

Marilia Librandi.

***Writing by Ear: Clarice Lispector and the Aural Novel.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018.**

Writing by Ear is an ambitious book. It does not merely set out to study the work of Clarice Lispector in an innovative manner; it proposes what Marília Librandi herself characterizes as a (new) theory of fiction writing, based on Clarice Lispector's work.

The premise of the book is as follows: Clarice Lispector's writing engages in a particular relationship with the sense of hearing (experienced both by the fiction writer and by the reader) which justifies a reframing of the concept of "writing" as we conventionally understand it. Different than simply "writing," what Lispector does should best be described as "writing as listening," which Librandi views as a third entity, to be placed somewhere between writing and orality. This proposal implies that the concept of authorship will be revisited as well. The role of listening—traditionally viewed as passive—should now be considered as much a part of writing as the act of (actively) producing *new* words. New words which, Librandi would say, are not pulled out of thin air and are not simply *created* by demiurge-like authors; instead, they are partly *heard* and *given* to whomever writes them: "How are we to understand authorship when writers present themselves as objects of reception rather than subjects of production?" (Librandi 7).

This is an exquisitely written and researched book, which occupied the author for years. It gradually grew out of conversations and collaborations with many scholars and students of writing and of Clarice Lispector: "This book is the result of collective work. My name is on the spine, but it has been authored just as much by those who have suffered through and enjoyed the listening/writing process with me" (Librandi xi). The author also claims that the process of reflecting on issues of aurality, which gave rise to the book, started on December 25, 2008, when she and her family "landed" (her words) in the U.S.

The project can also be traced back to work done at Stanford University, where the author taught. There, some discussions concerning "rhythm and writing" took place, organized by a group named "Sense and Sound," in which the scholar

Vincent Barletta, also interested in issues of rhythm, was a prominent participant. However, the *eureka* moment, which was the culmination of this process of experiences and reflections, related to the act of listening (for example, the way our own language sounds when heard through a tapestry of foreign words) was triggered, according to Librandi, by a passage found in Lispector's *A Hora da Estrela* (*The Hour of the Star*). In it, the narrator, Rodrigo S.M., confesses: "escrevo de ouvido," which, in English, could be translated as "I write by ear," or perhaps "I write with what I hear," or still "I write based on what I hear." In Portuguese, Lispector's idiomatic expression, which greatly impressed the author of *Writing by Ear*, could mean that the narrator's approach to writing is a spontaneous one, or that of a non-professional, a self-taught person. Rodrigo S.M. himself reinforces this notion when he confirms precisely what Lispector has stated elsewhere: "Mas acontece que só escrevo o que quero, não sou um profissional (...)" (Lispector, *A Hora da Estrela* 17).¹

The sensitivity and aural acuity which accompanies the writing process, as Marília Librandi contends, stems from the fact that Lispector, although having written exclusively in Portuguese, was immersed in a world that featured other languages, among them the Hebrew and Yiddish of her childhood and the many European languages (some converted by Lispector into Portuguese, in literary translations) to which she was exposed while she lived abroad as the wife of a Brazilian diplomat. As a Brazilian scholar living abroad, Librandi claims also to have experienced an enhanced sensitivity to her own language after she moved to the U.S., as other languages, particularly English, challenged her, forcing her to strain her *ear*, as she experienced *estrangement* which, conversely, contaminated (or intensified, refreshed) her relationship with Portuguese. This circumstance made her more aware of the role that *listening* played in communication. It is understandable that this fact (experienced in different degrees and fashions by all immigrants) helped Librandi empathize with (and masterfully detect) Lispector's well-tuned writer's ear. Paradoxically, it seems that a renewed mastery of one's own language is achieved when one experiences (if only in part, given the concomitant risks to our vocabulary recall, grammatical precision, etc.) the freshness of a foreigner's ear to words and expressions in one's own native language, to whose beauty, nuances, and contradictions many non-immigrant speakers grow deaf due to habit, a ossified ear, or a lack of experience with other languages.

Librandi claims that what she calls the (oral or) aural quality of Clarice's writing consists of a particularly Brazilian trait seen, in part, in the dominance of the oral tradition in Brazilian culture (in contrast with a less established tradition of

literacy) and may be found (*heard*) in several of its best known authors, namely Machado de Assis, Guimarães Rosa, etc.

The book is divided so that it presents the different aspects of this new aural theory (Lispector is here considered as much a theorist as a fiction writer). This allows other scholars to apply it to their respective literatures and cultures, since the field may be, as Librandi views it, in the midst of an “aural turn.”

The first chapter, “Writing by Ear,” bears the same title as the book and in it the general aspects of the theory are explained. In the second chapter, the author expands on the notion of the aural novel, which could be viewed as a refashioning of Earl Fitz’s term “lyrical novel.” Then, a more direct analysis of a novel, *Near to the Wild Heart*, is on display in the chapter “Hearing the Wild Heart.” Another analysis of a novel is carried out in “Loud Object,” a chapter devoted to *Água Viva*. Finally, *The Passion According to G.H* is studied in the chapter “The Echopoetics of GH,” where Librandi applies her poetics of resonances to Lispector’s book.

I find *Writing by Ear* to be a remarkable achievement because, while deepening our understanding of Lispector’s universe, it forces us to move beyond the author of *Água Viva* and face the (not so obvious) fact that fiction writers do follow a particular rhythm when they write. This idea forces us to question the dominance of paraphraseable content (meaning) over internally heard rhythm (sound). And, if nothing else, it also forces us to seriously consider the interdependence of the two. A shocking consequence of this line of reasoning could be the realization that meaning/sense/possibly even story and plot are not such pure, controlled, and deliberate authorial decisions, contrary to what we may have initially thought or been led to think. Any reader of the following sentence, even without an English translation, will notice how Rodrigo S.M’s discourse is here propelled (and certainly *shaped*) by the strength and energy of its alliterations and assonances, which leads us to believe that “sound” often tends to precede “meaning,” and not only in poetry: “A dor de dentes que perpassa esta história deu uma fisgada funda em plena boca nossa” (Lispector. *A Hora da Estrela* 11).

My only (minor) reservation about the thesis of the book is expressed by the following questions: what writing (particularly “artistic writing”) is not shaped by rhythm or propelled by an aural thrust? Is that not what writers do and what writing does? (As a student of poetry, where this is more noticeable, I have always suspected this is so.) Potentially, I believe, all writing is strongly influenced by (and dependent on) the act of listening/sound/rhythm, a possibility that Librandi’s argument amply allows, by the way, without necessarily placing it explicitly at its center.

Effectively internationalizing the usefulness of the book, Librandi writes that “writing by ear” has relevance “for literatures that tend to maintain an ethical, poetic and political connection with communities deeply shaped by forms of verbal communication that do not rely on the mediation of writing” (18) and that “one of my basic goals for the present book is for it to serve as a conversation starter” (23). And so the conversation has started around this intriguing topic, thanks to this timely book, as was Librandi’s intention:

The presence of hearing/listening in writing calls on its readers to contemplate a sense that has been left largely (if paradoxically) unexplored in previous discussions on the relationship between orality and writing. It is my intention to show that the inclusion of the ear changes the panorama of the discussion. (Librandi 7)

This study does shed new, fresh light on Clarice Lispector’s work; on some Brazilian authors, particularly prose writers; and, finally, on Brazilian literature in general and (possibly) on all the writing that almost unnoticeably surrounds us with “its resonant silence, its mute shrieks, its vibrant muteness” (17). This is a welcome and important book.

NOTE

1. Lispector, Clarice. *A Hora da Estrela*. Rio de Janeiro: Rocco. s.d.: “As it happens, I only write what I want, I am not a professional” (my translation).

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