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Experience moves beyond the self and beyond linear time

The philosophy of Clarice Lispector



30th April 2025

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1,355 words

Read time: approx. 7 mins



The creation of the self brings with it the creation of linear time; the self lives towards death. And by imagining her own death, writer Clarice Lispector, escapes the self and the pull of time. Michael Marder argues that Lispector is calling for us to open ourselves to the world and embrace an existentialism that extends beyond the human.

Until 2009, the name of Clarice Lispector was virtually unknown in the English-speaking world, except for a few connoisseurs of Brazilian literature. That year, the publication of Benjamin Moser's biographical study of Lispector, titled *Why This World*, became a watermark moment if not in her posthumous popularity, then in a wider recognizability. I will not revisit the cliché designations of the author as "the Brazilian Kafka" (I find it highly suspicious when critics transpose the name of an iconic European writer onto writers outside of Europe, even though, in this case, Lispector was born in Ukraine, in a Jewish family that immigrated to Brazil when she was still an infant). What I would like to touch upon, if only very briefly, is the dimension of her literary work, which may be called posthuman before posthumanism (*pre-post* is a designation she would have had a hearty laugh about) and which amounts to a non-human existentialism.

Lispector's perspective is not only posthuman, but also posthumous with respect to herself, as she makes clear in numerous interviews.

Posthumanism – a way of challenging traditional human-centred views by emphasizing the interconnectedness of humans with non-human entities and complex systems – emerged in philosophy, as well as literary and cultural criticism, in the late twentieth century, though its roots are traceable back to the nineteenth century. Lispector's perspective is not only posthuman, but also posthumous with respect to herself, as she makes clear in numerous interviews. The invisible bonds tying together *posthumous* and *posthuman* deserve more attention than they usually receive, not least because both revolve around *humus*, the earth, which defines the human in a decidedly non-humanist way, repressed in trendy approaches to posthumanism, and which receives the corpse. The *death of the author*, theorized by Roland Barthes, is very literal for her: she is speaking and writing as though having already died, and, indeed, without the pretense of the *as though*: "I have died and I am speaking from my grave," she says in an interview a little less than a year before her death in 1977. More than a premonition of her impending demise, this is how Lispector frees herself from a fixed chronology, from her life, her time, and her world, that is to say, from the possessive form (a *herness*), harnessing existence to a very particular (appropriative) relation to actuality.



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For Lispector, true existence begins when I stop trying to appropriate the world and instead surrender to its strange, unpredictable reality.

In *The Passion According to G.H.*, Lispector's most famous novel, she puts it simply: "the world was neither me nor mine [*o mundo não era nem eu nem meu*]." Rather than depriving herself of the world, she opens herself up to its unfamiliarity, to its uncanniness, to the fact that she does not feel at home in the world – nor in herself. The end signaled by the death of *me* and of *mine* is the beginning of an infinite journey, as inner as it is outer: "I was leaving *my* world and going into *the* world." For Lispector, true existence begins when I stop trying to appropriate the world and instead surrender to its strange, unpredictable reality.



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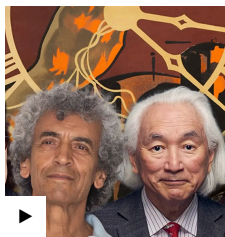
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Leaving and going is the undergoing, "the passion" in the title of the novel, and, therefore, an experience, always in the gerundive as an experiencing, or, better, an ex-periencing, a going outside and beyond the limits of that which I deem to be mine. Lest we think that this is an exceptional experience of someone living her death, the same title gives an important clue as to who might be experiencing all this. It could well be that "G.H." stands for an abbreviation, in Portuguese, of *Gênero Humano*, or "humankind." Which would mean that the double movement of leaving and going shorn of a fixed destination and point of departure, the positive dispossession of *my* world, the suspension of fixed chronologies of life and death are at the non-human heart of being human, *Near to a Wild Heart* – to recall another novel of Lispector, her first, where, for example, the protagonist Joana senses the body of a horse as the continuation of her body, then is described a bird, a wildcat, a dog, a snake...

Becoming an animal, a plant, or an altogether inanimate entity sounds like an eccentric proposition provided that we think and act with the invisible boxes that match [systems of scientific and metaphysical classification](#) in our heads. If, conversely, the human is already *humus*, or the earth; if this life is already an afterlife and death is an afterdeath; if experiencing is becoming other; if existence is setting aside the "mineness" of my world and of myself – then the entire panorama of metamorphoses, of *mélanges* and passages, comings and goings glistens with another sense.

Lispector's gesture, letting go of an appropriative relation to the world, to life, and to herself, allows her to get in touch with "the fruit of the world," as described in *An Apprenticeship, or the Book of Pleasures*. There she writes:

It was in this dream-glimmer state that she dreamt seeing that the fruit of the world was hers. Or if it wasn't, that she'd just touched it. It was an enormous, scarlet, and heavy fruit that was hanging in the dark space, shining with an almost golden light. And that right in the air itself she was placing her mouth on the fruit and managing to bite it, leaving it nevertheless whole [...]. The fruit was whole, yes, though in her mouth she felt as a living thing the food of the land. It was holy land because it was the only one on which a human could say while loving: I am yours and you are mine, and we is one.

Touching and biting into the fruit of the world, Lispector is getting in touch with something really ancient, but all the more vital today: the antiquity that looks at her and at us from the future. In mystical Judaism, and, particularly, in the medieval [Book of Zohar](#) [*Radiance*], the interpretation of the original sin by Adam and Eve is extra-moral – very much in the spirit of Lispector, to put it anachronistically. Their transgression has less to do with disobeying a divine order not to eat the fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil and more with *how* they should have eaten: not in separation, but as a whole, not apart from the tree of life but as its integral part. A knowledge that indulges in immoderate analyses, biting into the world, chewing and digesting it – the knowledge that breaks existence down into distinct categories, into objects, or, more minutely still, into [elementary particles](#) – is one that loses the horizons of the good and of life that nourish it.

In “this dream-glimmer state” of *An Apprenticeship*, the act of eating the fruit of the world no longer separates it from life, nor does it draw a wedge between living and knowing – “...and managing to bite it, leaving it nevertheless whole... .” Lispector’s is the knowledge of life that, in a non-doctrinal manner, grapples with the original sin that has humanized Adam and Eve and all of us in their wake. Or, more precisely, hers is the knowing of living and of dying, or of living-dying, that does not thematize living but emanates from it, from all the infinitely varied forms and kinds of living that, as soon as they are appropriated, assimilated, digested by a mind that knows everything in and through separation, are as good as dead. And it is, hence, the knowing that is indistinguishable from being, from experiencing and embodying, posthumously and posthumanly, the pulsations, rhythms, times of life beyond the fictitious façade of the earth that has forgotten its earthiness in the human.

Michael Marder
30th April 2025

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