

Women's Rights and Women's Writing

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Abstract

This essay argues that Virginia Woolf's alternative aesthetics anticipate Clarice Lispector's experimental writing and culminate in Hélène Cixous's anti-foundational thinking about writing. Woolf in *The Waves* and Lispector in *Água viva* (*The Stream of Life*) introduce compelling questions about the desire, need, and right to write, and the living waters of the writing performance. Freedom is freedom from male discourse and domination, masculine cultural ideas, and the "subject." Woolf and Lispector dismantle totalizing modes of thinking in order to transfigure themselves and others in "the act of writing."

Writing against phallogocentrism, challenging oppression and injustice, reconstituting subject-other relationships in *The Waves* and *Água viva*, Woolf and Lispector perform Cixous's *écriture féminine* (women's writing), free themselves from traditional gender constitutions, and focus on writing as sensory response, exploring possibilities of language, disorganizing to organize, transfiguring reality with new signs, generating new modes of thinking and being while writing the "other." Anticipating Derrida's deconstruction and exploring the sense of touch, Woolf and Lispector are able to break the silence and write genesis according to a woman.

Clarice Lispector, an avant-garde Brazilian writer, inherits Virginia Woolf's writing legacy, which she extends until her death in 1977; Hélène Cixous discovers Lispector in 1978 and claims Lispector's writing best exemplifies "*écriture féminine*," which appears in Cixous's *La jeune née* in 1975. These qualities in Lispector's writing that perform *écriture féminine*, which will be identified in *Água viva* and discussed throughout this study, are visible forty-four years earlier in Woolf's *The Waves*. Correspondences between Woolf and Lispector illustrate how both transform women's writing by challenging phallogocentrism. Woolf's alternative aesthetics drive Lispector's experimental writing and culminate in Cixous's anti-foundational thinking about writing. Distancing themselves from male discourse, challenging and dismantling systematic modes of thinking that close off and totalize, writing against the desire to appropriate meaning and annihilate mystery, and making writing their subject; they transfigure themselves and others by "the act of writing."

To understand Woolf's opposition to inherited modes of male discourse in *The Waves*, it is important to read her characters as either representatives of or alternatives to tradition. Percival, for instance, is both patriarchy and the *Bildungsroman* literary tradition; his story is told in the scrambled voices of six friends. Neville marks Percival's "pagan indifference." Louis notes, "His magnificence is that of some mediaeval commander."¹ Bernard calls him a Romantic hero. Classical, Medieval, and Romantic aesthetics, along with British imperialism, accompany Percival to his death in India. What remains of tradition is blurred in a sublime

¹ Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (New York: Harcourt Brace), 36-37.

confusion that will give way to alternative ways of being in the world, when reading the phenomena of writing allows one to read and thereby transform oneself, restore one's rights, and enjoy one's own as well as uphold another's freedoms.

Lispector's *Água viva* begins *in medias res* as sublime metaphor; traditional philosophy is precluded by her focus on sensorial responses in the writer's writing experiences, in flashes of instants, epiphanies and silence. Lispector defines herself in relation to others and objects and becomes an "other" among others. Not appropriating the other allows for freedom. Meaning does not always exist, and narration consists of random scenes. Love, death, life are a diaspora of "living elements." Dialogical voices free the text from a single "voice"; the speaker is and is not Lispector and exists in both literal and literary worlds. Text re-presents reality in "now instants" as writer partakes of writing moments.

Woolf's sensorial responses and subjective revisionism unfold as six children respond to a new day. The elemental fibers and "blind" and "blank" of the opening interlude are attached to the children's sensory experiences by "a spider's web on the corner of the balcony...[with its] beads of water [and] drops of white light." Balcony is in turn connected to girls with fans sitting on verandas in the penultimate interlude. Fan, as bones of the hand, is a synecdoche for a writer's hand.

Rather than using characters, Lispector links verbs to senses; verbal nouns are vehicles for exploring writing as sensory response. There are linguistic chains and a web like complexity of signs. Synaesthesia is a mode of webbing. According to Earl Fitz, "Lispector's work is always fluid and open and poetically rendered, antilogocentric, and a struggle with language which denies human existence..."² "[She] leads us to ask not merely what we know (or think we know) but about how we know."³ She confuses genres, stretches assumptions about what texts are and how they operate, reproduces and values women's silences.

Woolf explores language and sense and draws out their possibilities in children's play. She also examines how language both reflects and constitutes the child's reality, and how literary inheritances impinge on childhood experiences. Children chained to traditional fairytales are unbound in Woolf's retellings. Louis suffers his Australian accent, seeks refuge from shame in

² Earl Fitz, *Clarice Lispector* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1985), 39

³*Ibid.*, 41.

nature; Jinny kisses Louis as he hides in the foliage. Thus, Grimms' "Rose-Bud"⁴ is reversed—and "Sleeping Beauty" has no moral tag. Jinny's hand is like snake skin, and Louis's belt is fastened by a brass snake, but their fall predates both Lilith and Eve when it results in Susan's suffering, fuses with the primordial image of the Great Mother archetype and Nature weeping, and gives rise to Bernard's Elvedon tales. Bernard has "seen signposts at the cross-roads with one arm pointing 'To Elvedon.'"⁵ Elvedon is beyond the wall where the lady writing sits between two long windows, privy to both reality and fiction. Strangely enough in Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, Shakespeare's fictional sister lies buried at a cross-roads.

Leaving Neville to comfort Susan with his Elvedon tales, Bernard interrupts Neville's boat building; carrying off Neville's knife, he takes phallogentrism and violence with him. For Neville, who despairs of Bernard's "sloppy sentiment," there is an order; representing both Eliot and tradition, Neville predicts "we are doomed, all of us by the apple trees."⁶ A mystical Rhoda tries to control her fleet of make-believe ships, white flower petals floating in a basin of water, but she can neither wake from dreaming, nor control the world's chaos. She links water poured over dead mackerel in a bowl to bubbles that float to the surface in a chain when heated. Bernard calls these bubbles "words," and this chain links the children to the "school of death."

Lispector disorganizes to organize and allows childhood to surface without prescribing temporal sequences or boundaries. Her knife, she intimates, is going dull. Writing is behind thinking, behind syntax, and the word—"is." The Portuguese *é*, a single phoneme for "it is," is all there is. Each sensory response redirects her writing. She listens and the hand writes as it enters realms of painting and music, and primordial and contemporary existence. She explores her world by listening, singing, tasting, smelling, touching, and writing 'now instants' to avoid systems of entrapment. Love is never separate from death, life, or hatred. She is living, dying, loving, losing until gaps between them close in the writing; characters split, multiply, die or give birth to. The writer's objective is to write without thought but unconsciousness precludes writing. As Cixous suggests, writing then becomes a balance between the annihilation of thought and the least thought necessary to sustain writing—hence writing the body, with the bodily senses is the goal. Not understanding is necessary; her reality has neither thoughts that correspond, nor words to signify it. To transfigure reality, she needs new signs and articulations.

⁴ Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, *Grimms' Fairy Tales* (London: Penguin Books, Ltd, 1994), 40.

⁵ Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1978), 17.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 25.

Woolf introduces new modes of thinking and being with Percival's death, which crashes into his friends' lives, bringing silence and blindness. Ethical dimensions associated with "schools of love" are re-written as love becomes another metaphor for death. Woolf gradually transitions from the many to the one voice of Bernard who learns life is in the flow of words; there is only Bernard the aging body feeling the fragility of life, writing his story in the stream, between silences broken by words bubbling to the surface. He is inheritor, but of what? Militaristic order and progress are lies; friends are consigned to death. He says they are "scarcely to be distinguished from the river...bodies...all threaded to the world and to one another, and to the woman writing."⁷ Characters cannot finish their stories, and no matter how high they leap—they fall back into the stream, where there are no beginnings, endings, or true order. Learning for Woolf is a transition from old age to letting go, to summing up, to being in the moment, existence being simply the denial of death in the face of death.

Learning for Lispector is learning the language and ethics of "othering," which is her denial of death by denying the existence of the autonomous subject.⁸ "*Écriture féminine* is the endeavor to write the other in ways which refuse to appropriate or annihilate the other's difference in order to create and glorify the self in a masculine position of mastery."⁹ Called upon to be something "other" amidst the failed writing and useless philosophy, Woolf's Bernard is coming to *écriture féminine*. In *La jeune née* Susan Sellers writes, "Cixous warns of the dangers in attempting to 'theorize' *écriture féminine*, a process, she argues, that will inevitably reduce, distort or obliterate its essential features: 'at the present time, defining a feminine practice of writing is impossible with an impossibility that will continue; for this practice will never be able to be theorized, enclosed, coded, which does not mean it does not exist.'"¹⁰ For Lispector and Woolf, writing free from the law of male discourse, the circle breaks, and the totalizing pattern is interrupted, which allows for pure flow.

To write the "other" entails attention to the process of writing. Writing, Cixous argues, "creates its own others and body of meanings; as soon as you let yourself be led beyond codes, your body filled with fear and joy, the words diverge, you are no longer enclosed in the maps of

⁷ Ibid., 235.

⁸ Susan Sellers, *Hélène Cixous: Authorship, Autobiography and Love* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996).

⁹ Ibid.,

¹⁰ Hélène Cixous, *The Newly Born Woman* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

social constructions, you no longer walk between walls, means flow.”¹¹ Bernard must tell his story in broken phrases and inarticulate words—must follow the writing as if writing the story from moments, with arrows of sensation and comments in margins.¹² He must learn, as Cixous says, by “journeying to the heart of the unconscious.... Walking through the self toward the dark....”¹³ Writing is not arriving at the self but leaving it. “The journey from the inside out [Bernard says] is to a world where things happen in a second and last forever.”¹⁴

Just as Lispector anticipates Derridean deconstruction, Woolf’s Bernard deconstructs his image in the looking glass: “this is not one life; nor do I always know if I am man or woman, Bernard, Neville, Louis, Susan, Jinny or Rhoda—so strange is the contact of one with another.”¹⁵ Bernard is ‘all selves,’ and has been without a self, a dead man, and what is it to describe the world without a self? He begins to forget and asks himself, “Who am I?” He becomes the “you are.” He is also Bernard in the third person, the Bernard who made phrases and kept a notebook. There is no more need of “lies and phrases.” There is, in the glass, a face, an eye, but not an “I.”

Lispector speaking of mirrors says: “Take away frame or contours and it spreads, as water pours.... No, I haven’t described a mirror—I’ve been one.”¹⁶ She cannot define “At the Edge of Beatitude,” but she has lived it. She cannot explain; there is only: “Because today, July 25, at five in the morning, I fell into a state of grace. I had just finished my coffee and I was simply living, sitting there with a cigarette burning down in an ashtray.” She fails, she says, because “Real freedom, as an act of perception, has no form.... True thought seems authorless.”¹⁷ There are no words for freedom, and freedom has to sever itself from the slavery of the word. Words imprison as well as free. As she writes she tries to free the words from the letter of the law. At times there are no words, no meaning, no follow through on a thought: “It’s as if life said the following: and there simply wasn’t any following. Only the colon, waiting.”¹⁸ There are realities that have no correspondences in thoughts, just sensations behind thoughts. To live is more an indirect remembering. Since logical discourse is part of the tragedy, she must disrupt thinking and dislodge logic. She must blind herself to see and break all rings because life

¹¹ Hélène Cixous, *“Coming to Writing” and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991).

¹² Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1978), 239.

¹³ Hélène Cixous, *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

¹⁴ Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1978), 240.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 281.

¹⁶ Clarice Lispector, *The Stream of Life* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 65.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 74.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 70.

in the circle is ‘fatal.’ The subject must lose its subject-ness, and it is necessary not to understand, though non-intelligence is impossible. “There is danger of madness in the subject getting lost in things, but those who are not lost cannot know freedom and do not love it.”¹⁹

Woolf explores the sense of touch, touching life and the lives of others. The stream is not learned; it is entered into by Bernard who like Lispector leaves his bodies along the way, goes to meet himself, exceeds himself by abdicating himself, and becomes the “you are.” After Percival’s accident and Rhoda’s suicide, five characters remain in Bernard’s story—the single rose with five petals. In *Veils*, Cixous and Derrida engage in a dialogue on myopia; their discussion leads to the revelatory point that to see is to touch. Its significance here is in Woolf’s and Lispector’s contribution to seeing the rose—as touching the rose. As Lispector says in *Água viva*, “hands also see.”²⁰

The initial interlude of *The Waves* begins both with lack and in silence. In the “not,” there is. The sun is “not yet risen.” Rose is present simply as potential—in the past tense verb form. Sea and sky are indistinguishable, except “the sea was slightly creased as if a cloth had wrinkles in it.”²¹ The “word” of the author is conspicuously absent. As the sky whitens, grey with black strokes and waves like pen marks, still beneath the surface, are following and pursuing each other perpetually. Waves are writing; bars—heaped, broke, swept. The wave is “as if” the sleeper, unconscious. It is “as if the arm of a woman couched beneath the horizon had raised a lamp and flat bars of white, green and yellow, spread across the sky like blades of a fan.”²² In the act of writing, fan, as hand, touches. Woolf’s arm of a woman is not above but within and lifting up. Air, as she raises the lamp, becomes fibrous—earth bursts into red and yellow fibers—fibers fuse in one haze. The elemental scene is composed of fibrous matter and structure, as well as the fibrin of which the original cobweb on the balcony is formed. Couched “beneath the horizon,” the woman in *The Waves* draws up the physical weight of the picture. Rose, as noun, is disseminated in verb forms until light striking the trees in the garden rests on the tip of a fan and leaves “a blue fingerprint of shadow under the leaf by the bedroom

¹⁹ Ibid., 58.

²⁰ Ibid., 63.

²¹ Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1978), 7.

²² Ibid., 7.

window.”²³ Verb is transposed into noun when on the penultimate page of the text “leaf” becomes “the pale rose that hangs by the bedroom window.”²⁴

Woolf’s *Waves*, as genesis according to a woman, unfolds in a single day. Lispector’s *Água viva*, as a letter to an ex-lover, is like an X—letter as phoneme. To begin is to end; love ended—the ring broke—the ring is also a break in the discourse, which continues on. In “Extreme Fidelity,” Cixous says Lispector addresses the use and abuse of owning in an immense “book of respect, a book of the right distance”; in *Firstdays* she says Lispector opens a new space for writing, “transforming our relations to the world, ourselves, and others.” Following the hand writing, becoming a scribe of the unconscious, breaking all textual frames, touching the source and suddenly “bewitched,”²⁵ Lispector is now absent, and text, as other, continues on. “Water witches” are implements used for finding water, or those closest to living sources of water. Writers writing *écriture féminine* do not claim to know; they simply allow us to reach the source and content ourselves with not knowing. Being in the flow in life and writing is enough.

Between Woolf’s interludes, the woman sits writing; there are buds, blossoms, petals in slanted light, heads of flowers drooping and fallen into the garden; in the final interlude, Woolf’s garden is a broken vessel, and at the cliff’s edge...there are waves of darkness surrounding a sunken ship. Suddenly there is a “mountain where the snow lodges for ever on the hard rock even when the valleys are full of running streams and yellow vine leaves, and girls sitting on verandahs look up at the snow, shading their faces with fans,”²⁶ also in darkness. They are Woolf’s legacy—Shakespeare’s sister(s)²⁷ sitting in gardens, writing themselves in tributaries of their own writing, no longer looking at the snow, powerless and secluded in shadows. The garden as “broken vessel” is now pure flow.

Surveying the meaning of his life, Bernard remembers—“The lady sat writing. Transfixed, stopped dead, I thought, ‘I cannot interfere with a single stroke of those brooms. They sweep and they sweep. Nor with the fixity of that woman writing.’ It is strange that one cannot stop gardeners sweeping nor dislodge a woman. There they have remained all my life. It is as if one had woken in Stonehenge surrounded by a circle of great stones, these enemies, these presences.” And then Bernard has “one of those sudden transparencies through which one sees

²³ Ibid., 7-8.

²⁴ Ibid., 296.

²⁵ Clarice Lispector, *The Stream of Life* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 79.

²⁶ Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1978), 237.

²⁷ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own* (San Diego: Harcourt, Inc.), 48.

everything.”²⁸ The garden is a “splintered mosaic.” The stream is alive and deep, flows from January to December, and they float. There are many Bernards now in the “full tide of life”; life, he says, is “a dust dance,” “a floating in the stream,” and in the forgetting—comes “I am you.” The sky, “kindling in immanent renewal,”²⁹ reveals the rose.

Woolf tells us how to read the rose. The subject and verb have become entwined, entangled in threads and vines, the being and human being are one as the rose is denuded of its symbolic trappings and allowed to exist, even after the sun which had risen inch by inch throughout the text had sunk. In Lispector’s story of the rose, she understands relationships, hers to the rose, what exists between them, an understanding of this it-love understood without words, behind them and veiled. It is what Lispector calls the “slanted reality” of the “obliqueness” of the rose.

In Woolf’s *Waves*, Rhoda’s name signifies “rose.” As “nymph of the fountain always wet,” she cannot complete her metamorphosis. “Rose” is further transfigured with the verb “rose.” At the end of *The Waves*, the looking glass, that double reflection, is no longer behind the scene by the window; there is only “a redness that gathers on the roses, even on the pale rose that hangs by the bedroom window.”³⁰

To see the rose is to touch the rose is to touch the source; to touch the source is to live the other and to live the other is “being” with both a capital and a small “b,” being, in this context, being both noun and verb. To reach the source, Woolf and Lispector dismantle totalizing modes of thinking in order to transfigure themselves and others in “the act of writing.” Living is a noun, and the best is between the lines. The secret is simply that—secret. Lispector’s rose *é. Écriture féminine* lets the flower be a flower; Woolf’s five-petaled rose “is.” Reality has no synonyms. “One has to read the very phenomena of writing, reading oneself.... Everything is a giving birth to, a getting back to the origins, and the reader must help in the being born.”³¹ To find the source is to drink from the fountain, and the nymph of the fountain is Rhoda, rising and falling into Woolf’s *Waves*, which are Lispector’s *Living Waters*—without beginnings or endings

²⁸ Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1978), 240-241.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 296.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 296.

³¹ Hélène Cixous, “Forward,” *The Stream of Life* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1989), xxiii.

or true order, where roses have threadlike roots and women have roots in real and paper gardens, and gardeners sweep, and women sit silently writing with “the hand in its infinite sensibility.”³²

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³² Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1978), 291.