself as an optimal example of *écriture féminine*, of writing through the body, beyond rationality, as a way of exploring the unknown:

Estou consciente de que tudo o que sei não posso dizer, só sei pintando ou pronunciando, sílabas cegas de sentido. E se tenho aqui que usar-te palavras, elas têm que fazer um sentido quase que só corpóreo, estou em luta com a vibração última. Para te dizer o meu substrato faço uma frase de palavras feitas apenas dos instantes-já. (11)

Estou tentando escrever-te com o corpo todo. (12)

Estou viva. Mas sinto que ainda não alcancei os meus limites. (18)

(I am aware that I cannot say all I know, I only know by painting or pronouncing, syllables blind with sense. And if I have to use words for you here, they must make a sense that is only corporeal, I am fighting against the last vibration. To tell you my substratum I make a sentence of words made almost of now-instants.

I am trying to write with my whole body.

I am alive. But I feel that I have not yet reached my boundaries.)

But Cixous does not need to provide any quotations from Lispector's texts in order to sustain her intuitive, explorative (if not exploitative) reading. She prefers to convey her own feelings of joy or fear in response to the existence of such a book than to try to grab it, grasp its content, or capture its words in finite quotations. Her experience as a reader is rather peculiar, but even more peculiar is the fact that she confesses it in public: 'when somebody brought me *Água viva*, it gave me such joy that I did not read it. It took me at least a year to do so. And all of a sudden, the book was divided into a thousand books. Each sentence seemed to me to be another book' (*Reading with Clarice Lispector*, 141).

Cixous's public confessions and meditations can be very valuable at least as a source of inspiration. They primarily make us readers question the ways in which we read and encourage us to explore new possibilities of reading. In her seminar meditation "'The Egg and the Chicken": Love is not Having', for instance, Cixous introduces Lispector's story of that title as a 'living' text which requires an attentive form of reading:

To read something that is not mechanical, but something living that has been symbolised, an active reading has to be invented that is not rendered mechanical by the application of external categories. One has to be as close as possible to an analytic reading. It is from an analytic position that one has to listen to the text at length: one has to listen to what is said between the lines, to the silences, the breathing, the hidden as well as the revealed words in a text, to the living reality of the text, its repetitions, anomalies, grammatical curiosities. (*Reading with Clarice Lispector*, 99)

'Analysis' does not mean for Cixous the breaking up, the division or dissolution of a text.¹⁴ Her so-called analytical reading is based on respect, on not imposing meaning on a text as one would not impose meaning on a person:

A text has to be treated like a person, with its mystery. We must have in our relation to the text a position both active and passive, one of patience. One has to accept what one accepts from a person: not to understand. It is there that the very question of meaning is posed. A text becomes meaning. 'The Egg and the Chicken' has meaning in the plural. (99-100)

Elaborating on the title of Lispector's story and the remains of her own reading of *La Fontaine*, Cixous offers us her own prescription for reading:

The text is like a chicken that incessantly lays golden eggs. The text will not cease to lay golden eggs when one makes an incision to go in and see what is in its belly. The meanings of a text are like the eggs: they are to come; they are in preparation. For an egg to be, one has to give the chicken a chance to live. It has to be given time to eat. All this is to say that if there is interpretation, it is not through the theft of the egg but out of love for the chicken. (100)

14 This is not only the standard meaning of the word, but also the etymological meaning of the word 'analysis', derived from the Greek *lyein*, to break up, to loosen.

For other texts by Lispector, however, Cixous provides different reading recipes. *Agua viva*, for instance, is nothing like an egg-laying chicken. As she puts it in her seminar '*Agua viva: How to Follow a Trinket of Water*', this text 'is living water, full water. It escapes the first rule of a text. It is not linear, not formally constructed, whereas most other texts by Clarice Lispector are somehow constructed [...]. There is no exterior border' (*Reading with*, 15). The nature of the text determines the way one reads it: 'one reads it in a circle. One follows the text's breathing rhythm'(17).

As Cixous teaches us in her seminar 'Sunday before falling asleep: a Primal Scene', inspired by Lispector's story of the same name, the reader of a living text can have a choice about how he or she approaches it, either trying to dominate it, to tame it as if it were an animal, or surrendering to it, letting it feed itself on his or her subjectivity: 'when we read a text, we are either read by the text or we are in the text. Either we tame a text, we ride on it, we roll over it, or we are swallowed up by it, as if by a whale' (*Readings: the Poetics of Blanchot, Joyce, Kafka, Kleist, Lispector, and Tsvetayeva*, 3). It is thus not so surprising to find Cixous's dreams, obsessions and fragmented subjectivity in the whale's belly of the stories by Lispector which she reads publicly. As she goes on to suggest, 'there are thousands of possible relations to a text, and if we are in a non-defensive, non-resisting relationship, we are carried off by the text' (*Readings*, 3). It is not difficult to see how Cixous is carried off but also carried by the texts she reads.

What may be more difficult is to read Cixous's texts outside the sympathetic context of her seminars and accept the didacticism with which they are loaded, as when she proclaims:

This is mainly the way it goes. But then, in order to read, we need to get out of the text. We have to shuttle back and forth incessantly. We have to try all possible relations with a text. At some point, we have to disengage ourselves from the text as a living ensemble in order to study its construction, its techniques, and its texture. (3)

The subjectiveness with which Cixous feeds Lispector's texts to others seems to have no boundary:

To arrive at a possibility of reading 'Sunday, before falling asleep', I think of a children's game, a game of weaving with coloured paper that is both homogeneous and heterogeneous. One has to find the color threads of the text, the semantic threads, and see how 'to see', 'to drink', 'to get up', are linked. There are verbal chains and nominal chains that can be worked on with a grammar of meaning. One can work on the text from

many approaches, at many different levels. One can climb up and down a tree or sit on a bench in order to read it. (3)

All these ways of reading may sound very naive, very innocent. But this is what Cixous wants to inspire in us, an attitude of *in-nosence*, of not knowing. This is, at least, what, in her seminar 'Apprenticeship and Alienation: Clarice Lispector and Maurice Blanchot', she claims to have learned from Lispector: 'Clarice seems to say: if you ask questions, I will tell you that I do not know. She is on the side of not-knowing, on the side of what she calls real knowledge or real love' (*Readings*, 75).

This idea is emphasised again in 'Extreme Fidelity':

In the texts of Clarice Lispector, we find all the lessons of knowledge, but it is a knowledge of how to live, not a scholarly knowledge. One of the first lessons about living is the one about knowing how to not know, which doesn't mean not knowing, but knowing how to not know, knowing how to avoid getting closed in by knowledge, knowing how to not understand, while never being on the side of ignorance. It is not a question of not having understood anything, but of not letting oneself get locked into comprehension. (22)

It is the knowledge of how to live which, in Cixous's view, counts more than scholarly knowledge.

Lispector's texts serve as an arena in which Cixous finds herself facing questions of how to live: 'there is a whole series of texts which work on her question of having, of knowing how to have what one has. It is one of the most difficult things in the world, since, poor humans that we are, no sooner do we have, than we no longer have' (20). In her seminars Cixous appears above all as a humanist, interested in human beings. It is her concern with human beings in general which shapes her reading activity, as she had claimed in her 1982 interview:

I do not care to master a text. I am not interested in that. I am not interested in making it enter into categories, because really I grant myself the luxury to read in texts only that which for me is a question of life and death. So when I read, I ask of the text questions that I ask of myself. I ask questions like 'where does it come from?' Questions of origin. Where does it go? How far? What stops? What arrests? My questions are of, and concern, human beings in general. What causes some people to waste their lives, not to know how to live, and what makes others capable of

pushing back the limits of death in life? And I ask *if* questions concerning love in relation to a life-giving body or to one that gives death.¹⁵

Driven by her need to find out about human beings, Cixous reads Lispector's story 'Clandestine Felicity' not only as a source of biographical information about Lispector's feelings as a girl ('Extreme fidelity', 21), but also as a source of moral teaching: 'we need to know that we can only have if we know how to have in a way which does not destroy, does not possess, preserves' (22). Similarly, Cixous's meditation on G. H.'s inner journey of discovery in Lispector's *The Passion according to G. H.* takes a moral turn, as she concludes that her failure was brought about by her 'not having left room for the other love as an immoderate passion' ('Extreme fidelity', 29). Qualifying the protagonist's last move as 'lack of respect for the other', 'identification' and 'appropriation', Cixous emphasises the story's moral lesson, i.e. that 'the most difficult thing is to arrive at the most extreme proximity while guarding against the trap of projection, of identification' (29). Although this is a trap which Cixous herself has not been able to avoid, she nonetheless can persevere in her wishful thinking: 'the other must remain in all its extreme strangeness within the greatest possible proximity' (29)

VI

Cixous contrasts the destructiveness of pity or badly thought-out love, or the annihilating effect of ill-measured understanding, all wrong examples of subject positions, with the lessons she finds in Lispector's work about respect and 'the right distance' ('Extreme fidelity', 19). Part of this distance is perhaps created by the fact that Lispector writes in a language which Cixous has been able to enjoy since the early days, when she did not even understand it fully:

This voice was not searching for me, it was writing to no one, to all women, to writing, in a foreign tongue, I do not speak it, but my heart understands it, and its silent words in all the veins of my life have translated themselves into mad blood, into joy-blood. (*To live the Orange*, 10)

At the time Cixous was led to focus on the material level of Lispector's texts, their sounds and their mysterious poetic effects: 'senses flow, circulate, messages as divinely complicated as the strange microphonetic signals, conveyed to the

15 See Conley, *Hélène Cixous, Writing the Feminine*, 153.

ears from the blood, tumults, calls, inaudible answers vibrate, mysterious connections are established' (30). Almost two decades later Cixous continues to read Portuguese intuitively, understanding it with her heart, rather than through any intellectual study. During all this time she has been able to share her own intuitive understanding of Portuguese with the members of her seminar, knowing that most of them also had a limited knowledge of that language. On occasion she has even made daring gestures such as suggesting to her audience that the Portuguese *entender* means 'to hear', rather like in French (*Reading with Clarice Lispector*, 56), or reading too much into Lispector's omission of the subject pronoun (69), the norm in Portuguese but not in French.¹⁶ Such imaginative suggestions may be seen as an unconscious attempt on Cixous's part to bridge the distance between languages and cultures which she so much values and respects, rather than as proof of the 'Francocentric attitude' of which she has been accused. They may be seen less as the basis for criticism than as a confirmation of the way in which Cixous proposes that one can read one's own subjectivity, one can 'let oneself (be) read (by) Clarice Lispector'.

VII

In 'Extreme Fidelity' Cixous defends her right to practise a non-argumentative kind of criticism, using a quotation from Lispector's *The Hour of the Star* as an *autoritas*, as if to prove that this is possible. At least the 'author' persona created by Lispector in that text shares Cixous's views about the need for sympathy:

This I who is you, for I can't bear to be simply me, I need the others to hold me up, giddy and awkward as I am, for after all what is there to do except meditate in order to fall into this full emptiness that can only be attained through meditation. [...] I meditate without words and on nothingness. (*Hour*, 8; this is the translation used in 'Extreme Fidelity', 20)

In Lispector's name, Cixous defends the pertinence of performing sympathetic readings before sympathetic audiences rather than wasting one's time writing critical works for scholarly audiences:

16 The remark has been made by Marta Peixoto who, in her invaluable study of Cixous's contribution to the understanding of Lispector, notes the above two examples of linguistic inaccuracy as evidence for her argument that 'Cixous's command of Portuguese is not entirely adequate to the task of interpreting the nuances of Lispector's texts'; see 'The Nurturing Text in Hélène Cixous and Clarice Lispector', in *Passionate Fictions, Gender, Narrative and Violence in Clarice Lispector*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1994, 39-59 (49).

I read this and I tell myself how terrible it is that we spend precious months of our existence trying to give 'proofs', falling into the trap of critical interpellation, allowing ourselves to be led before the tribunal where we are told: give us proof, explain to us what feminine writing or sexual difference is. And if we were more courageous than I am, we would say: a flute for your proof, I am alive. I am not serene enough, except when I write. And when I write, I tell myself that it is not enough, we need to do something else. However, it is true that the truest is like this: either you know without knowing, and this knowledge which doesn't know is a flash of joy which the other shares with you, or else there is nothing. We cannot convert someone who is not already converted. We will never touch the heart that lives on another planet. ('Extreme Fidelity', 20)

We cannot therefore expect that Cixous will provide any evidence to sustain her claims about Lispector as long as they make her feel alive, or at least for as long as she finds a sympathetic audience of people who will listen to her with their hearts, already sharing in, or living on her joy of writing. She does not need to engage with other critics of Lispector, since she is not interested in finding an objective truth about Lispector, but in exploring her own subjectivity through the reading. She can simply go on speaking of herself, her own obsessions from inside the belly of Lispector's texts, inside the belly of her seminars.¹⁷

17 Inspired by her image of the whale (see above, *Readings*, 3), I see Cixous's seminars and critical readings as offering a kind of intrauterine experience comparable to that which the Hebrew prophet Jonah had in the whale's belly before he was vomited onto dry land and sent off to preach to the Ninevites (Jonah 1-2).