

«PHILOSOPHY IN THE FLESH»: BEING HUMAN WITH CLARICE LISPECTOR

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CLARICE LISPECTOR'S WORK MAY BE UNDERSTOOD, in some of its central features, as a literary impersonation of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's thesis about metaphor as a bodily structure, a vehicle by which we are moved in passionate spirituality through the use of a neural mechanism that recruits our abilities to perceive, to move, to feel and to envision, in the service of theoretical and philosophical thought and also of spiritual experience (Lakoff/Johnson 1999: 568). Her notions of the «metaphysics of matter» (Sá 2004: 280), her constant search for transcendence and spirituality through body and substance, her belief in writing as a «pure impulse» (Lispector 1984: 294) and in the use of language as a way to incorporate the no-word, to understand what is hardly reproduceable, refer us to Lakoff and Johnson's considerations on the embodied sense of spiritual life and to their conception of subject and self in the cognitive unconscious:

An embodied spirituality requires an aesthetic attitude to the world that is central to self nurturance, to the nurturance of others, and to the nurturance of the world itself. Embodied spirituality requires an understanding that nature is not inanimate and less than human, but animated and more than human. It requires pleasure, joy in the bodily connection with earth and air, sea and sky, plants and animals – and the recognition that they are all more than human, more than any human

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beings could ever achieve. Embodied spirituality is more than spiritual *experience*. It is an ethical relationship to the physical world (Abram and Spretnak *apud* Lakoff/Johnson 1999: 566).

I would say that Lispector's spirituality, her voracious need for self understanding brings her to an aesthetic quest, present in her use of language, through embodiment in Brazilian modernism. This, divided as a rule into three phases or generations, emerged in 1922 with the Week of Modern Art. It absorbed many of the ideals of the European avant-garde but developed in a different way, selecting, expurgating and assimilating the European tradition and emphasising the value of popular and regional elements. The metaphor of anthropofagy, used by the movement brings up the clash, the encounter between the primitive and the Latin culture and the critical swallowing up of the modern and civilised. Lispector's work reflects this blend of modernity and primitivism, this «encounter between opposites» (Williams 2006), the «travessia do oposto» (Sá 1993) through the exploration of the oxymoron so frequent in her writing. If we read her work as an oxymoron, an interplay between the basic magma of life and the metaphysical perplexities it generates, we will find at least three areas of description: devouring and eating, primordial substances and the animals. The author uses these *topoi*, as a means of configuring her obsessive monocentric narrative (Nunes 1989) and, as a consequence of this, they may take on multiple forms.

Hunger is one of the impulses vital to individual survival and a basic drive from infancy, starting with the child experiencing of things, first with its mouth; it is a way of fusing with and incorporating the outside world, a way of abolishing frontiers between self and the external objects; this may bring the reconstruction of subjectivity or acquisition of a condemning knowledge, traditionally symbolised by Eve's crime of eating the apple. «Food can be seen to act as the 'transitional object' which establishes the limits between internal self and external world, as vital to the development of subjectivity as is language» (Williams 2006: 106). The association between words and food goes back to the Bible and we should also remember the Christian Eucharist's powerful image and Lispector's Jewish origins. Lispector's featuring of the act of eating is heterogeneous but stems

from only one link – the connection with the organic. In «O Jantar» (Lispector 1989), Lispector uses the description of a narrator's watching of an aged man eating dinner in a restaurant, his degradation and elusive authority, to bring up the notion of dualism in life: blood and tears, emotional and material, the impulse to devour and to kill - «O velho comedor de crianças pensa nas suas profundezas» (*ibid.* 72) and «ele parece mais fraco embora ainda enorme e embora capaz de apunhalar qualquer um de nós» (*ibid.* 73), the grotesque and the energetic, the «powerfulness» and the «ruin» (*ibid.* 73), the nausea before the conflictual consciousness of feeling:

mas eu sou um homem ainda; quando me traíram e assassinaram, quando alguém foi embora para sempre, ou perdi o que de melhor me restava, ou quando soube que vou morrer eu não como. Não sou ainda esta potência, esta construção, esta ruína. Empurro o prato, rejeito a carne e seu sangue. (*ibid.* 73)

Food and its final annihilation is used to reveal this contrast and the supremacy of the self, but once more, a way out of an impossible road.

In «Uma história de tanto amor» (Lispector 1971), the act of eating brings the physical pleasure of incorporation and possession and evokes the Catholic ritual of transubstantiation in the Mass. When her favourite pet chicken is killed for dinner the protagonist feels the animal inside her:

Comeu Eponina mais do que todo o resto da família, comeu sem fome, mas com um prazer quase físico porque sabia agora que assim Eponina se incorporaria nela e se tornaria mais sua do que em vida. Tinham feito Eponina ao molho pardo. De modo que a menina, num ritual pagão que lhe foi transmitido de corpo a corpo através dos séculos, comeu-lhe a carne e bebeu-lhe o sangue. (Lispector 1971: 158)

The best example of clear devouring in search of the essence, of the living nucleus is the eating of the cockroach in *A Paixão segundo G. H.* (Lispector 1964). But this eating has little to do with that of «O Jantar», nothing to do with the nutritional side of food; the cockroach

is repellent, filthy and forbidden by the Bible. Eating here is a ritual and symbolic act which brings the confrontation of the narrator with herself: «ela é a solenidade de si própria e não tem mais medo de consumir-se ao servir ao ritual consumidor – o ritual é o próprio processar-se da vida do núcleo, o ritual não é exterior a ele: o ritual é inerente» (Lispector 1988: 75). Eating is not a generative power to sustain the body organically, the cockroach is not food, but a way to access the «neutro inexplicável e vivo [...] o protoplasma, o sêmen e a proteína» (*ibid.* 66). This «primordial matter», «this plasma» (*ibid.* 64) is also what the narrator is made of; that is why she says she is eating herself too (*ibid.* 83) and she speaks about self-consumption (*ibid.* 75) and of spitting out herself (*ibid.* 107). The intensity and strength of the organic elements are used and conformed once again to Lispector's monocentrism: the best proof of transmutation of herself into herself would be to put the cockroach into her mouth (*ibid.* 107). However the narrator will finally spit it out, feel nauseated, thus bringing up one of the underlying questions of Lispector's work: the basic living mistake of repugnance; feeling repugnance, though necessary, contradicts the material side of the narrator's self (*ibid.* 105), feeling repugnance at kissing a lepar, at the vision of a dead rat as in the short story «Perdoando Deus», at the blind man chewing gum in «Amor» or the wound in the beggar's leg in «A Bela e a Fera ou a Ferida Grande demais». When merging the modernist crisis of the subject, postmodernist hybridism of forms and constant self-interrogating play of language, with the vitality of organic and inorganic matter surrounding us, Lispector is bringing together Lakoff and Johnsons's embodied reason in search of answers for philosophical and ontological questions: «quando se realiza o viver, pergunta-se: mas era só isto? E a resposta é: não é só isto, é exactamente isto. [...] A trajetória somos nós mesmos» (*ibid.* 111 and 113).

Lispector's incorporation of the Other brings with it an essentialism about primordial substances also revealed in other works: in *Uma Aprendizagem ou O Livro dos Prazeres* (Lispector 1994) Lóri's visit to the market is part of her «search for the world» (Lispector 1994: 144) and for identity; there, again, she tries to reach the living neutral of things through the non human; she sees pure blood dropping from a red beet (*ibid.* 144), she takes a bite of the «flesh of a pear» (*ibid.* 145)

and tries to understand the importance of each thing in the market, in itself and as a whole; but what is the whole? asks Lóri. Everytime she goes into the essence of something to meet the final answer, Lispector comes to a dead end. And it is language that helps her to construct or deconstruct this paradox. In *Água Viva* (Lispector 1993) she says: «Não. Não é fácil. Mas 'é'. Comi a minha própria placenta para não precisar comer durante quatro dias» (Lispector 1993: 39). Everything is here associated to the idea of birth, birth of the being and of the text, the writing.

One of the best examples of the interplay between the physical being and the spiritual experience is the novel *A Maçã no Escuro* (Lispector 1992) where natural things imposing their splendour are in opposition to language and social systems. Martim, the main character, running away from his past and from society starts working on a farm where he will try to recover his personal identity, starting from the root of things; in the first steps of this journey he sleeps in a barn, in a desolated ground, between animals, stones and shadows, a «tertiary ground of fundamental life» (*ibid.* 77), reproducing the image of the mother-earth as origin and container of all things. He starts his work in a stable, which causes revulsion in him because of its filthiness, flies, smells, cows, a «smell of matter» (*ibid.* 90). But this contact will bring him the possibility of going forward spiritually, of getting inside the timing of the cows and looking at the stable as one of them would:

O curral era um lugar quente e bom que pulsava como uma veia grossa. Era à base dessa larga veia que homens e bichos tinham filhos. Martim suspirou cansado com o enorme esforço: acabara de „descortinar“. Era a partir dessa veia larga que um grande animal atravessava um riacho espalhando água que brilha. (...) Era por causa dessa pulsação que as montanhas eram longe e altas. Era por isso que as vacas molhavam o chão com um barulho forte. Era por causa desse latejar que vagas migratórias saíram de zonas frias para as temperaturas (*ibid.* 92-93).

As mentioned earlier, the animals are the third element illustrating the Lispectorian fusion of the two elements I have been discussing. She says: «todos os seres vivos, que não o homem, são um escândalo

de maravilhamento: fomos modelados e sobrou muita matéria-prima – it – e formaram-se então os bichos» (Lispector 1993: 60). There is, therefore, an animal side inhabiting the human which is revealed in the animal images and characters and which links humans to the primitive and often liberating forces of life (Lispector 1994: 22). They keep the primitive, ancestral essence and participate of the nucleus of things. Animals are mediators between inanimated matter and humans and they benefit from the simplicity of spontaneously living without human selfconsciousness. They are frequently used to teach people valuable lessons about the facts of life as happens in «A Galinha» (*Laços de Família*) or «A Legião Estrangeira» (*A Legião Estrangeira*). Starting significantly in the egg, and with the exception of the buffalo, most of the animals are domestic or liable to be brought to domesticity. As Benedito Nunes very clearly states, the presence of these animals is still the human presence (Nunes 1989: 131), as the cockroach is partly the narrator and the narrator is partly the cockroach («então, pela porta da danação eu comi a vida e fui comida pela vida», Lispector 1988: 77); but they also have the function of contrasting the human existence to suggest the world is a place where all eat each other, as dramatized in the short story «A menor mulher do mundo» (*Laços de Família*). Devouring is intimately connected with animality; both allude to different modulations and levels of significance: i. e. the simple act of eating, as was said before, but also to greediness as a form of overcoming emptiness, to the violence wreaked on the weak or to the erotic imagery, namely in the volume *A Via Crucis do Corpo* (Souza 2000). This view of animality echoes Lakoff and Johnson's notion that the environment is part of our being, the locus of our existence and identity, as part of nature itself (1999: 566).

Lispector's writing oscillates between a strong natural world, autonomous, refulgent of life, physical, and the incomplete, linguistically tentative, social and cultural plan of the human spirituality. These oppositions, structurally corresponding to the author's frequent use of the oxymoron and interrogation - and we should not forget that there are deep affinities between oxymoron and metaphor (Johnson 1981, Prandi 2004) -, reveal the contradictory relation inherent to Lispector's involvement in the world: the desire of being leads the characters to the pure identity in which being annihilates itself;

the impulse of using language, to get to the being, is eluded by the ambiguous power of the word that sets free and subjugates (Nunes 1989: 133). Nature is stronger, the humanisation of people is a view of an allowed contingency. At the end of the novel Martim says:

«Vão para o diabo», disse-se então, olhando os homens, nauseado de ser gente. As plantas tranquilas chamavam-no. «Não ser», esta a vasta noite de um homem. [...] Pensou com desejo nas plantas do terreno terciário, com saudade das ratas negras. Uma moleza feita de sensualidade tirou-lhe a força de combate, deu-lhe uma nostálgica safadeza, uma melancolia à toa. Vagamente ainda tentou se aprumar e se refazer: «afinal sou brasileiro, que diabo!». Mas não conseguiu. Aquele homem estava saciado, queria refúgio e paz. (Lispector 1992: 307)

Eating, the images of primordial substances and animal symbolism echo a bodily world, a pulsation of life where Lispector through language strives to find the centre of a long desired essence, discarding three dimensional space and bringing herself and the reader into the unstable truth of the «instant's fourth dimension», asking herself, to borrow Lakoff and Johnson's words, «what embodied sense can be made of *transcendence*, where is the mystery to be found in a spiritual experience that is embodied and what is *revelation* there» (1999: 564-5). As an answer we could use the last lines of *A paixão Segundo GH*: «a vida se me é e eu não entendo o que digo» (1988: 115).

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