

Namorato, Luciana and César Ferreira, eds. *The Word According to Clarice Lispector – Critical Approaches*. Lima: Centro de Estudios Literarios Antonio Cornejo Polar / Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos, 2011. Print. 228pp.

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In 1981 Italo Calvino presented a series of propositions to define a *classic* in his own terms. In “Why read the Classics?” Calvino wanted more than recommend that people read the classics and that is what makes his essay more interesting than most (*Why Read the Classics?* New York: Vintage, 2001. 3-10). Beyond the acceptance of authoritative expressions of appreciation by academic gatekeepers, Calvino imagined the classics as those that continue live long after the death of their authors by being read and reread through generations and his essay described the capacity to attract readers from different times and places rather than explained why certain works possessed such capacity whereas others did not. One of Calvino’s propositions is of particular interest to this review and to critical discourse in general: the idea that a classic is that which “constantly generates a pulviscular cloud of critical discourse around it, but which always shakes the particles off” (6).

A volume such as *The Word According to Lispector – Critical Approaches* is a testimony to the condition of Clarice Lispector as a potential Latin American classic in Calvino’s terms – if one bears in mind that the reach of a text beyond its national and/or linguistic boundaries depends on more than simple serendipity or on its inherent qualities. True to Calvino’s proposition, Lispector’s works retain an extraordinary ability to transform themselves, enticing critics such as the ones involved in Luciana Namorato and César Ferreira’s project to explore new facets of this extraordinary oeuvre. Namorato and Ferreira managed well the challenge of capturing in a fairly small book (228 pages) the increasing depth and breadth of the cloud of critical discourse generated by Lispector’s instigating and multifaceted oeuvre. Furthermore, this book is a useful tool for those interested in making the works of Clarice Lispector better known in the English and Spanish speaking worlds.

The Word According to Lispector – Critical Approaches features a varied array of readings that manage to cover major works from all the many genres Lispector practiced in her career from the

early 1940s until her death in the late 1970s. The volume is divided into four sections: a short one called “Homages” and three other sections devoted respectively to the novels, the short stories and “Chronicles and Journalism.” Three crucial novels (*The Passion according to G.H.*, *The stream of Life*, and *The Hour of the Star*) get individual, detailed analyses besides brief commentary in several other articles. Similar concentrated attention is given to a few remarkable individual short stories (“Love,” “The Imitation of the Rose,” “The Crime of the Mathematics Professor,” “The Chicken,” and “The Fifth Story”) and to Lispector’s masterly story collection *Family Ties* (from which four of the five stories mentioned above come from). Finally, Lispector’s diverse and much less studied journalistic output is also fairly well covered in a short section that includes analyses of well-known *crônicas* (“O grupo” and “Menino a bico de pena”) as well as Lispector’s less known career as a ghostwriter in advice columns signed with pseudonyms such as Tereza Quadros and Helen Palmer. The hybrid character of the *crônica* makes it sometimes hard to tell them from short stories and analysis of stories that were included in books of *crônicas* by Lispector herself are to be found in other sections of this book as well.

The Word According to Lispector – Critical Approaches also keeps its own promise to “run the gamut from impressionistic appreciations to rigorous analytical readings that bring to bear the most recent theories of literary analysis” (11) including diverse types of contributions. These range from an impressionistic short story by Sônia Coutinho (who won the Brazilian Academy of Letters’ 2006 *Clarice Lispector Prize* for a short story collection of hers and died just a few days ago) and a brief personal testimony by Jewish Brazilian writer Moacyr Scliar to a host of scholarly essays from the US and from Brazil.

In between lies a magazine piece written by the Uruguayan writer Ida Vitale that serves as a good introduction to Lispector for a Spanish-speaking readership. Although there are a few imprecisions – Vitale writes that Brasília was designed by Oscar Niemeyer (75) instead of Lúcio Costa and that Lispector was “carioca” (76) even though she was born in Ukraine and came to Recife as a baby, where she grew up in one of the most vibrant literary/intellectual environments in Brazil – Vitale explains the mesmerizing power of Lispector’s prose writing that “very few – and I say very few to be on the safe side – have taken on so many novelistic conventions at once” (67). Lispector’s Judaism (or the relative lack of it) features prominently in Berta Waldman’s “Caminhos Cruzados: Clarice e Elisa Lispector,” which aptly contrasts the literary output of Lispector to that of her much less famous sister. Aparecida Maria Nunes also focuses on historical/biographical elements as she carefully reconstitutes Lispector’s ghost writer career since the 1940s to indicate

possible linkages between this and other facets of Lispector's oeuvre. Different psychoanalytical approaches play a central role in Yudith Rosenbaum's reading of the *crônica* "Menino a bico de pena" as well as in Alessandra Pires' analysis of *Adescoberta do mundo*. Rosenbaum and Pires converge in assigning a central role to what one calls "a subject before an inapprehensible object" (129) and the other "the encounter between the subject and that which he/she does not know" (227). The epiphany that follows these encounters is the central idea of a detailed structuralist analysis by the poet/critic Affonso Romano de Sant'Annathat had already been featured in the 1996 critical edition of "A paixão segundo G.H" organized by Benedito Nunes and is here carefully translated by Jason R. Jolley. Jolley himself relies on a philosophic discussion about ethics to write his own chapter, which revisits some stories from *Laços de Família* and reaches a conclusion similar to César Ferreira, who looks into the paradigmatic short story "Love" from that volume to discuss, once again, the issue of the encounter with the other as a moment of troubled self-discovery. Deleuze and Guattari provide the motif for María Fernández-Babineaux's interesting reading of identity in *The Stream of Life* whereas Queer Theory informs Rick J. Santos's view of some of Lispector's most striking protagonists. Fernández-Babineaux and Santos somehow converge on emphasizing Lispector as a literary figure of transgression. Dário Borim reaches a similar conclusion but he mostly relies on stylistics to read some of the stories from *Family Ties*. Finally, Leila Lehen offers a brilliant reading of the novel *The Hour of the Star*, taking Lefebvre's spatial turn as a starting point and extrapolating into Kristeva's notion of the Abject.

As one can see there are fifteen different approaches to Lispector in *The Word According to Clarice Lispector – Critical Approaches*. None exhausts what Lispector has to say, which fits another claim of Calvino's, that a classic "never exhausts what it has to say to its readers" (5). Reading Lispector continues to be an experience of wonder and puzzlement, and Luciana Namorato and César Ferreira effectively offer in *The Word According to Lispector – Critical Approaches* a pretty lively picture of what the present generation of specialized readers in the Americas has managed to find in Lispector.

It should be noted that *The Word According to Clarice Lispector – Critical Approaches*, true to its inter-American scope, is a tri-lingual volume. Four pieces in English and four in Spanish can certainly help teachers of Lispector who are involved in the necessary task of introducing her to Spanish and English speaking readerships in the classroom. In this sense, it would have been better if Jason R. Folley's interesting reading of Clarice in terms of what he calls "an ethics of self care" (163) had had all its quotes from Clarice's works translated into English as it was the case in all the

other seven pieces either in English or Spanish. This somehow limits the readership of that particular piece to bilingual students.

One of the most appealing aspects of Calvino's approach to the idea of the classics is that these propositions do not necessarily confine the classic into the ethereal realm of supposedly universal verities that remove a work of literature from the very human interplay of history and geography, as if the power of the classics depended on their being completely detached from any specific time and place. As part of the effort to enhance Lispector's stance, *The Word According to Clarice Lispector – Critical Approaches* offers its readers much more than platitudes about transcendence, and this is the result of hard critical labor. A satisfactory mediation between literature on the one hand and history and geography on the other depends primarily on critical consciousness and *The Word According to Clarice Lispector – Critical Approaches* offers several felicitous articulations between these three dimensions. We should be glad that the cloud of discourse around Lispector is not going to settle and hope that more and more readers will be exposed to her "word" and challenged to come up with yet new approaches to it.

However, at the heart of Calvino's conception is the issue of reaching a wide readership, which is dependent on more than the intrinsic qualities of a given text. *The Word According to Clarice Lispector – Critical Approaches* offers plenty in terms of vindicating the many extraordinary qualities of Lispector's work, but, when it comes to Latin American or any other so-called peripheral literature, one should always bear in mind that a solid readership beyond national and/or linguistic boundaries depends on matters such as adequate translations and engaging scholarship, but also on solid publishers with commitment and capacity for effective marketing and distribution.