

**READING CLARICE IN THE CONTEXT OF MODERN
LATIN AMERICAN NARRATIVE:
A COMPARATIVE ASSESSMENT**

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Além de grande autora brasileira, Clarice Lispector é também uma distinguida escritora latino-americana. Sua produção novelística corresponde à ascensão da “nueva narrativa hispanoamericana”, o gênero literário que marcou a chegada da literatura latino-americana no palco internacional. Se lêssemos a sua ficção nesse contexto crítico, como nos pareceria? Especificamente, se incluíssemos a ficção de Clarice Lispector na nossa interpretação da “nueva narrativa hispanoamericana”, o que diríamos dela? Que contribuição faria à nossa compreensão, agora comparativa, do desenvolvimento do “novo romance” latino-americano? Essas são as perguntas examinadas neste ensaio. A conclusão é que ela estabelece (já em 1944, em *Perto do coração selvagem*) uma definitiva presença feminina para a literatura latino-americana e, ao fazer isso, pratica um novo – e essencialmente pós-estruturalista – conceito da linguagem e de sua relação com a existência humana e a própria escrita.

As we know, Clarice Lispector (1920-1977) is one of modern Brazilian literature's most respected and influential figures. A prolific writer whose career, spanning some thirty-three years of work, coincided almost exactly with the rise of the justly famous "nueva narrativa," or "new narrative," in Spanish America, Clarice is especially renowned for her opaque, often hermetic novels and short stories, though for several years (from August, 1967, to December, 1973) she also wrote "crônicas" for the Saturday edition of the *Jornal do Brasil*.¹ But whether engaging in "fiction" or "non-fiction" (a distinction she often blurred in her work), Clarice was always concerned with the process of writing, which she understood as a quest for understanding,² a fluid and unstable process of signification in which self-creation, semantic free play and revelation were crucial components. Possessed of both an unmistakable style and a highly distinctive outlook, Clarice Lispector is the quintessential example of the writer who is easy to read but hard to understand.

But while there can be no doubt as to Clarice's importance to Brazilian literature, what is less clear is how she would fit into a larger, more comparative assessment of Latin American narrative in the second half of the twentieth century. That is, if we were to read the fiction of modern Latin America continentally, as an integrated whole that included both the Spanish American and the Brazilian traditions, how would Clarice's work seem to us? What would we say about it? What contributions would it make to the development of Latin American narrative? These are the questions that, twenty years after her untimely death from cancer, I would like to consider in this essay.

To accomplish this task, I will focus on three novels by Clarice, *Perto do coração selvagem* (1944), *A paixão segundo*

G. H. (1964) and *Água viva* (1973). These works represent fairly distinct stages in the development of her art and they can be read against what I feel are three equally representative Spanish American narratives of the time, Borges' *Ficciones* (1944), Cortázar's *Rayuela* (1963), and Sarduy's *Cobra* (1972). While I realize there are methodological problems in trying to compare three novels by a single author with three separate works by three separate writers from another literary tradition, I also believe that Clarice's importance as a writer – and particularly as a Latin American writer – warrants such a comparison.

In order to begin a more comparative evaluation of the artistic and intellectual legacy of this marvelous writer, I propose, then, that we go back to her first novel, the extraordinary *Perto do coração selvagem*, which appeared in 1944. I further propose that we read this landmark work not in isolation (that is, not as a decisive text in the history of the Brazilian novel, which it was) but as a Latin American novel, one that we can compare and contrast to what was going on in Spanish America at the time. Specifically, I am suggesting that we read *Perto do coração selvagem* in the context of Borges' *Ficciones*, which also appeared in 1944, thus making 1944 a year of singular importance in the history of Latin American narrative.

The importance of Borges and the *Ficciones* (1944) to the history and development of narrative fiction in Latin America is, of course, well known. Numerous studies have analyzed the methods by which Borges revolutionized the way fiction could be written, how he broke with tradition and invented a "nueva narrativa," a new narrative that did not depend on the modes of realism or on a mimetic reproduction of reality for its aesthetic validity. An immensely learned and sophisticated writer, Borges viewed fiction not, as George McMurray observes, "as an artistic representation of the real world, but rather as a poetic re-creation of the cultural labyrinths women and men have fabricated throughout history," a poetic re-creation that, as we see so brilliantly exemplified in his *Ficciones*, finally comes to exude "an aura of unreality that for him constitutes the very nature of art" (12). And while this widely held assessment of Borges' art has recently been challenged by Daniel Balderston in his book, *Out of context* (1993), I believe it still

has much to recommend it, particularly in terms of Latin American literary history, the context in which I am offering these observations on Clarice Lispector and the Latin American narrative tradition.

At first glance, the *Ficciones* and *Perto do coração selvagem* do not appear to have much in common. The Argentine's work is a collection of short "fictions", for example, while the Brazilian's is a full-length novel. Moreover, as a reader familiar with both will know, the *Ficciones* do exude a "greater aura of unreality" than *Perto* does, although the latter is hardly a prototypical representative of the realistic novel genre either.³ Yet in terms of what these works represent within their respective traditions, I think we can see that they possess a similar importance, for they both mark the end of one kind of writing and the beginning of another.⁴ Apropos of this point, the Brazilian critic, Massaud Moisés, argues that, in reference to Clarice's novel, it defines "a tendência introspectivista de nossa ficção dos anos 30" (Moisés 491), introspectiveness being a dimension that writers like Lúcio Cardoso, Adonias Filho, and Cornélio Pena had been experimenting with as a way of renovating the Brazilian novel. And, as Moisés further suggests (491), Clarice's novel can, in many ways, be read as the culmination of that effort.⁵ In addition, then, to showing how fiction could successfully depict the inner world of thought and emotion as well as the external world of action and event, *Perto do coração selvagem* also proved that the Brazilian novel could be urbanized (Coutinho 248-49) and, even more importantly, feminized, an issue that I will elaborate on more in just a moment. Overall, what I am suggesting here is that although the impact of Clarice's first novel was perhaps not as dramatic as was the impact of Borges' *Ficciones*, Clarice, too, was instrumental in changing the course of narrative fiction in her country.

Beyond their importance to their respective literary histories, however, there are two other areas in which Borges and Clarice can be illuminatingly compared. I refer here to what I think of as the theoretical, or conceptual, underpinnings of the *Ficciones* and *Perto do coração selvagem*, the principles of narrative that drive and structure them and that make them as unique as they are. In this respect the case of Borges is more

clear cut, primarily because of the existence of such seminal critical essays as "El arte narrativo y la magia" and "La postulación de la realidad", both of which appeared in *Discusión* in 1932. In contrast to the case of Borges, however, Clarice did not leave any comparable theoretical statements about her intentions as a writer, no extended essays or articles that would explain the new kind of narrative that she would be writing.⁶ If it is true that we have no such documents, as we do for Borges, then we have to approach Clarice's first novel differently, and with considerably less critical guidance than we have in the case of the *Ficciones*. Nevertheless, I think it is reasonable to assume that Clarice wrote *Perto do coração selvagem* the way she did because she had something definite in mind, some plan or idea about what she wanted to say and how she wanted to say it. *Perto's* poetic, reflective style and its temporally disjunctive structuring, as well as its development of a profoundly transgressive protagonist, were surely not accidents but, more likely, the actualization of what Clarice was seeking to do. This argument gains credence when we read *Perto* in the light of Clarice's other works, that is, when we begin to see how much of this first novel seems to reappear in her later narratives. So although we cannot be as definitive about the authorial intentionality of Clarice in *Perto do coração selvagem* as we can about what Borges sought to achieve in the *Ficciones*, I do believe that, in their own ways, both Borges and Clarice were in quest of a new kind of narrative. Though their reasons differed (with Borges' seeming to have been more theoretically sophisticated), their results were startlingly similar – not in the sense that the *Ficciones* and *Perto do coração selvagem* are in any way identical texts (they are, of course, very different), but in the sense that they both represent a new approach to fiction writing in their respective cultures.

As Latin Americanists interested in integrating the Brazilian narrative tradition with the Spanish American, however, we must ask ourselves how, exactly, do Borges and Clarice differ in terms of the new narratives they were writing in 1944? In comparative analysis, the differences that exist between texts are nearly always more important, more revealing of a text's uniqueness, than the similarities that bind

them together, and it is no different in the case of Borges and Clarice. When we read the *Ficciones* and *Perto do coração selvagem* comparatively, we are struck by two things: first, the powerful female presence that emanates from Clarice's work (and that stands in sharp contrast to the masculine world of the *Ficciones*) and, second, the different conceptualization of language that I think these two authors (and perhaps these two narrative traditions) brought to the writing of these particular texts.⁷

Of the first point, the female presence that so strongly marks Clarice's novel, I do not think there can be much doubt. Anyone who reads *Perto do coração selvagem* comes away deeply impressed by the intensity and iconoclasm of the female (and arguably feminist) perspective expressed in it. As Marta Peixoto has shown in her book, *Passionate fictions* (1994; 1-23), the often contentious and frequently malevolent attitude of Clarice's perhaps autobiographical protagonist, a young woman named Joana, dominates the text. Because certain aspects of Joana's character infuse virtually all of Clarice's later characters, we are tempted to say that, beginning with *Perto do coração selvagem*, modern Latin American narrative gains a steady and powerful female *ethos*, one that is, at times, profoundly at odds with the gender norms and the sexual politics of its cultures. If we are willing to think of Clarice as not merely a Brazilian writer but as a Latin American writer, then I think we can say that one of her greatest contributions to modern Latin American narrative is that she establishes, once and for all, the validity not merely of the female voice but of the subversive female voice, the one that does not hesitate to challenge the norms of conventionality or of patriarchal culture.

It is also noteworthy, I believe, that a major part of this new female potency, or "puissance," that Clarice brings to Latin American narrative is sexual in nature. For example, even in an early work like *Perto do coração selvagem*, the protagonist, Joana, appears to practice masturbation, to contemplate a lesbian affair, and to be interested in a *ménage à trois* not involving her husband. And in the egregiously underappreciated "A pecadora queimada e os anjos harmoniosos" (written between 1948 and 1949 but not published until

1964, when it appeared in *A Legião Estrangeira*), Clarice examines the repercussions of female adultery in the context of a male dominated society whose codes of sexual conduct are deeply unjust and hypocritical.⁸ As these and other of her texts show, Clarice had, even at the beginning of her career, a deep and abiding interest in the then explosive issue of female sexuality and in the androcentric sexual politics that complicate it.

Of the second point, that Borges and Clarice approach the importance of language in literature differently, what I mean is the following: that Borges' *Ficciones* dramatically demonstrates what we could think of as an essentially structuralist worldview while Clarice's often self-conscious "escrita," or writing, seems to epitomize the poststructural sensibility, a belief that meaning in language is inescapably a function of the infinite play of signifiers that characterizes all language use. Although normally we are well advised not to use jargonish terms like these to explain particular works of literature, in the case of Borges and Clarice it may be illuminating to do so. The point I am seeking to make can be summed up in the following question: is it not possible that, with Borges and Clarice, we have, in the history of modern Latin American narrative, two writers who exemplify the two great trends of twentieth century literary theory, structuralism and poststructuralism? I think this may well be the case, and it is for this reason that it is so very important to consider the very different concepts of language that seem to animate the *Ficciones* and *Perto do coração selvagem*.

As we know, the idea that the structuralist impulse marks Borges' work is not entirely new. As early as 1973, Emir Rodríguez Monegal had suggested as much,⁹ in addition to writing (four years later, in 1977) that "Borges anticipated the structuralists in viewing literature [. . .] in systemic terms, as an integrated collection of interrelated texts with its own autonomous development" (Monegal, II, 500). It requires no great effort to appreciate the applicability of this line of reasoning to the *Ficciones*, which, as evidenced in texts like "Las ruinas circulares," "La biblioteca de Babel," and "La muerte y la brújula," would seem to exemplify the basic contentions of structuralist thought,¹⁰ which holds that "Every

literary unit from the individual sentence to the whole order of words can be seen in relation to the concept of system" (Scholes 10). Exemplifying this approach to writing is "La muerte y la brújula," one of Borges' most celebrated detective fictions. Studying the diverse and apparently unrelated clues before him, Eric Lönnrot, who requires that reality (like art) be "interesting" and explicable, suddenly sees, in the text's turning point, what he feels certain is the pattern, or structure, that explains not only the crimes that have happened so far but the one that is about to happen in the very near future. Deciphering a mysterious letter that "profetizaba que el 3 de marzo no habría un cuarto crimen, pues la pinturería del Oeste, la taberna de la Rue de Toulon y el Hôtel du Nord eran 'los vértices perfectos de un triángulo equilátero,'" Lönnrot realizes that "Los tres lugares, en efecto, eran equidistantes. Simetría en el tiempo (3 de diciembre, 3 de enero, 3 de febrero); simetría en el espacio, también. . . Sintió, de pronto, que estaba por descifrar el misterio. Un compás y una brújula completaron esa brusca intuición" (*Ficciones* 155-156). In short, Lönnrot comes to believe (or, by his human need to see patterns and structures, is led to believe) that he has discovered the "conceptual system" to which the seemingly random clues point and belong. In reading a "fiction" like "La muerte y la brújula", or like "La biblioteca de Babel", it is entirely possible to wonder, in fact, if the international acclaim that was accorded Borges in the 1960s (the heyday of structuralist thought) was not at least partially due to the fact that his work, innovatively brilliant as it was, simultaneously validated and questioned the defining principles of structuralism and demonstrated how powerfully they pertained to literature.

But even if we accept this theory concerning the conceptual nature of the *Ficciones*, what could we say about the case of Clarice Lispector? What are her texts like, theoretically speaking? I would like to suggest here that if we are willing to consider Borges as a kind of proto-structuralist, then we could also think of Clarice as a proto-poststructuralist, as an example of a writer whose work, even in her first novel, demonstrates the basic principles of poststructural theory.¹¹ From *Perto do coração selvagem*, in 1944, to *Um sopro de vida* (published posthumously in 1978), Clarice's narratives parody

and unmask their narrators' "logocentric search for logic and unity in discourse" (Barbosa 64) and, in so doing, feature the semantically destabilizing shift in attention from the signified to the signifier that we associate with poststructural thought. Thus, while Borges' *Ficciones* demonstrate the epistemological power that systems and structures exert on us, Clarice's more fluid and self-deconstructing narratives emphasize not structures but the infinite play of signifiers. In saying this, however, I am not suggesting that Clarice was ever influenced by poststructuralism or that she ever deliberately sought to bring it to life in her writing. What I am suggesting is that not only her writing (its style, structure and thematics) but her sense of the intimate connection between language and being effectively demonstrate the ontological preoccupations that define poststructuralist thought.

If a "ficção" like "La muerte y la brújula" shows Borges' fascination with structures and with the control they exert on us, on our thinking and on the ways we perceive ourselves and the world about us, then we can also wonder whether the protagonist of Clarice's first novel doesn't exemplify the insecurities and anxieties we associate with poststructuralism. Although it is clear that both Borges and Clarice possess a keen awareness of language, they do so in markedly different ways, ways that, in my opinion, basically reflect the distinctions we normally make between structuralism and its controversial offspring, poststructuralism. If the Borges *Ficciones* function more at the level of structure, or form, then Clarice's more fluid and semantically opaque "textes" operate at the level of the word, at the level of the linguistic sign and its mercurial relationship to both its referent and to other signs. This would explain why the term, "palavra" (which, of course, is Portuguese for "word"), is so recurring in Clarice's writing, so much so that it becomes a basic motif of her work. As we learn of Joana, for example, late in her novel:

Mas a libertação veio e Joana tremeu ao seu impulso . . . Porque, branda e doce como um amanhacer num bosque, nasceu a inspiração . . . Então ela inventou o que deveria dizer. Os olhos fechados, entregue, disse baixinho palavras nascidas

naquele instante, nunca antes ouvidas por alguém, ainda tenras da criação – brotos novos e frágeis. Eram menos que palavras, apenas sílabas soltas, sem sentido, mornas, que fluíam e se entrecruzavam, fecundavam-se, renasciam num só ser para desmembrarem-se em seguida, respirando, respirando . . . Falara . . . As palavras vindas de antes da linguagem, da fonte, da própria fonte. (*Perto do coração selvagem* 155)

This preoccupation with the semantic elusiveness of words and with their ontological potency is endemic to Lispector's work, though it might be said to find its most complete and complex expression in *A hora da estrela* (1977), the last of Lispector's novels to be published in her lifetime. As the metafictional male narrator (one Rodrigo S. M.) of this profoundly poststructural "texte" describes it, ". . . esta história será feita de palavras que se agrupam em frases e destas se evolva um sentido secreto que ultrapassa palavras e frases" (*A hora da estrela* 19). He goes on to say, of his own intimate and symbiotic relationship with the story he is telling, that ". . . o que escrevo é uma névoa úmida. As palavras são sons transfundidos de sombras que se entrecruzam desiguais, estalactites, renda, música transfigurada de órgão" (*Hora* 21). Finally, and in a way that recalls Saussure's argument that words signify only in relation to other words, Lispector's acutely language conscious narrator concludes both that ". . . a palavra é fruto da palavra. A palavra tem que se parecer com a palavra" (*Hora* 25) and that the act of writing, like existence itself, is "A procura da palavra no escuro" (*Hora* 84).

If the problem Éric Lönnrot faces is that his deeply rooted need to see the universe in terms of an identifiable structure demands that he interpret certain carefully arranged clues in a certain (and, as it turns out, fatal) way, then the problem that Joana and Rodrigo face is that they gradually come to realize that their sense of being, their identities, both personal and public, are ultimately a function of language's self-referentiality, its semantic slippage or, or Derrida would have it, its inherent, inescapable "différance." We can sum up this argument by saying that if the structuralist impulse animates Borges'

Ficciones, in Clarice's case it is more the spirit of "différance" that drives her "textes," that imparts to them their singular nature. The "différance," we might finally say, between Eric Lönnrot and characters like Joana and Rodrigo, or between Borges and Clarice, is basically the difference between structuralism and poststructuralism.

Before we pass on to two other texts, I would like to stress that I am not at all interested in suggesting that what I think of as Clarice's essential poststructuralism is in any way superior to Borges' structuralism. Indeed, I am not interested in arguing that either system of thought is somehow better or worse than the other. For me, the idea that our Latin American tradition could boast of exemplary writers in not just one but both of these two great intellectual currents is an intriguing one, and, if we are willing to consider it, this argument would only further enhance the already established excellence of modern Spanish American and Brazilian prose fiction.

We can now move from 1944, and the birth of Latin America's "new narrative," to the early 1960s, when the period of the now famous "Boom" was gathering force. The novels I would like to examine here are Julio Cortázar's *Rayuela* (1963) and Clarice's *A paixão segundo G. H.* (1964). As in the case of the Borges *Ficciones*, the Cortázar novel is, of course, well known to all Latin Americanists. In many ways the "breakthrough novel" of the Boom, *Rayuela*, published in 1963, was immediately hailed as a masterpiece, with Carlos Fuentes even proclaiming its author to be "el Bolívar de la novela hispanoamericana," on the grounds that, with *Rayuela*, Cortázar had liberated the Latin American novel from the provincialism, rote realism and technical conventionality that had long characterized it. Although later criticism would take a somewhat more judicious position in regard to *Rayuela*'s merits, few would seriously question its importance "in introducing a new dimension into Latin American fiction" (Monegal, II, 718). As Monegal, for example, says:

Después de *Rayuela* las estructuras externas o internas de la novela en nuestra lengua ya no serán las mismas. El libro de Cortázar no sólo cuestiona la forma de contar una historia, volviendo al lector

consciente no sólo del orden de la lectura (véase el "Tablero de dirección") sino también del acto de leer mismo. (Monegal, *El Boom*, 82)

What commands our attention here is the fact that *Rayuela* was not the only Latin American novel of the period to do these things. Featuring a metafictionally self-conscious first person narrator/protagonist (a tradition that has existed in Brazilian narrative since the time of Machado de Assis), *A paixão segundo G. H.*, published a year after *Rayuela*, in 1964, likewise challenges both the conventional assumptions about the novel form and the role of the reader in the construction of the text's meaning. There are other similarities as well; both the Argentine and the Brazilian novel involve quests, both are sensitive to the nature of language, both wrestle with the structural concept of "the center," and (as we have already seen in Clarice) both feature the play of humor, desire, and even eroticism, in the play of their narratives.

Once again, however, we can see that while *Rayuela* and *A paixão segundo G. H.* have many things in common, they are really very different books. Their differences, in other words, are what distinguish them and what we must key on if, as Latin Americanists, we want to come away with a more complete picture of the Latin American novel during this tumultuous time. As we are told in its famous "Tablero de Dirección," for example, *Rayuela* can be read in at least two ways:

A su manera este libro es muchos libros, pero sobre todo es dos libros.

El primero se deja leer en la forma corriente, y termina en el capítulo 56, al pie del cual hay tres vistosas estrellitas que equivalen a la palabra *Fin*. Por consiguiente, el lector prescindirá sin remordimientos de lo que sigue.

El segundo se deja leer empezando por el capítulo 73 y siguiendo luego en el orden que se indica al pie de cada capítulo.

En caso de confusión u olvido, bastará consultar la lista siguiendo:

at which point we are given the "second book's" recommended ordering of the chapters: 73, 1, 2, 116, 3, 84, and so forth. As many critics have pointed out, if the reader follows the first manner of reading *Rayuela*, she or he will adopt a traditional, or passive, readerly role and will experience what becomes a fairly conventional novel, one replete with a linear plot and narrative line. If one follows the second manner of reading *Rayuela*, however, he or she "jumps forward and backward through the book, as if. . . playing hopscotch," entering into the creation of yet "another version of the novel" and becoming what Cortázar terms an "accomplice-reader," (Garfield 18), one who must participate actively in the construction of the text's meaning.

A paixão segundo G. H., a work that also challenges the reader's ability to know what she or he is reading, does not feature anything so attention-getting as *Rayuela's* introductory "Table of Instructions." Nor does it possess the wryly comic voice that leavens so much of the Argentine novel's narrative line. Yet in its own way, *A paixão*, too, plays with both the reader's expectations and his or her response to the text being read. "Are we to take G. H.'s story as fiction," Ronald Sousa asks, "or as speculation on philosophical problems in and through the narration of what we would traditionally call a 'plot'?" (Sousa, *The passion according to G. H.*, vii-viii). Sousa then goes on to note that *A paixão segundo G. H.*:

comprises a series of nontraditional language uses. It is constituted by segments somewhat but not wholly linearly arranged. . . . The text also comprises . . . poetic phrases, . . . [the] creation of fictitious allusions; [the] reuse of apparently important terms with slightly changed signification . . . [and the] employment of complex verbal-conceptual ambiguities. (Sousa viii)

Overall, it can be argued that while *Rayuela* and *A paixão segundo G. H.* are both very much concerned with language, Clarice's novel cultivates a greater sense of linguistic instability, ontological anxiety, and semantic slippage (or "différance") than does Cortázar's novel, which, upon a careful second reading, seems more concerned with the basically structuralist

problem of how meaning is conveyed rather than what meaning is conveyed, or, perhaps more accurately stated, with the problem of meaning itself.

As we can see, in both *Rayuela* and *A paixão* language quickly establishes itself as one of the main characters. Yet here, too, there is a key difference between the two texts. Cortázar, in my opinion, effectively develops in discourses of *Rayuela*'s protagonist, Horacio Oliveira, the kind of critique of structuralism that Derrida more famously delivers three years later in his 1966 talk at Johns Hopkins University, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences." Thus, for Cortázar, the essential problem dealt with in *Rayuela* is the overwhelming, inescapable power of Logos, which Oliveira (whom we can now think of as an early deconstructor) seeks constantly to subvert or avoid. How far, we might well ask, is Oliveira's struggle against all that Logos represents from Derrida's criticism of Logocentrism as "the orientation of philosophy toward an order of meaning – thought, truth, reason, logic, the Word – conceived as existing in itself, as foundation" (Culler, *On deconstruction* 92)? How different from Derrida's critique of Logocentrism is Oliveira's conception of it, Oliveira who perceives the enshrined status of Logos as the supposedly ultimate, immutable Truth but whose own discourse in *Rayuela* constantly reveals it to be nothing more than an arbitrary, unverifiable, and contingent verbal construct, the product of our desire to be able to explain away the chaos of human existence? As the text expresses it, apropos of Oliveira's iconoclastic outlook:

hay una especie de equivocación inefable al principio de los principios, de donde resulta este fenómeno que les está hablando en este momento y ustedes que lo están escuchando. Toda tentativa de explicarlo fracasa por una razón que cualquiera comprende, y es que para definir y entender habría que estar fuera de lo definido y lo entendible. (*Rayuela* 190)

Then, and presaging Derrida's famous contention that we can never get outside of the system or structure (language, for

example) that we are seeking to critique, we are told, of the human condition, that:

Y así ocurre que el hombre solamente parece seguro en aquellos terrenos que no lo tocan a fondo: cuando juega, cuando conquista, cuando arma sus diversos caparazones históricos a base de ethos, cuando delega el misterio central a cura de cualquier revelación. Y por encima y por debajo, la curiosa noción de que la herramienta principal, el logos que nos arranca vertiginosamente a la escala zoológica, es una estafa perfecta. (*Rayuela* 190)

The linguistic concern of *A paixão segundo G. H.*, however, is rather different. Much less concerned (overtly, at least) with the issue of Logos per se (the word is never actually mentioned, as it is in Cortázar's text), Clarice's narrator, a bourgeois woman known to the reader only by the initials of her name (which are embossed on a suitcase), nevertheless enters into an exploration of language and being that ultimately leads her to question the same kinds of things – the power of Logos, for example – as Oliveira does. The crucial point, however, is that, as in the case of Borges' *Ficciones* and *Perto do coração selvagem*, while Cortázar critiques language from the macroperspective of structure, the Brazilian comes at it from the microperspective of "a palavra," the word. As G. H., ruminating on the language grounded nature of her own existence, expresses it:

A realidade é a matéria-prima, a linguagem é o modo como vou buscá-la – e como não acho. . . A linguagem é o meu esforço humano. Por destino tenho que ir buscar e por destino volto com as mãos vazias. Mas – volto com o indizível. O indizível só poderá ser dado através do fracasso de minha linguagem. Só quando falha a construção, é que obtenho o que ela não conseguiu. . . Pois como poderia eu dizer sem que a palavra mentisse por mim? (*A paixão* 212-213; 217)

The result is that, for Clarice, the primary problem addressed in the text is more related to meaning, to semantics (understood in its deeply personal context, as a problem of personal ontology), than to the larger – but no less valid – question of philosophical systems or socio-political codes of conduct, the issues that seem to concern Oliveira and his text the most. Yet this is not an “either/or” situation (to so imagine it would be to commit precisely the kind of spurious binary thinking that both Cortázar and Clarice warn us against) since both authors apply, to one degree or another, their examinations of language to both the public and the private spheres. But as a description of a general characteristic of *Rayuela* and *A paixão segundo G. H.* I believe that the idea that they critique language differently (one structurally, as a problem of conflicting semiotic systems, and the other poststructurally, as a psycho-semantic problem of personal identity and being) has some merit.

But if *Rayuela* and *A paixão* both challenge the validity of logocentric thinking as a proper basis for human civilization, they part company dramatically on the question of its pernicious machista cousin, Phallogocentrism, that is, the extension of the basic principles of Logocentrism (the alleged primacy of law, reason, logic, and truth) into an argument for the supposed superiority of the male order. On this point, as we shall now see, *A paixão* develops in a very different direction, one that I believe greatly enriches the Latin American novel of the Boom period by imparting to it a powerful female presence. Anyone who has read both *Rayuela* and *A paixão segundo G. H.* carefully will, I think, understand what I mean. Unless one argues, as Sydney Aboul-Hosn has recently done (307-316), that La Maga is the novel's most important character, the world of *Rayuela*, which is to say the world the text projects, is overwhelmingly a male dominated one. Indeed, it is, I think, not an unfair judgement to say that the lives led by Oliveira and his comrades in “The Club” epitomize not only Logocentrism but, as I suggested earlier, the more damaging and oppressive Phallogocentrism as well.¹²

The textual world created by G. H., on the other hand, is radically different. Although on balance overwhelmingly

female in its orientation and outlook, G. H.'s narrative also shows itself, near the end, to be surprisingly conformist in terms of what G. H. imagines her future to be. In stunning contrast to the militant resolve shown by Joana (in *Perto do coração selvagem*) at the close of her novel (in 1944), G. H. brings her hitherto seemingly anguished discourse to a close by making plans to go out with her friends for an evening of dining and dancing at her favorite club, the "Top-Bambino."

What is the reader to make of this decision, of this scene, which is often overlooked even by readers familiar with the novel? Although I am far from certain about it, I wonder if Clarice isn't here expanding the notion of what a "female presence" entails. It seems to me possible that, by having her protagonist be unable or unwilling to change the way she lives (and to make this decision in spite of what she has learned from the metaphysical self-inquisition she has just undergone), Clarice is showing us that this thing we call the "female presence" is a very complex phenomena, one that encompasses radically different states of being, some of which (G.H.'s, for example) may not be ideologically fashionable.¹³ As G. H. perhaps not so coyly puts it:

(De uma coisa eu sei: se chegar ao fim deste relato, irei, não amanhã, mas hoje mesmo, comer e dançar no "Top-Bambino", estou precisando danadamente me divertir e me divergir. Usarei, sim, o vestido azul novo, que me emagrece um pouco e dá cores, telefonarei para Carlos, Josefina, Antônio, não me lembro bem em qual dos dois percebi que me queria ou ambos me queriam, comerei crevettes ao não importa o quê, e sei por que comerei *crevettes*, hoje de noite, hoje de noite vai ser a minha vida diária retomada, a de minha alegria comum, precisarei para o resto dos meus dias de minha leve vulgaridade doce e bem-humorada, preciso esquecer, como todo o mundo.)
(*A paixão* 194)

While this need to "esquecer," to forget the terrifying chaos of life, stands in some degree of contrast to Oliveira's need "to

experience a world free from the constraining values of rational Occidental civilization" (Garfield 17-18), the texts of G. H. and Oliveira are similar in that they both confront the problem of life understood as a vast, inescapable system. One of the most powerful and complex novels of the early Boom period, and a text that, as I have attempted to demonstrate, can be profitably read in conjunction with Cortázar's *Rayuela*, *A paixão segundo G. H.* can make a considerable contribution to our more complete understanding of the Latin American novel of the 1960s.

The final two novels that I would like to discuss are Clarice's *Água viva* (1973) and Severo Sarduy's *Cobra* (1972). I select these works not randomly but, as with the others, because they seem to represent something similar in terms of what they mean to the evolution of modern Latin American narrative. For Suzanne Jill Levine, indeed, *Cobra* is "More the culmination of the New Latin American Novel" (*Cobra* vii),¹⁴ the "nueva" "nueva novela," so to speak, while, of Clarice's 1973 "ficção"¹⁵ it might be said that it is the culmination of its author's career-long struggle with language – and particularly autobiographically charged language – as an ontological force and as a problem of epistemology. The main point I would like to make in regard to these two texts is that while they are far from being identical, they have a great many features in common. For example, both *Cobra* and *Água viva* feature analogies between writing and painting and both are structured around an acute sensitivity to language understood as an ever-changing semiotic code. While this latter orientation is much more obvious in the case of Sarduy, whose interest in Barthesian theory and whose participation in the journal *Tel Quel* are well known, it is also indicative, I believe, of Clarice's sense of language. Other significant similarities between these texts include the degree to which they feature the implications inherent in the act of writing, the destabilizing pressure of eroticism, the transformative nature of language, and the inter-play of opposites. Other similarities would include the abiding interest both *Cobra* and *Água viva* have in using metafictionally self-conscious texts to loosen the grip in which binary thought holds us prisoner,¹⁶ in relentlessly plumbing the depths of language's inherent semantic

instability, and in exploring what, for their authors, seems to be the myth of the stable linguistic sign.

In a sense, all of these basic similarities manifest themselves in the sundry ways *Cobra* and *Água viva* examine the nature of writing, which (recalling Derrida) they both seem to understand as the most profound way language has of interrogating itself. Of *Água viva*, for example, Hélène Cixous has, in fact, said that:

If there is a subject of this text, or an object, it is on the question of writing. *Água viva* is about writing, as a verbal activity. [. . .] The circulation of blood in this text, the vital theme of this text, is writing, all the questions of writing. [. . .]: why I write, how I write, from where I write, to whom I write, with what I write, of what I write, about what, toward what. All the questions of writing are right here. (Cixous, *The stream of life*, xv-xvi)

Similar commentaries on the nature of writing occur in *Cobra*, where, early on, we read that:

La escritura es el arte de recrear la realidad. (Cobra 17) [. . .] No. La escritura es el arte de restituir la Historia (18). [. . .] La escritura es el arte de descomponer un orden y componer un desorden (20). [. . .] [and] La escritura es el arte del remiendo (25).

For Sarduy, according to Roberto González Echevarría, "Writing," therefore, "does not simply represent a mode of communication, but is that through which the workings of language are made manifest. Language arises from difference, or in difference, in the incision between two elements that, in order to signify, to be, have to remain distinct from each other. [. . .] What *Cobra* dramatizes time and again is the [. . .] very heart of language" (455) and of being.

For Lispector, in a not altogether dissimilar fashion, the issue of writing reveals itself to be less a function of Aristotelian

mimesis and narration than the expression of a deeply personalized and poeticized ontology, a function of the fundamentally linguistic nature of existence itself. Or, to put it another way, for Lispector the question is not so much about the ability (or even the inability) of writing to represent reality but the self-creative act of writing itself, and what this act means to both the sender and the receiver of the message. As *Água viva's* nameless female narrator expresses it:

Tudo acaba mas o que te escrevo continua. O que é bom, muito bom. O melhor ainda não foi escrito. O melhor está nas entrelinhas. [. . .] O que te escrevo é um "isto". Não vai parar: continua. [. . .] O que te escrevo continua e estou enfeitçada. (*Água viva* 96-97)

Yet for all that the nature of writing ties these two texts together, several issues demonstrate key differences between Sarduy's work and Clarice's. In *Cobra*, for example, language per se can be said to be the main character, while in *Água viva* it is the psycho-linguistic self-realization of an unnamed woman that fulfills this role. But because *Água viva* clearly shows the process of self-realization to be not only fluid in nature but also simultaneously self-effacing, or what we might call "self-deconstructive," the partially autobiographical (Peixoto 72) characterization of *Água viva's* protagonist becomes, as in *Cobra*, a constant function of change, of transformation. Although this is most obvious in the more campy *Cobra*, where a transvestite (or sign) named "Cobra" sees her or his body metamorphose in a dazzling variety of ways, it is also applicable to the more restrained but perhaps also more intense *Água viva*, whose narrative voice lives – through language – in similarly varied modes of being. Yet there are other important differences as well: *Cobra* is both more overtly chaotic than *Água viva*, and more parodically self-conscious – even to be point of derisively challenging the reader's ability to interpret its text and of comparing itself (favorably, of course) to the famous novels of the Boom.¹⁷ *Cobra*, moreover, is a more explicit demonstration of Barthesian semiotics than is *Água viva*, which, one feels, is more a philosophical or

psychoanalytic issue of language-as-being, of language understood as a mode of bringing one's self into existence. As many critics have noted, *Cobra* represents a kind of culmination for a certain aspect of the modern Spanish American novel (González Echevarría declares it to be "a work of the anti-Boom", 445). But as I have tried to suggest, it is not alone in its singular status, for it has a Brazilian counterpart. Read together as texts that both compliment and offset each other, *Cobra* and *Água viva* give vivid testimony to the signal importance language, understood as an ever mutating and inherently erotic semiotic system, has had to the evolution of Latin American narrative in the second half of the twentieth century.

In the preceding pages I have tried to assess, if only in rudimentary form, the importance of Clarice Lispector and to show how she and her work might be read in the larger context of modern Latin American narrative. I have tried to show, in particular, how certain of her novels, *Perto do coração selvagem*, *A paixão segundo G. H.*, and *Água viva* could be compared to certain decisive narratives from the Spanish American tradition of the same time period. As what we now commonly think of as Latin American literature continues to evolve into the twenty-first century, one of our most important tasks will be to integrate its two great traditions, the Spanish American (which, of course, is much more widely known and appreciated) and the Brazilian. As I have sought to suggest, the narratives of Clarice Lispector, one of modern Latin American literature's most daring and original writers, offer us an outstanding opportunity to do precisely this. By including her work in our evaluation of it, the modern Latin American novel suddenly takes on a unique technical brilliance (one that dramatizes the basic issues dealt with in poststructural theory) and a consciousness of women, psychologically, culturally and politically, that it would not otherwise have until much later. In sum, then, it is perhaps not an exaggeration to conclude that the contribution of Clarice Lispector to the modern Latin American novel significantly alters our perception of it as it evolved, formally and thematically, between 1944 and the early 1970s, the period of some of this celebrated form's greatest achievements.

¹ For Clarice, the move from the stories and novels of her fiction work to the peculiarities of the "crônica" was not an easy one to make. As Giovanni Pontiero notes, "Lispector confessed she did not find it easy to adapt to the genre [the "crônica"]... She questioned the wisdom of tackling a genre which to some extent was alien to her introspective nature. Summing up her disquiet, she commented: 'I am apprehensive. Writing too much and too often can contaminate the word.'... She was afraid of becoming too personal, and the need to be topical and conform to the conditions and constraints of a weekly column worried her." *Clarice Lispector: discovering the world* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1984), p. 21.

² For a more complete statement of her opinions on this subject, see *A descoberta do mundo*, 4 October and 20 December, 1969.

³ See my Clarice Lispector and the lyrical novel: a reexamination of *A maça no escuro*, *Luso-Brazilian Review* 14 (1977): 153-160.

⁴ In the context of their respective literary histories, another important difference between Clarice and Borges is that the Brazilian seemingly did not outline her new theory of narrative in critical essays, as Borges did in "El arte narrativo y la magia" (1932) and "La postulación de la realidad" (*Discusión*, 1932).

⁵ Roberto Reis, in *The pearl necklace*, makes a similar point, arguing that Clarice (along with Guimarães Rosa) carries Brazilian narrative into "an authentic modernity" (42), one driven by "a radical shredding of language" (41) that calls attention to itself and to its relationship to History (41).

⁶ Although Clarice did not write any formal essays or lengthy articles on the theoretical foundations of her "escrita," she did occasionally allude to the new kind of fiction that she was writing. In *A descoberta do mundo* for example, she writes, ("O Verdadeiro Romance," Aug. 22, 1970) that she finds the traditional, or "true" novel, boring. She also says that in her narratives she is guided by a quest for discovery (this, one feels, in contrast to the "true" novel's sense of plot, solid characterization, and detailed description). Similarly, in *A legião estrangeira* (1964), Clarice offers several brief comments that show her reflecting on the unorthodox nature of her own work (see, for example, "Submissão ao processo," "Escrever, prolongar o tempo," "Dois modos," and "Escrevendo"). See also the Introduction to Marta Peixoto's *Passionate fictions* (1994).

⁷ See, for example, Paul Dixon, The Modernity of Machado de Assis, *Hispanic Studies Series*, 4 (1989): 71-80, and Alfred Mac Adam and Flora Schiminovich, *The postmodern movement*, Stanley Trachtenberg, editor (Westport: Greenwood, 1985: 251-262). For a comparative discussion of Latin America's two narrative traditions, see Earl Fitz, *Metafiction in Latin American narrative: the case for Brazil*, or, if Brás Cubas were here today, what would he say about Spanish American fiction?, *Mester* xxvi (1997): 43-69.

⁸ See Earl Fitz, "A pecadora queimada e os anjos harmoniosos": Clarice Lispector as Dramatist, *Luso-Brazilian Review* 34, 2 (Winter 1997): 25-39.

⁹ In 1973, Monegal, citing the work of Gérard Genette and Jean Ricardou, would write that "The French Structuralists have already recognized their partial debt to Borges" (*The Proceedings of the 7th ICLA Congress*, vol. 1, 1973: 434), and in 1974, Robert Scholes, citing Genette's work (*Enquêtes*), would discuss

Borges as an exemplary structuralist writer (*Structuralism in literature*, New Haven: Yale, p. 11).

¹⁰ John Sturrock, also noting the affinities Borges's "ficciones" have with Structuralism, has written, in fact, that "'The Library of Babel' . . . is the bad dream of a Structuralist . . ." (*Ficciones*, with an Introduction by John Sturrock, New York: Knopf/Everyman's Library, 1993: xviii.)

¹¹ Barbara Mathie's "Feminism, Language or Existentialism: The Search for the Self in the Works of Clarice Lispector" (*Subjectivity and literature from the Romantics to the present day*, Philip Shaw and Peter Stockwell, eds., London, NY: Pinter, 1991: 121-134) notes the poststructural ethos of Clarice's narratives as does Maria José Somerlate Barbosa's *Clarice Lispector: spinning the webs of passion* (New Orleans: of the South, 1997).

¹² It can be easily argued, for example, that sections 24-38 – the sections that describe the death of the child, Rocamadour, and the actions (and reactions) of La Maga, Oliveira and the members of "The Club" – are the quintessence of the problem of Phallogocentrism as it is featured in this novel. The key questions, however, have to do with how the reader should interpret this extraordinary scene and how we should regard its role in the novel.

¹³ This is not the first time that Lispector had taken this tact in regard to one of her protagonists. Ana, in the short story, "Amor," undergoes a very similar experience. After her metaphysically disorienting experience in the Botanical Gardens, she returns to her home and her kitchen and wants everything to be as it was before her experience, her moment of epiphany.

¹⁴ Remarking that "*Cobra* . . . is a work of the anti-Boom," Roberto González Echevarría comes to a similar conclusion. See his "Plain song: Sarduy's *Cobra*."

¹⁵ Clarice herself preferred to think of *Água viva* as a "fiction" rather than as a novel.

¹⁶ *Cobra*, in particular, is explicit in its dismissal of binary thought. In a "note", for example, we are told, parodically, that ". . . the Madam would protest. 'We must correct the errors of natural binaryism' – she added, Benvenistian – 'but *per piacere*, gentlemen, this is not like shooting fish in a barrel!'" (*Cobra* 4-5). Though *Água viva* is never this overt, it is relentless in undoing binary opposites that characterize classical structuralist thought and in ceaselessly reforming their constituent parts in an endless pattern of semantic free play, the structure of which comes to be the text, or "texte", of *Água viva* itself.

¹⁷ What we are told, in another "explanatory note," is the following: "Tarado lector: si aun con estas pistas, groseras como postes, no has comprendido que se trata de una metamorfosis del pintor del capítulo anterior – fíjate si no cómo le han quedado los gestos del oficio – abandona esta novela y dedícate al templete o a leer las del Boom, que son mucho más claras" (*Cobra* 66). For a Latin Americanist trained in the narrative tradition of both Spanish America and Brazil, this parodically dismissive treatment of the reader echoes the work of Brazil's Machado de Assis, who, in several works but most notably in *Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas* (1880), establishes himself as the master of this technique. As I have argued elsewhere (see my "Metafiction in Latin American narrative: the case for Brazil, or, if Brás Cubas were here today, what would he say about Spanish American fiction?", with this novel Machado not only initiates Latin America's original "new narrative", he calls for a new type of reader as well.

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