

A NEWLY DISCOVERED POEM BY CLARICE LISPECTOR

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Resumo: Discutem-se as razões por que Clarice Lispector teria se dedicado à prosa ficcional, apesar de seus romances e contos deixarem transparecer um significativo teor de poeticidade. Recuperam-se dois poemas de sua autoria publicados na imprensa em 1941 e 1947.

Palavras-chave: Clarice Lispector; poemas; escrita poética; mercado editorial.

Not long ago, an elderly correspondent in Rio de Janeiro sent me a poem, a cheesy pastiche about a woman leaving her lover (“I no longer love you/I would be lying if I said that/I still love you,” and so forth), a poem that, like a palindrome, could be read backwards, which in the process cleverly reversed its meaning (“I still love you/I would be lying if I said that/I no longer love you”). It was harmless enough, the kind of heartwarming ditty that often enjoys a magnificent career on the internet; but it was certainly not the work of the person to whom it was attributed, Clarice Lispector. Though the idea that Brazil’s greatest modern writer could be responsible for such treacle is, apparently, widespread: “Around 90% of the emails I receive on this site contain questions about these [apocryphal] texts,”¹ writes the author of one website dedicated to Clarice’s work. “Clarice Lispector never wrote poetry, only prose.”

In correcting one myth, however, the writer propagates another: that Clarice's literary production was exclusively in prose. In recent years, an ever-increasing torrent of publications, illuminating one or another aspect of Clarice Lispector's career, has poured out of Brazil, and not only out of Brazil. "Today there is a Clarice for every taste", Vilma Arêas writes in the introduction to her study of the author. "That is why I sometimes think that it is too late – or, to the contrary, very early – to write about her."² Indeed, for the sheer heft of her bibliography, Clarice Lispector is probably the most studied Brazilian writer since Machado de Assis. A survey of the literature that appeared in 1993 ran to over three hundred pages,³ and that was *before* the blossoming of Clarice studies that the past decade has witnessed. By this measure, Clarice Lispector, who during her lifetime often had trouble finding a publisher, has surely surpassed even such giants as Euclides da Cunha, João Guimarães Rosa, and Carlos Drummond de Andrade.

The quality of this critical production is another matter, of course. But its pure volume makes it seem unlikely that there are many stones still unturned. In fact there are. In 2006, Aparecida Maria Nunes published an anthology of Clarice's "feminine" journalism, *Correio Feminino*,⁴ that suggested the nature of the problem. The book, however welcome and attractive, was only a selection. Much of her journalism has never been collected: not only the remainder of the women's pages but also many of the interviews she did for *Manchete* and *Fatos & Fotos/Gente*. These were partially collected in *De Corpo Inteiro*, but many – probably most – are only available in the archive in Rio. The same goes for the newspaper columns ("crônicas") published in *A Descoberta do Mundo*: that weighty volume, which runs to over five hundred pages, is nonetheless far from complete. As Clarice Lispector takes her increasingly unquestioned place at the forefront of twentieth-century literature, the time will come for a complete critical edition of her works.

First, however, we have to locate them. The columns and the journalism are largely, though surely not completely, collected in the Museum of Brazilian Literature at the Casa de Rui Barbosa in Rio de Janeiro. They are available to anyone who wants to make the trip. Is there more out there? There is. And for scholarly sleuths, the case of Clarice Lispector's poetry offers an intriguing challenge.

Clarice Lispector herself claimed that she did not write poetry, though it is well-known that Clarice was not a stickler for biographical exactitude. She shaved a few years off her age (which hardly made her unique among women of her generation) and she claimed to have arrived in Brazil from Europe when she was two months old (in fact she was over a year old). This was perhaps to emphasize her close connection with the country where she spent most of her life, or perhaps to blunt accusations that she was a foreigner.

These misrepresentations, though they once caused problems for her biographers, are not particularly scandalous. Likewise, her later denial that she ever wrote poetry is not mysterious: many writers disavow, or simply forget about, parts of their early work; and because Clarice Lispector became a writer of prose, she either forgot about her early poetry, or came to think of it as irrelevant. Or maybe she just didn't feel like talking about it: in an interview with *O Pasquim*, we find the following dialogue, with Olga Savary and Sérgio Augusto:

OS: Did you ever write poetry, Clarice?

CL: No.

OS: You never even tried?

CL: Never.

OS: Not even when you were a teenager?

SA: Because your texts are very poetic.

CL: But I am not poetic.⁵

The *Pasquim* interviewers seem to have irritated Clarice, for most of the answers she gave in the interview were similarly curt. In an interview

she gave to the Museu da Imagem e do Som the year before her death, in which she was surrounded by friends, comfortable, and even chatty, she was more forthcoming.⁶

Interviewer: Did you ever make any explicit attempt to write poetry? Because you write in prose, strictly speaking, but *Água viva* is a poetic text ...

CL: It seems everyone starts with poetry, right?

Interviewer: Or some write it and then don't show it to anyone.

CL: I scribbled a few things, but I threw them out, told myself they were worthless.

In 2006, in Rio de Janeiro, I had the chance to pose the question to Tania Lispector Kaufmann, Clarice's 91-year old sister. "People always ask me about that, but I don't think she did, not as far as I know", Tania said. In a letter to her Clarice's English translator Giovanni Pontiero, Tania had earlier written that "Clarice didn't write poetry. It's possible that she wrote a bit as a teenager, but she didn't publish it".⁷ In his review of her first novel, *Near to the Wild Heart*, her close friend Lúcio Cardoso referred to her poetry, which "has the same sonorous qualities of many of the best pages of *Near to the Wild Heart*." Cardoso recognized the "muffled voice running through all of her debut book, ready to rise up alive, dominating, revealing not a little maker of poetic filigrees but a proud and rare nature, a real vocation for this dramatic occupation which is the destiny and the work of a poet".⁸ And in 1945 Manuel Bandeira told her: "You are a poet, Clarice dear. To this day I regret what I said about the verses you sent me. You misinterpreted my words".⁹

There had once been some poetry out there somewhere, but had it ever been published? Only one poem was known, published in 1990 in *Langues de Feu: essais sur Clarice Lispector* by the Canadian writer Claire Varin. Perhaps because the book was written in French,¹⁰ the poem seems to have remained obscure. Called "A mágoa," it was printed in the *Diário de São Paulo* under the rubric "Children's corner," on January 5, 1947.

Os telhados sujos a sobrevoar
Arrastas no vôo a asa partida
Acima da igreja as ondas do sino
Tê rejeitam ofegante na areia
O abraço não podes mais suportar
Amor estreita asa doente
Sais gritando pelos ares em horror
Sangue escoia pelos chaminés.
Foge foge para o espanto da solidão
Pousa na rocha
Estende o ser ferido que em teu corpo se aninhou,
Tua asa mais inocente foi atingida
Mas a Cidade te fascina.
Insiste lúgubre em brancura
Carregando o que se tornou mais precioso.
Voas sobre os tetos em ronda de urubu
Asa pesa pálida na noite descida
Em pálido pavor
Sobrevoas persistente a Cidade Fortificada escurecida
Capela ponte cemitério loja fechada
Parque morto floresta adormecida,
Folha de jornal voa em rua esquecida.
Que silêncio na torre quadrada.
Espreitas a fortaleza inalcançada.
Não desças
Não finjas que não dói mais
Inútil negar asa partida.
Arcanjo abatido, não tens onde pousar.
Foge, assombro, inda é tempo,
Desdobra em esforço a sua medida
Mergulha tua asa no ar.

Last year, I discovered a second poem, published six years before in the Rio newspaper *Dom Casmurro*, Brício de Abreu's "Grande Hebdomário Brasileiro" whose motto was "A confusão era geral" and where Clarice Lispector published some of her first works. "There was a paper, *Dom Casmurro*," she remembered. "I took some ... some things over there. Just like that, without knowing anyone [...] They loved it, they thought I was gorgeous! They said I had the prettiest voice in the world! And they published it. And they didn't pay. Of course! Of course!".¹¹

The pages of *Dom Casmurro* give an idea of the interests of Rio de Janeiro's lettered classes at that time. The paper was serious but playful — the women's pages carried articles about how to whiten one's teeth — alongside articles on the Origins of Nietzsche, the death of Christ, the animal in painting, Peruvian popular poetry, "Our Mother, Greece," and "Let's talk about Freud". There is local interest: the sermons of Padre Antônio Vieira, the novels of Eça de Queiroz, the baroque churches of Minas Gerais, and "The Academy and the Brazilian Language". The wide range makes its complete lack of political coverage all the more notable: the heavy censorship of the Estado Novo made sure that in the midst of a world war, with Getúlio Vargas still flirting with both sides, the most "engagement" one would encounter were repeated pleas for money to provide the poet Castro Alves with a properly glorious tomb.

The poem Clarice Lispector published there on October 25, 1941, "Descobri o meu país", has much in common with the poem she published in 1947, which makes it possible that the latter was in fact written around the same time. Their common theme is the painful longing to escape the world, and the terrible knowledge that escape is impossible.

"Descobri o meu país"

Subi a montanha
e no seu topo os anjos me cercaram
e me engrinaldaram a fronte
com as flores do céu.
Azas zumbiam
em harmonias fráguas
e vozes de arcanjos louvavam a paz.
Derramaram sobre meu corpo
sete bálsamos purificadores
e fizeram-me beber
ambrosia e mel.

Banharam-me no rio da música
e eu saí ingénue
como o canto de uma criança.
E depois surgiram novos anjos
e não havia noite
e não havia dia.
E a ambrosia e o nectar
deslisavam com fartura celestial.
E novas canções se entoaram
sempre em louvor a Deus.
E não havia noite
E não havia dia.
E aos poucos cresceu dentro de mim
o desespero
e eu busquei em vão os olhos celestiais.
Eles nada diziam
e cantavam a paz.
E aos poucos uma nostalgia
me enlanguesceu
e eu era o arco distendido
sem a flexa
e eu buscava o ar
sem respirar.
Um anjo me interrogou: mais nectar?
Eu gritei: quero cheiro da terra!
E o anjo me perdoou
E eu cansei de ser perdoada,
eu queria sofrer.
E não havia noite e não havia ...
Quebrei minhas azas,
desci a montanha
e vivi na Terra!

.....
Homens amavam
e cansavam do amor.
Homens bebiam sangue
e descobriam
que não desejavam brigar
Entoavam-se canticos místicos
onde só havia a insatisfação.

E depois homens morriam
e todos sabiam que era o fim.

.....

Nem a terra,
nem o céu!

.....

Fechei-me num quarto,
inventei outro Deus,
outro céu, outra terra
e outros homens.

The discovered country of the title – “nem a terra,/nem o céu!” – suggests the solution Clarice Lispector found: a life of searching, “locked in a room”, somewhere between earth and heaven, creating a world of her own. “Não quero ter a terrível limitação de quem vive apenas do que é passível de fazer sentido”, she wrote in her late masterpiece *Água Viva*. “Eu não: quero uma verdade inventada.”

Why did Clarice Lispector not continue her poetic career? She gives a tongue-in-cheek hint in a letter to a little girl, Andréa Azuly, the daughter of her psychoanalyst Jacob David Azuly, with whom she carried on a warm correspondence. Impressed by Andréa’s verbal capacities, Clarice encouraged her embryonic writing career. In one letter, from around 1975, she gave her some advice: “Andréa lia muitos livros até quase onze horas da noite. E também escrevia muito bonito. Mas veio a fada e avisou-lhe: se você vier a ser escritora, procure escrever em prosa, até mesmo prosa poética, porque ninguém edita comercialmente livro de poesias”.¹²

It seems unlikely that commercial considerations led Clarice to abandon poetry. Her own (prose) books earned her almost nothing, and she had to support herself with journalism and translations. It is more plausible that as her poetic impulse became increasingly subsumed into her prose, she simply no longer felt the need. As Affonso Romano de

Sant'Anna pointed out in the interview with the Museu da Imagem e do Som, her writing was prose, "strictly speaking, but *Água viva* is a poetic text". The same can be said of her entire oeuvre, a bravura demonstration of just how arbitrary is the division between the two genres.

We may assume that the decision to write exclusively in prose was gradual – unless, of course, Clarice wrote no more than two poems and published them six years apart. The time span, and the references to her poetry in interviews and articles, strongly suggest that more poetry is out there, hidden in the yellowing pages of the publications she was associated with: *A Noite*, *Dom Casmurro*, *Pan*, *Vamos Ler!*, as well as Getúlio Vargas's press bureau, the Agência Nacional. For the literary archaeologist, discovering this lost and dispersed work offers a unique, and uniquely valuable, challenge.

NOTES

¹ <http://www.geocities.com/Paris/Concorde/9366/mude.htm>

² CL *Com a ponta dos dedos*, São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2005, p. 13.

³ CL *A bio-bibliography*, ed. Diane Marting, Greenwood Press: Westport CT, 1993.

⁴ Rio de Janeiro: Rocco, 2006.

⁵ *O Pasquim*, June 3-9, 1974. Quoted in Mendes de Sousa, 68-69.

⁶ October 20, 1976. p. 264. Outros escritos. The interviewer is Affonso Romano de Sant'Anna.

⁷ "Clarice não escrevia poesias. É possível que na adolescência tenha feito algumas, mas não as publicou." No date. The letter is in my own library.

⁸ *Diário Carioca*, March 12, 1944.

⁹ "Você é poeta, Clarice querida. Até hoje tenho remorso do que disse a respeito dos versos que você me mandou. Você interpretou mal minhas palavras. Você tem peixinhos nos olhos; você é bissexta: faça versos, Clarice, e se lembre de mim."

¹⁰ Though it was later translated into Portuguese as *Línguas de Fogo*.

¹¹ Quoted in Nádia, 154.

¹² *Correspondências*, 307.

