

The Hour of the Star: Clarice Lispector's Struggle with Writing and Ethics

"It's not easy to write," says the narrator of the Brazilian Clarice Lispector's *The Hour of the Star* (*A hora da estrela*, 1977). "It's as hard as breaking rocks" (10). And indeed the story that he tells us takes its time to emerge. In part this is because he wants "to write in an ever simpler way" (6), and yet "simplicity" comes only "with enormous effort" (3). It is a tussle both with language and with the body, for "I write with my body" (8). He seeks, "contrary to [his] normal habits to write a story with a beginning, middle and 'grand finale' followed by silence and falling rain" (5). But how do you even get to the beginning? "How do you start at the beginning, if things happen before they happen?" So he begins at the very outset of the world, with a cosmic affirmation: "All the world began with a yes. One molecule said yes to another molecule and life was born" (3). But how then to get from here to the story he wants to tell? Everything has already happened, and yet nothing much has happened at all. What, if anything, will happen next?

The narrator provides some clues early on as to what he wants to write about: he will tell the story of a "northeastern girl" (from one of Brazil's poorest states, Alagoas) now living in Rio de Janeiro, one of "thousands of [such] girls scattered through the tenement slums" (4, 5). She is a typist—and so also a writer of a sort—but beyond that the narrator knows only "the tiniest details" about her (13). "Oh I'm so afraid to start and don't even know the girl's name," he complains (10). And the problem is not only beginnings, but also endings: "I wonder if I should jump ahead and sketch out an ending right away," the narrator muses, only to confess that "it so happens that I myself have no idea how this thing will turn out" (8). At the same time, "what I'm about to write is already somehow written in me." He "hold[s] a destiny in [his] hands"—should the girl marry, or not, for instance?—but he does not "feel powerful enough to invent freely: I follow a hidden, fatal line" (12). Yet emerge the story does, despite the narrator's misgivings ("I see I'm almost into the story"): the girl is nineteen years old; she has "a very slight and constant toothache" (15); she works at an office; she has a co-worker, Glória, and a boss, Mr Raimundo Silveira; she came to Rio with her aunt, now dead; she lives in a tenement room with four other young women; she listens to the radio and reads old newspapers; she eats very little and never in a restaurant; she meets a boy, "the first thing she could call a boyfriend in her life" (34). And then at last, almost halfway through this short novel,

she finally has a name: “Macabéa” (35). By this point, the tale (“the story of the story” [34]), in all its simplicity, can perhaps be told.

The boyfriend, who goes by the extravagant, self-assumed name of Olímpico de Jesus Moreira Chaves, also comes from the Northeast—the area around Salvador da Bahia, Fortaleza, and Recife, jutting out into the Atlantic Ocean, which is not only the poorest region of Brazil, but which also has the highest proportion of its population, well over a third, who are of African descent. It was here that many of the four to five million enslaved people transported from Africa to colonial and postcolonial Brazil were first disembarked, primarily to work in the sugar plantations on the coast. Now those slaves’ descendants migrate south, to richer (and whiter) cities such as Rio and São Paulo, seeking a better future. Olímpico certainly thinks he is on the way up, working in a “metals factory,” but just as he has augmented his name in line with his aspirations, he “didn’t call himself a ‘worker’ but a ‘metallurgist’” (36). He wants figuratively (as well as literally) to make a name for himself: “One day I’ll be very rich,” he brashly informs Macabéa. “I’m very intelligent, I’ll end up a congressman” (37). He quickly becomes annoyed with the girl, who by contrast seems not to aspire to anything and is all too easily pleased even with the very little that she has. Olímpico thinks that her co-worker, Glória, might be a better match for him: “he immediately realized that she had class.” Moreover, Glória is white (if with “the strength of mixed race”), has bleached-blond hair, and “was born and bred in Rio [. . . making] her belong to the longed-for clan of the South.” What is more, “though ugly, Glória was well fed. And that made her quality goods” (50). Olímpico promptly dumps Macabéa and hooks up with the co-worker.

Abandoned by Olímpico, Macabéa does not allow herself to become despondent: “sadness was also something for rich people, for people who could afford it, for people who didn’t have anything better to do. Sadness was a luxury” (52-53). She is almost without affect, not least because her social circle is now still more reduced, so that it is as though she is not even there, hardly leaving an imprint on the city: “For other people she didn’t exist” (54). She wants to be a star: she paints her lips in imitation of “Marylin [*sic*] Monroe,” but “instead of lipstick it looked like thick blood had spurted from her lips” (53); “she identified with the picture of the young Greta Garbo” (55). But she sees “that for her there was no place in the world” (57). For the first time in her life, she goes to a doctor, who sees she is malnourished and diagnoses her with “the early stages of

pulmonary tuberculosis." By this point, though he tells us that he is "in love with Macabéa, my dear Maca, in love with her ugliness and total anonymity since she belongs to no one" (59), even the narrator is beginning to tire of her. He takes a break from writing. When he comes back, Macabéa, encouraged by Glória, visits a fortune-teller, who tells her she has a "marvelous destiny" (69), and will have a rich, foreign, blond boyfriend; her life "will change the minute you step out of this house" (67). But as she leaves, crossing the street, she is hit by a car, and for all the narrator's efforts ("I'm going to do everything I can to keep her from dying" [71]), there she dies, "finally free of herself and us" (76). Nothing much has happened in the end. Her bare, almost entirely unqualified life is over and done with. Yet "at the hour of death," we are told, "a person becomes a shining movie star, it's everyone's moment of glory" (20). Has Macabéa had her hour as a star? Would anyone even notice if she had?



Street scene in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

Lispector's novel is about doing justice to such a life, a life so marginal and mundane that there is hardly any story to tell, but which may still somehow have its moment of glory. *It is therefore about an ethics of writing, about how writing can be true to life, to "a life," without necessarily laying claim to the truth of that life. It is about the hesitations, affirmations, and disruptive explosions that mark any text as it tries to describe and negotiate the world.* And it is also about how we in that world construct our own narratives or sense of ourselves—our own selves—from the material available to us, from what is at hand, from what we consume more than from what we produce. Yet such consumption can also be our downfall, our self-erasure as much as our self-making.

1. *A Hesitant Ethics*

The novel ends as it begins, with an affirmation—a simple “Yes” is its final word, which may be the narrator's response to his realization that death waits for him, too, or to the rather more banal observation that “for now it's strawberry season” (77). But alongside and undercutting these affirmations are many questions and anxieties. This is, as we have seen, a narrator who often does not seem all that sure of himself. And before the book proper begins there is a “Dedication by the Author” that declares that “what trips up my life is writing” (xiv), following which is a series of over a dozen alternative titles for the book itself: “The Hour of the Star,” but also “She Doesn't Know How to Scream,” “Account of the Preceding Facts,” and “Whistling in the Dark Wind,” for instance (1). It is as though it were up to the reader to be the final judge as to what the book should really be called, or as to whether the narrator (or author) has made the right decisions. As French feminist theorist and critic Hélène Cixous comments, “Each title could function as a key to the text” (*Reading with Clarice Lispector* 146). My question, then, is what difference a title makes, and how we might read this novel differently if it were entitled, say, “Singing the Blues” or “Discreet Exit through the Back Door” in place of *The Hour of the Star*. How do we evaluate these choices? How does it affect us to read a book that declares that it is still being written while we are reading it (“I'm writing at the same time I'm being read” [4])? Put down some thoughts. While you do that, I'll have a can of Coca-Cola, but I'll be right back.

Drinks Pairing: Coca-Cola

Macabéa eats and drinks very little, but she likes Coca-Cola. Indeed, her taste for Coke is one of the few fundamental facts of her existence, something that anchors her in the world and gives her a sense of who she is: “When she woke up she no longer knew who she was. Only later did she think with satisfaction: I’m a typist and a virgin, and I like coca-cola. Only then did she dress herself in herself, she spent the rest of her day obediently playing the role of being” (27). In fact, the narrator tells us that Coca-Cola is sponsoring the novel, forcing his hand, making him finally embark on his story: “the account that soon is going to have to start is written with the sponsorship of the most popular soft drink in the world, even though it’s not paying me a cent, a soft drink distributed in every country. [. . .] This drink which contains coca is today. It’s a way for a person to be up-to-date and in the now” (15). As Thomas Waldemer observes, the narrator thus presents “Coca-Cola [as] the point of departure for his text.” Waldemar suggests that the notion that Coke would really sponsor a text such as this is “as laughable as it is preposterous” (“Imperfect Harmony” 103). But the claim shows that the narrator is not so far-distanced from Macabéa as he may like to think, and that not even a writer such as Lispector can ever entirely escape the consumer culture that Coke instantiates and represents.

Some of the titles come from phrases (“The Right to Scream,” “As for the Future”) found in the text itself. Others point to possible interpretations and even value judgements: “A Sense of Loss,” “Cheap Tearjerker.” A couple, however, also point to a sense of ethical anguish, or alternatively an attempt to pass the buck, on the part of someone observing the events the book sets out to narrate: “It’s All My Fault,” “Let Her Deal with It,” “I Can’t Do Anything.” The book’s “star” (in the title we ultimately have) is here displaced, to stress instead the perspective of the bystander, the person on the side of the road, and of course the narrator himself who so frequently examines—but also washes his hands of—his own responsibilities and duties towards the character he is conjuring up for us.

Throughout the book, after all, the overly voluble (over-sharing) narrator turns to us to explain and justify himself where he can, and to throw himself on our mercy where he cannot or will not. Even down to the issue of his heroine’s death, he is keen to stress his limits, his powerlessness: “Is Macabéa by any chance going to die? How should I know?”

And when something does happen, his response—like Macabéa’s own resigned view of the world—is that this is just the way things are. It is fate, that is (like the accident itself that mows Macabéa down) all part of life’s game of chance. So why, then, talk of blame at all? “Who am I,” the author asks, “to rebuke the guilty? The worst part is that I have to forgive them. We must reach such a nothing that we indifferently love or don’t love the criminal who kills us” (72). But if this is in fact the lesson of the book—if this book, or any other, needs to offer a lesson—then it is perhaps only Macabéa herself who ever arrives at this point of bliss, such that she can forgive both the driver who kills her and the narrator who (for all his denials) has her killed.

Hélène Cixous (who, perhaps more than anyone else, helped to establish Lispector’s reputation outside of Brazil, not least by promoting her as an example of *écriture féminine* or specifically women’s writing) observes that in the end *The Hour of the Star* is a novel less about narrative—events and their consequences—than about a state of being, one that is moreover so common, especially in a country such as Brazil, that it goes almost without comment much of the time. This is a book about poverty, about “nonhaving,” about having nothing (*Reading with Clarice Lispector* 153). More, it is a book about how to approach such poverty: in the words of critic Cinthya Torres, it is “an unsettling yet beautiful reflection on the challenges of writing on poverty and the impoverished Other” (“On Poverty” 193). Torres adds that “for Lispector the challenge, as well as source of frustration, seems to be in composing an accurate and ethical portrayal of a subject and sphere unknown to most individuals and to which she cannot fully relate” (194). Hence the hesitation and doubt on the part of the narrator, the way in which he struggles with responsibility and blame, and with the assumptions he makes about a state, a way of being, that he can never fully comprehend, that slips out of his hands. Hence also the role of the narrator himself, as both a stand-in for and distancing from Lispector, a way of acknowledging that “author” and “narrator” are simply roles that we play, but which we can still learn to play better.

However self-aware the narrator may be about his role as a writer, what he can never fully grasp is that he, too, is but another character. The true author of *The Hour of the Star* is, of course, Clarice Lispector, who makes herself known only fleetingly: with the subtitle to the author’s dedication, “actually [*na verdade*], Clarice Lispector” (xiii), and with a signature inserted in the list of potential, but mostly discarded, titles for the novel. Yet

even these gestures of showing the author's hand are in turn misleading. For the author of the dedication is not "actually" Lispector in that there is no reason why we should believe that this is her own voice any more than we can believe her stand-in, to whom she has given the name of Rodrigo S. M. And the same goes for her as goes for Rodrigo when he asks himself "Or am I not an actor? Actually [*na verdade*] I'm more of an actor because with only one way to punctuate, I juggle with intonation and force another's breathing to accompany my text" (14). Lispector, too, can do no more than juggle with the limits imposed upon her by grammar and writing, which can only ever approximate truth, though they can perhaps be true to themselves, as at best a play with words. And if writing is compared to "playing ball" (albeit, in the first instance, paradoxically "without a ball" [8]), from the outset Lispector tries also to toss the ball to us, her readers, as the novel is described as awaiting our response: "It's an unfinished book because it's still waiting for an answer. An answer I hope someone in the world can give me. You?" (xiv). We are also, implicitly, characters in this novel! How will we respond to, relate to, account for a life such as Macabéa's? What title will we choose for that endeavor to live with the other, to share their world? And to what extent can we accept that we, too, are playing out roles first written for us by others?

2. *An Interrupted Consumption*

On its hesitant title page, a page still full of the possibilities and potential of what the novel might yet become, Lispector presents us with her signature, as though it were the proof of some legal claim to the text, a trace that confirms both her individuality as well as a contract made with the reader. And yet this signature is but a mass-produced image, identical on every copy of the book sold. Even within the book itself it is doubled, copied, in a photograph of the page mock-up, ready for type-setting by the publisher, that follows the title page itself, as though to present us with some of the otherwise hidden technical machinery and human labour required for any book to come to the market. As Marília Librandi Rocha observes, "It is in this way that [Lispector] begins a fictional play within her fiction, which gives her book a theatrical touch of performativity in that it exposes the framework of creation and its correlative process" (*Writing by Ear* 48). The author, too, is part of a larger and more complex machine that sustains and enables representation. Language and the market together work to erase individuality; and yet they are also the tools with which we endlessly try to distinguish ourselves, to make ourselves heard.

Macabéa, in turn, is a creature and victim of these same forces, neither more nor less so than Rodrigo S. M. or Clarice Lispector, though her existence is rather more precarious than that of either the narrator or the author (except that, actually [*na verdade?*], Lispector would be dead by the time this book was published). One sign of this precariousness is the length of time it takes the narrator to come up with a name for her, and even then it is only a first name, and a strange name at that (Olímpico tells her it “sounds like a disease, a skin disease” [35]), a name that is also an allusion, a gesture towards the Maccabees, rebel Jewish warriors who are the subject of a semi-apocryphal Biblical book. But what, if anything, is it that our reluctant heroine is rebelling against or resisting?

Macabéa seems so much of the time to be so passive. She is described as “obediently playing the role of being” (27). But she does have her tastes and preferences, “her pleasures” (30). Even for someone who consumes so little, she is a creature of the market: almost literally so, in that her diet apparently consists entirely of hot dogs and Coca-Cola. She listens to the radio, where she picks up snippets of information about something called “culture” (for instance, that “a man wrote a book called ‘Alice in Wonderland’”) alongside “the correct time [. . .] and ads” (41). Indeed, she is fascinated as much by the adverts as by the shows that they punctuate: “she liked to read by candlelight the ads she cut out of old newspapers lying around the office. Because she collected ads. She pasted them into an album” (30). Moreover, she watches films—she “loved horror films and musicals,” we are told (49). And her dreams come directly from mass culture: to be a film star, like Marilyn Monroe. Critic Thomas Waldemer argues that “Macabéa's cultural consumption consists almost entirely of commercial propaganda. Her inner life is a series of commercials that offer her everything she cannot have and that are the promise of everything she cannot be” (“Life Eating Life” 67). The fortune-teller only plays into such plots drawn from melodrama and the movies when she predicts that a handsome foreigner will pick her up and whisk her off to a fairy-tale future, in which her self-fulfillment will be defined by what she wears: “my poor little orphan, you’ll wear satin and velvet and even get a fur coat!” When Macabéa pragmatically points out that “you don’t need a fur coat in the heat of Rio,” the fortune-teller responds that “you’ll have it just to dress up” (68). At last she will be able to play a new part, a new role involving something more than simply “being,” even if the script is written elsewhere.

Consumption is also a disease—the tuberculosis that the doctor diagnoses. And though it is not the TB that kills her, it is a Mercedes-Benz, a name-brand imported luxury car whose driver does not bother to stop to see the damage he has caused. As Waldemer puts it, “it is as if Macabéa has wandered into a commercial where she does not belong. Her mere presence is indigestible because it interrupts the illusion of consumerist perfection.” (“Life Eating Life” 67). Alternatively: is this another instance of the many explosions that punctuate the text, the wordless detonations (explosion!) that seem to indicate some hidden violence that these media narratives cannot fully occlude? No wonder it is hard to write when the force of such interruptions threatens to blow holes in the fragile web of language. Struck down, “her face gently turned towards the gutter” (70), Macabéa hovers between life and death. Lispector (or Rodrigo S. M.) suggests that it is only in this moment that Macabéa is born, “born for the embrace of death” (74). And that it is only, lying there, that she realizes “her destiny [. . .] to be a woman.” But this is a strange kind of becoming: neither subject nor object (for in truth in most of her short life, she has never been either), the last words we hear her say, “clearly and distinctly,” is the phrase “As for the future” (75), a phrase that is also one of the book’s potential titles. This is a future that seems closed off to her, as much as it had ever been, except that she has been immortalized, however reluctantly, by the author and narrator whose frame of reference she forever escapes, “finally free of herself and us” (76). In the words of the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, commenting on a passage in English novelist Charles Dickens’s *Our Mutual Friend* in which a man is similarly agonizing, neither fully dead nor fully alive: “Between his life and his death, there is a moment that is only that of a life playing with death. The life of the individual gives way to an impersonal and yet singular life that releases a pure event freed from the accidents of internal and external life, that is, from the subjectivity and objectivity of what happens” (*Pure Immanence* 28). Soon enough, however: “OK, it’s over” (76), the narrator of *The Hour of the Star* tells us, and his thoughts turn to the strawberries no doubt on offer in the local market. Consumption (and narrative, subjectivity, things happening one after another) goes on as ever, but it has been briefly interrupted, for those with eyes to see or ears to hear.

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Song: "Una furtiva lagrima" (Enrico Caruso)