

Bookslut

 www.bookslut.com/the_bombshell/2011_03_017294.php

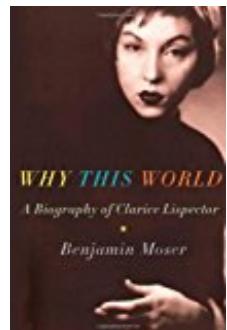
March 2011

Jenny McPhee

The Bombshell

A Soul Turned Inside Out: Clarice Lispector, Hélène Cixous, and L'écriture féminine

The first time the Brazilian writer Clarice Lispector was interviewed, following her sensational debut in 1944 with the novel *Near to the Wild Heart*, she was asked why she writes: "I write because I find in it a pleasure that I don't know how to translate. I'm not pretentious. I write for myself, to hear my soul talking and singing, sometimes crying." She said she believed all writing, in some sense, was autobiographical: "After all Flaubert was right when he said: '*Madame Bovary c'est moi.*' One is always at the forefront." Shortly before her death, she stated:



"I write as if to save somebody's life. Probably my own life." (A *Breath of Life*, 1978)

Benjamin Moser's thorough biography of Clarice Lispector, *Why This World*, struggles, and wonderfully fails, to bring us closer to the writer he describes as, "weird, mysterious, and difficult, an unknowable mystical genius far above, and outside, the common run of humanity." Indeed, Lispector's entire project as a woman and a writer was to remain unknown while simultaneously exposing herself. "I am so mysterious I don't even understand myself," says Lispector in one breath; in the next, "My mystery is that I have no mystery." Her carefully constructed auto-biographical conundrum dictates that the only way into Clarice Lispector is via the individual reader's esoteric engagement with her writing; Moser admits to having in this manner "fallen in love" with her himself. In a valiant attempt to describe Lispector's unknown/known quality, he writes:

The soul exposed in her work is the soul of a single woman, but within it one finds the full range of human experience. This is why Clarice Lispector has been described as just about everything: a woman and a man, a native and a foreigner, a Jew and a Christian, a child and an adult, an animal and a person, a lesbian and a housewife, a witch and a saint. Because she described so much of her intimate experience she could credibly be everything for everyone, venerated by those who found in her expressive genius a mirror of their own souls.

“The toothache that passes through this narrative has given me a sharp twinge right in the mouth. I break out into a strident, high-pitched, syncopated melody. It is the sound of my own pain.” (*The Hour of the Star*, 1977)

Hélène Cixous, the French feminist theorist and literary critic, described Lispector as what “Kafka would have been had he been a woman, or if Rilke had been a Jewish Brazilian born in the Ukraine. If Rimbaud had been a mother, if he had reached the age of fifty. If Heidegger could have ceased being German.” Moser asserts Clarice was compared most often to mystics and saints: “Like the reader of St. Teresa or St. John of the Cross, the reader of Clarice Lispector sees a soul turned inside out.” Lispector manages, by seriously toying with the limits of language and playing rigorously with all its fantastic, grotesque, perverse, violent, and hilarious capabilities, to provide a glimpse of a reality beyond language, what Lispector described as, “capturing the symbol of the thing in the thing itself” or, to borrow from her fiction:

“‘My life is truly a novel!’ cried the failed woman writer.” (“Where Were You At Night”, *Soulstorm*, 1974)

Since the Vida stats appeared showing gross disparities between men and women writers regarding publication and reviews, women -- and men -- writers have been doing quite some soul searching. Jen Howard, here on the Bookslut blog, declared: “I am a writer. I am also a woman. Both are essential facts about me. But I don’t like the phrase ‘woman writer.’ (Have you ever heard someone talked about as a ‘man writer’? No.) Save your labels. I’m a writer.”

Katha Pollitt in *Slate* wrote: “Both sexes see life through a gendered lens, after all. But while women are constantly reminded that their views are only partial, men have the luxury -- in life as in grammar -- of thinking they represent humanity, *tout court*. So while male editors may say they wish they had more women writers, women are always going to be an afterthought for them, an add-on, a specialty item -- dance criticism. As in those studies that show men overestimate the number of women in a group [...] a big piece by a woman two years ago feels like it was published last week, and one or two pieces by women feels like half the magazine.” No wonder Jen Howard dislikes the phrase “woman writer”; clearly no one ever says “man writer” because the word “man” is embedded in the very word “writer.”

“Because when I take a pill, I don’t hear my scream, I know I’m screaming but I don’t hear it, that’s how it is, she said adjusting her skirt.” (*The Apple in the Dark*, 1961)

In the seminal anthology *New French Feminisms* this concept of writer=man is variously addressed, including by Hélène Cixous in an essay entitled “Sorties”:

And if you examine literary history, it's the same story. It all refers back to man, to *his* torment, his desire to be (at) the origin. Back to the father. [...] Subordination of the feminine to the masculine order which appears to be the condition for the functioning of the machine. The challenging of this solidarity of logocentrism and phallocentrism has today become insistent enough [...] to threaten the stability of the masculine edifice which passed itself off as eternal-natural [...]. What would become of logocentrism, of the great philosophical systems, of world order in general if the rock upon which they founded their church were to crumble?

"It was then that Mrs. Jorge B. Xavier bent brusquely over the sink as if she was going to vomit out her insides and interrupted her life with a shattering muteness: there! has! to! be! an! exiiiit!" ("In Search of Dignity," *Soulstorm*, 1974)

In response to what the French feminists (Cixous, Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, et al) saw as the relegation of the Other (principally woman but also anyone who wasn't a straight white Western male) to a subordinate, nearly silent position in literature, Cixous came up with the notion of "feminine writing," a mode of expression that celebrated and respected the Other's differences, placed experience before language, and privileged unconventional narrative approaches. Cixous promoted this much criticized utopian idea using Lispector's opus as the supreme representative of *l'écriture féminine*. (See *Reading with Clarice Lispector* by Hélène Cixous.) What the French feminists (and the Vida stats) uncovered is not simply a gross disparity of opportunity but, even more significant, the lack of a sincere attempt by all of us to equally value Other ways of reading and writing and creating literary culture, which is finally our great loss.

"Any cat, any dog is worth more than literature." (*The Via Crucis of the Body*, 1974)

Wary of criticism, Clarice Lispector once said of a critic who had given her a bad review: "Everything he says is true but he acts like the man who beats his wife every day because she must have done *something*." She was even more suspicious of literary theory. Once when attending a conference featuring her work with fellow Brazilian novelist Nélida Piñon, she left the room, beckoning Piñon to follow her: "Tell them," Clarice said to her friend, "that if I had understood a single word of all that, I wouldn't have written a single line of any of my books."

"And I -- all that's left for me is to bark at God." (*A Breath of Life*, 1978)