REMATE DE MALES, Campinas, (12):101-114, 1992

RAPE AND TEXTUAL VIOLENCE IN CLARICE LISPECTOR

MARTA PEIXOTO
Univ. New York

Clarice Lispector is known to feminist literary audiences in France and the United States mainly through Hélene Cixous's mediation. As Cixous tells us in **Vivre l'Orange**, she first read Lispector in October 1978, almost a year after the Brazilian writer's death.[1] Cixous's critical and fictional texts about Lispector (the boundary between them is tenuous) reveal a deep though somewhat suspect sympathy. With the words of another woman from a foreign place, Cixous establishes a tender dialogue, and in them discerns multiple mirrorings of the dynamics of her own texts. I take as an example one of many passages where Cixous both describes and enacts the generative receptivity towards objects and beings she finds in Lispector:

> *A patience pays attention. A tense, active, discreet and warm attention, almost imperceptible, weightless like the slight warming of glances, regular, twenty one days and twenty one nights, at the kitchen window, and at last an egg is. Patiences pay attention: do nothing, do not agitate, fill in, replace or occupy space. But let space be. Think delicately about. Direct a mixture of wise glances and loving light towards. A face. Surround it with a discreet questioning, confident, attentive. Allow, watch over it, for a long time, until penetration of the essence.*[2]

A superlative reader of the nuances of gentleness in Lispector, Cixous nevertheless presents a tamed version of her texts, stripped of their disturbing pull towards violence. Although she sets up Lispector as an exemplary practitioner of *écriture féminine*, possessor of a feminine libidinal economy "more adventurous, more on the side of spending, riskier, on the side of the body",[3] Cixous privileges in Lispector traditional and ideologically conservative feminine stereotypes (woman as mediator, as benevolent nature, as Good Mother).[4] Yet the context for gentleness in Lispector is often a field of textual interactions charged with violence. I would like to examine this textual violence by focusing on a persistent issue in Lispector's fiction: writing the victim.

Starting with her earliest fiction, Lispector turns an acute gaze to the exercise of personal power, to the push and pull of the strong and the weak, and particularly to the dynamics of victimization. Sometimes the line between victim and victimizer blurs, or in a sudden reversal, the two exchange places. Lispector places these interpersonal struggles in the broader context of the individual subject's contact with impersonal cosmic forces, termed "reality" or "God" (though

---

[1] Hélène Cixous, **Vivre l'orange / To Live the Orange** (Paris: des femmes, 1979).

[2] This is from another of Cixous's early texts on Lispector published in the same year as **Vivre l'orange**: "L'approche de Clarice Lispector, Se laisser lire (par) Clarice Lispector, A Paixao segundo C.L.," **Poétique**, November 1979, 40, p.412; my translation.

[3] "voice i...," an interview with Hélene Cixous by Verena Andermatt Conley, **Boundary 2**, Winter 1984, 12, 2, p.54.

[4] Cixous attempts to give to these stereotypes a liberating slant. See, for instance, Toril Moi in **Sexual / Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory** (London: Methuen, 1985), p. 115: "Cixous's mother-figure is clearly what Melanie Klein would call the Good Mother: the omnipotent and generous dispenser of love, nourishment and plenitude. The writing woman is thus immensely powerful: hers is a *puissance féminine* derived directly from the mother, whose giving is always suffused with strength...".

not in any conventional religious sense), a contact that seems not entirely voluntary, fraught with violence, and also cast as an interaction between self and other. In one of Lispector's best-know novels, **The Passion According to G.H.** (1964), this "reality" inheres in a cockroach: a female narrator watches it closely, kills it, then, in a sort of mystical communion, tastes its substance. In this tense encounter, observation yields repulsion, identification, and dizzying reversals of relative power as the woman feels engulfed by the cockroach, which is in turn victimizer and victim. I think it fair to say that in Lispector narrative demands a victim, or conversely, that the victim demands narrative.[5]

But how, from what perspective and with what investments, does one write the victim's experience? From among the many answers Lispector gives to this question in the practice of her writing, I would like to examine two. First, I will look at three short narratives about rape, to define and interpret the curious moves whereby Lispector distances and naturalizes violence against women. Second, I will turn to the last narrative Lispector published before her death, **The Hour of the Star** (1977), where the strategy for writing the victim no longer entails a containment within ideological and narrative structures that minimize the violence, but involves, on the contrary, an unleashing of aggressive forces. While the rape stories show the workings of representation as a construct that further oppresses the victims by diminishing and justifying the assaults they suffer, **The Hour of the Star** foregrounds and calls into question the perverse components of the pleasures of writing and reading and the suspect alliances of narrative with forces of mastery and domination.

I.

The three stories about sexual assault, "Mystery in Sao Cristóvao," "Preciousness," and "Pig Latin," the only representations of rape among the many instances of transgressive sexuality and physical violence in her fiction, depict a symbolic, a partial, and a deflected rape. She wrote these stories at different stages in her career, and collected them in volumes published in 1952, 1960 and 1974 respectively.[6]

In the earliest story, "Mystery in Sao Cristovao," a thirdperson narrator tells of the encounter in a lyrical and tranquilizing tone. The violence, mostly psychological (its slight symbolic manifestation deflected onto an object), occurs in the setting of a family's home in a middle-class neighborhood of Rio. Late at night, three young men on their way to a party, dressed up as a rooster, a bull, and a knight with a devil's mask, trespass into "the forbidden territory of the garden" (FT 135) to steal some hyacinths. They have barely broken the stalk of one flower when the "defloration" begins. "Behind the dark glass of the window, a white face was watching them" (FT 137). The men feel as frightened as the nineteen-year old woman who watches them. "None of the four knew who was punishing whom. The hyacinths seemed to become whiter in the darkness. Paralyzed, they stood staring at each other" (FT 137). The encounter provokes deep but unspecified resonances in each participant. The young woman, whose white face becomes *her* mask, appears no more a victim than the trespassers. "The simple encounter of four masks in that

---

[5] I modify here Laura Mulvey's sharp formulation, "Sadism demands a story," quoted and discussed in its possible reversibility by Teresa de Lauretis ("Is a story, are all stories to be claimed by sadism?") in "Desire in Narrative", **Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema** (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), p.102.

[6] "Mystery in Sao Cristóvão" was later republished in **Family Ties**. The page numbers after all quotations of Clarice Lispector are from the published English translations, which I modify occasionally for reasons of accuracy. I use the following abbreviations:
FT: **Family ties**, trans. Giovanni Pontiero (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1972.
PL: "Pig Latin," trans. Alexis Levitin, in **Soulstorm: Stories by Clarice Lispector** (New York: New Directions, 1989), pp.59-62.
HS: **The Hour of the Star**, trans. Giovanni Pontiero (Manchester: Carcanet, 1986.

autumn evening seemed to have touched deep recesses, then others, then still others..." (FT 136). This ritual-lake confrontation, while not naming the specific motive for the powerful feelings, hints that they spring from the fascination with and fear of sexual contact.

Although fear strikes all four, the confrontation touches the young woman most deeply. She leaves the window and screams but can explain nothing further to her alarmed family.

> *Her face grew small and bright--the whole laborious structure of her years had dissolved and she was a child once more. But in her rejuvenated image, to the horror of her family, a white strand had appeared among the hairs of her forehead.* (FT 137)

The white hyacinth, her white face, and finally the white strand of hair represent the vulnerable female body that bears the marks of the assault. It is the grandmother, "her white hair in braids," who finds the only "visible sign" of the incident: "the hyacinth--still alive but with its stalk broken" (FT 137-38). The young men, also shaken, cling together at the party, "their speechless faces beneath three masks which faltered independently" (FT 137). Their costumes seem a flimsy façade of masculinity. The hyacinths--"tall, hard and fragile" (FT 135) -- also have a phallic import: the initiation involves a fearful rupture and is curiously disempowering for both sexes. The four characters act in the grip of an impersonal force which surges from their "hollow recesses," yet seems somehow alien, like their masks. In a convergence of culture and nature, masks and inner forces work together to determine the actions of the uncomprehending and frightened subjects. The characters come to no rational understanding of the encounter; the violation remains unacknowledged, unspoken. The young woman soon forgets or represses whatever the confrontation led her to intuit (the better to proceed with the "real" violations it foreshadows?): "she gradually recovered her true years" (FT 138).

In this encounter, a mysterious violence aligns itself with inner and outer nature, appearing as natural as the evening, the moon, and the flowers. The masks of masculine aggressiveness represent cultural roles but their animal guises (rooster, bull) link them back to nature, and the mythic figure (devil) stands for equally unquestioned psychic impulses. Distance and impersonality characterize the narrative mode of this story. The narrator stands back from the nameless character to tell or their actions. In the post-symbolist climate of this theatrical, stylized and aesthetically pleasing world, masks, sounds, looks and the play of light and darkness bear suggestive meanings. The encroachment upon a woman's body, and its repercussion back on the aggressors, seem justified as an inevitable part of growing up, and as a component of the post-symbolist repertoire which the narrative deploys.

"Preciousness," a longer and more complex story, takes up again an initiatory encounter between strangers. Two frightened but predatory young men briefly attack an adolescent on her way to school in the darkness of early morning by reaching out to touch her body. A third-person narrative, unwaveringly centered on the young woman, conveys her feelings and fantasies, and only "reads" those of the young men in the sound of their footsteps and their gestures. The sexual assault is embedded in a subtle and many layered account of the girl's adolescent conflicts. Timidity and arrogance, pride and shame in her body, sexual curiosity and revulsion, gender role rebellion and compliance, alternately determine her thoughts and actions. The narrative follows a double movement. First, it presents the girl's daily routine of going to school and back, when the fear of a sexual attack weaves in and out of her thoughts. Second, the narrative retraces that routine on one specific day, when an attack in fact does take place. As in the first story, the violation, rather slight in its outer manifestation, occurs in a dreamy atmosphere, close to that of sleep. It is as if inner fantasies and outer events converged: the girl on her way to school spends an hour of "daydreams as acute as a crime" (FT 103).

Questions of power, gender, and sexuality are at the center of this story. The "preciousness" of the title refers to the girl's feelings about herself, which echo and prolong society's positive valuing of nubile virgins. Yet she is precious to herself mainly for other reasons:

> *She was fifteen years old and she was not pretty. But inside her thin body existed an almost majestic vastness in which she stirred, as in a meditation. And within the mist there was something precious. Which did not extend itself, did not compromise itself nor contaminate itself. Which was intense lake a jewel. Herself.* (FT 102)

If she is precious or interesting to men as a brand new sexual object, untouched and touchable, she is precious to herself for an as yet imprecise but "vast" potential that she protects by her aloof, self-enclosed manner. The girl's newly developed body bestows upon her an as yet untapped "vast" power over men yet also results in a new sort of vulnerability to sexual advances.

Although the girl mainly fears the milder and more common assaults by looks or words (even men's thoughts she considers invasive and wishes to control), in the incident she suffers an attack by touch. As the two men come toward her, she feels compelled not to turn back and flee an encounter where pride and power are at issue. The narrator describes the girl with a kind of respectful exaltation: she walks on "heroic legs," "with a firm gait, her mouth set, moving in her Spanish rhythm" (FT 108). Her courage is more than courage: "It was the gift. And the great vocation for a destiny. She advanced, suffering as she obeyed" (FT 108). It is as if this assault followed a predetermined plan, to which the individuals involved must submit. Yet the attackers overstep the boundaries of that plan:

> *What followed were four awkward hands, four hands that did not know what they wanted, four mistaken hands of people with no vocation, four hands that touched her so unexpectedly that she did the best thing that she could have done in the world of movement: she became paralyzed. They, whose premeditated part was merely that of passing alongside the darkness of her fear, and then the first of the seven mysteries would collapse; they...had failed to understand their function and, with the individuality of those who experience fear, they had attacked. It had lasted less than a fraction of a second in that quiet street. Within a fraction of a second, they touched her as if all seven mysteries belonged to them. Which she preserved in their entirety and became the more a larva and fell seven more years behind.* (FT 110)

In this ritual gone wrong, the error seems to lie in the rush to appropriate too many mysteries too soon. Only youth, awkwardness, lack of understanding and vocation characterize these anonymous at tackers, presented with remarkable sympathy and some disdain. "From the haste with which they wounded her, she realized that they were more frightened than she was" (FT 110). Where and how they "wound" her remains unspecified but the impact seems severe. The attack at first impedes the girl's inner growth; she "falls behind" and experiences a paralysis on which the narrative dwells at length.

The assault seems to have proved to her that she is not, after all, precious to anyone else. Alone in the school lavatory, she cries out loud: "I am alone in the world! No one will ever help me, no one will ever love me! I am all alone in the world!" (FT 112). She has exchanged the solitude of the special being, the elect, for the solitude of someone whose power has been cut back. She moves out of the world of missions and sacrifices; the narrative abandons those aggrandizing metaphors. As she looks in the mirror to comb her hair, she sees herself as an enclosed animal: "The expression of her nose was that of a snout, peeping through a fence" (FT 113). The certainty of the disparity between her external and internal value moves her to practical gestures of self-protection, which includes demanding of her family new shoes: "Mine make a lot of noise, a woman can't walk on wooden heels, it attracts too much attention! (FT

113). This request reconnects her obliquely to the assault. As the men approached her, she focused her fear on the sound of their footsteps and of her own. By demanding new shoes, she counters the insight that followed the violation: she extracts tangible proof of her family's love and care. The "quiet" shoes would put her in a relationship of dissimilarity both to her own previous self and to her assailants. By associating "quiet" with womanliness she internalizes a traditional feature of femininity and seems to give up her fantasies of specialness and power.[7] Yet the language of ritual returns in the paragraph that concludes the story with an almost celebratory tone:

> *Until, just as a person grows fat, she ceased, without knowing by what process, to be precious. There is an obscure law whach decrees that the egg be protected until the chick is born, a bird of fire. And she got her new shoes.* (FT 113)

The attack seems to begin a process that ultimately results in the loss of her preciousness, now appearing as a self-protective fantasy, and in the girl's recognition of her true vulnerability as a woman and human being. Sexual assault, here as in the first story, is mitigated by appeals to "obscure laws" which govern human nature and social conduct. The attack nudges forward the protagonist's growth: the suffering of violence brings with it inner progress and social adaptation, turning ugly chick into "bird of fire."

The story "Pig Latin," published in **The Stations of the Body (A Via Crucis do Corpo**, 1974), is an example of Lispector's later short narratives, where the plot enacts literally the violence previously contained in her characters' feelings and fantasies and in the figurative language which describes them. The stories are brief, brisk, their simple syntax and occasional vulgarisms a stark contrast to the involutions and peraphrase or Lispector's earlier style. They also dismiss the psychological scrutiny at the center of her earlier work. Yet this story about rape repeats in a different register certain configurations of the two earlier ones. It is also a violent initiation, since the protagonist, Cidinha, is on the brink of entering a larger world. An English teacher from the provinces, she is travelling to the metropolis: first Rio, then New York. "She wanted to perfect her English in the United States" (PL 68). Two men sitting opposite to her in the train look her over and begin talking to each other in a strange language. Suddenly she understands they are speaking pig latin, planning to rape her in the tunnel and kill her if she tries to resist. She does not consider using her advance warning--pig latin was the language "they had used as children to protect themselves from the grownups" (PL 60) --to defend herself; getting up and changing places might have been enough. Her response is more devious:

> ... *if I pretend that I am a prostitute they'll give up, they wouldn't want a whore.*
> *So she pulled up her skirt, made sensual movements she didn't even know she knew how to make, so unknown was she to herself--and opened the top buttons on her blouse, leaving her breasts half exposed. The men suddenly in shock.*
> *"Eshay's razycay."*
> *In other words, "she's crazy."* (PL 61)

This act of self-defense masked as seduction reveals the hidden motives of the men. Cidinha correctly sees that they desire not sexual pleasure but inflicting cruelty and humiliation. When she offers to give freely (or perhaps for a fee) what they were about to take, the men are amused and put off. The ticket-collector also takes her for a prostitute and she is turned over to the police. Because, like other of Lispector's protagonists, she cannot explain --"How could she explain pig latin?" (PL 62)--she spends three days in jail.

---

[7] Naomi Lindstrom, "A Discourse Analysis of 'Preciosidade' by Clarice Lispector," **Luso-Brazilian Review**, 1982, 12, 2, p.193.

Finally they let her go. She took the next train to Rio.
She had washed her face. She wasn't a prostitute any more. What bothered her was this: when the two had spoken of raping her, she had wanted to be raped. She was shameless. Danay Iay maay aay orewhay. That was what she had discovered. Humillation. (PL 62)

When she left the train under arrest, still in her prostitute mode, a young woman about to board looked at her with scorn. Several days later, Cidinha comes upon a newspaper headline: "Girl Raped and Killed in Train." The presumably virtuous and unyielding young woman dies at the same assailants' hands. Cidinha saves herself by pretending to be what in her own severe self-judgment she really is.

Her successful strategy hinges on the recognition of her double oppression in society. She is "rapable" to the extent that she is "pure," for in order to be a particularly desirable object of sexual violence, she must have done prior violence to herself, by suppressing her own sexuality. Yet Cidinha agrees with her attackers, complicitly acquiescing in the brutal equations that oppress women: having sexual desires equals being a whore; wanting sexual contact equals wanting to be raped. The men still manage to humiliate her by making her aware of her sexual desires.

The protagonist's escape is a small battle won in a losing war. After she reads the headlines, "she trembled all over:"

It had happened, then. And to the girl who had despised her.
She began to cry there in the street. She threw away the damned newspaper. She didn't want to know the details.
"Atefay siay placableimay.'
Fate is implacable. (PL 62)

The protagonist's complicity wath a gender ideology which oppresses her becomes clear in her adoption of the rapist's pig latin. In it, she accuses herself of being a whore, and sees the rape and murder of her substitute not as the result of certain human arrangements but as an instance of implacable fate. The naturalization of violence persists in this story. No longer seen as a ritual that helps girls and boys grow up, the confrontation with sexual violence is presented as an initiation into the brutality a woman faces in the "real world" by virtue or her gender. The men's own fear, their youth, or their compliance with mysterious "obscure laws" no longer mitigate the display of violence on the part of the assailants, briefly and stereotypically described: "One was tall, thin, with a little mustache and a cold eye, the other was short, paunchy, and bald" (PL 68). Although these two are certainly the most ridiculous, made fools of by the girl (though not thereby permanently disarming them), all the men come off badly in these stories, even the earlier assailants that had been sympathetically described. The configuration of two or three men against one woman at first seems an obvious symbol of the unequal balance or power between the sexes. In the unfolding of the stories, however, the numerical imbalance also points to the weakness of men, who gather together for strength in order to impose their dominance. The protagonist of "Pig Latin" manages only to deflect the violence. The farcical elements here--the comic improbability of a plot where crimanals speak pig latin, where rape and murder occur in broad daylight in a normally occupied train--, serve as a distancing device in a story which proceeds as a morality tale, laying. bare the cruel workings of a rigidly unjust world.

II.

These three narratives figure sexual assault in a progression that goes from a mildly toned and "aesthetic" symbolic representation to literal and farcical plot events. Yet all the stories

share narrative devices which minimize violence. Effaced third-person narrators interpret the victim's experience, only in the case of "Preciousness" occasionally merging with the protagonist, but never implicating themselves in the violent acts. There are no encoded readers; these texts suggest for their reception the position of discreet, impersonal observation. These stories focus on specific incidents of aggression which are explained and assimilated by ideologies about personal growth, adolescent sexual fantasies, initiation into the harshness of male-female relations, and woman's place in a world governed by "implacable fate." **The Hour of the Star**, the 90-page novella Lispector published just months before her death, offers a new and challenging perspective on writing the victim, where violence is no lorger naturalized and contained.[8] In this work, Lispector represents overlapping systems of oppression and a victim absolutely crushed by them. At the same time, she accuses writer, narrator and reader of participating in and profiting from that oppression.

In an elaborate fiction within a fiction, the narrator of **The Mour of the Star**, a male writer, discusses his creation of a female protagonist. This young woman, a *bona fide* social victim, is a native of the Northeast, a region that in its tortured landscape and harsh reality of droughts and severe economic ills, has attracted the imagination of many Brazilian writers. The protagonist, recently arrived in Rio, hungry, marginalized, displaced, represents others in her situation, a fragment of a vast social reality. In this text, Lispector opens up the scope of her depiction of the experience of oppression beyond the scrutiny of gender-role conflicts and spiritual crises of middleclass women (and the occasional man). Simultaneously, she calls into question the process whereby literature represents oppression.

The protagonist, Macabéa, a barely literate typist, has joined the urban poor of Rio. Like the four shopgirls with whom she shares a room, she belongs to an underworld of those who, severed from their families, live in cramped quarters and subservience in exchange for enough to eat. Her improbable job as a typist--this text also has many farcical elements--provides her with a modicum of dignity but exposes her to ridicule since she types word for word and can't spell. An orphan, her growth stunted by poverty, Macabéa was raised by an aunt who enjoyed beating her. Chaste, proud of her virginity, she murmurs each morning: "I'm a typist and a virgin, and I like Coca-Cola" (HS 35). She confides to her boyfriend an incongruous dream: "Do you know what I really want to be? A movie star.... Did you know that Marilyn Monroe was the color of peaches? --And you're the color of mud," her boyfriend retorts. "You haven't got the face or the body to be a movie star" (HS 53). Macabéa, moreover, is infertile: "her ovaries are as shrivelled as overcooked mushrooms" (HS 58). Yet she is sensuous without knowing it. "How could so much sensuality," the narrator asks, "fit in a body as withered as hers without her even suspecting its presence?" (HS 73). With the rude bluntness of caricature, Lispector makes clear that Macabéa is victimized by everything and everyone: her socio-economic origins have weakened her body (which the mutinational purveyors of Coca-Cola further malnourish), her brutal aunt broke her spirit, her boyfriend insults her, while patriarchy neutralizes her sensuality and foreign stereotypes of beauty encourage her and others to despise her body and its color. The movies also provide an outlet for her self hate: "Macabéa had a passion for musicals and horror films. She especially liked films where women were hanged or shot through the heart with a bullet" (HS 58). Macabéa is "raped" not by one individual man but by a multitude of social and cultural forces that conspire to use her cruelly for the benefit of others.

The plot takes Macabéa through a series of large and small misfortunes, which relentlessly beat her down. First, her boss puts her on notice to be fired. Next begins a desultory courtship, where Macabéa is the object of Olimpico's insults and audience for his fantasies of

[8] The following commentary on **The Hour of the Star** is a revised and modified version of my discussion of it in the article "Writing the Victim in the Fiction of Clarice Lispector," in **Transformations of Literary Language in Latin American Literature: From Machado de Assis to the Vanguards**, ed. K. David Jackson (Austin: Dept. of Spanish and Portuguese, University of Texas at Austin / Abaporu Press, 1987), pp.84-97, reprinted by permission.

grandeur. He soon abandons her to take up with her office mate Glória. Finally, a fortune-teller predicts for Macabéa a happy ending, complete with marriage to a rich *gringo*. But this Cinderella outcome is no sooner suggested than brutally cut short. Stepping out of the fortune-teller's house, Macabéa meets her death in a hit and run accident: the *gringo*, driving a Mercedes, turns out to be her killer, not her groom.[9] On one level, then, these "feeble adventures of a young woman in a city all set up against her" (HS 15) compose a plot that parodies the sentimental stories of ill-used innocence and shattered dreams of many literary and non-literary texts. On another level, thas novella, "a fiction of fiction making" in Peter Brooks's term,[10] concerns itself with narration, especially with the possibility of mimesis and with the charged authorial investments in the creation of characters. We are given not only the story of the victim but a meditation on writing the victim, a process which itself duplicates and inscribes the act of victimization.

Macabéa is both a grotesque *other* and a repository for subtle processes of identification by which the narrator claims to gain access to her interiority and her reality. "I use myself as a form of knowledge," the narrator remarks, addressing Macabéa. "I know you to the bone by means of an incantation that goes from me to you" (HS 82). Macabea herself does not engage in quests. She lacks practical ambitions and insight into what the narrator claims is her "true" condition. Her inwardness is empty: "She was only vaguely aware of a kind of absence of herself in herself. If she were someone who could communicate her feelings she would say: the world is beyond me, I am beyond myself" (HS 24). The narrator is the questing character, who pursues a verbal construct: writing the victim's story and through it, his own. "Even though I have nothing to do with this young woman, I will have to write myself through her, amazed at every turn" (HS 24).

In the dramatization of the story-telling act, three textual interactions emerge as central. All are unstable and often aggressive, hinging on identification and rejection, sympathy and repulsion: first, the implicit connection between Lispector and her male narrator, Rodrigo S. M. (given the context of cruelty, it is difficult not to think of the sadomasochism these initials sometimes signify); second, the narrator's relationship to Macabéa, whom he invents, but whose "truth" he also claims to "capture;" third, the interaction between Rodrigo S. M. and the encoded reader, whom he frequently--and contentiously--addresses. References to narration fragment the plot, interrupting it on almost every page. There is nothing seamless about the text, and much that is abrupt, excessive, and grotesque. The grid through which Macabéa is written, itself fictional, of course, remains firmly in the foreground.

From the mid-sixties on, autobiographical references frequently intrude in Lispector's fictional narratives, disrupting systematically the fictional pretense with what we might call the autobiographical pretense. In the preface to **The Hour or the Star**, "Dedication by the Author (actually, Clarice Lispector)," she assumes a masculine voice and makes the preface stylistically indistinguishable from Rodrigo S. M.'s narrative. If her narrator is a mask, Lispector seems to imply, then so is her autobiographical "self." The preface begins:

> *Thus, I dedicate this thing here to Schumann of long ago and his sweet Clara, who are now bones, woe to us. I dedicate myself to a shade of red, very scarlet like my blood of a man in his prime and therefore I dedicate myself to my blood.* (HS 7)

In these dizzying reversals of subject / object relations, the disdain impilcit in "I dedicate this thing here" quickly subsides and the verb becomes reflexive: "I dedicate myself." The giving of something external to someone else collapses, in a vertigo of self-involvement, into the giving of

---

[9] The Brazilian film **The Hour of the Star** (1986), directed by Suzana Amaral, and available in the United States, is a very interesting adaptation of Lispector's novella. Considerably less corrosive than its literary counterpart, the film stresses the failed Cinderella plot and (wisely) omits the mediated narration and metafictional meditations.

[10] Peter Brooks, **Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative** (New York: Knopf, 1986), p.315.

oneself to oneself (but also to a male other residing in one's very blood). These alternations of rejection and identification between the first person, the text, and those whom it addresses continue to be dramatized as points of friction in the novella. But why, we might ask, the equivocal cross-gender connections between Lispector and her male narrator? She gives *him* a, masculine identity, he gives *her* male blood: "my blood of a man in his prime." The author is a woman who assumes a male mask and the narrator, the mask of a female author. The blurring of gender demarcations continues in the novella when the narrator in turn creates a fictional female as his mask and his double. The insistent recourse to a male subject of discourse--both in the autobiographical preface and in the fictional narrative--functions as a distancing device which opens up textual space for various kinds of irony. Rodrigo S. M. again and again refuses the rhetoric of pity. To this end, his individuality may be irrelevant but his gender matters:

> *Come to think of it, I discover now that I am not at all necessary either and what I write another could write.*
> *Another writer, yes, but it would have to be a man because a woman writer might get all tearful and cloying.* (HS 14)

With irony, Lispector at once curiously rejects and endorses the cultural myth of the sentimental woman writer. While the "real" author is of course a female writer, she insists that the fictive author must be male. The male mask, by increasing the distance between narrator and character, also points up the outrageous presumption which writing the other, especially the oppressed other, implies. "It is my passion to be the other. In this instance, the female other. I tremble, emaciated, filthy, just like her" (HS 29).

The interaction between Rodrigo S. M. and Macabéa, the most pressing concern of the metatextual commentary, entails two main issues. First, a sustained though in part implicit questioning of the status of a novelist's invention of fictional characters. How much of it originates in valid apprehension of personal and social truth, as the narrator in his more optimistic moments believes? "Can it be that it's my painful task to imagine in my own flesh the truth that no one wants to face?" (HS 56). Wrating, in this view a generous gift, gives voice to those who would otherwise be silent. In much of the metatextual commentary, mimesis appears urgent and attainable.

A second set of metatextual commentaries contradicts the possibility of mimesis, or at least sees representation as more complicated and charged. One obstacle to mimesis stems from class differences between narrator and characters. These disparities in economic status and cultural presuppositions are not smoothed over but played up as points of friction. Prejudice, repugnance, fear and guilt animate the cruelty so pervasive in this text, lodging, for instance in the narrator's remarks about the street where Macabéa lives: "Acre Street. What a place. The big fat rats of Acre Street. I wouldn't go there for the world because I'm shamelessly terrified of that drab piece of filthy life" (HS 30). The narrator constructs Macabéa and the other characters by calling upon openly displayed class prejudices. The characterization of Olímpico and Glória, especially, relies with strident glee on the clichés through which the upper classes typically view the poor: Olímplco's gold tooth, proudly acquired, and greasy hair ointment; Glória's cheap perfume disguising infrequent baths, her bleached egg-yellow hair.

Other pressures also undercut social mimesis and intrude into the narrator's resolve to see Macabéa. How much of the novelist's invention originates in the murkier waters of self-concern? In self-seeking, self-abasing, expiatory, or malevolent investments? The narrator loses focus on his protagonist and deviously, compulsively, takes her place: "I see [Macabéa] looking in the mirror and--the ruffle of a drum--in the mirror my face appears, weary and unshaven. So thoroughly do we take each other's place" (HS 22).

Images of victim and victimizer alternately define the relatlonship between narrator and Macabéa. His masculine gender allows for double entendres which sometimes propose for this

"liaison" the model of a typically exploitative sexual affair between a man and a woman of disparate social circumstances: "Before this typist entered my life, I was a reasonably cheerful man" (MS 17). Although the social context of his discourse may implicate him as the exploiter, he often sees himself as victim. "Well, the typist doesn't want to get off my back. Why me, of all people? I find out that as I had suspected poverty is ugly and promiscuous" (HS 21). Although Macabéa in the text's fiction knows nothing of her narrator--like Borges's dreamer in "The Circular Ruins" she believes she is real--, she possesses a peculiar power as a site for the narrator's investments. Provoking his guilt, forcing him to live in her skin, she drags him through the misfortunes he invents for her. The attraction of the narrator to Macabéa is compulsive, involuntary. Lispector offer this equivocal commerce between narrator and character as a parable on a basic motivation of narrative and on the obstacles to social mimesis.

Two contradictory but interwoven languages govern Macabéa's characterization. The language of the grotesque fixes Macabéa's life and appearance in cruelly degrading poses but is periodically displaced by another language which rewrites her in lyrical terms. Narrator and characters seem equally drawn to defining Macabéa in disparaging metaphoric and descriptive epithets which favor essentializing predicates following the verb *to be*. The following quotations are representative of the narrator's deflating definitions:

> *She was all rather dingy, for she rarely washed.* (HS 26)
> *Nobody looked at her in the street; she was like a cup of cold coffee.* (HS 27)
> *She was born with a bad record and looked like a child of who knows what, with an air or apologizing for taking up space.* (HS 26)
> *She was a chance event. A fetus thrown in the garbage, wrapped in newspaper.* (HS 36)
> *She had no fat and her whole organism was dry like a half empty sack of crumbled toast.* (HS 38)

Other chararacters contribute to thas insistent chorus. "You, Macabéa, are like a hair in a bowl or soup," her former boyfriend tells her. "No one feels life eating it" (HS 60). This generalized textual impulse to demean the protagonist continues down to the scene or her death.

> *Did she suffer? I believe so. Like a chicken with a clumsily severed neck, running around in a panic, dripping blood. Except that the chicken flees, as one flees from pain, with horrified cluckings. And Macabéa struggled in silence.* (HS 80)

Bakhtin, in a chapter of his book on Rabelais, points out that "of all the features of the human face, the nose and mouth play the most important part in the grotesque image of the body...."[11] Although images of absence, insubstantiality and lack usually define Macabéa, Lispector, in two mirror scenes, contrives to provide her with a grotesque nose and mouth. In the bathroom of her office building, it seems to Macabéa at first that the dull and darkened mirror reflects nothing at all.

> *Coult it be that her physical existence had disappeared? This illusion soon passed and she saw her whole face distorted by the cheap mirror, her enormous nose like the cardboard nose of a clown.* (HS 24-25)

A later mirror scene, which likewise stresses this text's attachment to a deforming mimesis, focuses on her mouth. She puts on bright red lipstick, on purpose going beyond the contours of her thin lips, in a futile attempt to resemble Marilyn Monroe. Afterwards,

---

[11] Mikhail Bakhtin, **Rabelais and his World**, trans. Helen Iswolski (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1968), p.316.

she stood staring in the mirros at the face staring back in astonishment. It seemed that instead of lipstick thick blood oozed from her lips, as if someone had punched her in the mouth, broken her teeth and torn her flesh. (HS 61-62)

Blood and vomit, obsessively frequent in this text, signal the opening up of the body and the rupture of its self-enclosed system. Like other "acts performed on the confines of the body and the outer world",[12] bleeding and vomiting contribute to the grotesque image of the body as Bakhtin describes it. Macabéa suffers from permanent hunger and equally permanent nausea, indexes of her position in a world she cannot incorporate and which refuses to accept her. Blood and vomit mark the hour of her death, which the narrator had mistakenly predictied would bring her a moment of glory:

she would surely die one day as if beforehand she had learned by heart how to play the star. For at the hour of death a person becomes a brilliant movie star, it's every one's moment of glory. (HS 28)

The promise of stardom--of height, of exaltation--is reversed, debased, materializing in a star-shaped pool of blood on the pavement. Eating (and the contrasting states of hunger and nausea), several forms of elimination, and bleeding, dispersed throughout the text, point up Macabéa's pathetic lack of glory and adaptation in contrast to the other characters' vigorous if repugnant incorporation into and of the world.

In counterpoint to this grotesque inscription of Macabéa, an equally insistent through less dominant language of lyricism emerges. The narrator exalts her, proclaims his affection:

Yes, I'm in love with Macabéa, my darling Maca, in love with her homeliness and total anonymity, for she belongs to no one at all. In love with her fragile lungs, the scrawny little thing. (HS 68)

Her physical thinness at times becomes airy, delicate. He reveals her spiritual bent: she has faith, believes in the goodness of others and falls into ecstatic states upon contemplating a rainbow, a particular play of light, hearing Caruso sing on the radio, or looking at a tree. Her subjectivity is not entirely empty, after all. Yet it is through her inner emptiness that she approaches saintliness: "Most of the time she possessed without knowing it the emptiness that fills the soul of saints. Was she a saint? It would seem so" (HS 37). Irony lurks at the edges of this lyrical language but does not totally undercut its effect. In sketching Macabéa, the text proceeds by disconcerting juxtapositions of the "high" and the "low," in the plot, in descriptions, and in clusters of metaphors. These contradictory forces of exaltation and abasement, which at times include a gratuitous violence, appear again and again.

Berta Waldman, one of Laspector's insightful readers, remarks about Macabéa:

In her simple nature, she represents a being without fissures, continuous with herself, who exists at the center of the savage heart [an allusion to Lispector's first novel, **Close to the Savage Heart]** *in the paradisiacal space where beings participate in the inner nucleus of things, a space which proved impenetrable to Lispector's other characters.*[13]

---

[12]

[13] Berta Waldman, **A Paixao Segundo C.L.** (Sao Paulo: Brasiliense, 1983), p.69; my translation.

Waldman accounts here for only one side of Macabéa's portrayal, an unstable one at that, for Macabéa's paradisiacal self-identity is not constant. The critic neglects to acknowledge how irony and the grotesque constantly undercut her presentation as a being without fissures. But in one sense, and this is an aspect of the text some readers may find offensive, Macabéa is a privileged soul when set against the gallery of Lispector's seekers of truth and anner harmony. Her simplemindedness attenuates anguish and self-division; she believes she is happy. As the quintessentially vulnerable being, ideally open to existence, she possesses, like a holy fool, an unsought, unconscious wisdom. Macabéa's musings echo those of Lispector's serious thinkers, with a parodic edge, in terms significantly askew. Curious about the cultural artifacts which surround her and yet escape her, she collects odd bits of information and words whose meanings she doesn't know ("algebra," "electronic," "culture," "ephemeris"). She asks questions, both weighty and idiotic, without necessarily expecting answers.

> *How do I manage to make myself possible?* (HS 48)
> *Is the sky above or below?* (HS 31)

In his own tortured way, the narrator also questions and despairs of finding answers:

> *As long as I have questions to which there are no answers, I'll go on writing.* (HS 11)
> *This book is a silence. This book is a question.* (HS 17)

And Lispector, in turn, also refracts this same questioning mode when she writes in the preface:

> *This is an unfinished book because an answer is missing.*
> *An answer I hope someone in the world will provide. You?* (HS 8)

Macabéa, both a subject without fissures and a truncated, grotesquely charged version of Lispector's questing characters, carries their typical moves to a *reductio ad absurdum*.

The dramatization of the text's reception provides no relier from the tense interactions of the other participants in the narrative act. The encoded reader, source and recipient of violence, offers a particularly uncomfortable position for any real reader to occupy. Frequently addressing the reader as *vós* (the formal pronoun, now archaic), the narrator assumes various tones: ceremonious, religious, lyrical, or mocking. The narratee shares the narrator's niche of economic security and comes to the text with motives not entirely clean.

> *(If the reader possesses some wealth and a comfortable life, he must step out of himself to see how the other at times can be. If he is poor, he won't be reading me because reading is superfluous for those who feel slight and permanent pangs of hunger. I function as an escape valve for the crushing life of the average bourgeoisie....)* (HS 30)

This "coming out of oneself," not a pleasant escapism, involves a degrading identification which the narrator wishes to force upon the narratee.

> *If there is any reader for this story, I want him to soak up the young woman like a mop on a wet floor. This girl is the truth I wished to avoid.* (HS 39)

In another passage, the aggression against the encoded reader reaches a shriller pitch:

> *Let those who read me, then, feel a punch in the stomach to see if they like it. Life is a punch in the stomach.* (HS 82-83)

As a perpetrator of violence, the "you" collaborates with the forces that crush Macabéa and the narrator:

> *I have to ask, though I don't know who to ask, if I must really love whoever slaughters me and ask who among you is slaughtering me.* (HS 81)

The narratee, then, provides a fictional space for participation in the main activities figured in the text: repulsion and identification, violence and the reception of violence. Reading the victim, like wrating the victim, entails a symbolic engagement with the pressures of her life. That engagement is doubly uncomfortable, doubly suspect, in the role this text proposes for the reader: sympathy slides into suffering and disengagement into the wielding of a malevolent power.

In her dramatization of the production, transmission, and reception of a fictional text which attempts to write the victim, Lispector allows none of the *dramatis personae* of author, narrator, character and reader to occupy a comfortable position. With hyperbole and uncompromising detail, Lispector stresses the particular agencies of that victimization. Macabéa, as we have seen, is not simply or perhaps even mainly a social victim. The novella presses this point in the implicit contrast between Macabéa and her two false friends. Olímpico, also a displaced migrant from the Northeast, displays will and an evil forcefulness. Glória, a sensuous female, combines vigor with a smug self-satisfaction. Macabéa's position as a victim transcends motivations of gender, class and what might be loosely called race, factors which nevertheless contribute to her oppression. This hyperbolically naive, unprotected, bewildered young woman--"adrift in the unconquerable city" (HS 80) -- signifies the shared human helplessness of belngs engulfed in the brutality of life, "life which devours life" (HS 84).

Macabéa's hunger is both a product of material deprivation and a metaphor of that totally vulnerable and denuded existence that Lispector sets up as an ideal in many texts. In this polyvalent encoding of poverty, Lispector questions the dubious moral and psychic forces at work in the representation of oppression. She points up the absurd hubris of the well off writer who imagines the position of someone who goes hungry, stressing--and giving in to--the urge to engage in just such an act of the imagination. For a writer in a city crowded with the poor, perhaps especially for a woman writer who enters into daily, intimate contact with attenuated poverty in the person of the domestic servant (I think here of the many maids, shadowy or acerbic presences, in Lispector texts), the compulsion to write the victim is in no way innocent or simple.

> *In a street of Rio de Janeiro I caught a glimpse of utter disaster in the face of a young woman from the Northeast.* (HS 12)
> *Care for her, ladies and getlemen, because my power is only to show her so that you will recognize her in the street, stepping lightly because of her fluttering thinness.* (HS 19)

These initially simple, lyrical acts of seeing, showing, and recognizing quickly absorb violent energies, as Lispector implicates, melodramatically, even histrionically, both in the misfortunes of the victim and in the powers that crush her, all the subjects who engage in the narrative transaction.

One may question whether the construction of Macabéa as both social and existential victim may not overload the circuits and disrupt any effective social criticism. A character whose "wisdom" consists of meek acceptance--"Things are the way they are because that's the way they are" (HS 26) --is written by a narrator who agrees with her: "Could there possibly be another answer? If someone knows a better one let him speak up for I have been waiting for years" (HS 26). And in the preface, the "real author" echoes this statement, placing the burden of an answer on someone else. Yet if we read this novella in the context of the three stories about rape which soften the implications of sexual assault and women's oppression, we see

that the very refusal to provide answers underlies the disturbing effectiveness of **The Hour of the Star**. Macabéa dies in utter abjection, learning nothing from her trials. The narrator finds no moral in his tale, and with reluctance and relief detaches himself from her in the end. Lispector refuses to naturalize the oppression of one class, or gender, or race by another, or for that matter, to see human life in heroic terms.

We might also read this novella as a parable on the motivations of narrative and on Lispector's own creative process. Peter Brooks, in **Readin for the Plot**, affirms his belief that "narrative has something to do with time boundedness, and that plot is the internal logic of the discourse of mortality."

> *Walter Benjamin has made this point in the simplest and most extreme way, claiming that what we seek in narrative fictions is that knowledge of death which is denied to us in our own lives: the death that writes finis to the life and therefore confers on it its meaning. "Death," says Benjamin, "is the sanction of everything that the story teller can tell."*[14]

A similar view about the generative connection between death and narrative drives the plot and perhaps also other instances of textual violence in **The Hour of the Star**. The narrator seems to engage through Macabéa in a kind of sacrificial rite which culminates in the killing off of the protagonist. "Death is my favorite character in this story" (HS 83), he says. In the ritual performed by the narrative, symbolic self-immolation plays a part. The narrator remarks in one of his more histrionic moments: "I want to be a pig and a chicken, then kill them and drink their blood" (HS 70). Macabéa dies in a slow motion scene that takes up seven pages. The narrator watches her surfer, gloating strangely over his power to save or kill her. He decides she must die, yet acknowledges her death as his betrayal of her. "Even you, Brutus?!" (HS 84), he says to himself. He claims to accompany her at the moment of dying: "Don't be afraid, death happens in an instant and is quickly over. I know because I just died with the young woman" (HS 85). Although in Lispector's fiction the ritual sacrifices, the charged commerce between victimizer and victim, narrator and double, do not bring about enduring illumination, and much less result in dramatic change, they are essential acts that set her narratives in motion.

The Hour of the Star offers, then, a lucid representation of the aggressive investments narrative entails. Violence is no longer limited, as it was in Lispector's earlier fiction, to intrapsychic conflicts, clashes between characters, or the mimesis of social forces. Violence is no longer justified, contained and subdued by ideological and narrative strategies. Instead, in this text and elsewhere in her later fiction, the act of narration itself appears problematic, aggressive, guilt-provoking. A textual violence permeates the vertiginous doublings and mirrorings in which author, narrators, characters and readers engage. I propose this interpretation in contrast to Hélene Cixous's, which privileges in Lispector a matrix of mild and generative identifications and a narrative subject who assumes a position of innocence: "just looking with beneficent eyes," seeking "to overrule the ego and the pretense of mastering things and knowing things", as Cixous defines it in a recent article.[15] But Lispector questions, I believe, the very possibility of innocence: she enacts a knowing, guilt-ridden struggle with the mastering and violent powers of narrative.

---

[14] Peter Brooks, "Reading for the Plot," p.22.

[15] Hélène Cixous, "Reaching the Point of Wheat, or the Portrait of the Artist as a Maturing Woman," **New Literary History**, Autumn 1987, 19, p.20.