

The Hour of the Star or Clarice Lispector's Trash Hour

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Written in 1976 and published one month before the author's hospitalization that ended with her death in December 1977, *A Hora da Estrela* (*The Hour of the Star*) is part of a group of texts by Clarice Lispector that not only make up her final body of work but also stage the end, depicting it as dissolution. The end of a life, the end of a career, the end of an oeuvre. This was a phase in Lispector's writing that she referred to as "trash time" in her reply to criticism of her collection of short stories *A Via-crúcis do Corpo* (1974).¹ Hour of the star, trash time. *Via-crúcis* had been criticized for the sketchy nature of the narratives and for the author's allegedly blunt approach to sexual themes. Trash time, death time. The death of Macabéa, the very reverse of a movie star, a nontragic character, the protagonist of a non-life that culminates when she is run over by a car at the end, the caricature of a banal apocalypse. Physical death of the author, who may have been aware of her illness by the time she began writing *A Hora da Estrela*.

Lispector's "trash time" covers a relatively short period in her career, and includes her final writings following *Água Viva* (1973). It is no more than a further step in the radicalization of a writer who had from the very beginning been labeled radical or idiosyncratic by all of the canonic tendencies in Brazilian literary criticism. The radical aspect of the texts of the "trash time" phase is closely associated with *Água Viva*. They are all part of the same aesthetic gesture, the development of an interplay between the sublime and desublimation. While *Água Viva* can still be read in terms of the feminine sublime, associated with the valorization of the sublime activities of painting and/or writing, which were already prominent features of the author's first

work (*Perto do Coração Selvagem*, 1944), in *A Hora da Estrela* we are confronted with the complete inversion of this dynamics.² The female narrator and/or protagonist is replaced by the brutal, sadistic (if vacillating) voice of a male narrator. The narrative act makes few concessions to anything that is not sarcastic or grotesque. The dialectical interchange between the sublime and the desublimed, which is so evident in *Água Viva*, with its frequent references to the merely organic and visceral, is here frozen. Trash time means the refusal of all sublimation. *Água Viva* may then be seen as the moment of *luxo* (“luxury”) that precedes the plunge into *lixo* (“trash”) as an aesthetic entity.³

The labeling of Lispector’s work as radical or idiosyncratic may be ascribed initially to the fact that its sense cannot be grasped in terms of the nationalistic, social, historical and referent-based values that were dominant in the Modernist critical canon. Lispector debuted in 1944 with a subjectivist fiction and a nonmimetic rhetoric, full of unusual metaphors, violent metonymic shifts, effects of estrangement produced by a narrative flow characterized by allusive description and based on heightened attention to sensory impressions and details.⁴ She brought a sophisticated element into Brazilian fiction, an introspective basis for moral and existential questioning. It is a type of fiction which is to this day mostly unaccounted for by the dominant conceptual models of academic literary history, although individually some of the authors in this current have received some critical attention—Cornélio Pena, Otávio de Faria, Lúcio Cardoso, among others. But Lispector’s work, unlike theirs, was seen as surprising because of its unmistakably experimental component associated with a commitment to the darker aspects of existence—evil, sin, crime—as the privileged, though not exclusive topics for literature and art in general.

The experimental nature of Lispector’s work continued to increase, undergoing various inflections that pointed both to linear evolution and to an order of “repetition”: the repetition, with variations, of the same transgressive gesture, bringing progressive changes to her discourse. Following *A Maçã no Escuro* (1961), this dynamics was intensified; from then on, the self-reflective element was radicalized in the context of an avant-garde textual logic, as in *A Paixão Segundo G. H.* (1964) and *Uma Aprendizagem, ou o Livro dos Prazeres* (1969). The former is a woman’s rewriting of Kafka’s myth of the man-cockroach, while the latter—a text that begins with a comma—is from the outset presented as a *writerly* text (to use Barthes’s term), as has been observed by a number of critics.⁵

In some ways, the texts produced in what I have been calling Lispector's trash time stage the limits, the exhaustion of a project of progressive radicalization of self-reflective writing. From an aesthetic viewpoint, this is the most spectacular ending possible, the one that probably determines all others: the end of modernism. From a descriptive viewpoint, the trash-time texts—and now *Água Viva* is being included in this category as well—are characterized by extreme fragmentation. The books are short, the short stories are sketchy and edgy. What I am referring to as “books” are in fact collages of fragments unified by some sort of thread: *Água Viva*, *A Hora da Estrela* and the posthumously published *Um Sopro de Vida*. This radical fragmentation interacts with a journalistic aspect. Lispector published portions of her books and the stories as part of her *crônicas* in the Rio de Janeiro daily *Jornal do Brasil*, to which she was a regular contributor from 1967 to 1973. Her *crônicas*, in turn, are frequently “literary” and philosophical in tone, including reflections, meditations, metaphors and ironic games that are typical of her literary work. Thus, communication was established between the two genres, a system of erratic interchange that was part of Lispector's permanent practice of rewriting.

Lispector's trash time is characterized by a duality between the literary and the journalistic, avant-garde erudition and kitsch, good taste and bad taste, high and low, poetry and cliché, irony and sentimentality. In Brazilian literature, the *crônica* is a paraliterary genre, which in the 1950s and 1960s was seen as addressed to readers with a “literary sensibility.” On the one hand then, the trash-time texts signal the author's acceptance of her popular side, expressed in the meditative *crônicas*: a taste for Lispector had become a myth in Brazilian culture, amounting to a declaration of “sensitiveness.” On the other hand, they also participate in her experimental, avant-garde, literary side, expressed in her books, where the “lowness” of sentimental-existential clichés is intertwined with the estrangement caused by the complexity of the self-referential language characteristic of high modernism.

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In *Água Viva*, *A Hora da Estrela* and *Um Sopro de Vida*, the most striking discursive strategy is the narrator's expressed intention to create effects of simultaneity in the text. The writing is intended as the simultaneous actualization of thinking and feeling. To use the iconic expression coined in *Água Viva*: a writing of the *now-moment* (“*instante-já*”). This simultaneity is associated with the way the narrator's subjectivity is presented. While in Lispector's works

previous to *Água Viva* this subjectivity is conveyed by means of the classic interplay of narrative enunciation and characters, here narrative viewpoint is placed at the center of the stage. The fictive philosophy of subjectivity in Lispector is now concentrated exclusively on the figure of an ego that is an *ego scriptor*, whether naive, as in the case of the painter who decides to write in *Água Viva*, or an experienced writer—male in *A Hora da Estrela*, male and female in *Um Sopro de Vida*.

The writerly subjectivity is not only engendered but also split, and it traces a trajectory from the dialogic to the diasporic. In *Água Viva* the split takes place by means of a strategy of intersubjectivity. The painter-narrator directs her discourse to a male addressee, which in this way becomes a simulacrum of a letter. Intersubjectivity is defined here as dialogical, its third term being a referent: the reality or truth of pure sensation. The search for simultaneity between writing and happening preserves an *ontological* concept of the experienced, seen as a substance to be attained by representational activity, which, however, obviously fails every time. The narrator of *Água Viva* is unable to go beyond the abyss of *différance*, figured in the text by the use of graphic and thematic spacing.

In *A Hora da Estrela*, the aim is no longer to reach a substantial reality. The triangle of communication is now made up of the male narrator (Rodrigo S. M.), the reader and the character, Macabéa, whose story is reduced to minimal biographical data: an orphan, she works as typist, has a failed loved affair, loses her boyfriend to a fellow worker, goes to a fortuneteller and, in the closing scene, is run over by a car and killed. The effect of simultaneity here is given by the fact that the most important narrative plane of the text is that on which the narrator discusses with the reader the process by means of which he creates a fictional character that is entirely alien to him. The central motif of *A Hora da Estrela* is the sequence of the narrator's conflicting feelings towards the character he wants to create, an effort that never gets much farther than mere caricature. The simultaneity sought here is no longer between writing and sensation, but between writing and reading. Treated as the very axis of the narrative, the self-reflective dimension takes shape as the narrator's self-reflection concerning his *relation* to the character. Among the fascinating effects produced by this discursive operation are the exposure of the reader's own nature as a simulacrum. Radicalizing Machado de Assis' experiment with Bentinho, the narrator of *Dom Casmurro*, Lispector creates a Rodrigo who is S. M. ("sadomasochistic") in relation to both the character and the reader.

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But Macabéa is not just another character, which is why practically everything that has been written about *A Hora da Estrela* (as well as Suzana Amaral's movie version of the book) centers on her figure. Macabéa is the caricature of a Northeastern woman. And "Northeastern" is by no means a neutral category in Brazilian culture: in Brazilian literature, Northeasterners are always poor, excluded, peripheral, anachronistic remnants of a bygone era in the modernized Brazil that has emerged since the late nineteenth century, culturally and economically dominated by the powerful Southeast. In terms of the ideology imposed by the civilized Southeast, Northeasterners are labeled members of an "underdeveloped" or "inferior race," stigmatized by poverty. Macabéa more or less corresponds to what North American racist discourse might call "white trash," though she is described in terms of a typically Brazilian and quite flexible notion of "white race," for her skin is said to be *parda* (light brown).

On the mimetic or documentary level, one of the marks of the originality of *A Hora da Estrela* is the fact that Rodrigo S. M. depicts an urbanized Northeastern girl: neither a Northeasterner in her native backlands nor one migrating south fleeing destitution, two typically Modernist images. Rodrigo S. M.'s Macabéa is a postmodern migrant, settled in a working-class suburb of a large Southeastern city, a type also portrayed in Brazilian movies of the 1970s such as Nelson Pereira dos Santos' *O Amuleto de Ogum* (1975). In this contemporary post-1970s setting, not even the Northeastern *sertão* region (backlands) can be depicted in the substantialistic language of genuine origin. As in Walter Sales's recent film *Central do Brasil* (*Central Station*) (1999), the *sertão* as location is no longer a wasteland of spiny cactuses and cow skulls, but simply an area in the periphery of a city occupied by a housing development very much like the ones found outside the metropolises of the Southeast. Macabéa, created by Rodrigo S. M. as an emblem of poverty, is not only Northeastern but also a grotesque and stereotyped representation of a subjectivity totally defined by the most obvious forms of consumerism: she lives on Coca-Cola and her sole pastime is listening to "Rádio Relógio," a radio station that tells the time and combines ads with bits of useless "cultural" information.

Lispector has Rodrigo S. M. break all the sentimental and socially utopian rules that have traditionally underpinned the literary myth of the Northeasterner in Modernist literature. In this sense, the relation between the

narrator and Macabéa is an allegorical representation of the relation between the Modernist intellectual and the poor, deprived sectors of the population. In the more populist versions of Modernism, writers expiate their own social guilt by writing texts that denounce the status quo in order to “save” the poor. Of the major authors from the generation that arose in the 1920s and 1930s, only Graciliano Ramos, in *Memórias do Cárcere*, and Carlos Drummond de Andrade, in some of his deconstructive so-called “social” poems, dared to allude to what Lispector renders in such harsh colors: the hypocrisy and sadism that underlie the relations between the intelligentsia and the poor in Brazilian cultural tradition.

Rodrigo S. M. tries to do something that seems impossible in Brazil—to speak of social marginalization without being demagogic. Lispector’s text, in fact, was published at the very time when a momentous change took place in Brazilian political culture at the turn of the 1970s: for the first time, marginalized groups spoke out for themselves, rather than through middle-class populist parties, politicians and intellectuals.⁶ Rodrigo S. M. is aware that his motivation lies entirely outside the drama actually experienced by those who provide the model for his Macabéa. “Why do I write?” he asks in the beginning of this narrative, and answers: “Above all, because I have captured the spirit of the language, so that sometimes it is form that produces content. Therefore I write not because of the Northeastern girl, but by dint of a serious ‘act of God,’ as they say in official documents, an ‘act of law.’” (23) From this point on, the narrator’s leitmotif is the conflict of feelings caused in him by his Herculean effort to *identify* with Macabéa. Rodrigo S. M. wavers between repugnance and empathy, between cruel indifference and pity, reviving the interplay of sadism and sentimentality that Gilberto Freyre identified in *Casa-Grande & Senzala* (*The Masters and the Slaves*, 1933) as essential to the social relations between the white or brown ruling class and black slaves in Brazil. To provide minimal illustration for my argument, here is the paragraph in which Rodrigo S. M. presents Macabéa for the first time.

She came from the worst sort of background and now looked like the child of a what-is--this with an air of apologizing for taking up space. Absently, before the mirror, she closely examined some patches on her face. Up in Alagoas they were known as ‘cloths,’ people said it was the liver that caused them. She covered them up with a thick layer of rice powder, which made her look whitewashed but

anyhow it was better than being brown. She was a bit dingy, since she hardly ever washed. During the day she wore a blouse and a skirt, and at night she slept in her slip. One of her roommates could never bring herself to tell her she had a musty smell... Nothing about her shimmered, though in between the patches on her face there was a slight opalescence. But that did not matter. No one ever looked at her on the street, she was cold coffee. (34)

Rodrigo S. M. parrots all the clichés of racial and social prejudice against Northeasterners—uncleanliness, disease, ignorance—, carrying them to extreme lengths, to the point of buffoonery, as part of his effort to avoid a demagogic, artificial identification with Macabéa.⁷ However, it is impossible to write about someone else without a minimum of empathy, of subjective projection. But even this empathy surfaces in the text as parody. Here is the passage immediately following the one quoted above:

Thus time passed for this girl. She used the hem of her slip to blow her nose in. She had none of that delicate thing known as enchantment. I alone see her as someone enchanting. Only I, her author, love her. And suffer for her. And only I can tell her: 'Whatever you ask me for with a tear, I give to you with a song.'(34)

There is only one aspect in which Rodrigo S. M. is able to establish nonparodic identification with Macabéa, though even this is done on a farcical plane, given the radical heterogeneity between creator and creature: loneliness. This is the single link that makes it possible to construct a discourse across such a yawning abyss of difference. In a completely exterior and artificial way, Rodrigo S. M. also draws a parallel between the inevitable solitude of the *ego scriptor* and Macabéa's dumb anonymity. Solitude confines the writer to a residual sphere in the order of things, and it is as residue, it is by means of the idea of residue, that Rodrigo is able to establish the tenuous thread of identification with the Northeastern girl. But this identification still contains a crucial element of difference, for the writer possesses the priceless gift of the word, of which Macabéa is bereft:

How I wish she would open her mouth and say:
'I'm all alone in the world and I don't believe in anybody, they all lie, sometimes even in the hour of love, I don't believe anyone can ever really talk to someone else, the truth comes to me only when I'm alone.'

Maca, however, has never spoken in sentences, first because she is not much given to talking. And it so happens that she had no self-awareness and did not complain of anything; indeed, she thought she was happy. (. . .) (I see I have tried to attribute to Maca a trait of my own: I need a few hours of solitude every day, or else me muero.) (83)

The final scene, when Macabéa is run over by a Mercedes Benz instead of meeting the blond fiancé the fortuneteller had promised her, underscores the artificiality of social pity as a motive for artistic creation. “Was the ending grand enough for your needs?” (104) is the question asked of the reader by the most cynical narrator ever created by Clarice Lispector. Macabéa’s dead body lying in the gutter is not only an allegory of a certain concept of *ego scriptor* but, more importantly, serves as a merciless self-image conceived by Lispector in her final hour, through the mouthpiece of Rodrigo, the author’s sadomasochistic transvestite:

I write because there is nothing for me to do in the world: I have been left behind, and there is no room for me in the world of men. I write because I am a desperate man and I am tired, I can’t stand any longer the routine of being myself, and if it were not for the ever-new practice of writing I would die symbolically every day. But I am prepared to go out discreetly through the back door. I have tried almost everything, including passion and the despair of passion. And now all I would like to have is what I would have been and never was. (27)

Notes

¹ See, for instance, Godlib 417; Ferreira 268.

² On the feminine sublime in Lispector, see Peixoto 68-72.

³ In the original text, the author plays with the words *luxo* (“luxury”) and *lixo* (“trash”), two opposite and yet complementary aesthetic terms that were used as a kind of minimalistic slogan in one the most popular visual poems written by the avant-garde poet Augusto de Campos at the height of the Concretista movement in the late Fifties. In the original Portuguese there is also a lexical comparison being made between the title of the novel, *A Hora da Estrela*, and the period called the “hora do lixo.” (Translator’s note)

⁴ See Santiago, “A aula” 13-30.

⁵ See, for instance, Santos and Helena.

⁶ See Santiago, “Democratização” 11-23.

⁷ For a very original and interesting reading of the clownish element in *A Hora da Estrela*, see Aréas.

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