
Claire Williams

Clarice Lispector died on 9th December, 1977, 30 years ago. Since Clarice Lispector published *Closer to the Wild Heart*, the literary critics have devoted their time studying her masterpieces according to different focuses.

Revista da Anpoll is now part of this fortune written about Clarice Lispector for the sake of an interview with Claire Williams, a Portuguese language and culture professor at Liverpool University, in the United Kingdom.

Claire Williams's doctoral thesis on Clarice Lispector, entitled *The Encounter Between Opposites in the Works of Clarice Lispector*, was published in 2006 (Bristol: Hipla). This year Williams prefaced a selection of articles about Clarice in Brazil – *Clarice Lispector: entrevistas* (Rio de Janeiro: Rocco). In this interview, she tells about her research on Clarice's masterpieces and on the interest for them in Great Britain.

WHEN AND HOW DID YOU DISCOVER CLARICE LISPECTOR'S LITERATURE?

I first read about Clarice Lispector in 1993, whilst in my final year of studies at the University of Durham, in the North East of England. I took a course in Contemporary French Women's Writing that included works by the feminist theorist Hélène Cixous, whose concept of *écriture féminine* I found very exciting at the time. I was intrigued by the notion of essentially female writing and eager to read fiction by the Brazilian writer with the mysterious name. I was studying Portuguese, but I must confess that I first read Clarice in English translation – *The Hour of the Star*. The book combined so many aspects that fascinated me then, and still do: metafiction; the relationships between author, character and reader; the question of writing about something totally alien to oneself (a middle-class intellectual writing about poverty, a man writing about a woman); the relationships between men and women; the inventive use of language and unexpected metaphors; the anti-heroine Macabea... It is my favourite book by Clarice, one that I teach every year and one in which I always discover something new.

WHAT WERE YOUR FIRST STUDIES/ RESEARCH PROJECTS ON HER LITERATURE? PLEASE TELL US ABOUT THEM.

I started a doctoral thesis on Clarice in 1994, certain that I wanted to write about her works, but still unsure exactly how I would approach them. I read everything I could find that was written by her, and everything I could find that had been written about her. I soon accumulated a huge archive of material in different languages and from different sources around the world. I visited Rio de Janeiro to see the places that she mentioned in her books (Jardim Botânico, Praça Mauá, Leme, Copacabana, Maracanã) and to gain access to the archives in the Casa de Rui Barbosa. I was thrilled to read letters written

or typed by Clarice, to see manuscripts and cuttings and to touch her identity cards and personal documents, even though it felt a little voyeuristic. I was very moved when I went to the Biblioteca Nacional and the lady who looked after the special collections showed me a lock of Clarice's hair – it was almost the same colour as mine!

When I got back to the UK, I decided to analyse the way her texts were constructed around an epiphany triggered by a chance encounter between opposites: self and other, man and woman, mother and child, human and animal/vegetable/mineral. The thesis was published in 2006 and is called *The Encounter Between Opposites in the Works of Clarice Lispector* (Bristol: Hipla). Then I developed some ideas from sections of the thesis and published articles on: the stories 'A Menor Mulher do Mundo' and 'O Ovo e a Galinha'; the names Clarice chose for her characters; an intertextual comparison of *A Hora da Estrela* and *Alice in Wonderland*; a reading of *A Paixão Segundo G.H.* I try to keep aware of what is being published about Clarice in Brazil and elsewhere and occasionally review critical studies of her work.

I decided to study the interviews she did for *Revista Manchete* and *Fatos e Fotos: Gente* partly because nobody had examined them carefully and partly because I found the ones already published in *De Corpo Inteiro* so interesting. They quite clearly showed as much of Clarice as they did of the people she was interviewing. At the Casa de Rui Barbosa there were newspaper cuttings of a large number of Clarice's interviews, many more than had been collected in *De Corpo Inteiro* and some of them with Brazilian icons like Elis Regina and Zagalho. Many of them lacked a date nor indicated where they had been published. I managed to obtain a grant from the British Academy in the UK to travel to Rio de Janeiro and study the magazines in the Biblioteca Nacional, eventually taking microfilm copies so that I could transcribe the interviews for possible publication. I found even more interviews. The staff at both the Biblioteca Nacional and the Casa de Rui Barbosa were very helpful, despite technical problems and strikes. I contacted Rocco with the material, via Clarice's son Paulo Gurgel Valente and my friend (Clarice's biographer) Teresa Cristina Montero, and they thought that it was worth re-publishing the interviews with the most famous people. There are still some forty interviews from *Manchete* and *Fatos e Fotos* that have not been republished, but they were with writers, celebrities and politicians (or their wives) who are no longer as well-known as they were in the 1970s.

Recently I have been looking at travel as a theme and a metaphor in Clarice's life and works. She was very well-travelled for a woman of her time and she wrote vividly about her impressions in letters to her friends and family. In her fiction the journeys tend to be symbolic, or figurative, such as G.H.'s

short walk across her apartment to the maid's room, but they still imply a strong impact on the character due to the change in environment.

HOW INTERESTING IS CLARICE LISPECTOR'S JOURNALISTIC WRITING FOR THE GENERAL READER?

Clarice was one of the first women journalists in Brazil and she worked for a number of newspapers and wrote a variety of kinds of articles. She needed to earn her living so many of her journalistic assignments were done out of duty rather than choice. In the early 1940s she was a reporter for the Agência Nacional, publishing articles and reports in *Vamos Ler* and *A Noite*. Later, in the 1950s and 60s she contributed items for the Women's Sections of *Correio da Manhã*, *Diário da Noite* and *Comício* (this area of Clarice's writing is well documented and analysed by Aparecida Maria Nunes in *Clarice Lispector jornalista: páginas femininas & outras páginas* [SP: Senac, 2006] and examples can be seen in Nunes's compilation *Correio Feminino* [RJ: Rocco, 2006]). In terms of interest for the general reader, the early reports and interviews are necessarily objective and factual. The Women's Sections texts show the fashions and conventions of the day for middle-class society housewives whose lives revolved around husband, children and home. I think that writing those sections affected her writing in two ways. Firstly, she began to address the readers personally. She was writing for a particular audience and I think the intimate tone she uses later developed into the one she used when writing crônicas. Secondly, I think that while she was compiling those pages she reflected on her readers and their domestic lives and roles, and society's expectations, and was inspired to create the female characters who would appear in her fiction, particularly those who feature in the stories of *Laços de Família* and *A Legião Estrangeira*.

She published her first short stories in magazines and wrote her famous crônicas for the *Jornal do Brasil* in the late 1960s and early 1970s, which made her popular with a whole new audience. And, she interviewed famous people for *Manchete* and *Fatos e Fotos*.

Overall, I would say, Clarice's journalistic writing is interesting in terms of the evolution of her fiction and its themes. The crônicas are wonderful short texts that are as poetic and philosophical as her longer writing. The choice of interviewees shows who was famous and important in the 1960s and 70s. The topics they discuss with Clarice reflect contemporary concerns and ideas; therefore they provide a historical snapshot of Brazilian culture at the time. Sometimes she was enthusiastic about interviewing a particular person and the conversation becomes a rich exchange of opinions and experiences. Most importantly, her personality shines through. At other times she makes

minimum input and effort, and is clearly bored – she seems almost to disappear.

So, her journalistic writing is uneven – there are moments of genius and lyricism when she assumes control of the text; but also pieces where she is doing her job and no more, where she hides behind the mask of the reporter or interviewer.

DO ENGLISH READERS KNOW ABOUT LISPECTOR'S MASTERPIECES?

Unfortunately, the average British reader has never heard of Clarice Lispector. Those who study Portuguese at University will undoubtedly encounter her work; usually *A Hora da Estrela* or *Laços de Família*. And she is also read by students of Women's Studies courses when they work on feminist theory, Cixous in particular. The problem is not to do with language; in fact the most easily available translations into English are by the late British professor Giovanni Pontiero, who met Clarice in the 1970s. The British are rather suspicious of 'foreign' literature, although things are changing.

In July 2005, I was very pleased to hear that BBC radio was reporting from the FLIP literary festival in Parati where Clarice was the featured author. In the end, the programme focused on Machado de Assis and promising new Brazilian writers, but not on Clarice. However, I attended the festival, which was wonderful and while waiting for the British writer Jeanette Winterson to autograph one of her books for me I asked her if she had heard of Clarice. To my delight she had not only heard of her but read her and loved her work. Furthermore she mentioned other writers, friends of hers, who claimed that Clarice was their favourite writer. So, Clarice does have English readers. Not many, but they are very devoted.

30 YEARS WITHOUT CLARICE. IS THAT TOO LONG? HAS LITERATURE CHANGED?

Of course, it is absolutely tragic that 30 years ago Clarice passed away and the source of her writing stopped. If she were alive today, I'm sure she would still be creating the most amazing texts. I sometimes wonder what she would have written next. Nevertheless, she did leave us some very densely poetic works that continue to inspire her faithful readers and attract new ones too. Literature is closely affected by the publishing market, which has changed a lot over the last thirty years. The internet has changed the way people gain access to writing and there are hundreds of webpages quoting Clarice. Preconceived ideas about women's writing have changed, and trends and fashions come and go. But the human feelings, dilemmas, passions and fears that Clarice wrote about are still very real.