



THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
Department of French, Hispanic & Italian Studies

RMST 202

Romance Studies,
Modernism to the Present

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The Hour of the Star:
Clarice Lispector's
Struggle with
Writing and Ethics

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The Hour of the Star: Clarice Lispector's Struggle with Writing and Ethics

with Jon Beasley-Murray

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**“It’s not easy to write. It’s as hard
as breaking rocks.” (10)**

“I intend [. . .] to write in an
ever simpler way.” (6)

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ever simpler way.” (6)

“I only achieve simplicity with
enormous effort.” (3)

“I’ll try contrary to my normal habits to write a story with a beginning, middle and ‘grand finale’ followed by silence and falling rain.” (5)

“How do you start at the beginning, if things happen before they happen?” (3)

“How do you start at the beginning, if things happen before they happen?” (3)

“All the world began with a yes.
One molecule said yes to another
molecule and life was born.” (3)

But how then to get from here to the story he wants to tell? Everything has already happened, and yet nothing much has happened at all. What, if anything, will happen next?

“Oh I’m so afraid to start and don’t even
know the girl’s name.” (10)

“I wonder if I should jump ahead and sketch out an ending right away. But it so happens that I myself have no idea how this thing will turn out.” (8)

“What I’m about to write is already somehow written in me. [. . .] The fact is I hold a destiny in my hands, yet don’t feel powerful enough to invent freely: I follow a hidden, fatal line.” (12)

At last, almost halfway through the novel,
she finally has a name: “Macabéa” (35).

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By this point, the tale (“the story of the story” [34]), in all its simplicity, can perhaps be told.

“He didn’t call himself a ‘worker’
but a ‘metallurgist.’” (36)

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but a ‘metallurgist.’” (36)

“One day I’ll be very rich. [. . .] I’m very
intelligent, I’ll end up a congressman.” (37)

“He immediately realized that she had class. [. . .] Though she was white, she had the strength of mixed race. [. . .] Even bleached she was still a blonde, which made her a step up for Olímpico. [. . .] The fact that she was a carioca made her belong to the longed-for clan of the South. [. . .] Though ugly, Glória was well fed. And that made her quality goods.” (50)

“Sadness was also something for rich people, for people who could afford it, for people who didn’t have anything better to do. Sadness was a luxury.” (52-53)

She is almost without affect, not least because her social circle is now still more reduced, so that it is as though she is not even there, hardly leaving an imprint.

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“For other people she didn’t exist.” (54)

“Instead of lipstick it looked like thick blood
had spurted from her lips.” (53)

“Instead of lipstick it looked like thick blood had spurted from her lips.” (53)

“For her there was no place in the world.” (57)

“Yes, I’m in love with Macabéa, my dear Maca, in love with her ugliness and total anonymity since she belongs to no one.” (59)

“I’m going to do everything I can
to keep her from dying.” (71)

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to keep her from dying.” (71)

“She was finally free
of herself and us.” (76)

“At the hour of death a person becomes a shining movie star, it’s everyone’s moment of glory.” (20)

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Has Macabéa had her hour as a star?
Would anyone even notice if she had?

Lispector's novel is about doing justice to such a life, a life so marginal and mundane that there is hardly any story to tell, but which may still somehow have its moment of glory.

It is therefore about an ethics of writing, about how writing can be true to life, to “a life,” without necessarily laying claim to the truth of that life. It is about the hesitations, affirmations, and disruptive explosions that mark any text as it tries to describe and negotiate the world.

And it is also about how we in that world construct our own narratives or sense of ourselves—our own selves—from the material available to us, from what is at hand, from what we consume more than from what we produce. Yet such consumption can also be our downfall, our self-erasure as much as our self-making.



A HESITANT ETHICS

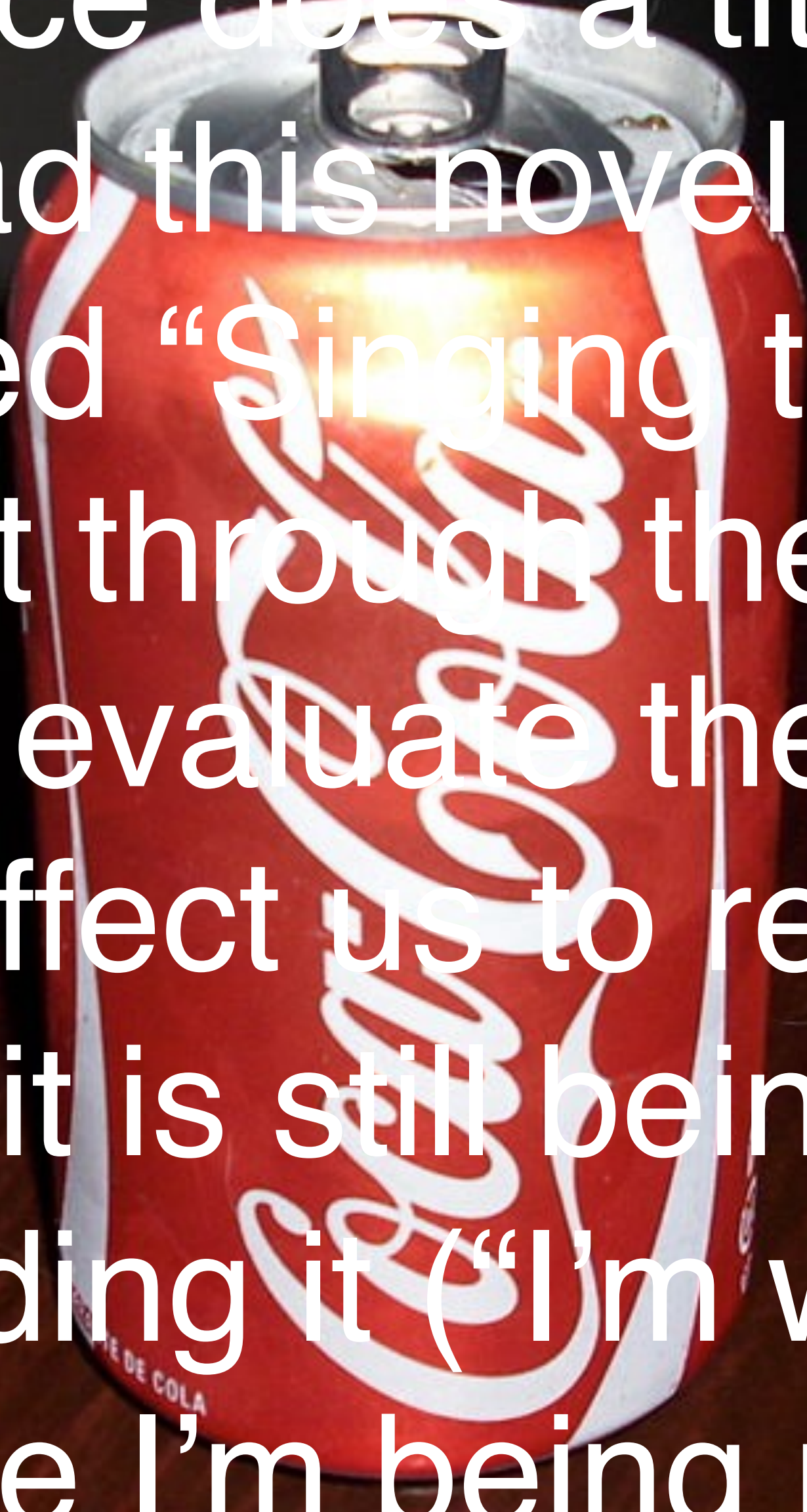
“Don’t forget that for now
it’s strawberry season.
Yes.” (77)

“What trips up my life is writing.” (xiv)

It is as though it were up to the reader to be the final judge as to what the book should really be called, or as to whether the narrator (or author) has made the right decisions.

“Each title could function as a key
to the text.” (Hélène Cixous)

What difference does a title make? How might we read this novel differently if it were entitled “Singing the Blues” or “Discreet Exit through the Back Door”? How do we evaluate these choices? How does it affect us to read a book that declares that it is still being written while we are reading it (“I’m writing at the same time I’m being read” [4])?



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The book's "star" is here displaced, to stress instead the perspective of the bystander, the person on the side of the road, and of course the narrator himself who so frequently examines—but also washes his hands of—his own responsibilities and duties towards the character he is conjuring up for us.

Throughout the book, the overly voluble narrator turns to us to explain and justify himself where he can, and to throw himself on our mercy where he cannot or will not.

Throughout the book, the overly voluble narrator turns to us to explain and justify himself where he can, and to throw himself on our mercy where he cannot or will not.

“Is Macabéa by any chance going to die?
How should I know?” (72)

And when something does happen, his response—like Macabéa's own resigned view of the world—is that this is just the way things are. It is fate, that is all part of life's game of chance.

“Who am I to rebuke the guilty? The worst part is that I have to forgive them. We must reach such a nothing that we indifferently love or don't love the criminal who kills us.” (72)

It is perhaps only Macabéa herself who ever arrives at this point of bliss, such that she can forgive both the driver who kills her and the narrator who (for all his denials) has her killed.

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This is a book about poverty, about “nonhaving,” about having nothing.

“*The Hour of the Star* is [. . .] an unsettling yet beautiful reflection on the challenges of writing on poverty and the impoverished Other.” (Cinthya Torres)

“For Lispector the challenge, as well as source of frustration, seems to be in composing an accurate and ethical portrayal of a subject and sphere unknown to most individuals and to which she cannot fully relate.” (Cinthya Torres)

Hence the role of the narrator, as both a stand-in for and distancing from Lispector, a way of acknowledging that “author” and “narrator” are simply roles that we play, but which we can still learn to play better.

However self-aware the narrator may be about his role as a writer, what he can never fully grasp is that he, too, is but another character.

“Or am I not a writer? Actually I’m more of an actor because with only one way to punctuate, I juggle with intonation and force another’s breathing to accompany my text.” (14)

Lispector, too, can do no more than juggle with the limits imposed upon her by grammar and writing, which can only ever approximate truth, though they can perhaps be true to themselves, as at best a play with words.

“I’m putting off the story and playing ball
without a ball.” (8)

“It’s an unfinished book because it’s
still waiting for an answer. An answer
I hope someone in the world can give me.
You?” (xiv)

How will we respond to, relate to, account for a life such as Macabéa's? What title will we choose for that endeavor to live with the other, to share their world? And to what extent can we accept that we, too, are playing out roles first written for us by others?



AN INTERRUPTED CONSUMPTION

Lispector presents us with her signature, as though it were the proof of some legal claim to the text, a trace that confirms both her individuality as well as a contract made with the reader. And yet this signature is but a mass-produced image, identical on every copy of the book sold.

“It is in this way that [Lispector] begins a fictional play within her fiction, which gives her book a theatrical touch of performativity in that it exposes the framework of creation and its correlative process.” (Marília Librandi Rocha)

Language and the market together work to erase individuality; and yet they are also the tools with which we endlessly try to distinguish ourselves, to make ourselves heard.

Macabéa, in turn, is a creature and victim of these same forces, neither more nor less so than Rodrigo S. M. or Clarice Lispector, though her existence is rather more precarious than that of either the narrator or the author.

“She spent the rest of her day obediently playing the role of being.” (27)

“She liked to read by candlelight the ads she cut out of old newspapers lying around the office. Because she collected ads. She pasted them into an album.” (30)

“Macabéa's cultural consumption consists almost entirely of commercial propaganda. Her inner life is a series of commercials that offer her everything she cannot have and that are the promise of everything she cannot be.” (Thomas Waldemer)

“My poor little orphan, you’ll wear satin
and velvet and even get a fur coat!

[. . .]

—But you don’t need a fur coat in
the heat of Rio. . .

—Then you’ll have it just to dress up.” (68)

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[. . .]

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“My poor little orphan, you’ll wear satin
and velvet and even get a fur coat!

[. . .]

—But you don’t need a fur coat in
the heat of Rio. . .

—Then you’ll have it just to dress up.” (68)

At last she will be able to play a new part,
a new role involving something more
than simply “being,” even if the script
is written elsewhere.

“It is as if Macabéa has wandered into a commercial where she does not belong. Her mere presence is indigestible because it interrupts the illusion of consumerist perfection.” (Thomas Waldemer)

No wonder it is hard to write when the force of such interruptions threatens to blow holes in the fragile web of language.

“Then—lying there—she had a moist and supreme happiness, since she had been born for the embrace of death.” (74)

“Then — lying there — she had a moist and supreme happiness, since she had been born for the embrace of death.” (74)

“Then Macabéa said a phrase that none of the passersby understood. She said clearly and distinctly:
— As for the future.” (75)

“Between his life and his death, there is a moment that is only that of *a* life playing with death. The life of the individual gives way to an impersonal and yet singular life that releases a pure event freed from the accidents of internal and external life, that is, from the subjectivity and objectivity of what happens.” (Gilles Deleuze)

Consumption (and narrative, subjectivity,
things happening one after another)
goes on as ever, but it has been briefly
interrupted, for those with eyes to see
or ears to hear.



MUSIC

Pianochocolate,
“Romance”



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