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life contemplating itself in the hour of the star

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It is well known that Brazilian writer Clarice Lispector is less interested in creating a narrative than in capturing "sensations" through her writing. As Benjamin Moser highlights in his biography of the author, this particular interest can even be traced back to her childhood. Young Lispector, who had already started writing her own stories, would send them to the children's page of the Brazilian newspaper *Diário de Pernambuco*, only to get rejected every time. Recalling those days, Lispector later speculated about why her stories might have been rejected by the newspaper: "I kept sending and sending my stories, but they never published them, and I knew why. Because the others went like this: 'Once upon a time, and so on and so forth.' And mine were *sensations*" (qtd in Moser 54; emphasis added). What interests Lispector as a writer are not grand events and actions or "sonorous facts," but rather the ever so subtle "whispering" that takes place between facts. Such is her goal, Lispector professes, through the mouthpiece of Rodrigo S.M., the narrator of her last novella *The Hour of the Star*: "The facts are sonorous but between the facts there's a whispering. It's the whispering that astounds me" (16). As we will show, the poverty of the story (and the richness) of *The Hour of the Star* has to do with this infinite smallness of life's whispering, its "delicate essential," which Lispector tries to capture through her protagonist Macabéa, a "girl who was so poor that all she ate was hot dogs" (qtd in Moser 372). To our mind, unlike a writer like Samuel Beckett, Lispector's gesture here is not that of the reduction or subtraction of life's richness to the bare essential. In his book on Beckett, Alain Badiou argues that Beckett's primary gesture as a writer is to subtract inessential ornament from language, so it exposes "generic humanity." In his words:

> For Beckett, writing is an act governed by a severe principle of economy. It is necessary to subtract more and more – everything that figures as circumstantial ornament, all peripheral distraction, in order to exhibit or to detach those rare functions to which writing can and should restrict itself, if its destiny is to say generic humanity. (Badiou 3)

In contrast to this Beckettian asceticism, Lispector attunes her readers to the vitality and richness of the infinitely small itself.[1] The

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Lispectorian word for this attunement to the infinitely small is "sensation."

If sensations do not belong to the realm of factuality (what Lispector's narrator calls "sonorous facts"), neither are they reducible to mental images of one's own introspection, that is, feelings and emotions that pass through one's conscious mind, which can be then translated into words. For Lispector, one does not have this or that sensation separate from one's own self, the subject *affected* by it. Sensation rather involves the self's relation to itself, the act of touching itself. Put differently, in having a sensation, the self contemplates itself. Insofar as sensation implies a self-relation, it resembles what Lispector calls a "meditation" that is "an end in itself" because here meditation has no other content but its own act of contemplating. As Lispector writes in the "Dedication" of *The Hour of the Star*: "[W]hat can you do besides meditate to fall into that full void you can only reach through meditation. Meditation doesn't need results: meditation can be an end in itself" (xiv). The conventional distinction between the meditator and the meditated is suspended because there is no object of contemplation separate from the one who contemplates. Otherwise, its content would not be a "void" because there would always be something one contemplates. Lispector's idea of meditation as an end in itself is analogous to what Plotinus calls "living contemplation":

> Contemplation is a movement of nature toward the soul, and of the soul to thought, and contemplations become always more intimate and unified to the contemplators … So this must be something where the two become truly one. But this is living contemplation […], not an object of contemplation […] like that in something else. For that which is in something else is alive because of that other, not in its own right. (Qtd in Agamben, *Use of Bodies* 216)

Sensation is "living contemplation" because the self is being *moved* by the sensation of itself, its own existence.

In her last novella, *The Hour of the Star*, Lispector makes plain that the brilliance of life – any life whatever – lies in its capacity to endlessly contemplate itself and that as such it is inseparable from its mode of contemplation. As we will suggest in this article, Lispector's view of life as living contemplation resonates with Giorgio Agamben's conception of being as potentiality. In the last installment of his *Homo Sacer* series, *The Use of Bodies*, Agamben tries to offer an alternative paradigm of life to that of Western biopolitics, whose power operates on its separation of bare life from forms of life. Central to this new ontology is Agamben's notion of a life as inseparable from its mode or form, as he highlights using a hyphen: form-of-life. By form-of-life, Agamben means that one's living is never reducible to the biological or economic facts of existence because it essentially concerns itself with its potentialities, its singular modes of being.[2] Life that contemplates itself is a life which simply *is* without being reducible to its function. In *The Hour of the Star*, Macabéa is not simply a figure of bare life as some critics have suggested by reducing her life to her factual circumstances. She is rather a figure whose life is affected by its own sensation of existing – its unborn possibilities.

i am what i write: meditation on "the author," actually clarice lispector

For Lispector, writing involves a kind of auto-affective movement, which takes place in a zone of the mind where the subject and the object of creation, interiority and exteriority, and potentiality and actuality become indistinguishable. As her narrator Rodrigo declares at the outset of the novella, "Thinking is an act. Feeling is a fact. Put the two together – I am the one writing what I am writing. God is the world" (Lispector, *Hour* 3). On the following page, Rodrigo repeats a similar idea once again: "Just as I'm writing at the very same time I'm being read" (4). As made plain in these passages, writing is the ultimate paradigm of immanence for Lispector, in which subject and object creatively blend. These passages

conspicuously evoke the biblical idea of divine creation, the notion that God "is what he is," as he tells Moses in the burning bush episode. God, for Lispector, is not transcendent but the one that is immanent to his created world – a motif Lispector borrows from Baruch Spinoza.[3] The idea that the creator is immanent to his creation means that he is continually modified and affected by the world he creates, for the former does not exist *apart from* or *prior to* his act of creation, as Agamben explains,

> As Spinoza has suitably reminded us, [the concept of the *causa sui*] certainly cannot mean that "before existing it had brought to pass that it was to be, which is absurdity itself and cannot be" (Spinoza 4, II, XVII); instead it means the immanence of being to itself, an internal principle of self-movement and self-modification. (*Use of Bodies* 243)

Spinoza's God is the *causa sui*, or the immanent cause of itself, in whose act of creation, the creator and the created, essence and existence, and the subjective and the objective blend with each other. According to Agamben, Spinoza furnishes us with a linguistic example that illustrates this logic of the immanent cause when he analyzes a "Hebrew verbal form, the reflexive active verb," which is translated as to constitute oneself as one does something (*Use of Bodies* 29). For example, using this form, we do not say, "one walks" or "one visits," but rather say, one "constitutes-oneself" as visiting or walking. Spinoza stresses the importance of this linguistic construction in reference to the immanent cause: "It was therefore necessary to invent another kind of infinitive, which expressed an action referred to the agent as immanent cause … , which means to visit-oneself, or to constitute-oneself as visiting or, finally, to manifest-oneself as visiting" (qtd in *Use of Bodies* 29). The concept of the immanent cause does not express some sort of self-mastery; on the contrary, it indicates that the subject constitutes itself through its auto-affection, and "expresses, and loves itself in the affection that it receives from its own modifications" (*Use of Bodies* 165).

Lispector identifies the author-subject as the figure of the *causa sui*, for whom writing is a process of "self-movement and self-modification."[4] On the dedication page of *The Hour of the Star*, Lispector visualizes her own transformation through the act of writing the story by adding a curious sort of phrase: "Dedication by the Author (actually Clarice Lispector)" (xiii). The name "Lispector" is (spatially and temporally) suspended between the brief parenthesis, following "the Author." This suspension creates a space between "the author" and the name "Lispector," which signals that the author does not exactly coincide with herself. By suspending an immediate identification of herself with the author, Lispector makes visible a rupture or a gap existing between the two separate times; Lispector after *The Hour of the Star* is no longer the same as Lispector before it. This rupture is echoed in the text when Rodrigo says: "Will I someday return to my former way of life? I very much doubt it" (Lispector, *Hour* 14). Lispector/Rodrigo is split into two, one before and after the story-event. It is through the story as the event that Lispector "explodes into" a new subject, "I" (xiii). The conventional notion of authorship as having complete sovereignty over her work is challenged in the sense that the author-subject is simultaneously born at the time of writing a work and retrospectively given its symbolic position in the presence of her work. Alenka Zupančič introduces a similar notion of the author in her formula of the "subject-event-subject." In Zupančič's words:

> The paradox consists in the fact that the subject-as-author, (temporally) situated at the beginning of the process/labor of authoring, is entirely dependent upon the subject who is subsequently going to become the subject of the work-yet-to-be-completed […] the relationship between the subject and the event should be written as follows: subject-event-subject. "Subject" names the something inaugurated by the event, as well as the something that makes a place (and time) for the event (although this place is subjectivized exclusively in a retroactive manner, after the event). (19)

The author-subject and the story-event internally condition each other. The author is neither a meta-voice that exists outside his or her story, nor an ultimate authority that guarantees its truths from without. The author is immanent to and contingent on the creative event. Which is the reason that Lispector suggests that the story-event is the "crystal" of the time between the past and the present, the time between "the yesterdays of today" and "today" as "the transparent veil" (xiii). The story-event simultaneously gestures toward the future, toward "the time-yet-to-come" by preparing the encounters with its future readers. In anticipating the readers to come, Lispector willingly announces her story as an "unfinished book": "[This story] is an unfinished book because it's still waiting for an answer. An answer I hope someone in the world can give me. You?" (xiv). Just as the author is created by the book, the book is also transformed by its audience.

In *The Hour of the Star*, Lispector suggests that the author-subject is the one who risks putting her innermost life into words without reserve, to such an extent that she is transfigured into the "object-thing" created (9). This does not mean, however, that Lispector's stories are autobiographical in the usual sense of the term. Lispector warns us of this possible confusion through the voice of the narrator of her novel *Água Viva*: "I am not going to be autobiographical. I want to be 'bio'" (qtd in Moser 314). In contrast to a "personal life," "bio" here signifies an "impersonal life" that is so intimate that it becomes opaque even to Lispector herself.[5] For Lispector, the author is *immanent* to her work, not as a cipher of some final meaning of the text, but as a limit that marks what goes beyond its written words: an impersonal passion of life that the author once bore witness to in herself. The author exists on the threshold between life and language, a being and its name, or the thing and the word – a relationship that Lispector never stops interrogating throughout her writings.

Language is both a mode of revelation and concealment regarding a life. Or, as Lispector puts it, "the word has its own light" and yet this light simultaneously creates its own point of obscurity and darkness. As Moser perspicuously points out, Lispector believes that a being is revealed in the world through its name, that is, by being marked by language. In Moser's words:

> [Lispector] identifies the point at which a thing is named as the point where that thing comes to exist. The name of the thing *is* the thing, and by discovering the name one creates it […] The point where the name of a thing becomes identical to the thing itself, the "word that has its own light," is the ultimate reality. (155)

Moser here explains one aspect of the relationship between a word and a being, namely, the former as a mode of revealing the latter. If their relationship is amenable only to a mode of revelation, however, writing would not have troubled Lispector. And yet, Lispector writes, "I meditate wordlessly and upon the nothing. What trips up my life is writing" (*Hour* xiv). Her troubling relationship with language has to do with the fact that once language reveals life, life soon appears as what eludes language, that is, as something ineffable. To borrow Agamben's expression, a being "remains disguised – hidden away in what opens it, concealed in what exposes it, and darkened by its own light" (*Potentialities* 195). In this dialectical movement, the light which illuminates a being and that which obscures it become one and the same thing. A supreme example is the human face. One reveals oneself to the world through one's face, but once it appears as such, the face simultaneously becomes a mystery of its own, as if it had hidden something behind it. For Lispector, the true mystery of our existence lies not in the ineffable nature of the thing-in-itself beyond words but, on the contrary, in the fact that our being is caught up in language. The essence of the thing should thus be sought in its very appearance, its mode, or what Lispector calls, "the symbol of the thing in the thing itself" (qtd in Moser 155).

beyond bare life: macabéa's mode of being

Considering this view, it should be made clear that when Lispector says that her goal as a writer is to capture a life or bio, she does not mean some sort of bare life, as if a life in its barest state could be stripped of its mode or way of being. On the contrary, Lispector highlights that a life is intimately intertwined with its mode of being, that is, its being-in-language. The inseparability of life from its form, or a being from its mode of existence, applies without exception to Macabéa, the protagonist of *The Hour of the Star*, however impoverished and naked her life appears to be at first glance. In his article entitled, "Lispector, the Time of the Veil," Cory Stockwell points out how the narrator of the story, Rodrigo, continually *fails* to reduce Macabéa to her nakedness despite his desire to unveil and reach her essence. As Stockwell writes,

> To get at Macabéa's essence, her nakedness, her *nudez*, is the aim of this novel, and yet it is powerless to do anything but enhance this nakedness with "pomp, jewels and splendour." What the narrative tells us, in this strange simultaneity of the necessity and impossibility of nakedness, is that it can only arrive at its object – at the true being or the "naked essence" of Macabéa – by way of the various veils by which it conceals her. (251)

The gesture of unveiling Macabéa presupposes that the essence of her being can be separated from its mode of being. By having her narrator fail this mission repeatedly, however, Lispector rather insists upon life as nothing but its form or mode. Or, as Rodrigo puts it, "Why do I write? First of all because I captured the spirit of the language and that's why sometimes the form is what makes the content" (Lispector, *Hour* 9). For Lispector, language is not some external reality that is imposed upon a being; on the contrary, it is what Agamben calls, a "form-of-life," a "life that can never be separated from its form, a life in which it is never possible to isolate and keep distinct something like a bare life" (*Use of Bodies* 207).

In our view, it is thus crucial *not* to read Macabéa merely as a figure of bare life or a universal victim as some critics have done. Marta Peixoto argues that one of the recurring motifs in Lispector's stories from her earliest fiction, *Near to the Wild Heart* to *The Hour of the Star*, is to explore "the dynamics of victimization" (Peixoto 82).[6] Working within this framework, Peixoto identifies Macabéa as a victim of both social and textual violence, thereby concluding: "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" (90). On the other hand, Earl E. Fitz stresses Macabéa's lack of minimal technological and linguistic sophistication necessary for her to survive economically and socially – "a point poignantly underscored [in the text] by her virtual inability to type, to 'process words'" (139). According to Fitz, Macabéa is a "victim of language" in the sense that she is marginalized in socioeconomic and cultural practices mediated by the power of language. By equating Macabéa's "essence" with the social injustice she goes through, critics unwittingly flatten the "delicate essential" of the character Macabéa. These critics get lost in the "sonorous facts" about her – her poverty and misery – thereby failing to hear the subtle "whispering" between these facts.

Emerging from her anonymous existence, Macabéa indeed catches the eye of the narrator Rodrigo and arrests his attention on the street of Rio de Janeiro. Lispector suggests that what makes him drawn to her is not her abjection (as there are many other northeastern girls as poor as she is), but her "particular mode of being abject, her bearing witness in some way to her abjection" (Agamben, *Use of Bodies* 232).[7] What *moves* Rodrigo to write the story of Macabéa is not simply her misery, but the *way* she suffers it and is affected by it. Rodrigo says, for example, that it is a particular look on Macabéa's face that catches his attention: "Because on a street in Rio de Janeiro in the air the feeling of perdition on the face of a northeastern girl" (Lispector, *Hour* 4). Or it is Macabéa's *way* of smiling at others on the

street, which Rodrigo finds "dumb" since nobody smiles back, or her lack of self-consciousness as "she didn't know what she was, just as a dog doesn't know it's a dog" (19). Although Rodrigo repeats that he writes about Macabéa "not by accumulation but by stripping naked" (72), he nonetheless cannot do away with these details, for it is only through the little grimace, smile, and gesture of Macabéa that the "delicate essential" of her life shines through.

In *The Hour of the Star*, Lispector shifts her focus away from the bourgeois lives of middle-upper-class women, the subject of her earlier novels, *Near to the Wild Heart* and *Passion According to G.H.*, to present Macabéa, a poor typist, from Alagoas, the northeastern region of Brazil, who barely makes her ends meet in the metropolis of Rio de Janeiro. However, it was not the first time that Lispector chose working-class women as the subject of her writing. In the weekly newspaper columns that she contributed to the *Jornal do Brasil*, Lispector devoted several essays to her maids, from the quiet woman Aninha who went mad one day, to a cook, Jandira, whom Lispector called a "clairvoyant." Lispector describes these women by way of minor traits which might go unnoticed by others, such as little gestures, habits, and pleasures of theirs.

For example, in her column entitled, "Gentle as a Fawn," Lispector writes of her maid named Eremita, a nineteen-year-old girl whose odd charm Lispector could not find the proper words to describe. What catches Lispector's attention among other things is Eremita's habitual "moments of distraction" – the moments in which her everyday activity is all of a sudden suspended as the young maid "succumb[s] to something" beyond the repetition of her mundane house chores. It is as if Eremita had momentarily fallen into a crack of time "more ancient than her nature" as Lispector observes:

> For [Eremita] had moments of distraction. Her face took on a smooth mask of impassive sadness. A sadness more ancient than her nature. Her eyes became vacant; one might even say a little cold. Anyone near her suffered without being able to help. All one could do was to wait. For this strange infanta had succumbed to something. No one would dare to touch her at such a moment. One could only wait, solemnly watching over her with bated breath. All one could do was to hope that the danger might pass. Until with an unhurried gesture, almost like a sigh, she would awaken like a newborn fawn struggling to its feet. (*Selected Crônicas* 19)

During this fleeting moment, Eremita retreats into herself, into the absolute privacy of her interior life that no one around her dares to intrude upon. As a helpless bystander, Lispector bears witness to Eremita's sudden fall into herself, into the depth of her interiority, only getting a glimpse of it through a subtle transfiguration of the maid's face as it loses its familiar expression, becoming "vacant," "impassive," and "cold."

Eremita's naked face here becomes its own veil or mask – the "smooth mask" of inexpressive neutrality. Through her impassive face, Eremita's inner life is exposed to the world, but only as sheer opacity. In this regard, the face reveals *nothing* other than its own opacity. Even though Lispector detects "sadness" reflected on the maid's face, she is careful enough to describe it using an indefinite article rather than a possessive noun, hence calling it "a sadness," not "her sadness." Lispector further qualifies the latter idea, saying that this anonymous sadness is "more ancient" than Eremita herself – some archaic affect that is within but eludes the maid's consciousness. Eremita touches on something in herself that is simultaneously beyond herself. It is this "something" that momentarily unravels her individuated personhood. The transfiguration of her face thus exposes Eremita's interiority only as *impenetrable* and *opaque*, not only to others, but also to herself. In these moments of distraction, Eremita contemplates her inner opacity which is the site of her potentiality as it transpires through her fleeting transfiguration.

macabéa's auto-generative meditation

Just like the young maid who habitually falls into her interior life contemplating its opaqueness, Lispector suggests that Macabéa, too, contemplates herself but rather endlessly. For Macabéa, contemplation is a mode of living, or a "form-of-life," to borrow Agamben's term, which is so intimate to herself that she is not even aware of it as Lispector thus writes:

> [Macabéa] had what's known as inner life and didn't know it. She lived off herself as if eating her own entrails. When she went to work she looked like a gentle lunatic because as the bus went along she daydreamed in loud and dazzling dreams. These dreams, because of all that interiority, were empty […] Most of the time she had without realizing it the void that fills the souls of the saints. Was she a saint? So it seems. (*Hour* 29)

Macabéa does not know that she has an "inner life" because this interiority of hers is emptied out of any contents. Even when Macabéa daydreams, Lispector suggests, her mind is being affected, not by the specific contents of the dreams (these dreams are "empty"), but by their sensations, which are "loud" and "dazzling." These contentless dreams are pure sensations without knowledge. Because these sensations cannot be an object of cognition, Macabéa's life is "a long meditation on the nothing" (29). What touches Macabéa's mind are these pure sensations *as* sensations of her otherness as Rodrigo observes: "She was only vaguely beginning to know the kind of absence she had of herself inside her. If she were an expressive creature she would say: the world is outside me, I am outside me" (16). In contemplation, the mind does not think this or that thought, but is being affected by its potentiality to be other. It is this alterity of the mind that *immanently* constitutes Macabéa's life as living contemplation.

Macabéa's life is nothing but such a movement of immanence as though it were nourished by the depth of her own interiority, as Rodrigo observes: "[Macabéa] live[s] off herself as if eating her own entrails." Or, in another place, Rodrigo imagines Macabéa, the orphaned girl as follows:

> she no longer knew what it was to have a father and mother, she'd forgotten the taste. And, if she thought about it, she might say she sprouted from the soil of the Alagoas backlands like an instantly molded mushroom. (Lispector, *Hour* 21)

Macabéa's "eating her own entrails" or her being "sprouted" on its own, indicates not so much her self-sufficiency as her capacity to experience herself as an immanent cause – the supreme state of blissfulness or "beatitude" according to Spinoza.[8] Macabéa is a figure of a saint for Rodrigo precisely in this sense: the saint is the subject that "causes itself," "becomes its own cause" *without* letting the Other be the cause of its own subjectification to borrow Slavoj Žižek's expression. Žižek explains the position of the saint as being situated beyond the law of desire governed by the Other:

> [W]e risk the step beyond desire itself and adopt the position of the saint who is no longer bothered by the Other's desire as its decentred cause. In the case of the saint, the subject, in an unheard-of way, "causes itself," becomes its own cause.

What gives Macabéa a "state of grace" (Lispector, *Hour* 18) is her self-constituting and self-nourishing capacity with which she sustains herself as Rodrigo explains:

> Who was [Macabéa] asking? God? She didn't think about God, God didn't think about her. God belongs to those who manage to get him […] She didn't ask questions. She guessed that there were no answers […] Since there wasn't anyone to answer she herself seemed to have answered: that's how it is because that's how it is. (18)

Macabéa does not believe in the God-Other who pulls strings from above.

While the *idea* of God does not concern Macabéa as such, she is nonetheless gripped

by the *sensations* of his presence without being able to speak about this experience. For example, Rodrigo tells us that one day Macabéa has a moment of ecstasy – an experience she tries to explain to her colleague Glória but fails: "She'd tried to tell Glória but couldn't, she didn't know how to talk, and to tell her what? The air? You can't tell everything because the everything is a hollow nothing" (Lispector, *Hour* 54). Experience thus defies narration. In the next paragraph, Rodrigo also reports that at times Macabéa experiences the touch of grace:

> Sometimes grace grabbed [Macabéa] in the middle of the office. So she'd go to the bathroom to be alone. Standing and smiling until it passed (it strikes me that this God was extremely merciful to her: He gave her what He took away). Standing thinking of nothing, eyes glazed over. (54)

What disappears at the level of her consciousness – the idea of God – reappears at the level of the *sensations* she has. For Macabéa, God is unrepresentable not because he is an unreachable Being beyond this world but precisely for the opposite reason: his overproximity in the world.

Considering Rodrigo's statement at the outset of the story: "God is the world," that is, God's immanence in the world, it is possible for us to argue that God remains hidden and withdrawn from Macabéa, precisely because he is so close and intimate to her. He reveals himself in Macabéa as the opaque core of her being, as her intimate Other. And yet, the same goes for God, for it is through His relation to the created beings that God "affects, modifies, and expresses" Himself (Agamben, *Use of Bodies* 165). In this sense, Spinoza's concept of *causa sui* or the immanent cause, expresses not the idea of God's self-sufficiency but that of a *relation* between God and the world, the creator and the created, or substance and its modes as Agamben explains:

> The immanent cause is therefore an action in which agent and patient coincide, which is to say, fall together […] Modal ontology can be understood only as a medial ontology, and Spinozan pantheism, if it is a question of pantheism, is not an inert identity (substance = mode) but a process in which God affects, modifies, and expresses Godself. (*Use of Bodies* 165)

In *The Hour of the Star*, Lispector makes Rodrigo a godlike figure regarding his fictional creature Macabéa. However, unlike God, Rodrigo *needs* Macabéa to reach a certain truth about himself. An accomplished writer, Rodrigo is fascinated with the idea of surpassing his limits, of reaching beyond himself, and so this time around he decides to write about reality, something he feels he has not done yet (Lispector, *Hour* 9). He can only comprehend himself by way of writing the story of Macabéa. Lispector highlights the inseparable bond between Rodrigo and Macabéa in the scene in which Rodrigo literally appears *as* Macabéa: "I see the northeastern girl looking in the mirror and – a ruffle of the drum – in the mirror appears my weary and unshaven face. We're that interchangeable" (14). Just as Macabéa and Rodrigo become interchangeable, Lispector, too, tries to transfigure herself into the object-thing that she creates – *The Hour of the Star* – and disappears into it. Lispector visually highlights this slippage into the text by signing her name *Clarice Lispector* in the middle of the thirteen titles of the book. It is important *not* to read her signature as some meta-truth, the name above all names she gives to the book. On the contrary, as Hélène Cixous points out, it should be noted that the signature "comes in the place of 'or.' As if the 'or' were the general equivalence of Clarice Lispector? She is the 'or' of her text, of her protagonist" (148). Far from holding the ultimate truth of the text, the name *Clarice Lispector* rather marks a threshold between the past and the future, what was lived and what will come.

time to shine: the halo's ennobling glow

In 1977, months prior to her death, Lispector gave her one and only TV interview. In the interview, she was asked if she thought what she wrote changes social reality, the way

things are in the world. "It changes nothing," Lispector repeated, and said that she writes without hope. In her words: "It changes nothing. I write without the hope that anything I write can change anything at all. It changes nothing" (qtd in Moser 293). It was not the first time that Lispector expressed her powerlessness as she once wrote to her sister, Tania Lispector:

> In Recife, where I lived until I was twelve, there was often a crowd on the streets, listening to someone speak ardently about the social tragedy. And I remember how I trembled and how I promised myself that this would one day be my task: to defend the rights of others. Yet what did I end up being, and so early? I ended up as a person who searches for what she deeply feels and uses the word to express it. It's little, it's very little. (Qtd in Moser 63)

Lispector was keenly aware that her writing does not save anybody and that reality does not budge. It stands as it is as Rodrigo says in *The Hour of the Star*: "facts are hard rocks. You can't escape" (62). Echoing Lispector's powerlessness, Rodrigo admits that he is even unable to save Macabéa from her inevitable fate, so she dies at the end. But if that is so, why then does Lispector choose to write?

As we mentioned earlier, according to Lispector, reality is comprised not just by facts, but a tiny space between them – what she calls, a "whispering." For Lispector, writing is an act of seizing upon this tiny space – a gesture that does not change reality in any substantial manner, but makes a "tiny displacement" possible (Agamben, *Coming Community* 53). In his article entitled "Halo," Agamben identifies this gesture as that of the messiah. In referring to a Jewish parable about the Kingdom of the Messiah, Agamben explains that in the messianic world to come, "[e]verything will be as it is now, just a little different" and yet "this small displacement is so difficult to achieve […] [that] it is necessary that the Messiah come" (53). What is crucial here is the aporia implied in the statement: if everything is already perfect and complete in the messianic world ("everything will be as it is now"), how is it that it could be "otherwise" or "a little different" at the same time? It is Lispector's aporia as well, for if reality stands as it is so her writing changes nothing, what is it that art adds to reality?

In *The Hour of the Star*, Lispector attempts to answer this question at the end of the novel, where Macabéa faces her impending death. As Stockwell observes, Lispector's narration suspends Macabéa's death for a brief period. In his words:

> The hour of the star has not yet arrived, and this "not yet" is key: it indicates a deferral, by which that which must come to be is put off, if only for the briefest of moments […] In a time that, for the briefest of moments, puts off an ending that is imminent. (Stockwell 259, 260)

Stockwell argues that this deferral introduces a messianic time that is filled with the hope that Macabéa will not die and indeed have a future. And yet, this messianic promise is soon betrayed as the narrator announces that Macabéa has in fact died. According to Stockwell, Lispector's narrative here presents a "kind of countermessianic time" which culminates in her death (260), as much as a messianic period that promises its indefinite deferral.

Although we agree with Stockwell that in the last pages of the novella Lispector opens the narrative space to a different mode of temporality, that of messianism, in our view, what is at stake in this messianic moment is not the narrator's promise for Macabéa's survival as Stockwell claims. Instead, we want to foreground Macabéa's *own* gesture, namely, the way she embraces her impending death and the imperceptible transfiguration she goes through:

> Macabéa on the ground seemed to become more and more a Macabéa, as if reaching herself […] That reluctance to give in, but that longing for the great embrace. She embraced herself longing for the sweet nothing […] She clung to a thread of consciousness and mentally repeated over and over: I am, I am, I am. (Lispector, *Hour* 72, 74)

In facing her death, Macabéa for the first time emerges from her obscurity and becomes a subject – an instant she explodes into "I." Soon after Macabéa announces her last words as Rodrigo reports: "She said clearly and distinctly: – As for the future" (75). How should we read Macabéa's announcement here? Does it express her longing for a future that would never arrive for her? Quite the contrary: it indicates the seizing upon and fulfillment of the future as it is literally born out of Macabéa's body as "something luminous." As Rodrigo says: "At this very moment Macabéa feels a deep nausea in her stomach and almost vomited, she wanted to vomit something that wasn't her body, to vomit something luminous. A thousand-pointed star" (75). The luminous light surrounds Macabéa's dead body like a profane halo.

In portraying the mundane lives of her maid and Macabéa, it is not like Lispector tries to embellish or sublimate their otherwise miserable existence, imbuing it with new meaning. Lispector pays attention to her maid and Macabéa because they seem to be absorbed in their meditative state which renders them untouchable. Their falling into this contemplative state suspends or deactivates their social positioning: what appears instead is a life that contemplates itself, thereby being affected by its own contemplation without knowledge. It is life as pure potentiality which IS in spite of actions or functions. Lispector's writing about these figures does not change their social status or add any new value to their existence; on the contrary, what she intends to do is rather to expose the "brilliance" of their being as pure potentiality without function. For this life that affects itself already contains something like beatitude, as Lispector writes: "[t]he greatness of everyone" (*Hour* 76). The way Lispector ennobles or dignifies her characters seems to have much in common with the logic of the halo, as theorized by Saint Thomas Aquinas and elucidated by Agamben in *The Coming Community*:

> The theory developed by Saint Thomas in his short treatise on halos is instructive in this regard. The beatitude of the chosen, he argues, includes all the goods that are necessary for the perfect workings of human nature, and therefore nothing essential can be added. There is, however, something that can be added in surplus, an "accidental reward that is added to the essential," that is not necessary for beatitude and does not alter it substantially, but that simply makes it more brilliant. (53)

To conclude, we might note that the last word of the book, "Yes," is an affirmation of life which takes us back to the opening sentence, "All the world began with a yes." Written close to her death, the novella sees Lispector meditate on what it all amounts to. Early in the book, Rodrigo notes, looking back on the accomplishments of his long career as a writer, that in the end, someone else could have written the books he has composed. Was his life worth it then? Is, in fact, any life worth it, and especially that of someone as anonymous and forgettable as Macabéa? Yes. Lispector answers in the affirmative because, at the "hour of the star," when her protagonist is about to die and thereby gains something like the aura and the contours of a movie star personality, the glow that surrounds her singles her out as one of life's radiant particulars. In other words, life itself is what Lispector celebrates at the end of this novella – the brute facts of life but also the fact that things could always have turned out otherwise (maybe Macabéa didn't have to die and maybe Lispector herself was not going to die after all, despite being gravely ill). Macabéa's death is deeply tragic and moving because this is a character that had not ever truly lived. It is important for Rodrigo to capture reality's cruelty in this regard, the fact that a life can be extinguished precisely when it was about to begin (we are told that Macabéa was "pregnant with the future"). And yet, that is the way things go – "life eats life" and nothing can be done about it. Still, according to Lispector, art adds a surplus layer to life's stubborn facts – a profane halo. Although it does not change reality, art allows figures like Macabéa to

shine, it puts them in the spotlight and impresses upon us the ineradicable dignity of their being.

disclosure statement

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notes

1 As Hélène Cixous argues in her reading of *The Hour of the Star*:

> The *tour de force* of the book is that it is small. One could have said that to bring alive someone like Macabéa, who is but a grain of dust, an atom, so much work is needed that one could expect an enormous book. Instead, not only did Clarice succeed in bringing something tiny into life at the price of a colossal amount of work, but she also succeeded in giving it the form of something small. (159)

2 As Agamben writes,

> [A life that cannot be separated from its form] defines a life – human life – in which singular modes, acts, and processes of living are never simply *facts* but always and above all *possibilities* of life, always and above all potential. (*Use of Bodies* 207)

3 According to Moser, Lispector had a great familiarity with Spinoza's work from her youth. For the influence of Spinoza's philosophy on Lispector's writings, see Moser, ch. 12.

4 Lispector highlights the auto-affective nature of her writing when she says that she writes first and foremost for herself: "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" (qtd in Moser 136).

5 In reading Lispector's writing in light of Gilles Deleuze's philosophy, Fernanda Negrete argues that Lispector's writing tries to capture "impersonal life" beyond the limits of identity and representation. For more discussion about this topic, see Negrete's "Approaching Impersonal Life with Clarice Lispector."

6 In Peixoto's words:

> In *Near to the Wild Heart*, in *Family Ties*, and elsewhere, she 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. Usually, but not always, the victims are female; sometimes the line between victim and victimizer blurs, or, in a sudden reversal, the two exchange places. (82)

7 Our reading here is inspired by Agamben's commentary on an episode in which Franz Kafka meets a girl at a hotel. During their fleeting encounter, the girl did "in perfect innocence" "something slightly disgusting." It is this small gesture that makes the girl unforgettable because it brings to light not "her abjection" but her "particular mode of being abject" (Agamben, *Use of Bodies* 232).

8 As Agamben explains: "In Spinoza, the idea of beatitude coincides with the experience of the self as an immanent cause […] *Beatitudo* is the movement of absolute Immanence" (*Potentialities* 237, 238).

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