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ON POVERTY AND THE REPRESENTATION OF THE OTHER IN
THE HOUR OF THE STAR BY CLARICE LISPECTOR

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The problem of justice for me is such an obvious and basic
feeling that I am unable to surprise myself on its account
—and unless I can surprise myself, I am unable to write.
Also, because for me, to write is a quest.

"Literature and Justice," Clarice Lispector

The Hour of the Star, Clarice Lispector's last novel published in 1977, has been considered her most socially committed text. Labeled as a difficult writer more concerned with reflecting allegorical representations of the individual than of her reality, Lispector was criticized for her lack of engagement with a literature that addressed the social problems affecting Brazilian society, embraced by fellow Regionalist writers such as Jorge Amado and Graciliano Ramos. While *The Hour of the Star* is a story that places its social commentary at the forefront, it is also an unsettling yet beautiful reflection on the challenges of writing on poverty and the impoverished Other.

An insightful reader and critic of Lispector's work, Hélène Cixous observes that *The Hour of the Star* is a text on poverty that is not poor at all. Not as dense as her previous books, Lispector nevertheless succeeds "to speak from such richness on the topic of such thinness" (143). Interested in the interplay of strategies through which an account of the "ordinary" and "unnoticeable" turns into "an absolutely grandiose" poetic narrative, Cixous focuses on the question of the author, Clarice, and her attempt to portray "real, primitive poverty." "Those who have can never have

nothing...There are always remains of having, even if one no longer has"(153), she remarks, to note Lispector's tremendous and thoughtful effort to dispose herself of everything in order to approach the world of someone who has nothing and aspires for nothing. Taking Cixous as a point of departure, I am interested in exploring Lispector's motives in writing about the troubled figure of the narrator Rodrigo and, from there, appreciating a critical consciousness when it comes to writing about the Other. By making no attempts to disguise her efforts in approaching poverty and the poor, Lispector reveals the contradictions and restraints of language in the depiction of the Other. Further, and more importantly, this exposition acknowledges the impossibility of authentically representing him without falling into romanticized stereotypes or imprinting one's own biases. Even though writing on the Other and his reality is attainable –and Regionalist authors did so extensively in the 1930s– 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.

Praised for her originality and experimental narratives since her first book, *Near to the Wild Heart* (1944), Lispector's fiction diverted from traditional forms and topics. Although this last novel takes on a social tone, more attuned to her contemporary Brazilian context, it does so on her own terms, truthful to her work and introspective nature.

Born with a legacy of misfortune in one of the poorest regions of the northeast, the young protagonist in *The Hour of the Star*, Macabéa, is raised by an unloving aunt after the death of her parents to typhoid fevers in the backwoods. Barely literate and poorly equipped with a basic typing course, she finds her way from the rural Alagoas to the bustling and urban Rio de Janeiro. Living on hot dogs and coca cola, her frugal existence unfolds around the bedsit she shares with four other girls, an underpaid job, and occasional moments of joy: "Acre Street for living, Lavradio Street for working, the docks for excursions on Sundays"(30). Unaware of her outward misery, the narrator notes that Macabéa passively performs her role of living, simply existing without questioning her existence or her poverty. "Nobody desires her," remarks Rodrigo, as Macabéa was so hopelessly tiny that she went unnoticed to everyone but him.

How does one represent poverty? Can art accurately portray the voice of the oppressed? Can writing become a force of change? Despite the common criticism that Lispector was known to be a self-centered writer indifferent to social problems, as a matter of fact, several of her texts evidence that she was mindful of the realities of the poor –her Saturday column in the *Jornal do Brasil* addressed poverty, a topic that haunted her from early on in her life.¹ In a text that traces Lispector's

literary incursions into the topic of poverty, Marta Peixoto argues that, “despite her continued awareness of social injustice and her sense of the urgent nature of the problem it presents, she felt unable to approach it ‘de um modo “literário” (isto é, transformado na veemência da arte)’ [in a ‘literary’ way, in other words, transformed into the vehemence of art]” (106). Poverty was a tangible experience for Lispector, first during the family’s early years in Maceió and later during her childhood in Recife. In her autobiographical account, *No Exílio* (1948), her sister Elisa recounts Pedro Lispector’s desperate efforts to provide for his ailing wife and young daughters as a peddler upon their arrival in Brazil.² Several years later, Lispector settled in the upper middle-class neighborhood of Leme, where the city’s uneven urban landscape placed the rich and the poor side by side, and she coexisted with the slums’ precariousness. In “O que eu queria ter sido” [What I Should Liked to Have Been], one of her weekly *crônicas* published in November 2, 1968 during Brazil’s first years of dictatorship, a candid Clarice confesses how ever since she was a child she would have liked to have been a fighter to defend other people’s rights:

The social drama left me distressed and bewildered as I witnessed the injustices to which the so-called underprivileged classes are subjected. In Recife, where I spent my childhood, I used to visit our maid’s house in the slums every Sunday. And the misery I saw there convinced me that something had to be done to change the situation. I wanted to act. (199-200)³

Instead, she became someone that feels deep down and meditates through the word. “Someone so unimportant, so very unimportant,” she humbly concedes at the end of the text, almost as if an apology. In contrast with Regionalist writers who viewed poverty as a literary subject from which to denounce social exploitation, Lispector finds it difficult to depict the poor and his hunger just by an “act of imagination.”⁴ Even when imagined, the scene of the famished boy asking his mother for food in “As crianças chatas” [Tiresome Children] appears too real and is a reminder of a poignant reality that she cannot accept and wants to ignore: “Until overcome by suffering and weariness, they both doze off in their shell of resignation. I cannot bear resignation. Ah, how I swallow my disgust with greed and pleasure” (33). In another chronicle, “A entrevista alegre” [A Pleasant Interview] from December 30, 1967, and in response to the question if she would be prepared to devote her writing to a political cause, Lispector replied: “Frankly, I see myself as being committed. Everything I write relates, at least deep down inside me, to the reality around us. Perhaps this aspect of my writing will become

more forceful one day. Perhaps not" (84). Aware of the injustice and perils of her times, for Peixoto Lispector's reluctance to address poverty directly in full view corresponds to her self-awareness in belonging to a social group that strengthened the social difference between rich and poor (2002: 111). Although true, I would like to further argue that it is her preoccupation *both* to naturalize poverty and to turn the powerless Other into a character of amusement. From there, her angst-ridden character Rodrigo as well as her powerlessness in the face of a reality she cannot alter through writing, makes her hesitant in tackling the subject of poverty through fiction. However, it is precisely through words and her capacity for feeling that she wages her own fight for justice.

Most of Lispector's female characters are well-to-do women who reside in middle-class neighborhoods in Rio de Janeiro, whose comfortable lives conceal their inner neuroses and frustrations. Lispector does approach the underprivileged Other's uncomfortable life, but cautiously and generally, through characters that function as troubling agents of an apparent flawless social order, such as the blind man in "Amor" [Love], the beggar in "A bela e a fera" [Beauty and the Beast], the old defenseless woman in "Viagem a Petrópolis" [Journey to Petropolis], and the enigmatic housemaid Janair in *The Passion according to G.H.* (1964). An interesting character is the domestic servant, a common presence around Brazil's middle and upper classes who despite their intimate relationship with their employers in the private sphere, remains an alien and uncomfortable presence. In Lispector's chronicle "O lanche" [The Party], the narrator recreates an imaginary tea-party in which all of her guests are the maids she has had throughout her life. Seated with arms crossed over their bosoms, the women remain silent until one by one they speak to the narrator. "I want three days off during the Carnival, madam, for I'm tired of playing Cinderella," says one. "Food is a question of salt. Food is a question of salt" (361), remarks another. Through carefully crafted responses that first appear trivial, Lispector explores a new order of interactions at the practical and symbolic level, as Peixoto notes, and through which the reader is confronted with social and discursive practices that enforce the distance between them. In another chronicle, "A mineira calada" [The Quiet Woman from Minas], she recounts how once her maid Aninha asked to read some of her work. At first surprised by such unusual request, she replied that her books were somehow complicated, to which the maid, unaffected, responded: "I like complicated things. I can't stomach *sugared water*" (67). A character that appears in a few of her chronicles, Aninha's response surprises her once again as it forces her to rethink the class prejudices she inadvertently practices in her everyday life.

Although Lispector admits that maids make her feel uncomfortable

because their presence serves as a reminder of the deeply-rooted unequal social order, she does not avoid the conversation. Rather, by placing her conflicted narrator and the helpless protagonist side by side in *The Hour of the Star*, she takes a frank look at the Other, challenging the reader to reevaluate his views and preconceptions on poverty, justice, and empathy, while simultaneously reflecting on the creative process of writing. In the following section, I will explore Lispector's authorial voice behind Rodrigo's ambivalent character and her ultimate approach to poverty and the Other.

Composed of true facts and written with simplicity, Rodrigo begins his account forewarning the reader that his is a plain story of the "unremarkable adventures of a girl living in a hostile city." Fragile and with little to say, the narrator deems his mandate to speak on behalf of his undernourished heroine: "What I am writing is something more than mere invention; it is my duty to relate everything about this girl among thousands of others like her... For one has a right to shout. So, I am shouting" (13-14). But quite the contrary takes place. In a rambling tone that overshadows that of his protagonist, Rodrigo appears as a conflicted presence whose intentions and role result unclear. If at the beginning he reveals sympathy for his protagonist, soon after he is more interested in describing his own efforts expended in narrating poverty. One wonders if he cares about Macabéa, or if he is more concerned with finding a way to channel his voice and overcome his own marginality.

Deliberately exposing the narrator's inconsistencies and fictionality, Lispector deconstructs the creative process in order to reflect on how writing about poverty, otherwise viewed as a powerful mechanism to redress social injustices, loses meaning in its composition and becomes a tool that normalizes it. For what Rodrigo represents as a wearisome task that demands him to "acquire dark circles under [his] eyes from lack of sleep: dozing from sheer exhaustion like a manual laborer" (19), a view on poverty based on assumptions and social clichés, to Lispector is a true calamity that is not poetic in the least. A text "absolutely unequalled in terms of signification, audacity, and invention" (145), as Cixous observes, Lispector's inventiveness consists in crafting a text within a text from where to approach the difficult yet necessary question on the Other from both a social and discursive stand.

Beginning with its structure, *The Hour of the Star* proves to be anything but a simple story. A dedicatory opens the text and highlights that in truth Clarice is the writer, not her narrator Rodrigo, and then the text is followed by fifteen alternative titles, like *The Blame is Mine*; or *Let Her Fend for Herself*; or *She Doesn't Know How to Protest*, among which comes forward the author's signature, *Clarice Lispector*, next to *The Right to Protest* and without the accompanying conjunction *or*, a symbolic gesture that

blurs the distance between author and text, and thus of fiction and reality. After this sections comes the narrator, Rodrigo's, persistent voice that acts as a prelude to the text and ends up engulfing it. From the protagonist, Macabéa, the reader does not hear much, getting only glimpses of her life through Rodrigo's erratic thoughts. Only in the middle of the text does Rodrigo retake the reader to the thread of the plot, when he announces having found three pages in the trash, that Macabéa surfaces and appears in full view to the reader. Interestingly, like the protagonist, Rodrigo also faces marginalization; however, his is more poignant as it is real and transcends the fictional sphere. In contrast to Macabéa, who ignores the actual conditions of her existence, Rodrigo is aware of his alienation in a city in which he feels incapable of positioning himself within a particular social group. "Yes, I belong to no social category, marginal as I am," he laments, "the upper class consider me a strange creature, the middle classes regard me with suspicion, afraid that I might unsettle them, while the lower classes avoid me" (18). Displaced within reality, Rodrigo finds in the fictional ground the means to create a character in whom he can be reflected and signified: "I see the girl from the Northeast looking in the mirror and – the ruffle of a drum – in the mirror there appears my own face, weary and unshaven. We have reversed roles so completely" (22). By projecting his own marginality over Macabéa's life, Rodrigo symbolically invests himself with an authority he lacks in reality. Cynthia A. Sloan observes that this interchanging of roles represents for Rodrigo "the only way to transcend the limits of the self" (96). Powerless in reality, it is through his protagonist that he seeks to change his fate. However, his aspiration to relocate in discourse does not come easily. When he transfigures himself through Macabéa, her life, destiny, and hunger, become his also. "An entire human being who is as much alive as I am" (19), Rodrigo ends up losing himself in a character that pressures his own for a response. An unbearable burden he does not know how to represent any longer, he has no choice but to kill her.

Regarding Rodrigo's legitimacy as an engaged narrator, we should follow the issue of his insistence for stark realism, his efforts at certain point appearing exaggerated, if not disproportionate. Confident in his role, he remarks that facts and words are enough for him to capture the spirit of language and immerse himself into the plot. Peixoto finds this treatment of poverty problematic as he "constructs Macabéa and the other characters by calling upon openly displayed class prejudices" (1991:195). Olímpico the Jesus with his gold tooth and greasy hair, Glória and her swinging hips and mentholated cigarettes, the poor people's doctor that cares more about his earnings than that of his ailing patients, or the other four Mariás roommates, as poor and unskilled as Macabéa, compose a portrait in which poverty appears as a standardized experience. While

one could argue that Rodrigo's intention is to offer an honest portrait of the underprivileged in order to give substance to a subject generally seen only as a statistic, and who, in becoming familiar to the reader, can prompt a response, he later admits that he is unacquainted with such reality. Can poverty be disguised as an authentic experience? It appears so. However, intentionality remains a central matter here. Macabéa's consent to a life of hunger and misery does not correspond to her true wishes, if she were to decide, but to Rodrigo's view of her reality, feelings, and mediocre aspirations. When he comments that she finds happiness in going once a month to the movies, craving for a chance to eat meat, or sipping cold coffee before going to bed, he views poverty as a condition, rather than a social problem. Despite the fictional nature of the text, Macabéa's hunger, the same of that the crying boy of "As crianças chatas," is a real problem and calls for a response.

In drawing attention to the narrator's prejudices, as when Rodrigo claims that anyone but a woman could write this story as a "woman would weep her heart out" (14), Lispector now calls upon the reader and his own role in consuming the text. In *The Author's Dedication*, *alias Clarice Lispector's* opening text, she summons the reader to take part in her story: "This story unfolds in a state of emergency and public calamity. It is an unfinished book because it offers no answer. An answer I hope someone somewhere in the world may be able to provide. You perhaps?" (8). Lispector is fully aware that her opening text is the effective space to present the reader with a responsibility and burden that not everybody is ready to bear. For example, Carla de Sousa, the protagonist of "Abela e a fera," is unable to feel empathy for the beggar and his condition, focusing instead on her own feelings and thoughts. Removed from the reality of poverty, the beggar exposes her to her privilege, unfulfilled social responsibility, and guilt. Growing desperate by her situation, "she felt an unexpectedly murderous urge: to kill all the beggars in the world! Just so she, after the massacre, could enjoy her extraordinary well-being in peace" (656).⁵ Unlike Carla, Lispector allows herself exposure to poverty, requesting the help of the reader to put into writing the poor: "Amen for all of us," she concludes in her dedication.

Rodrigo affirms that he writes because he is bored and has nothing else to do. Why does Clarice write? Although she acknowledges in several of her chronicles that there is little she can do by solely writing, as it has no real effect in the concrete world, she perseveres in her task of meditating and feeling.

Here, I would like to attempt an interpretation of this question using Sartre's idea of *bad faith*. A philosopher that Lispector acknowledges having read, Jean Paul Sartre defines freedom as a fundamental structure of the conscious being. In recognizing oneself free, the individual realizes

that he can make choices in life for which he is entirely responsible. "We are condemned to be free," notes Sartre to explain how freedom can become a heavy burden, generating a sense of anguish in the subject once he realizes his tremendous responsibility towards the choices and actions he takes. Aware of the distress freedom engenders, Sartre identifies two attitudes for addressing this anguish. Individuals can either choose to make a conscious and responsible use of their freedom, known as authenticity; or they can opt to flee the anguish by lying to themselves. This second option is known as bad faith, or the conscious attempt to deceive or lie to oneself as a recourse to hide one's freedom. Freedom is not something that one can escape, and those who choose to be authentic will irremediably face anguish. Although self-deceptive and temporary, bad faith represents a recurrent temptation for the individual. The ending of *The Hour of the Star* is by all means unexpected. In an unusually self-indulgent act, and per advice and help of Glória, Macabéa decides for the first time to inquire about her future, visiting Madame Carlota, a retired prostitute turned fortuneteller. To her surprise, Macabéa learns how miserable her life has been until that moment and how from now on a promising destiny awaits her. Incredulous of her discovery, although hopeful for her new future, she leaves the medium's house and is tragically hit by a car, dying in the middle of the street. Rodrigo, hesitant about what to do –if he should change her future or let her die– resolves that there is nothing he can do to change her destiny. "Et tu, Brute?" he seems to ask himself, as if in shock at his own betrayal. Rodrigo's refusal to give his protagonist a different finale could be interpreted as his own bad faith action. Once Macabéa becomes a more demanding presence, surpassing her initial role as a reflection of Rodrigo's marginality, the narrator realizes the big responsibility he has assumed with respect to the happiness and future of a person who depends on him. Fearing the costs of bearing this heavy burden, he argues that someone is to blame for her miserable condition, as he only describes the facts of a reality towards which he has no direct responsibility. Furthermore, he suggests that in her death she ultimately frees herself of the immitigable tragedy that is her life. Here, and in relinquishing his authorial responsibility onto someone or something else, Rodrigo seems to suggest that the facts he claimed as truth to depict poverty were indeed literary mechanisms he employed to present a persuasive portrayal of a hopeless reality, instead of an honest and responsible account of a reality he ignores. This uncompassionate attitude challenges Rodrigo's ethical approach in voicing a marginal subjectivity. In choosing to kill Macabéa, Rodrigo individually liberates himself from a painful but necessary duty that would require more concrete action from his current role. In the broader picture, his personal failure signifies a larger social problem in which a

ruling class is complicit in its decision to ignore a situation that is a direct consequence of its unsuccessful actions to overcome these divisions. In either scenario, the lack of an ethical approach towards the poor and their situation not only unmasks the prejudices and hypocritical attitude of the ruling elite, but also the insincere sentiments of the middle class towards the less privileged.

In an unusual gesture that she describes as a sort of forgiveness of herself in the chronicle "Literatura e justiça" [Literature and Justice] from *The Foreign Legion*, Lispector observes that while her contribution to the human and social problem has not been carried through in an "active way," that is to say within the "maze of political intrigue," it has been through writing that she found a way to address the question of justice. "Long before I ever felt 'art', I felt the profound beauty of human conflict. I tend to be straightforward in my approach to any social problem. I wanted 'to do' something, as if writing were not doing anything" (124). Aware of her social reality, it is through her reflective nature and writing that Lispector finds the way to do more, for her, her characters, and the reader. Little as she is, Macabéa finds through language the means to overcome her nothingness and become a star. In her self-realization of a future and a different life, even momentarily, Lispector allows her to be seen. To the reader she speaks too, challenging him to think of his own prejudices and indulgent apathy in the face of a reality that, despite existing in the imaginary as a fiction, is all too real.

For Sartre, all stories present a particular mode of reasoning that respond to a specific ideological context, but also: "all works of the mind contain within themselves the image of the reader for whom they are intended" (73). This corresponding relationship becomes evident in Rodrigo's regular calls to his reader to validate his own perception of the poor, which in turn brings to light the reader's biased view of poverty and complacency with an unfair reality. In the same manner, the ironic tone Rodrigo employs for representing the poor is shared by a reader who identifies with it and conforms with Rodrigo's class prejudices: "if the reader is financially secure and enjoys the comforts of life, he must step out of himself and see how others live...here I am acting as a safety-valve for the bourgeoisie" (30). Macabéa's story allows Rodrigo to write on the poor and himself. More importantly, it provides the reader with the means to experience a reality of precariousness that he or she is unfamiliar with from literature, in which he or she feels close to the disgrace of a marginal class. However, even though Rodrigo denounces a social problem and blames someone else for this situation, it is interesting to note that he does not question his readers' values and ethical responsibility. Thus, the reader—as Lispector suggests in her dedicatory—contents himself with relating to this story "in technicolor

to add a touch of luxury” as a simple observer, instead of a conscientious reader. Sharing the same apathy, the narrator feels liberated of his moral duty when he declares that Macabéa is dead, his story finished, and that strawberry season is around the corner.

Cixous explains that in her study of Lispector’s novel she intends to examine what Macabéa is, instead of what she is not, which she finds easier to illustrate, in order to unveil the text’s strategies for writing on poverty. Several of Lispector’s fellow writers preferred to present compelling portrayals of backwardness in order to denounce the political and social crisis of their time through literature. Lispector, in turn, chooses a different option that goes beyond the initial portrayal of poverty Cixous discusses: to propose a critique to inequality at the same time that she uses the fictional discourse to disclose the mechanisms from which poverty is recounted and reinforced. In doing so, Lispector unveils how some narratives that claim a commitment to the poor, can actually lead to the misperception of a reality that continues to reproduce a biased understanding of the marginal subject. Her hesitancy to write on the Other should be interpreted too as her lucid awareness that, notwithstanding her significant efforts to apprehend the poor Other, her portrayal would be fragmented and serve as a reflection of her own values and views. Thus, *The Hour of the Star* should also be read as her successful denunciation of a social calamity and her honest surrender to the Other. In both situations, the potential of the word aims to restore the voice and visibility of the Other in discourse, whereas in reality this is more difficult.

NOTES

- 1 See the work of Irene Marques for more information.
- 2 Quoted in Benjamin Moser, especially Chapter 6. See also Earl E. Fitz.
- 3 All chronicles quoted from the English translation *Discovering the World* unless stated otherwise.
- 4 “Macabéa’s hunger is both a product of material deprivation and a metaphor of the totally vulnerable and denuded existence that Lispector sets up as an ideal in many texts. In this polyvalent encoding of poverty, Lispector questions the dubious moral and psychic forces at work in the representation of oppression. She points out the absurd of the well-off writer who imagines the position of someone who goes hungry, stressing –and giving in to– the urge to engage in such an act of imagination”. Marta Peixoto, *Passionate Fictions* (1994: 97).
- 5 See Clarice Lispector, *Complete Stories*.

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