

**“On Being G.H.”:
Between Being and Non-Being
in Clarice Lispector's The Passion According to G.H.**

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Abstract

As some critics point out, structurally Clarice Lispector's The Passion According to G.H., [1] represents a mystic rite of passage, a liturgical quest by which G.H. attempts linguistically to reach the reigning and significant “other” of being. [2] But, contrary to the consensus of the critics, I propose that The Passion does not end in a mere acceptance of Wittgenstinian silence, and, thus, in the eventual failure of her linguistic project. They err by determining that G.H.'s epiphanic journey is failed given her denouncement of speech for an “irrational adoration” which leaves her at the mercy of a logocentric world without a voice. Rather, I propose that G.H. does finish, if one can call it a finish, her quest as her being is projected towards a new ontological programme which transcends not only the limits of western Logos, but the borders of the narrative body itself. That is, that it is precisely because of this abandonment of the body as the space of rational and linguistic existence that G.H. asserts her triumph over the chains of language. The Passion is not only G.H.'s own narrative of her real struggle as a being; it is also a “cantata” based upon the original narrative of G.H.'s struggle as narrated by G.H. to G.H. through Lispector's text [3].

This transformation is represented in three moments: 1) when G.H. enters the room; 2) in G.H.'s encounter with the cockroach; and 3) with G.H.'s acceptance of her postlinguistic condition.

The Passion According to G.H. is the story of a woman, known only as G.H, who recently fired her maid. One day she decides that she has put off long enough cleaning the room. As she nears the room she fears the mess in which the maid must have left the room. But, upon entering the room, G.H. is assaulted not by the expected “jumbled shadows” of stale space, but, rather, by its domineering emptiness. As G.H. notes, she “now looked in on a room that had about it a calm, empty order,” thus finding no trace of its previous occupant (29, 32-33); and, as G.H. thinks about this new “dry, empty space” which “the maid had opened up ... in [her] fresh, cozy, moist home,” she realizes the emptiness which she had allotted the maid all along (29). Furthermore, a cockroach, the only other protagonist of the story, crawls in to deny G.H. a prompt retreat from the room. In so doing, the cockroach engenders externally the negativity created by G.H.'s logocentric world as she faces her fear of the “itself” defined by the heideggerian “being-there.” [\[3\]](#) Meanwhile, G.H.'s verbal circumambulations appear to show the futility of Logos in re-presenting truth, in this case, being, since the logocentric discourse focuses being, tentatively, in the “house of language,” that is, in an eventual linguistic body in space. [\[4\]](#)

As if prophetically ordained, G.H. describes the space of her own “true” self. Clean and vibrant, the whiteness of the walls, the coldness of the soiled bed and the deliberately austere

presence of three tall and squalid figures drawn on the wall — a woman, a man and a dog — shapes of empty nudity which unnerve G.H. in such a manner that she finds herself thrown into an existential vortex which denies her of all comprehension of her own life. [31-34] Like a slap to her face, the sterile emptiness of the room, and, especially, of the bodies on the wall, yield to the inherent anguish of the “fullness”, or lack, thereof, of the reality with which G.H. surrounds herself, that is, G.H. would come to grasp the “instant of ‘lack of meaning’” (27). G.H. will come to fear this moment, this space of lack, as she comes to realize that “it is there that meaning lies and that [she] not only can't reach it but [does not] want to because there are no guarantees” (27-28). And, to accentuate this instant amidst that deserted and frightening precinct, this courageous cockroach appears, with taunting antennae, reminding G.H. that in the end it will be they who will remain in a world devastated by humanity's foolish sense of security. [39, 45]

In a moment of impassioned despair, of pure and unadulterated hatred, G.H. attacks vehemently that cockroach which impedes her escape from the room by slamming the room's door against it. In this act of pure rage, G.H. finds herself closer to her nature than ever before. Full of power and irrationality, G.H. finds a lusty satisfaction bound by the rare taste in the primitive and violent act of defending herself and of killing. [46] But the cockroach doesn't die instantly. Rather, the cockroach languidly trembles with its last breaths of white substance which spasmodically ejaculates from its crushed shell nauseating and terrorizing G.H., taking her into a moral and religious deliberation with her self and her acts. [54-55]

This white substance which nauseates and terrorizes G.H. does so because it is also the whiteness of the room. It is the whiteness of purity, of cleanliness, and of salvation which, irrationally, comes forth to meet her from the most nauseating entity in her world. As in Kafka's

“Metamorphosis” the hidden becomes exteriorized, to surround a life that ignores its authenticity of being. But, while Kafka exteriorizes the inner turmoil of Gregor Samsa by encapsulating him in the horrors of a “cockroach's” shell, Lispector externalizes the falsity and vacuous existence of G.H.'s external in-authentic life, marked by the humid and lurid apartment with which G.H. has surrounded herself, by mirroring its disgusting humidity in an other's body. Thus, Lispector does not enclose G.H. in the ugliness of the cockroach, but she encloses G.H. in the purity of being's in-between-ness. It is the whiteness of a miserable cockroach's entrails. This is why G.H. is enclosed not in a dark and foreboding room, as Gregor Samsa is, but, rather, in a stark and garishly bright room, a room as white as the cockroach's entrails.

In this moment of pure violence against the cockroach, a moment veiled by the drowning (phallo)logocentric silence that surrounded her, G.H. encounters that repressed world which, until then, had been hidden from her. That is, G.H. confronts her own self accumulated, or, rather, hidden by the phenomenological veil of her created reality, a hegelian construct represented by the lushness of her apartment. To further her *Angst*, G.H.'s remembrance of the soft muted colors of the plush cushions, rugs and curtains which mute the reality that enters her own residence, a space which G.H. had earlier assumed reflected her own being (22), are canceled out by the harsh and nauseating contrast of lights and shadows which invade the deserted maid's room.

G.H.'s entrance into this cockroach filled room forces her to encounter the reality of being, that is, it forces G.H. to face the insecurities of her being as a linguistic being, that is as a “speaking one” which carries an “intention” to signify in relation with “being-in-the-world.” [5] Previous to this encounter, G.H. could define her existence according to her

manufactured surroundings, surroundings which were no more than physical and linguistic constructs of her own device. But now, G.H. finds herself lacking the psychological crutches and linguistic asylums that gave her being reason and definition. [6] G.H.'s world has been reduced to the brackishness of being human, especially as reflected by the cockroach's eyes. Eyes which “looked at [G.H.] with the blind fertility of its look” (69). These eyes reminded G.H. that she “had tasted a man's eyes with [her] mouth and could tell that he was crying by the saltiness” (69).

At once G.H. recoils from such memories as she realizes that in “that desert [she] had gone into, ... there [she] had also discovered life and its salt” (69) In G.H.'s discourse the cockroach's body becomes that precinct of holy communion with the other. It is a body long claimed both by the church and the new technocratic age, within sexual and labor refer to the western ideal of power and of the control exerted over others. [7] And salt, or, rather, the brackishness of blood, establishes that communion between the human being and the other, that is, between human and God or even between man and woman. Thus it also represents the disgusting side of humans, the encrusted sweat on forehead and body, signs of humanity's daily toil and nocturnal pleasures. Salt becomes the manifested orgiastic passion of western being, both sexual and capitalistic. It is what western morality both avoids and desires in an ecstatic and corporeal encounter with being.

This “new” salt reflects centuries of western capitalistic and phallogocentric discourse, especially when she remembers tasting the salt contained in a man's eyes (69). Thus G.H. tries to evade western discourse by taking a nap and pretending that it is all just a nightmare. Eventually G.H. comes to realize that by trying to avoid confronting the situation she would do no more than post-pone what is inevitable. Thus, in what could be seen as a leap of faith, G.H.

understands her destiny as defined by the eventual communion with the body of the “other,” that is, with the cockroach. In this instant, G.H. understands that the “other” is “other” because of its despised and misunderstood op/position by the “one”. To overcome this contempt of the “other” G.H. must embrace the “other”: that is, G.H. must take communion with, and, eventually, of the “other”.

G.H. realizes that the cockroach's life, the life whose entrails were spewed out in the middle of that room awash in sunlight, was the same as her life, and that to commune with the cockroach is to commune with her-self. “But I knew that I couldn't do it that way. I knew that I would really have to eat the cockroach mass, and all of me eat it, Only then would I have what suddenly seemed to me to be the anti-sin: to eat the cockroach mass is the anti-sin, sin that would kill myself” (157). Thus, G.H. comprehends that she must take communion with the other, as Jesus did, so that she may take communion with her self by ingesting the body and blood of the sacrificed daughter of the depths, embracing and internalizing the precinct of the other in her own body.

G.H. is unable to complete the mystic rite of consuming the cockroach, and ends vomiting the offering and offense back into the world. Why? Because in those cockroachly eyes that beckoned her there was no salt (I find a similar problem with those tasteless Catholic wafers), that is, there was no life [77]. Or, rather, the cockroach did not hold the “life” she expected. G.H.'s encounter reveals the emptiness of the “subject without object, of the subject without other” as “revealed in everything which has lost its shadow and has become transparent” (Baudrillard 154). [8] Caught off guard G.H. finds that she has encountered, and tasted, the nothing, the neutral space “in between” of being which she had hidden from herself for so many

years: that is, the “devitalized” space that leads G.H. toward her death (157). That is why G.H., in her shock, thrusts the cockroach out again, denying, in turn, the sacrifice which she had laid on her tongue: G.H. has tasted the nothingness inherent in false substances: such as “sugar without calories, ... salt without sodium, ... life without salt (Baudrillard 154). What is given to G.H., then, is an understanding, brief as it may be, of the full human condition as present in the passion of Christ. [9] That is, G.H. expresses the fullness imbedded in the disinterested and depersonalized sacrifice of the mere being before the nothing (168). The absence of the expected makes G.H. reject this communion with her hegelian self, and to question its purpose. G.H. reveals herself to the emptiness of the constructed western subject with which she had surrounded her self for so many years. It is within this failure that G.H. finally grasps the inevitable experience of the authentic-self, a self whose prison had finally been broken. Thus G.H. exclaims:

Finally, finally, my husk had really broken, and I was, without limit. By not being, I was. To the edge of what I wasn't, I was. What I am not, I am. Everything will be within me, if I am not; for “I” is merely one of the world's instantaneous spasms. 172

Here we return to question the three figures on the wall, to the shapes of empty nudity which stand for the husks of previous cockroaches whose bodies might once have housed an authentic-being. These figures stand for the “I” which engenders neutral time, reminding G.H. that the body, and the room, stands in the “spacing of the place where *I* (who) takes place, where *I* comes into presence,” neither preexisting this “schematization” nor coming after

it. [10] This “hidden mural” attempts against G.H.'s western order. But these “crazy outsized figures” are bodies without cause, for they are “like three automatons. Even the dog had the tame insanity of something that is not powered by a force of its own” (31). So they question G.H. not in words, but in their “unspeakable quality,” a quality which augments “the ghoulish state of decay, antiquity, and dissolution” found in G.H.'s defined being. [11]

Thus we find in G.H. a dichotomy between what is “being”, and what is “human”. [12] In her act of defining the “I”, G.H. finds herself embattled against western established reality. This ambiguity is furthered by the open closure present in the text itself, as marked by the two ellipses which frame the novel, a fact not readily present in the translation since Sousa does not deem it necessary to reproduce them. G.H. is no longer interested in continuing with the linguistic game which has dominated and defined her world. Rather, she opens her experiential level to one of pure contemplation, opting to reject the doldrums and somewhat diverting ritual of the communion. [173]

I believe it is wrong to conclude that G.H. gives up in her epiphanic quest, as most critics have concluded. Most of the studies on The Passion presume that the only road to an epiphanic experience is through the ritualistic repetition of a communal memory of the Absolute. By negating the word, G.H. presumably abandons her search for union with the Absolute. This may be true, but only if this Absolute is determined by a linguistic roulette, and if the final stage of the mystic quest is to reaffirm the oppressive dominion of the Absolute over the human being, as most religions hope. Rather, I believe that G.H. rejects the word and its western logocentric repression when she states “life is itself for me” [173]. Comprehension, that western marvel of salvation, is a minor level of reality. It is being which G.H. must embrace, like a Zen nun,

without searching for answers, nor declaring the irrationality of the question, or even posing the question itself. To heed G.H.'s earlier warning: “The danger of meditation is the danger of starting to think without wanting to, and thinking is no longer meditating, thinking leads toward an objective” (104).

The dangerous objects mentioned earlier, then, could be interpreted as those speech acts that lead to western logocentric thinking, especially since they lead away from being and towards an artificial western *telos*. As Lacan reminds us “speech *is* the manifestation of desire as being-nothing, just as it *is* truth in opposition to reality. But,” continues Lacan, “there is another side to speech—revelation. Revelation and not expression—the unconsciousness is not expressed, except by deformation, *Entstellung*, distortion, transportation.” [\[13\]](#) That is why the room must be devoid of things. G.H.'s desires lie no longer in thinking, in looking for a rational telos. Rather, G.H. desires to enact the free meditative state of being without reproaches from western rationalism. That is, G.H. wants “to be” without having to be defined: definition being the rule of the oppressive west.

In the end, G.H. doesn't come out of this epiphanic experience untouched. And, I wouldn't say she leaves it at all. We are back to the ellipsis which are missing in the English version. Rather, G.H. seems to be condemned to repeat this revealing moment. G.H. has entered a precinct where openings and closures are one and the same. That is why each section opens with the closure of the one before. Nietzsche might say that The Passion remits to the “Eternal Recurrence of the Same.” I would also say that The Passion remits to the “Eternal Recurrence of the Same.” But not because it merely repeats openings and closures. Rather, The Passion is the

Eternal Recurrence of the Same because the same is the same by being also the other, that is, for G.H it is being also a cockroach.

This is crucial, since to understand Lispector's overall programme one must understand the relation of all the texts to this one. As I said before, this novel is the keystone of Lispector's work because, as it represents the turning point for the protagonist, it also serves as the turning point for the mood of Lispector's own work. Before this novel, all of Lispector's novels are marked by the failure and anguish of the protagonists. Her first three novels are especially dark in nature. In them, we see characters who are unable to enact their own power of being [Near to the Wild Heart 1944], characters who find themselves outside of society's safety, and encountering death [Chandelier 1946], or characters who are unable to find their place in life and, thus, cannot reconcile their identity with their surroundings [The Besieged City 1949].

The next three, of which The Passion forms part of, relate to failed attempts at redefining the characters' identity [The Apple in the Dark 1961 and An Apprenticeship: or, The Book of Delights 1969]. These three define the errors of false identification with the western rituals, and inquire into the elements that lead toward true being.

The next novel [The Stream of Life 1973] demonstrates what Lispector understands as the creation of the true free self. And the last two novels [The Hour of the Star 1977, and A Breath of Life 1978] deal with more specific encounters with this true being in relation to the socio-political, to the ethno-economic, and to itself, as Lispector finally delves into the human desire to control realities, especially through artistic creativity.

The Passion becomes part of Lispector's inquiry into true, or, as I deem, authentic being, for The Passion serves Lispector as it presents us with a key factor to her study in humanity. The Passion shows how it is important to lose one's self, that is, the self prescribed by western logocentric ideologies, so that one can take up the correct state of mind to move forward. G.H. doesn't lose her self when she hangs onto her anguishes and tries to solve them by following western rituals. Rather, it is when she sees the just-being of Christ in the cockroach, as represented in the lack of salt in the white ooze from its shell, that G.H. begins to comprehend the futility of searching for salvation through pre-established methodologies. In a way, what G.H. is left with is with the purest form of self-realization; that is, G.H. has opened her self to its self, a self free of western constraints and justifications. Thus, G.H., and Lispector, can now embark into a new quest, one free of presupposed goals and ideals, as they accept their own responsibility of being, and declare their adoration, without compromises, of all.

[0](#) Paper delivered at the 1997 Congress of the International Association of Philosophy and Literature held at Mobile, Alabama (6-10 May, 1997).

[\[1\]](#) A paixão segundo G.H. (1964/8). All English references are taken from Ronald W. Sousa's translation. The Passion According to G.H. Emergent Literatures. Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1988.

[\[2\]](#) For example see Daphne Patai's "Clarice Lispector: Myth and Mystification." Myth and Ideology in Contemporary Brazilian Fiction. Cranbury, N.J.: Associated University Presses, Inc., 1983

[\[3\]](#) See Martin Heidegger's Being and Time. Translation by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. NY: Harper and Row, 1969.

[\[4\]](#) Martin Heidegger Poetry, Language, Thought. Trans. by Albert Hofstadter. NY: Harper Torchbooks, (Harper and Row), 1972.

[\[5\]](#) Lacan, J. Ecrits Paris: Seuil, 1966. 83.

[\[6\]](#) As E. M. Cioran would note, "According to Hegel, man will be completely free only 'by surrounding himself with a world entirely created by himself.'/ But this is precisely what he has done and man has never been so enchained, so much a slave as now." The Trouble with Being Born. Trans. by Richard Howard. NY: Seaver Books, 1976. 139.

[7] Salt, mineral that comes from the depths of the sea or from the bowels of the earth, and, whose magic lies in satisfying the thirst of all beings, becomes an economic commodity revered through the ages as symbol of earthly life, so elemental, so pure.

[8] Baudrillard, Jean. "El mundo sin mujeres." El crimen perfecto. Traducido por Joaquín Jordá. Colección Argumentos, 181. Barcelona: Ediciones Anagrama, 1996. Traducción de Le crime parfait. 1995.

[9] Similar to Nietzsche's pronouncement in "The Madman" in The Gay Science.

[10] Nancy, Jean-Luc. Introduction. Who Comes After the Subject? Ed. by Eduardo Cadava, et.al. N.Y.: Routledge, 1991. 1-8.

[11] Lovecraft, H. P. "The Outsider" [The Dunwich Horror and Others. Sauk City, WI: Arkham House, 1963. 46-52] 51.

[12] For a similar encounter with non-being see Fakhruddin 'Iraqi's Divine Flashes. The Classics of Western Spirituality. Translation by William C. Chittick and Peter Lamborn Wilson. New York-Ramsey-Toronto: Paulist Press, 1982.

[13] Lacan, Jacques. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book I. Freud's Papers on Technique. (1953-54). Trans. by John Forrester. NY: Norton, 1988. 270-1/297.