

# CLARICE LISPECTOR, AN (IM)POSSIBLE READER OF VIRGINIA WOOLF

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## RESUMO

O biógrafo Benjamin Moser (2011) relata que Clarice Lispector não apreciava comparações feitas entre a sua escritura e a de Virginia Woolf. Tendo se familiarizado com o trabalho da autora inglesa somente depois de ter publicado seu primeiro romance, *Perto do coração selvagem* (1943), Clarice Lispector afirmou que a razão pela qual refutou ter sido influenciada se devia ao suicídio de Woolf, que ela jamais poderia perdoar. De acordo com a escritora brasileira, cometer suicídio significaria interromper a continuidade da vida e, portanto, a horrível tarefa de sustentar o porvir. Entretanto, alguns trabalhos de Lispector parecem estabelecer um diálogo com as personagens icônicas de Woolf, como “Judith”, a irmã ficcional de Shakespeare de *A Room of One’s Own* (1928), por exemplo, como Moser propõe ao analisar o ensaio de Lispector, intitulado “A irmã de Shakespeare” (1952). Outro aspecto convergente nos romances de ambas escritoras é o uso de diferentes imagens do não-humano, que sugerem o indizível que jaz nos recessos da linguagem, especialmente discernível em *Água viva* (1973) e *The Waves* (1931). Este artigo busca analisar similaridades comparáveis nesses romances no que tange o complexo metafórico derivado dos diferentes usos das imagens da água, que ambas as autoras utilizam, a fim de melhor compreender as filosofias traçadas em suas obras e a (im)possibilidade de escapar a influência de outro artista.

**Palavras-chave:** leitura; influência; água; linguagem

## ABSTRACT

Biographer Benjamin Moser (2011) has reported Clarice Lispector to have said that she did not appreciate it when comparisons were drawn between her writing and that of Virginia Woolf's. Having only become fully acquainted with the English writer's work after her first novel, *Perto do coração selvagem* (1943), had been published, Clarice Lispector stated that the reason behind this refusal to being influenced was due to Woolf's suicide, which she could never forgive. According to the Brazilian writer, to commit suicide would inevitably disrupt life's continuity and therefore one's awful duty to withstand what is still to come. However, some of Lispector's works seem to establish a direct dialogue with Woolf's iconic characters, such as Shakespeare's fictional sister "Judith" in *A Room of One's Own* (1928), for instance, as Moser proposes when analyzing Lispector's essay "A irmã de Shakespeare" (1952). Another converging aspect in both writers' novels is the use of different non-human imagery to suggest the unfathomable breach in language which words cannot operate, especially discernible in *Água viva* (1973) and *The Waves* (1931). This paper aims to analyze comparable similarities in these novels concerning the metaphorical complex derived from the different uses of the imagery of water both novelists develop so as to better comprehend the philosophies devised in each writer's *oeuvres* and the (im)possibility of evading a fellow artist's influence.

**Keywords:** reading; influence; water; language

Biographer Benjamin Moser (2011) has reported Clarice Lispector to have said that she did not appreciate it when comparisons were drawn between her writing and that of Virginia Woolf's. Having only been introduced to the English writer's works after her first novel, *Perto do coração selvagem* (1943), had been published, Clarice Lispector stated that the reason behind this refusal to being influenced was due to Woolf's suicide, which she could never forgive. According to the Brazilian writer, to commit suicide would inevitably disrupt life's continuity and therefore one's awful duty to withstand what is still to come. Nevertheless, some of Lispector's works seem to establish a direct dialogue with Woolf's iconic characters, such as Shakespeare's fictional sister "Judith" in *A Room of One's Own* (1928), for instance, as Moser proposes when analyzing Lispector's essay "A irmã de Shakespeare" (1952).

This brings us to the question of whether a writer can evade a fellow artist's influence or not. It seems that, however reluctant to admit the power of words in making an impression on her as a reader of Virginia Woolf, Clarice immortalizes ideas with which she becomes acquainted and an overall sensitivity developed in the works of Woolf. Echoing Jorge Luis Borges's beautiful essay entitled "Immortality", it could be argued that each time we refer to an artist's verse or phrase, we embody such experiences and feelings, all of which become part of our identity. Memory is responsible for immortalizing ideas and so ways of accessing reality through new eyes while still resonating with an inevitably contemporary sensibility. It is because the worlds envisioned by writers have such an integral depiction of reality and so they represent questions which still remain unanswered that a new perspective can be elaborated on our conditions of existence and the texture of reality in itself. With a brand new contribution to the legacy that has been passed on through generations a new piece of writing can find its fresh take on ideas and images that are still preserved and shared in contemporary times, yet meaning something else, while still echoing the voices and influences of the past. Inevitably each of us makes a difference in being in the world and so our acts, achievements and attitudes belong to the fabric of human existence, helping to immortalize as well as unite us all through memory.

Another converging aspect in both writers' novels is the use of different non-human imagery to suggest the unfathomable breach in language which words cannot operate, especially discernible in *Água viva* (1973) and *The Waves* (1931). This paper aims to analyze comparable similarities in these novels concerning the metaphorical complex derived from the different uses of the imagery of water both novelists develop so as to better comprehend the philosophies devised in each writer's *oeuvres*. From a contemporary standpoint, it is possible to consider that as readers we only fully assimilate and embody texts when they become contemporary because that way they are able to shed light on the obscurities of our times, enlightening us with a distant look from within that enables a critical appraisal of what at first only seems strangely familiar (Agamben, 2009). I would like to think that it is possible to read between the lines of both novels to make them contemporary in that various audiences can communally relate to both novelists' representation of human experiences of time, language and silence.

While in *Água viva* readers are presented with an anonymous female narrator's attempt to realize her full potential in trying to understand herself in the process of becoming, *The Waves* pluralizes this ongoing reflection through the six different voices of Bernard, Neville, Louis, Jinny, Susan and Rhoda. Gradually, though, it is clear that Bernard has a more prominent role in assessing events and situations, and

so, due to time constraints, it would be convenient to narrow down this discussion to his own attempt to recollect and discern his identity from that of his friends or, as some would argue, other selves. Despite all differences, in both novels identities are perceived as being fluid, proving especially hard to demarcate any definitive lines that would eventually result in a thoroughly fixed idea of self.

Difference, necessarily seen as inherent to identity, stresses the difficulties in trying to evaluate and discern the boundaries that separate bodies and so would allow for an immediate and easy identification. Transition zones seem to act as moving edges whose becoming mixes all characters into one continuous search for other ways of thinking and being in this process. According to Deleuze and Guattari (2012), a single abstract wave seems to propagate the plot and to intertwine characters' thoughts and actions into one movement of deterritorialization through different lines of flight. Consequently, the French philosophers contend that any attempt of circumscribing identities to various social roles, age or gender one has to perform in society would inevitably fail, because such dimensions could have their boundaries blurred by their intrinsic interpenetration. In both novels they are even combined with elements and natural kingdoms, making it impossible to crystallize vital movements that escape an absolute center, that is, a one and only way of comprehending reality.

In *The Waves* Bernard recognizes that his life cannot possibly be comprehended if not through his friends' perspectives and the way they help shape his understanding of the world and his place in it. His rich and multifaceted identity is marked by the difficulty which would lie in rationally and logically trying to analyze and separate his identity from his friends' in an antagonistic and polarizing fashion when, in fact, they are the ones that contribute and share his pain, happiness, doubts, concerns and displeasure. And so he enquires: "And now I ask, 'Who am I?' I have been talking of Bernard, Neville, Jinny, Susan, Rhoda and Louis. Am I all of them? Am I one and distinct? I do not know" (WOOLF, 2015, p. 172). His identity is all the firmer the more it encompasses their otherness, which does not belong to other bodies only, but rather this otherness can be found in the plural individuality of a single body. Bernard is led to the conclusion that "there is no division between me and them. As I talked I felt, 'I am you'. This difference we make so much of, this identity we so feverishly cherish, was overcome" (WOOLF, 2015, p. 173).

Similarly, in *Água viva* the narrator also engages in the process of becoming. In delving into the experience of self-discovery which she shares with an anonymous reader, she establishes a dialog with herself, her reader(s) and their otherness, all of which is made possible through language and the way words help to articulate and designate one's place of enunciation or lack thereof. And so the following could be stated: "E se eu digo 'eu' é porque não ousou dizer 'tu', ou 'nós' ou 'uma pessoa'. Sou obrigada à humildade de me personalizar me apequenando mas sou o és-tu" (LISPECTOR, 1998, p. 12). Humility comes from the need to personalize oneself to be able to operate as a functional being in society and, consequently, have language become the most useful it could possibly be in signaling immediate identification and so to avoid one's becoming enmeshed into the essence of life, or as Clarice would put it, sheer *it*. Returning to this ultimate or perhaps it could be said original place from which we are sprung would mean complete abdication of personality or even the functionality inherent to words, resulting in a place of solitude and utter silence which would negate the need for words in the first place since they would diminish the scope of beings in their becoming: death.

This leads to the question of whether such immersion could actually be effected. In *The Waves*, a scene of Bernard shaving in front of the mirror gives us an opportunity to more closely follow this thread.

‘And time’, said Bernard, ‘lets fall its drop. The drop that has formed on the roof of the soul falls. On the roof of my mind, forming, lets fall its drop. Last week, as I stood shaving, the drop fell. I, standing with my razor in my hand, became suddenly aware of the merely habitual nature of my action (this is the drop forming) and congratulated my hands, ironically for keeping at it. Shave, shave, shave, I said. Go on shaving. The drop fell. All through the day’s work, at intervals, my mind went to an empty place, saying, ‘What is lost? What is over?’ And ‘Over and done with’, I muttered, ‘over and done with’, solacing myself with words. People noticed the vacuity of my face and the aimlessness of my conversation. The last words of my sentence tailed away. And as I buttoned on my coat to go home I said more dramatically. ‘I have lost my youth’.

‘It is curious how, at every crisis, some phrase which does not fit insists upon coming to the rescue – the penalty of living in an old civilisation with a notebook. This drop falling has nothing to do with losing my youth. This drop is time tapering to a point. Time, which is a sunny pasture covered with a dancing light, time, which is widespread as a field at midday, becomes pendent. Time tapers to a point. As a drop falls from a glass heavy with some sediment, time falls. These are the true cycles, these are the true events. Then as if all the luminosity of the atmosphere were withdrawn I see to the bare bottom. I see what habit covers (...)’ (WOOLF, 2015, p. 109).

In this excerpt Bernard experiences time liquefied to one impending drop, which enables him to later on have an epiphany in spite of the habitual nature of shaving. If initially the idea of having lost his youth might seem comforting because it provides him with a ready answer to his feelings of anguish, eventually it becomes clear that this initial crisis reveals something more meaningful and fundamental. Here we can witness Bernard experiencing what Virginia Woolf coined as *moments of being* in her “A Sketch of the Past” (1939), proposing that some instances in life can radically change our perception of reality because they seem to intensify human existence in its revealing intimacy with their surroundings, enabling human beings to fulfill their potential of passionate reflection and connection with themselves and the world they create even if just for one moment. As the drop falls we witness time falling and enlightening what at first could neither be contemplated nor comprehended in its entirety. Time tapering to a point illuminates what at first remains obscured by shadows of dissimulation, tricking Bernard into believing to have lost his youth, when, in fact, out of mundane day-to-day activities, which numbs us into going on about our lives in the most automatic and desensitized way, *i.e.*, out of *moments of non-being moments of being* can be experienced.

These *moments of being* hint at the possibility of glimpsing at life to its bottom, revealed in its magnitude of shade and light through the use of metaphorical language in both novels. These moments are continuously circumscribed to the unity within a cycle, such as the cycle of the waves whose rhythm seem to envelope all characters into *moments of being* and *non-being* repeatedly, “after Monday, Tuesday comes” (WOOLF, 2015, p. 160). On the other hand, in *Água viva* the narrator appears to delve into only one of these *moments of being*, or perhaps it could be said that she elongates their duration to the scope of the

whole novel. Continuity is made possible because “o tempo é quanto dura um pensamento” (LISPECTOR, 1998, p. 21). Time is continuously experienced in the now-instant, whose amalgamation of successive points in time allows for a stream of conscious effort and attention to be devoted to this endeavor to which she is committed: “mais que um instante, quero o seu fluxo” (LISPECTOR, 1998, p. 15). Only present time can be accounted for because in it stand both past and future as well, delineating the way present occurrences are affected by one’s past experiences and how future events can be anticipated from the present evidence that suggests great likelihood. Through memory of the now-instant the stream of life is condensed to a single scene that best illustrates this point:

Neste instante-já estou envolvida por um vagueante desejo difuso de maravilhamento e milhares de reflexos do sol na água que corre da bica na relva de um jardim todo maduro de perfumes, jardim e sombras que invento já e agora e que são o meio concreto de falar neste meu instante de vida. Meu estado é o de jardim com água correndo. Descrevendo-o tento misturar palavras para que o tempo se faça. O que te digo deve ser lido rapidamente como quando se olha (LISPECTOR, 1998, p. 16).

The narrator’s state is that of one blossoming and maturing with the stream of life. Flowing water is the quintessential representation of the flux of time in this novel. And although there is a stretch of time that builds up tension to a smooth transition from a life of distractions to a life of meaning, the narrator’s rebirth seems to lead up to this imagery quoted above. She takes a deep dive into the essence of life, sheer *it* – no interruptions. Writing enables her with the ultimate alternative to successive *moments of non-being* as it allows her to concentrate her energy into a philosophy of the now-instant. This is the only way for her to commune with the essence of life, which becomes manifest in everything around her and also in her veins, propelling her to thinking and being human. Naturally, human beings, unlike any other beings, have to resort to language as the ultimate answer to reality made manifest. Through words we are restricted to our own finiteness, but we are also given the opportunity to dwell within and without, relating to otherness, thinking and being in our propriety.

All of these different images and scenes help us to reflect on the nature of such language used to fully realize the potential of words in intensifying the experiences that, due to distraction or sheer monotony, might easily pass us by but for moments of being. In her essay *Craftsmanship* (1937), Virginia Woolf suggests that the true power of words resides in their potential to signify and make sense in between what is said and what is left unsaid, leaving enough room for the sunken meanings “to remain sunken, suggested, not stated; lapsing and flowing into each other like reeds on the bed of the river” (WOOLF, 2009, p. 36). This power of suggestion intrinsic to words opens up human experience to the possibility of glimpsing into the great mysteries that still remain indecipherable and so impossible to be logically and objectively communicated to others if not through the use of images and scenes so masterly crafted by both novelists to convey the recesses of silence in language.

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*Submetido à publicação em 20 de julho de 2017.*

*Aprovado em 27 de setembro de 2017.*