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Abstract
How does one state in words the impossibility of writing? How does one translate an author who has depicted herself as silent in the very text? The Brazilian writer Clarice Lispector dares to do so. From *Agua viva*, one of her first novels, to *Un soplo de vida*, her posthumous work, Lispector enters into an egotistic self-referential movement. She dares to speak from her work, from herself, from art, and from literature, thus mixing realities of different dimensions and erasing borders between life and letter. In *Agua viva* Lispector interrogates the causes and effects of the writing process in order to know it, to govern it. There, she begins to experience revelatory and joyful epiphanies that later, in *Un soplo de vida*, become mystical. However, the tone of this later text is quite different. There, her writing presages a forthcoming silence, and because of that the illusion of apprehending knowledge by language fades as it becomes certain of the impossible...

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Post a Comment

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How does one state in words the impossibility of writing? How does one translate an author who has depicted herself as silent in the very text? The Brazilian writer Clarice Lispector dares to do so. From *Agua viva*, oneof her first novels, to *Un soplo de vida*, her posthumous work, Lispector enters into an egotistic self-referential movement. She dares to speak from her work, from herself, from art, and from literature, thus mixing realities of different dimensions and erasing borders between life and letter. In *Agua viva* Lispector interrogates the causes and effects of the writing process in order to know it, to govern it. There, she begins to experience revelatory and joyful epiphanies that later, in *Un soplo de vida*, become mystical. However, the tone of this later text is quite different. There, her writing presages a forthcoming silence, and because of that the illusion of apprehending knowledge by language fades as it becomes certain of the impossible.

In what follows I will try to provide an understanding of two stages concerning the life and literature of Lispector: one belonging to her renaissance, the other to her decadence; one through a joyful autobiography, the other through an agonistic autothanatography (*thanatos* meaning death). As the study of the autobiographical genre enjoys a certain boom in academic work, so does Clarice Lispector. French deconstructionism and American postmodernism have found in the work of the Brazilian writer a rich land full of philosophy and literature to explore, with the French critic Hélène Cixous being the pioneer in inserting Lispector at the crossroads of deconstruction and literature. With "L'approche de Claris Lispector" (1979) and *L'heure de Clarice Lispector*, Cixous exorcized her own writing ghosts. Cixous named her *écriture féminine* after Lispector's work, and defined it—through the lens of the psychoanalysis—as a space of linguistic realization, an incestuous, homosexual, autoerotic, symbiotic mother who first must satisfy herself in order to find her own voice. Undoubtedly some critics have pointed out a lesbic-literary mirroring. But what concerns me here is Cixoux's belief that Lispector's writing (and *l'écriture feminine* by implication) is diametrically opposed to what she calls the Derridean "essentialism". What is she referring to when she speaks of "essentialism"? Is it perhaps an analytical feature more philosophical (i.e. phenomenological, epistemological, metaphysical) than the psychoanalytic one? Evident in Cixous's work on Clarice Lispector's literature is the privileging of the psychoanalytic over the philosophical reading. Yet, it is hard to detach one from the other. While employing philosophical rather than psychoanalytic terms, I seek to show a way in which Lispector's texts can be said to articulate and justify their own epistemology, that is, their own way of accessing knowledge; as well as the manner in which they sketch their own metaphysics, by which I mean the search for transcendental features such as the nature of phenomena. I

want to explore in the manner in which Derrida's phenomenological philosophy and that of his colleagues—Paul de Man or Maurice Blanchot, among others, all of whom I am referring to when I use the term "essentialist"—can be intertwined in Lispector's literature; all through her *écriture*, considering it feminine or not. In these pages I will contemplate the autobiographical genre as the result of a celebratory moment of life, as shown in *Agua viva*. At the same time, I want to highlight the usefulness of the term "autothanatography." Formulated by Derrida, this term can be applied to *Un soplo de vida*, which—among a number of rare discourses— is an attempt to write one's own death (or better, an author's two deaths: that of the writer and that of his text).

Two novels

Agua viva waspublished in 1973, shortly after Clarice Lispector's first divorce. She spent almost all her life with a Brazilian diplomat traveling around the world and by the time she wrote this text, she already had a public name. The story is about a recently divorced or separated woman who writes to her ex-lover an extended letter in which she explains her new single state. She is a painter starting to write. Her recently discovered activity produces a daily preoccupation about the possibilities of this new art. She wants to exceed language as she thinks she has exceeded the image. Therefore, throughout the text she maintains an optimistic attitude towards knowledge and language. Her argument is: if I write, I can simultaneously apprehend both moment and language. This argument shows a certain confidence in her epistemological potential, as well as the belief that if we can attain certain phenomenological knowledge and say it in words, we can, regarding literature, comprehend the act of writing, govern it, and wrestle its troubled nature. It is no coincidence that this text came after her divorce; becoming detached from her husband allowed her to develop a new life as a professional writer. That positive perspective leads us to conceive *Agua viva* like a life celebration, the testimony of a rebirth. The very title emphasizes the festive tone and adds to it a touch of religiosity. Live water runs strongly through the pages as it once did in the Bible to satiate the thirst of Moses and the Samaritan.

Un soplo de vida is quite different. Here we witness the last breath of an author. This time the narrator is a man. Not wanting to be alone, he invents a character to talk to, Angela. Both get entangled in absurd and endless dialogues or worse, autistic monologues. Two themes are constantly brought to the forefront throughout the text: writing and life. The author analyzes his two voices (his and Angela's) while his newborn character enjoys life and tries to get independence from her creator. They discuss at length the illusion of feeling empowered through the act of creation and free will. Their interest in writing and living shares the same importance. The narrator believes that by using metalanguage one can better understand language itself. Angela believes that she can be free just by existing, that she can escape the page's border. Sadly, there is no way to avoid the end of a posthumous novel as we cannot avoid finishing any book: as the text advances "life" gives way to "death" and the consequences are foreseen: after the writing process Angela will stop talking, experiencing and will live fixed and enclosed in a finished volume. The author will have a similar end, perhaps more drastic: he (she) will

die. *Un soplo de vida* was not published by Clarice Lispector, it came out after her death. Thus, it is a book published from the grave and in a way, by a dead person.

We have two moments in the life of an author and her *écriture*. In the former there is hope, in the latter despair. *Agua viva* finishes: "What I'm writing to you continues and I am fascinated" (100). Whereas *Un soplo de vida* sighs: "…no. I cannot finish. I think that…" (154). The "linguistic well-being" of the earlier text gets transformed in the second with the author's resistance to finish a sentence, even to use a full stop. The attitude towards literature shifts from playfulness to apprehension. But if both texts are so different what are the bridges that get them linked to the life and work of Lispector? I considered, among others, the self-referential writing, the search for apprehending phenomena, language, or *l'écriture*; as well as the presence of epistemological "epiphanies" and their evident autobiographical nature. Both of them, as the whole production of the Brazilian writer, turn out to be a matter or life/death and writing, subjects that haunted Lispector in each of her literary enterprises.

Phenomenon, Language, Epiphany, and Epistemology: the Joy of *Autobiography*

Agua viva and *Un soplo de vida* seek to apprehend the moment; in both texts, the narrators believed they can articulate a phenomenological knowledge by translating into words all that is manifest. *Agua viva* says: "Now is an instant. Now is another. And another. My effort: to bring the future now" (32, my translation). The female narrator believes that she can apprehend time in words; that she can know phenomenon just by saying it; and by consequence, that she can have a certain power over it. By contrast, in *Un soplo de vida* the male narrator says: "Never before life has been so actual as right now. Time for me is the disintegration of matter. It is organic putrefaction, as if time will be a worm inside a fruit taking from it all its flesh. Time does not exist. What we call time is the evolutionary movement of things, but it does not exist" (14). The reflection about time as a sensuous feature brings to both narrators the perception of experiencing everything in space. But whereas the first author flatters herself of *being in* and *writing of* the phenomenon (and by implication of knowing it and governing it), the latter believes that reality implies the notion of no reality, that is to say, that time is as inconsistent as disintegrated matter must be. Since the author acknowledges an impossible nature, he stops seeking and capturing frozen moments in sentences as his predecessor once did. For him, there is but one undermined reality made of time, matter, and energy as a presence eternally running away.

Language is for both texts the instrument to attain certain truths; language, and the act of writing as an intellectual and artistic *miraculum*. Both texts interrogate the writing process in the process itself through metalanguage, that is, writing about language in a partial philosophical, partial poetic fashion (and what is philosophy but poetry itself?). They look for a definition that will help them to figure out clearly their enterprise and govern it without the feeling of being constantly outside of words. *Agua viva* says: "Does writing exists by itself? No. It is just the reflection of something asking for… Writing is a question. It is just like this: ?"; whereas *Un soplo de vida* affirms: "Writing is a stone dropped in an empty water well" (16; 14). In the former text, writing is a question

without an answer, in the latter there is a reply: writing is but the echo that a rock will make at the end of an empty water well; is an echo and not the noise, it is to throw and not to pick, it is empty and not fulfilling. Writing then seems as transient as life is. Here, again, we see two moments: the first hopeful, the second embedded in a somehow bitterer atmosphere; the former with a confidence in life and literature, the latter foreseeing the imperative of death and silence. They both seek to apprehend phenomenon by language and inversely, language by phenomenon, through the act of writing. But neither knowledge nor language can reveal themselves in their entirety, their limitations can be symbolized as the walls of the water well.

Yet, the two narrators justify their knowledge by a somewhat naïve strategy, that is to say, an epiphany. In *Agua viva* the narrator explains that her knowledge comes from the belief that "… we really exist and the world exists. In this state [the *grace* state]… there is a lucidity which does not need to guess: it knows. Just like this, it knows. Do not ask me why, because I can only answer in the same way; it knows" (92). Later on, she continues talking about this state of *grace*: "What is happening to me is the *Grace*? Because I do not feel my body, it is weightless, it is desireless, the spirit does not struggle with itself or look for anything, I am surrounded by a luminous and silent aura: I exist in the air, out of time but within the instant, without a before or an after. I received myself and the world does not touch me" (123).

Undoubtedly, the narration of this state pervades the book with a mystical atmosphere that yet in *Agua viva* is not explored at length. On the contrary, in *Un soplo de vida,* the epiphany is totally rooted in a religious frame. For the male narrator, the grace is to see God, an "unspeakable, scarcely supportable beauty… pain and beauty get confused and blend with an apocalyptic happiness" (141). The former state of happiness becomes apocalyptic; the unexplainable knowledge entails the painful and the beautiful at once. Those epiphanies are for both narrators the authorities to claim the truths they dare to know. They say "to know something" but they do not specify what; leaving their revelation enclosed between the sentences of the texts.

The knowledge they claim to know is a primary knowledge, intuition, premeditation; all opposed to Kantian reason. *Un soplo de vida* says: "This is my thought, with the utterances that mentally are brought out, without speaking or writing before or after; prior to my wordy thought, it arises an instantaneous vision, without words or thoughts. Later, with the minimum difference of a millimeter, it comes the word" (18). Intuition can be a synonym of premeditation as Lispector understands it, insofar as it allows knowledge before language. About another synonym, prediction, *Un soplo de vida* continues: "Sometimes I see before seeing. I predict the following instant and rhythmically my breath accompanies time. I feel before feeling. Harmony is to predict next phrase, next sound, and next vision" (144). Once again, the narrator justifies his knowledge by one of the most primary ones: intuition, premeditation, prediction. According to this, we can agree with Hélène Cixous by saying that Lispector's writing contests the Derridean "essentialism," if we understand it as a coherent system of ideas firmly rooted in logic and reason. However, if we read differently Lispector's rhetoric we find that beyond this "instinctive" approach she is rationalizing knowledge. *Un soplo de vida* states:

"Premeditation is the immediate past of the instant. Meditation is concretion, materialization of what was foreseen. Actually, what really guides us is premeditation, linked so strongly to our soundless consciousness. Premeditation is not rational. It is virginal" (18). If the male narrator privileges an *a priori* knowledge, he does not forget to warn his reader about what he considers to be the nature of rational knowledge. Moreover, in this lyrical paragraph we attend to a philosophical speculation more than to a loose, instinctive affirmation. Nonetheless, he is not able to acknowledge the pervasive rationality in his discourse; solely based in his epiphanies, considered as epitomes of experience, the narrator wants to furnish his readers with enough satisfactory proof of their aprioristic knowledge.

But what is this knowledge about, to be precise? Plainly, I will say that *Agua viva* knows about life while *Un soplo de vida* knows about death. *Agua viva* is in my understanding the celebration of life for a newly-divorced woman. Even with the intrusion of fiction, with the creation of a painter starting the art of writing, the text cannot help itself from being autobiographical. We read Clarice Lispector within *Agua viva* as a new writer reentering the world, renaming it or re-cognizing it. To read this in such a fashion, we are required to sign the autobiographical contract, as Derrida and De Man named it, one which demands of its reader his/her acknowledgement. Paul de Man refers to the autobiography as:

a figure of reading or of understanding that occurs, to some degree, in all texts. The autobiographical moment happens as an alignment between the two subjects involved in the process of reading in which they determine each other by mutual reflexive substitution. The structure implies differentiation as well as similarity, since both depend on a substitutive exchange that constitutes the subject. This specular structure is interiorized in a text in which the author declares himself the subject of his own understanding… This amounts to saying that any book with a readable title-page is, to some extent, autobiographical. (922)

Jacques Derrida has extensively analyzed the autobiographical genre in a provocative book named *Otobiographies* in which, by focusing in the exordium of Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo*,he exposes the blurred borderline between (literary, philosophical) texts and the autobiography. Derrida proposes that the autobiographical genre is an egotistic affirmation of knowledge about anything and especially about oneself. Analyzing Nietzsche's exordium he explains that there was a time when Nietzsche looked pleasingly at the life left behind and the one to come. Thus, he wanted to celebrate, and he did it by writing: "I love what I am living and I want it eternally coming, I want what is happening eternally returning" (120), explains Derrida. This phenomenon occurs, according to the French philosopher, in a rounded movement from the mouth to the ear, for what he has called *oto (ear) –biography*: "it is the need of not just passing through the ear, but through all autobiographical-implied-ear, always listening to its own talking (I narrate my own story to myself, that means that I am listening to myself speaking, right?)" (70). Lispector explains this self-referential moment in a different scope using a paradox in *Agua viva*: "What I am saying is that a man's thought and his knowing-feeling can arrive to an extreme degree of incomprehensibility in which, without sophism or paradox is, at

once, the most communicative moment. He communicates with himself" (95). In view of that, Lispector echoes what Derrida said about the autobiographical moment: it is the self communicating with him/herself in a harmonic, aesthetic, comprehensible manner. It is egotistic, yes, but also conciliatory. Just like Nietzsche in *Ecce Homo*, in *Agua viva* Lispector felt pleased with both her past and future self, and decided to celebrate it, to return to herself the opportunity of a new start in life and writing. There is in Lispector, the Nietzschean, solipsistic and narcissistic eternal return, but also the view of discourse as a written gift that runs from her own thoughts to the page.

Auto-thanato-graphy, or the Writing of One's Own Death

Nonetheless, as we cannot apprehend the moment, we cannot apprehend fully both knowledge and language. And here is when we enter into the "impossible" domain. Derrida discusses the notion of knowing oneself by commenting a witty anecdote. In the preface of *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche narrates how traveling in Saint Moritz, Switzerland, he asked a young intellectual if he knew a certain Friederich Nietzsche; the young intellectual confessed never had heard that name before. Afterwards Nietzsche realized he was totally unknown in Saint Moritz, and pointed out a proposition: "the fact that I live is but a prejudgment" (47). This sentence is largely elucidated by Derrida who glosses the argument saying "my life, that what 'I live', the 'I live' in the present is but a prejudgment, a sentence, a precipitation, a risky anticipation: it just can be verified until the subject, he who calls himself alive, is dead" (48). Following this idea we can conclude that life is but a prejudgment while it is not confirmed by death, in other words, only after dying we could say that we have lived. Again, as in the search of apprehending phenomena, knowledge, or language, we face the dynamic of the impossible. Claude Levesque, in the Montreal's round tables organized after the publication of *Otobiographies*, discussed with Derrida and underlined that "he who wants to 'talk about himself with truth' is but entering in a dimension in which he inevitably finds (fading) the impossible. But this knowledge is a positive knowledge, an affirmative knowledge that has as its origin its own impossibility" (100).

That impossibility is perpetual and finally it seems that silence is the only alternative that would end that circular movement between desire to know and frustration, between the speakable and the unspeakable, between the being and the non-being. Regarding also the autobiographical genre and its implicit silence, Levesque comments that "there is something you cannot say, it is not scandalous, it is perhaps more than trivial, a void, a lightless region because its nature is not to be enlighten: it is a secret without any secret which broken seal is silence" (101). Silence, finally, represents in the writing process and in the search of knowledge, what death represents in life. Maurice Blanchot, analyzing the autobiography's silence, interrogates: "Is it silence the proof that any autobiographical text has respected the truth around which it is composed? He who goes to the end of his own book has not gone to the end of himself" (151-152). It will help us to understand why in *Un soplo de vida* Lispector does not want to use a closing period, knowing perfectly that any text cannot be fully done, fully ended. Moreover, this posthumous novel seemed to have been therapeutic for Lispector's own existence, her last great enterprise before leaving. She says in *Un soplo de vida*:
When you would finish this book, cry for me and sing a Hallelujah. When you would

close the last pages of this badly done, impertinent and playful book, just forget me. Then God will bless you and this book will end well. I will rest in peace. Peace I leave with you, between you and me. Am I falling in rhetoric? Forgive me, temple faithfuls: by writing I can release me of myself and finally go to rest. (21)

Death and life imbricate each other in Lispector's narrative as in Nietzsche's and Derrida's philosophy. Derrida affirms: for any writing about life, a writing about death is needed. The French philosopher recognizes that any "bios" intrinsically implies a "thanatos" as counterbalance. Therefore, if there is a biography, there must be a thanatography; if there is an autobiography, there must be an autothanatography. Derrida seeks to reformulate the biographical and thanatographical genre from the analysis of the exordium and the preface of *Ecce Homo.* However, the French philosopher does not take into account that Nietzsche's textis a celebration of life, it does not speak about death and for that reason it cannot be an auto-thanatography. By consequence, this genre remains in search of examples. I would like to propose that Lispector's *Un soplo de vida* deserves being named an autothanatography, or worse, an oto-thanato-graphy (implying the ear of an author writing his/her own death, the ear of a text—if such thing could exist—writing its own silence). If the condition is, as Derrida says, to talk about one self's death, this posthumous text agonizes. It was the last chance for Lispector to say "I lived." And its strength resides, in my opinion, in that challenge. The struggle with Angela, the character, is the final battle the author will fight in literature; his words, the last. That is why the narrator obliges himself to take the task seriously and to not leave anything to chance. He knows that life is disintegrating and that he'd better hurry up; he knows that every word will be but a distant echo (with no return) that will fall irretrievably to the bottom of the well; he knows he probably will be the only one to hear it falling. He knows all this through beautiful and painful epiphanies, so he strives to bring a revelation in every sentence, to bring all final fears, all great ideas, and all final words with urgency in the last minutes. Is proximity to death the agent of this perfection? Is maturity in both life and profession? I will say *closeness*. But there are no answers to such big questions; any and all—if they exist—will be shown to us in our very moment of death.

Notes

Autobiography and autothanatography, in this fashion, are considered diametrically opposed. The first, following Derrida's philosophy, and for the reasons of this work, will be considered as the narration of one's life in the most primary definition, whereas the autho-thanato-graphy will be considered like the narration of one's own death.

Cixous's fundamental documents about Clarice Lispector are: *The Poetics of Blanchot, Joyce, Kafka, Lispector, Tsvetaeva*. (Seminars 1982-1984) Trans. Verena Conley. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992; "Reaching the Point of Wheat, or a Portrait of the Artist as a Maturing Woman." *Remate de Males* 9 (1989): 39-54; *L'Heure de Clarice*. Paris: Des Femmes, 1988; "Extrême Fidélité." *Travessia* 14 (1987): 11-45; *Entre l'Écriture*. Paris: Des Femmes, 1986; *Vivre l'Orange, to Live the Orange*. Paris:

Des Femmes, 1979; "L'Approche de Clarice Lispector." *Poétique; Revue de Théorie e d'Analyse Litteraires* 40 (1979): 408-19.

In the American academy, one of the most important critics of Clarice Lispector's works is Earl Fitz: *Sexuality and Being in the Poststructuralist Universe of Clarice Lispector. The* Differance *of Desire.* Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001; "O Lugar de Clarice Lispector na História da Literatura Ocidental: uma Avaliação Comparativa." *Remate de Males* 9 (1989): 31-37; "Caracterização e Visão Fenomenológica nos Romances de Clarice Lispector e Djuna Barnes." *Travessia* 14 (1987): 136-47; "Bibliografia de e sobre Clarice Lispector." *Travessia* 14 (1987): 180-205; *Clarice Lispector*. Boston: G.K. Hall, 1985; "Point of View in Clarice Lispector's *A Hora da Estrela.*" *Luso-Brasilian Review* 19.2 (1982): 195-208; "The Leitmotif of Darkness in Seven Novels by Clarice Lispector." *Chasqui, Revista de Literatura Latinoamericana* 7, (1978):18-28; "Clarice Lispector and the Lyrical Novel: a Re-examination of *A Maçã no Escuro.*" *Luso-Brasilian Review* 2, (1977): 153-60; *Clarice Lispector: the Nature and Form of the Lyrical Novel*. New York: Diss. CUNY, 1977. In the Brazilian tradition I would like to highlight the work of Solange Ribeiro de Oliveira: "Rumo à Eva do Futuro: A Mulher no Romance de Clarice Lispector." *Remate de Males* 9 (1989): 95-105; "A Transcendência do Regional no Romance de Clarice Lispector." *Travessia* 14 (1988): 96-116; "O Seco e o Molhado: a Transubstanciação no Romance de Clarice Lispector." *Travessia* 14 (1987): 96-117. *A Barata e a Crisálida*. *O romance de Clarice Lispector.* Rio de Janeiro: José Olympio, 1985; "Um Exemplo de Mudança de Código no Romance de Clarice Lispector." *O Eixo e a Roda* 2.4 (1985): 13-29; "Aspectos do Barroco no Romance de Clarice Lispector." *O Eixo e a Roda* 2 (1984): 113-23.

In order to simplify the fluency of this paper, I have translated Lispector's, Derrida's, Levesque's, and Blanchot's texts.

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