

A Few Notes on Clarice the Artist

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Translated from the Portuguese by Ana Fletcher

Excerpt from A Breath of Life translated from the Portuguese by Idra Novey

Excerpts from Água Viva translated from the Portuguese by Stefan Tobler

Despite the extensive and growing body of critical work on Clarice Lispector and despite the familiarity with the writer's life that, in recent years, has come from the successive editions of biographies, there are still today readers who express astonishment when one speaks of Clarice the artist.

We can ask ourselves what place Clarice reserved for these paintings. It is reductive to state that the paintings constitute nothing more than a noncommittal act, a mere exercise in relaxation, a purely liberating gesture (as the writer herself described them). Of course this was so, but there are surely other implications to bear in mind. It will not have been by chance that Clarice made those assertions in public in her famous lecture about avant-garde literature; in the version the author read in a number of Brazilian cities in 1974 (a paper she first presented in 1963), she writes:

My writing, not being in any way a form of catharsis that does me good, does not serve me as a means of liberation. Perhaps from now on I won't write, and will only go deeper into myself and life. Or perhaps that deepening into life will take me to writing again. I don't know. What "relaxes" me, as incredible as it may seem, is painting, and not being an artist of any sort, and without learning any techniques. I paint so badly that it gives me pleasure, and I don't show my so-called "paintings" to anybody. It's relaxing and at the same time stimulating to play with colors and shapes, without a commitment to anything at all. It is the purest thing I do.

She produced her most significant group of paintings in 1975, which can be confirmed by reading the dates on her canvases, where such specifications occur. Of the seventeen paintings deposited in the Literature Archive Museum of Fundação Rui Barbosa and Instituto Moreira Salles in Rio de

Janeiro, fifteen include a reference to that year, and two are undated. In the Clarice Lispector collection belonging to the Instituto Moreira Salles, also in Rio de Janeiro, two further paintings dating back to the 1960s can be seen.

In Clarice's novel *A Breath of Life*, edited and published posthumously, the character Angela Pralini talks about her paintings:

I am so upset that I never perfected what I invented in painting. Or at least I've never heard of this way of painting: it consists of taking a wooden canvas—Scotch pine is best—and paying attention to its veins. Suddenly, then a wave of creativity comes out of the subconscious and you go along with the veins following them a bit—but maintaining your liberty. I once did a painting that turned out like this: a robust horse with a long and extensive blond mane amidst the stalactites of a grotto. It's a generic way of painting. And, moreover, you don't need to know how to paint: anybody, as long as you're not too inhibited, can follow this technique of freedom. And all mortals have a subconscious.

The character speaks for the author: the same method, the same paintings. The attempts to paint on the wooden boards, following the veins that appear there, reveal the respect for the material being used. In another sense, the paintings bring to the fore a theory of Clarice's style: the drawings of the nervures are like the language one writes in, and the horse made out by Angela is the other language, the writing itself. The animal breaks free from the reins and with it, contained in these folds, is the intention of bringing to the surface that which cannot be said. That which is figured (the horse) is the very elevation of the figural, and, at the same time, the impossibility of the figurative. We should also take into account the centrality of the horse in the Claricean universe; it is a figure that presupposes an essential identification with the very drive of her writing.

In the roundedness, or in the lines that freely follow the veins in the wooden boards, in the meeting that is instinctively presupposed, there is a representation of the least-representable experience: the "beyond thought," a concept-expression that was one of the potential titles for the 1973 book *Água Viva*, in which she writes, "I deal in raw materials. I'm after whatever is lurking beyond thought." And: "Beyond thought there

are no words: it is itself. My painting has no words: it is beyond thought. In this land of the is-itself I am pure crystalline ecstasy. It is itself. I am myself. You are yourself."

Two movements impose themselves on Clarice's paintings: escape and concentration. One can go so far as to talk of two dominant forces: the centralizing force and the lines in disorder. *Explosão* (*Explosion*) or *Pássaro da liberdade* (*Bird of Freedom*) point us in the direction of openness, of that which expands. It is also worth noting that the paintings in which centralizing dominates (as happens in *Medo* (*Fear*)) always contain the potential for escape.

In Clarice's paintings, the extreme contrasts and the tensions that result from those contrasts are always present. The strong colors and deliberately quick brushstrokes, over backgrounds in various stages of completion, make this battle explicit, as in *Luta sangrenta pela paz* (*Bloody Fight for Peace*). The titles also signal the contradictory states, like rage and tranquility, as well as the tension that these states provoke, seen in *Tentativa de ser alegre* (*Attempt to be Happy*). The opposite images in these paintings can also be interpreted as a mirror of the author's own writing, replete with contrasts. A confrontation is expressed paradigmatically in the shock that represents the eruption of violence within the closed limits of creation.