

Ethics in literature: reading Clarice Lispector's “Mineirinho”

YODITH ROSENBAUN

“We write to be what we are or else
to be what we are not. In either case,
we seek ourselves. And if we have the luck to
find ourselves – sign of creation – we will discover
that we are an unknown”.

(Octavio Paz)

The problem

THE WORK of Clarice Lispector has been, since her debut with the novel *Near the Wild Heart* in 1943, an ongoing challenge to literary critique for several reasons. The first of them is perhaps the impossibility to classify it within reductive tendencies or parameters. The author herself, according to her confidante Olga Borelli (1981, p.53), felt totally isolated in the Brazilian literary circle; another difficulty lies in that her texts refuse exclusionary interpretations, be it the existential and metaphysical approach, a field with which her writing has always been identified, or the social and historical views of more recent studies. This scission does no justice to what insists on being dialectically whole and complete.

How then to address a text like “Mineirinho”, published as a chronicle in 1969 but that can be read as a story which, from a true police report stretches to the limit the meaning of justice and the irreducible polarities of the self and the other? It will require emulating the author’s style, covering the text in an oblique, suggestive way, marked by gaps, and avoiding conclusive and absolute notions. Because even though the theme is explicitly social - the death of a criminal in Rio de Janeiro in 1962, during a shooting with dozens of police officers -, the narrator’s reflections transcend the sociological contingencies and move errantly and digressively through the deepest areas of subjectivity.

Therefore, because its dual face - psychological/existential and ethical/political - “Mineirinho” requires a comprehensive look, capable of understanding its multiple meanings. With that in mind, the purpose of this essay is to unravel the narrative structure - with its stylistic resources, its language maneuvers,

its formal elements, - a myriad of meanings that point to the author's fictional project. The meeting of this particular text with a kind of constitutive matrix of the writer's worldview is the risky goal of this brief study, as we already know that it is the path that stands out over the intended target; and that incomplete fragments are much more palpable than the intended whole, which is always intangible and inapprehensible, as Lispector shows us throughout the text.

The case

On May 1st, 1962, suggestively the date on which "labor day" is celebrated in Brazil, the newspapers in Rio de Janeiro announced the death of Mineirinho, alias José Miranda Rosa, a fugitive criminal. Chased for days by more than three hundred policemen, Mineirinho had escaped from the Municipal Mental Hospital and vowed never to return to prison to serve his 104 years sentence. Cornered by the police, he was shot multiple times and his body found on the side of the Grajaú-Jacarepaguá road in Rio de Janeiro. For the analysis of the chronicle in which Clarice Lispector commented on the event, it is worth checking out how some newspapers at the time reported the violent death of one of the most feared criminals from the region:

With a prayer to St. Anthony in his pocket and a newspaper clipping of his last shooting with the police, the thief José Miranda Rosa, a.k.a. "Mineirinho", was found dead in Sítio da Serra, along the Grajaú-Jacarepaguá road, with three shots in the back, five in the neck, two in the chest, one in the left arm, another in the left armpit and the last in the left leg, which was broken. The criminal was shot at close range, as evidenced by his charred pants. (Weguelin, n.d. *Diário Carioca*, May 1st, 1962).

At the scene, reporters found several .45mm shell casings used in "Thompson" and "Ina" machineguns, and a pair of grease-stained shoes. Mineirinho is believed to have been killed during the shooting. (ibid.)

Dozens of poor people came to the place where Mineirinho's body was found. No one could approach the body, since the police, as determined by the chief officer of the 23rd Precinct Agnaldo Amado, was violently pushing everybody aside. In general, the slum residents were upset about Mineirinho's death, who they considered a Rio de Janeiro version of Robin Hood. (ibid.)

With thirteen shots fired from an "Ina" machinegun and wearing a green jacket, black pants and blue socks, "Mineirinho's" body was dumped in the bushes, five meters from the curb of km 4 km of the Grajaú-Jacarepaguá road. (Weguelin, n.d. *Diário de Notícias*, May 1st, 1962).

Around the body there was not a single sign of blood, indicating that he was killed elsewhere. In addition, the residents of the neighboring slum ensured that there had been no shooting there during the night. "Mineirinho" had indeed been killed elsewhere and dumped there. (ibid.)

The death of the most feared criminal in Rio de Janeiro, also known as "Mineirinho" was not ordered by the courts. He sought it himself by challenging

the public order and a police apparatus whose machineguns, he knew, would give him no respite. Sentenced to 104 years in jail, the criminal still played around the streets and slums of the city for days, stealing and shooting – as these were his reason for living. (Weguelin, n.d. *Correio da Manhã*, May 1st, 1962)

The newspapers that reported the death boasted the following headlines among others: Mineirinho' died with a prayer and a newspaper clipping in his pocket" (*Diário Carioca*); "Mineirinho' was shot 13 times and dumped in the woods - people flocked to see the dead criminal" (*Diário de Notícias*)," the city is at peace " (*Correio da Manhã*) and " Mineirinho' had no seven lives to live" (*Jornal do Brasil*).

This small inventory of the repercussion of Mineirinho's death leaves no doubt as to public opinion mobilization around the event, oscillating between on the one hand the possible 'peace' that the criminal's death would have brought to Rio de Janeiro and the outrage of the slum residents at the death of their "Robin Hood". It is also clear that Mineirinho was killed by the police and his body was removed from the crime scene to conceal the murder.

The case seems to synthesize in an exemplary way, complex contradictions of Brazilian society, resulting from the vicissitudes of the process of colonization of Brazil, the violent scars left by slavery, and the misfits of peripheral capitalist development and elitist policies. This paper does not intend to provide exhaustive comments about the political-economic development of Brazil, as this would divert us from the narrative of the text and its other implications. For the moment, it will be enough to assume the Brazilian historical reality as a backdrop of the emergence of violence resulting from the tension between center and periphery, emptying the frequent (and daily) scene of a criminal killed by thirteen bullets. This episode resonates, from the pages of newspapers, inside an apartment in Rio, in the unique sensitivity of the writer Clarice Lispector.

* * *

In an interview to journalist Julio Lerner in the year of her death, 1977, Lispector commented on the text about Mineirinho, one of her favorites. And added her repudiation of the excessive police violence that involved the case: "one bullet would have been enough. The rest was sheer desire to kill".¹ Perhaps one could say that it is this 'rest' that moves her writing; that which exceeds the order of strict necessity and overflows the dams that contain us. Why does Clarice write about this case, precisely she who resented "not knowing how to express herself in a 'literary' way about the 'social problem'?" (cf. Borelli, 1981, p.53).² Perhaps also to drain in her this rest, this leftover, the shapeless residue of a bitter experience, thus creating a bed for a turbulent and dark river full of what is unknown to us.

From its title, "Mineirinho", the chronicle draws attention to the use of the diminutive form in criminals' names, something that has been frequent in

the history of Brazilian crime, as illustrated by Fernandinho ^{TN} Beira-Mar, Escadinha, Marcelinho V.P., all drug dealers who in their days also frequented the pages of newspapers. This level of informality is incorporated into the text, bringing to the family space a character that is dangerously strange and foreign to the household environment. The trait of affection in the childish treatment is notorious and turns Mineirinho into someone to be adopted by the author and her readers.³ The contrast with the term “criminal” right in the first paragraph shows that the narrator’s choice is to oppose this big enigmatic and unknown other by referring to him in a close and harmless way. Clarice’s text begins as follows:

Yes, I suppose that it is in me, as one of the representatives of us, that I should find out why the death of a criminal is hurting. And why I prefer to count the thirteen bullets that killed Mineirinho to counting his crimes. (Lispector, 1964b, p.252).

From the first line, then, the “I” narrator and we - everyone, including the readers - are immersed in the same dilemma, the same quest. The beginning of the text presupposes a kind of power of attorney from this “we” to the narrator (in fact a “woman narrator”, since the chronicler does not hide that the first-person voice is her own, although her name is never mentioned). The opening sentence indicates that it is imperative to seek through writing - “I should seek” - a way of coping with the event of the outside world. The interiority is instigated, cornered by Mineirinho’s death. The disturbing presence of the other is the driving force of Clarice’s narrative gesture that does not surrender to the fait accompli, but rather detaches itself from it, internalizes the reality and turns the language into the space of an inquiring consciousness.⁴

This provocative “Other” in the writing appears in Lispector’s text in the most varied forms: a rose on the table, an egg in the kitchen, a blind man chewing gum at the streetcar stop, a cockroach in the closet, the puzzled face of a Northeastern woman.⁵ Be that as it may, in all these manifestations of the otherness, the narrating subject and the protagonist of the plot cannot retreat from the experience. Inevitably transformed by it, the subjects question themselves by challenging externality, get lost and find themselves in the direct proportion in which they seek to understand the impossible other.

Reversals and liturgy

The narrator prefers to *count the thirteen shots that killed Mineirinho to counting his crimes*, exploring the duplicity of the verb “to count”^{2TN} in the

^{TN} In Portuguese, the suffix “inho” (masculine) / “inha” (feminine) indicates the diminutive form of the original name. E.g. Fernandinho means Little Fernando.

^{TN} In Portuguese the verb “contar” means both to count and to tell, hence the double meaning.

Portuguese language. The inversion in the literary subject matter (parallel to the journalistic subject matter) is immediately established and shifts the focus to the act of killing a criminal, entangling the known boundaries once and for all. This shifting of places is a known motto in Clarice's work, who excels in subverting the subjective positions presented as unequivocal. We shall go back to that later.

The text goes on to investigate the resonance of the fact in the house cook. And the reaction is described as follows:

I saw in her face the commotion of conflict, the discomfort of not understanding what one feels, of having to betray contradictory feelings for not knowing how to harmonize them [...] to feel divided in one's own perplexity at having to remember that Mineirinho was dangerous and had killed so many; and yet we wish he were alive. (*ibid* , p.252 - 3)

Commotion, discomfort, conflict, divided, perplexity. The sequence brings out that which, in principle, should remain silent. But therein lies one of the strengths of Clarice's narrative, which makes the negative side of human experience an unusual territory to be explored by the language. How can one wish that a murderer "that had already killed so many " were alive? Through the reaction of another (the cook), also excluded from the mainstream culture, the narrative brings into discussion different views and makes room for other values and beliefs, as seen in the cook's answer:

"What I feel cannot be said. Who doesn't know that Mineirinho was a criminal? But I'm sure he has already been redeemed, gone to heaven." I replied that "more than many people who never killed." (*ibid*, p.253).

The religious indicators in the narrative are numerous: salvation, heaven, darkness, God (first in uppercase and then in lowercase), divine justice, among others. In fact, the text itself is liturgically structured, making repetition one of its main stylistic resources, as seen in some examples:

My mistake is my mirror, where I see what in silence I have done of a man. *My mistake* is the way I saw life opening up in its flesh and I was amazed, and I saw the matter of life, placenta and blood, the live mud. (*ibid*, p.254, our emphasis)

His scary *violence*. His innocent *violence* - not in the consequences but in itself innocent like a child who was not attended to by his father. Everything that was violence in him is stealthy in us ... (*ibid.*, our emphasis)

Sentences and words come back as in a prayer, bringing with it the weight of the sacred. The crisis of a convulsed conscience is exposed on the one side to a public confessional, and on the other to a secular search for the meaning of the incomprehensible. The appeal to biblical law is the first attempt to organize the account and set parameters:

The first law, which protects the irreplaceable body and life, is that thou shalt not kill. It is my greatest guarantee: so do not kill me because I do not want to die, and so do not let me kill because having killed will be darkness to me. (ibid, p.253)

The support of the Judeo-Christian law does not guarantee, however, that everything should be ordered and the rest will impose itself, violating and disrupting divine justice. The “desire to kill” revolves around the sixth commandment and throws man into a dangerous abyss. The following paragraph, which at the beginning states the law to subsequently contrast it with the adversative conjunction “but” shows that the law that protects the individual can be violated by him as a paradoxical way of complying with it:

This is the law. But if there is something that makes me hear the first and second shots with a relief of safety, in the third it makes me alert, in the fourth restless, in the fifth and sixth it covers me with shame, in the seventh and eighth I listen with my heart pounding in horror, in the ninth and tenth my mouth is trembling, in the eleventh I say God’s name in awe, in the twelfth I call my brother. The thirteenth shot kills me - because I am the other. Because I want to be the other. (ibid.)

Here is the count of the thirteen shots announced by the chronicler in the opening lines of the text. Somehow, the way the news was reported by the newspapers already brought the detailing of the bullets in each of the parts of the body. The description merits to be recalled:

Three shots in the back, five in the neck, two in the chest, one in the left arm, another in the left armpit and the last in the left leg, which was broken. The criminal was shot at close range, as evidenced by his charred pants.

The shredding of Mineirinho’s body seems, in fact, to have impressed our author, who incorporates the resource giving it a new fate. At each additional shot it is your (and our) hearing that is hurt and squirms with shame, horror, astonishment, culminating in total identification with the victim and his own murder. From the relief of safety with the first shot that killed the other (and oneself), in the thirteenth shot there is a total and crucial reversal: from subject protected by law the narrator becomes another subject persecuted by the same law, a hinge with two antagonistic sides.⁶

The gradation accompanying the sentences resumes the journalistic sequence and approaches the two discourses again, but with a distinct difference: while the paper promotes the total distance between the self and the other, the chronicler becomes the other. In this process she goes through the extremes of protection and abandonment, losing her initial identity by moving away from the safe field of the self. There is even a desire to be the other (*because I want to be the other*) so as to see herself in the limit of some type of otherness.⁷

Having reversed the point of view through which violence is now felt deeply and personally by the chronicler, all other references change as well. What was once safety and stability begins to be harshly criticized by the narrator, casting a shadow not only on justice that kills Mineirinho, but on an entire delusive way of life - because it is unidentified with our deepest humanity. It is what we read in the following excerpt:

I renounce to this justice that guards my sleep, humiliated for needing it. Meanwhile I sleep and falsely save myself. We, the essential sly. [...] If I'm not sly, my house shakes. I must have forgotten that under the house is the ground, the ground where a new house could be built. [...] Until thirteen shots wake us up and in horror I say too late - twenty-eight years after Mineirinho was born - that the cornered man should not be killed. (ibid, p.253-4)

Strange mathematics

Thirteen shots, 28 years of age, 800 policemen, 800 machine guns... Lispector's text scores with numbers several reflective passages, bringing an interesting counterpoint. Why rank so accurately that which insists on extrapolating numerical limits? After all, it is an existential, social, humanistic subject, in which quantification, in principle, would not be appropriate. What is the reason for these milestones? Some hypotheses arise: inspired by newspaper articles, the chronicle re-edits some typical traits of the press, such as statistic and arithmetic figures (times and dates, for example), which objectify the report. The newspaper headlines and excerpts reproduced in previous pages attest to this aspect. Clarice's literary language flirts with his rival, the newspaper, disguising under the pseudoscientific face of the numbers, contents that subvert common beliefs.

There is also, however, other possible interpretations for this controlling practice. The figures (and counting is their corollary) follow a universal, abstract, generic standardization, while Mineirinho's dead body is pure uncountable reality. This relationship between corporeality and numbering appears, as we know, in the work of Sade, who strives to organize his passions into classes and modalities, "following a strict principle of progression, in which each day is dedicated to exactly five passions" (cf. Moraes, 2006, p.68). In the analysis of Sade's work, whose content of violence and sadism is no stranger to Clarice's text,⁸ the essayist Eliane Robert Moraes (2006, p.68) concludes:

The disturbing arithmetic of *120 Journées* goes hand in hand with the most terrible excesses of the body, as if every physical act could be calculated, accounted for, finally transfigured into a sign. Such is the radical nature of the "lascivious philosophy" that Sade proposes throughout his literature, reconciling the absolute abstraction of the figures with the irreducible immanence of the body to reject the ancient separation between mind and matter.

Equally radical is Clarice's view, which juxtaposes the flesh that is unique

to numeric abstraction ('abstract' in the sense of depersonalization, quantification of the humane that disqualifies and generalizes it). The chronicler also rejects the separation between mind and matter, seeking to see in Mineirinho's death, which would be just another statistic in the police section of a newspaper, a story of family and social abandonment ("a son whose father did attend to"), an unruly and deviant trajectory of love and madness, which leads to the final thirteen shots - obsessively repeated in news reports and in the chronicle itself.

Sly or mad

New oppositions accumulate as the provocative nature of the text advances. There is the counterpoint of a justice at the service of an alienating and false sleep, which would save us from expressing *outrage* and *love, protected*, if we were awake. The word "sly",⁹ which resembles adjectives such as "naive" and "ignorant", point particularly to one who is sly but plays dumb. It is in this sense that we are all sly, ignoring the basic violence that guarantees our safe sleep. Sleep saves us because if we are awake *the house shakes*. The image is repeated and proposes polarities which are known in the author's work, as seen in the opening paragraph of the story "*Os obedientes*": "this is a simple situation, a fact to be told and forgotten. But if one is reckless enough to stop a little longer than one should, one foot sinks in and you are committed ..." (Lispector, 1964c, p.99).¹⁰

Stopping a moment longer is sinking and committing. What is "stopped" is perhaps that automating gear - hence we are all sly - that prevents contact with the fabric of life in all its intensity and danger. This would be one of the structuring knots of Clarice's writing, since her texts seek to penetrate the warm routine and its protective covers. As if the endless layers of robotized cockroaches were peeled off and surprised their "from-within".¹¹

The clash is deeper, if we look at Clarice's in perspective and scope. In the constitution of the human subject, forces oppose one another in an agonizing way, structuring a game between pulsions and defenses. Protection against the explosive world that lives within us builds the house and the sleep the narrator rejects. The act of *sleeping* outlines in the text the defensive forms that circumvent our unrestrained aggressiveness, while the act of *awakening* condenses the pulsional discharge: "In Mineirinho, my way of living has blown up" (Lispector, 1964b, p.254), says the narrator. The repression of violence, as it is known from the psychoanalytic theory, takes its toll in the civilization process. What we see blowing up in Mineirinho is not strange to us; on the contrary, it is too human and therefore "we avoids the other's gaze so as not to understand one another." Mineirinho updates what in each of us is pent-up potential.

Clarice Lispector, as always, seems to display what should have stayed hidden: *the matter of life, placenta and blood, live mud*. The significant chain stretches and prepares the central image of the chronicle - "something that in us is as intense and clear as a dangerous gram of *radium* ", a kind of radical and primary constituent of the subject we are. The idea is clarified below:

This thing is a grain of life which, if stepped on turns into something threatening – stepped-on love; this thing, which in Mineirinho became a dagger, is the same that in me makes me give water to another man, not because I have water, but because I, too, know what thirst is ... (ibid , p.255)

Grain of life, gram of radium.¹² The natural world of the seed is summoned alongside a radioactive force that, when stepped on, explodes. The idea of indeterminacy of the pulsion seems unequivocal. There would be an original neutrality of this primal energy that is neither evil nor fraternal. What would define their destructive of sublime fates (or vicissitudes, according to Freud) seems to depend on multiple factors. Anyway, what one represses, according to the psychoanalytic theory, is not the pulsion itself, but its ideational representatives, since pulsion itself will never be eliminated but rather displaced.¹³ The metaphor for *radium* could point to this essential, neutral and powerful ground, capable of moving for or against men themselves. From his spring we build the highest culture and also the most violent destruction. That is, “*radium* will radiate anyway, if not for trust, hope and love, then miserably for the sick courage of destruction” (ibid, p.256).

The idea of a vital, shapeless and undetermined force, the most archaic substrate and foundation of both evil and virtue, assumes the most varied metaphorical shapes in Clarice's work. The common thread in all of them is their volatility, their material inconsistency, their undefined liquefied energetic aspect. The texts are impregnated with this mobile mass, often abject, which is found in the egg yolk, in the chewing gum, in the white mass of the cockroach, in the live jelly of a placenta, among so many other ways of appearance. In the text in question, we should add to the image of *radium* - which is another metamorphosis of this pulsating (pulsional?) core - the notion of an imminent danger, a perennial threat that can spoil everything.

A house/text

Like the house - raised with the bricks of the sly and of justice that guards our sleep - is built on the site of explosive *radium*, the text, too, is ultimately built by overlapping disturbing meanings. It can be said that there is a house/text being built for the reader, ‘dialectizing’ with the house of the textual enunciation. The game is made in such a way that, opposite to a “sly house” apparently safe and protected, the narrative dismantles solid meanings - in fact, ideological formations that insist on the mystification of absolute and immutable meanings - imploding through language effects the imaginary world of an organized society.

The scale that organizes the chronicle proposes constant oscillations of definitions, concepts, behaviors, images, showing that the outside and the inside, the mad and the sane, order and disorder, justice and crime are dualities that are put into perspective due to new views. The text lives, in the incessant

landslides of its propositions, the very shaking that it announces in our house (which “will not resist the first windstorm which will blow away a locked door”), should we seek to understand more than we should:

Because the one who understands disorganizes. There is something in us that would disorganize everything - something that understands. [...] This something serious becomes even more serious in me before the gunned man. Is this something in me the murderer in me? No, it is despair in us. Like crazy we know him, this dead man where the gram of *riadium* would burn up. But just like crazy, and not like a sly, we know him. (ibid, p.256)

Understanding disorganizes because it implies stopping a moment longer than one should and then one foot sinks in ... Like the reading of the text itself, a dangerous stop that fulminates us with thirteen shots, threatening our peaceful sleep. Incidentally, organizing/disorganizing is one of the founding dialectics of the economics of this narrative, going as far as opposing an “organized wickedness” of sane men to distinguish it from the “blown up violence” in Mineirinho. Mad and sly operate, now, the new oppositions of the text, building another logical system through reversals and tensions. The deep knowledge, capable of deconstructing the ideological arrangement that keeps us sly, arises, then, alongside the mad. Only through this new disruptive and violating look, it will be possible to inhabit an original facet of the world, love and understand what is forbidden to the inhabitants of the fragile imaginary house. A house which, as it turns out, is upside down.

The poor reader now finds himself devoid of the support of strict laws to establish clear boundaries between the self and the other, right and wrong, truth and falsehood. No value, one could call it metaphysical, resists at this point in the text out of its historical and contextual insertion. We return here to the opening paragraphs of this essay, in which the structural malaises of the country’s history were pointed out. Thus, the vision of a gunned man becomes a gateway to both questioning conventional justice (a criminal is killed because that is the way it should be), and to the mirage of another justice, a ‘previous justice’ in the words of the text, “that which sees the man before he becomes a patient of crime.”

The narrative expresses this new sensitivity by anchoring itself in the detailed images of Mineirinho’s inert body: “without the cap and shoes” or yet carrying the “of gold and diamond St. George,” indicators present also in the headlines of Rio papers. What draws attention is the dual side of this scene: the abandonment of someone who loses their few belongings (but that has an identificatory function) and the allusion to the Brazilian warrior saint, revealing the degradation of religious images throughout the chronicle. Neither God nor god. Neither cap nor shoes. The images are devoid of any substance that can guarantee truth beyond emptiness. And in the center of this void, the chronicler

tries to speak for someone in whom “human speech has already failed, he is so dumb that only the inarticulate cry serves as a sign”.

We inevitably associate this dumbness and this silenced cry with one of the last characters in Clarice’s work, Macabéa, protagonist of *The Hour of the Star*. She, too, was turned off by a “city made entirely against her.” Peripheral and at the margin of periphery itself, Macabéa protects herself not in the language, as she is adopted by a narrator who screams on her behalf. As said by Lucchesi (1987, p.44), already quoted:

The silence of Macabéa originates in the absent language, and that is the reason why she says nothing and she is nothing. Macabéa lives without existing. She is without ever being. In her there is not what is decisive for Sartre: life as a permanent “project”. So, there is no possibility for life to make sense. Macabéa does not exist for the “other”, just like she does not exist for herself.

Both are characters of exclusion, but react in antithetical ways. In Mineirinho, marginality turned into violence and terror; in Macabéa, into dissolution and disappearance of her-self. Interestingly, the thirteen shots of the chronicle masquerade into thirteen titles in the novel, denouncing an inextricable connection between the two narratives.¹⁴ Incidentally, in the same aforementioned interview, the author refers to the two texts in the same breath, as if the villain and the Northeastern woman were two sides – the passive and the rebellious – of the same coin. And to further strengthen the bond between the texts, the narrator brought into the novel, Rodrigo S. M., says: “I also know things because I am living. Those who live know, even not knowing that they know. That is how you know more than you think, and you are playing dumb” (Lispector, 1993, p.26).

Mineirinho was reduced to inhuman, crude and inarticulate. In him the language, the pillar of the constitution of the human subject, failed. The surrounding reality, with its organized violence, eliminated Mineirinho through execution by a firing squad. But what the chronicle makes clear is that even before the thirteen shots the criminal had already been destroyed, stepped on and lost as an individual. And it is to rescue the man before the patient of crime that Clarice’s text exists. Her political reach is uncontested. To claim an ethical speech that perceives the humanity that impregnates us, that knows that “all of us, live mud, are dark,” Clarice Lispector walks backwards to the inhuman, to the prime land where man comes from. If, as the author says in the final paragraphs, “our big struggle is that of fear, and that a man who kills a lot has experienced a lot of fear,” then the danger lies in our weakness, in the very insecurity of existing. We are all dangerous, because “at the moment of killing a criminal – at that moment an innocent is being killed.” I refer to Berta Waldman’s essay again (1992, p.161): “So, Mineirinho kills because he is a social pariah, because he is afraid, because he needs to defend himself. While the police, by firing thirteen shots at him, are murderers and violate the sixth commandment, which literally states that ‘Thou shalt not kill.’ “

Mineirinho acquits himself throughout the chronicle, shifting from criminal to victim. For this final reversal, the author creates an ethics of the human who, unlike the essential sly understands that man is made of explosive *radium* and that by stopping evil he can also execute it. Aporia established, all we can do is fill the silence left by the creative act of writing of someone who can no longer say anything.

“What I want is much rougher and harder: I want the land.”

Notes

- 1 Interview to journalist Julio Lerner, from Cultura TV Station, in January 1977, and published fifteen years after Mineirinho's death on *Schalom Magazine*, v.2, n.296, 1992.
- 2 Let us also remember her chronicle “Literatura e justiça,” first published in “*Fundos de gaveta*”, the second part of the book *A legião estrangeira* “Ever since I've known myself the social fact has had in me greater importance than any other: in Recife, the huts were the first truth for me. Long before feeling ‘art’, I felt the deep beauty of the struggle. But I have a simplistic way of approaching the social fact: what I wanted was to ‘do something’, as if writing weren't doing” (Lispector, 1964a, p.149).
- 3 Many thanks to Eliane Robert Moraes for this and many other valuable suggestions throughout this essay.
- 4 When addressing the novel *A hora da estrela*, Ivo Lucchesi (1987, p.36) states: “The objective reality serves as a starting point for organizing of the novel matter. Thereafter the language is the operating agent of transformation into fictional discourse.”
- 5 These are the following texts, in the order mentioned: “*Imitação da rosa*”, “*O ovo e a galinha*”, “Amor”, *A paixão segundo G.H.* e *A hora da estrela* and *A paixão segundo G.H.* and *A hora da estrela*.
- 6 In an essay on the same text, Berta Waldman (1992, p.159) states: “Thus, in the view of the narrator, Mineirinho is not guilty, despite not having complied with the law. The police complied with the law, but is guilty.”
- 7 About the differentiation and identification processes in Clarice Lispector, I refer the reader to test the essay *A via-crucis do outro. Identidade e alteridade em Clarice Lispector*, by Daniela Mercedes Kahn (2005, p.19), in which the text is seen as a reversible territory, where everything can turn into its opposite. According to the author, this universe of reversible relations reveals that “identity and otherness are inseparable.”
- 8 I refer the reader to my study *Metamorfoses do mal: uma leitura de Clarice Lispector* (Rosenbaum, 1999), where I dive deeper on the representations of envy, aggressiveness, sadism and death pulsions, trying to embrace the territory of negativity in the author's work.
- 9 In Lispector's chronicle (1991b, p.333) “Das vantagens de ser bobo”, of September 12, 1970, another idea of “sly” appears in contrast to the so-called “smart”. Alongside beggars and the mad, the fools are revered as personalities of exception, able to remain on the sidelines of a hegemonic and mass-oriented thinking. Ingenuity and availability to contemplate and live life make the sly an individual resistant to the alienating world. In the same chronicle, the fools, as the chronicler refers to them, are closer precisely to

the inhabitants of Minas Gerais, which makes us notice that Mineirinho (will he have been born in Minas, as in the epithet?) fits in the same gallery of distinguished sly. Says the passage in question: “There are places that contribute for people to be foolish (do not mistake foolish for stupid, or silly for futile). Minas Gerais, for example, makes it easy to be foolish. Ah, how many lose for not having been born in Minas!”

- 10 Also the short story “ Amor”, from *Laços de família*, touches on the same question: “Kicked out of her own days, it seemed to her that people on the street were ramshackle, that they remained for a minimum balance at the edge of darkness - and for a moment meaninglessness set them so free so that they did not know where to go” (Lispector, 1991a , p.33).
- 11 The change of the adverb into noun is used expressively in the story “ A quinta história “, in which a housewife decides to fumigate cockroaches in the apartment. The DDT formula is described as follows: “Mix equal parts of sugar, flour and gypsum. The flour and the sugar would attract them; the gypsum would toast their in-side. So I did. And they died.” (Lispector, 1964c, p.91).
- 12 It would be appropriate to recall here the poem “ Inocentes do Leblon “, by Carlos Drummond de Andrade (1992, p.63), in which the theme is the same: the false innocence of those who are well off and ignore their surroundings. Even the reference to the gram of radium is present: “The Innocents of Leblon / didn’t see the ship arrive / Has it brought ballerinas? / Has it brought emigrants? / Has it brought a gram of radium? / They wouldn’t know, aware of nothing. / But the hot sand and a fine oil / they knead into their shoulders and forget.” I thank Marcelo Coelho for reminding me of the poem.
- 13 “The disjunction between a representation and its affective content - in other words, the divestment of representation in the pre-conscious/conscious system - is the essence of repression. The pulsion will continue to exist anyway, but its movement should find other ways out. Its components will have separate destinations, but the calculation should be the same at the end. It is what allows Freud to consider that outside of a sexual fulfillment, either direct or indirect, there may also be a sublimation, that is, the pulsional energy aimed at non-sexual and socially valued purposes” (Scarfone, 2004, p. 80-1).
- 14 I thank Jaime Ginzburg for his generosity in sharing the suggestion of the equivalence of the number thirteen, an idea presented to him by his students during a course on Brazilian Culture in Minnesota (USA). I remind the reader that the novel *A hora da estrela* has thirteen titles, among them the name of the writer herself. Next are some examples of these: “ It’s my fault” or “The Hour of the Star” or “Let her deal with it” or “The right to the scream” or “Clarice Lispector” or “As for the future” or “Singing the blues” or “ She doesn’t know how to scream” or “A sense of loss “ or “Whistling in the dark wind” or “ I can do nothing” or “A record of preceding events” or “A tearful tale” or “A discrete exit through the back door” (Lispector, 1993, p.23).

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ABSTRACT – Through a reading of Clarice Lispector’s “Mineirinho”, the author tries to depict the constitution of the individual self, as explained by the psychoanalytical theory. The analysis and interpretation of Lispector’s text identifies stylistic and thematic maneuvers which intend to highlight its ethical and aesthetical implications. Writing a comment on the murder, by policemen, of a notorious criminal in nineteen-sixties Rio de Janeiro, Lispector casts a shadow of doubt over some ideological presumptions habitually taken for granted, and subverts political and social categories which intend to absolute validity. Within the author’s interpretative frames, this text also queries the concepts of normality and madness, as well as the relationship between social history and biography.

KEYWORDS: Clarice Lispector, Brazilian literature, Ethics, Psychoanalysis, Madness.

Yudith Rosenbaum is a professor of Brazilian Literatura at USP and author of the books *Manuel Bandeira: uma poesia da ausência* (Edusp/Imago, 1993) and *Metamorfoses do mal: uma leitura de Clarice Lispector* (Edusp/Fapesp, 1999) among others. @ – yudith@uol.com.br

Received on 15 June 2010 and accepted on 22 June 2010.