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Kanna Hüdson, ““We are the Tiniest Particle”: Authorial Agency and the Body,” *intersections* 10, no. 1 (2009): 389-430.

## ABSTRACT

I attempt here a clarification of some of the theoretical work on the relationships among and between authorship, text, and meaning. I am particularly concerned with the more problematic aspects of language: the perils of translating between any combination of languages and of transcribing speech into writing; the universal inability to describe experiences of wonder and trauma; the existence of infinite possible interpretations of poetry and everyday miscommunications. Building upon the work of Barthes and Blanchot, I first establish the author’s lack of agency over language — in that the author lacks control over the path of intended and interpreted meanings as they travel from the author to the text to the reader. I further contend that words exist as bodies; moving, growing, and procreating as such. Finally, I propose a possible solution to the lack of authorial agency by framing the embodied act of authorship as a productive act. The act of writing entails the interactions between embodied words and embodied authors, and this embodied experience inscribes itself on the world as agency. The work of Brazilian novelist Clarice Lispector, and in particular her novel *The hour of the star*, provides a case study for this project, while the work of Cixous serves as a theoretical ground.

[http://depts.washington.edu/chid/intersections\\_Winter\\_2009/Kanna\\_Hudson\\_Authorial\\_Agency\\_and\\_the\\_Body.pdf](http://depts.washington.edu/chid/intersections_Winter_2009/Kanna_Hudson_Authorial_Agency_and_the_Body.pdf)

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# “We Are the Tiniest Particle”

## Authorial Agency and the Body

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### Introduction<sup>1</sup>

“Don’t forget, in the meantime, that this is the season for strawberries. Yes.”<sup>2</sup>

Clarice Lispector

I grew up saying “ichigo” (Japanese for “strawberry”) and “strawberry” (English) at the same time. In my infancy I knew that these were two things. Honestly, I knew that they were thousands and thousands of things – perhaps children can appreciate the singularity of each individual strawberry better than adults. Anyway, when I grew up, I learned that these ichigo and strawberries were one thing. With each repetition, those thousands and thousands of strawberries are slammed into two tiny syllabic morsels.

This is how I first came to distrust language. Words always seem to confine things, suppress things. Here’s a common example. A person’s identity – strong, wide, vast, and effervescent – is confined to a few words or phrases on official forms that request “name,” “occupation,” and “race.” Those moments in life that plumb all human experience and capacity, those spectacular sights in nature that can break the very brain down: these things always seem to die when spoken. Sometimes, something beautiful emerges out of the words (therein lies good authorship), but the thing itself always dies. This is why, I think, there’s a tendency among inexperienced writers (myself included) to string together ill-assorted words. There’s a tendency to be imprecise. The young author wants something else (something other than the words’ usual and inadequate meanings) to erupt out of the incompatible coupling of words.

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<sup>1</sup> “We are the tiniest particle” is a quotation from the personal notebooks of Clarice Lispector, cited in Hélène Cixous’ *Three steps on the ladder of writing*, (New York: Columbia University, 1993), 33. I would like express my gratitude to my thesis-writing companions and fellow graduates in the Comparative History of Ideas program, particularly Vincent Gonzalez, Matthew Allen, Hannah Janeway, and especially Sarah Maria. Thanks beyond measure to my mentor and adviser, Professor Phillip Thurtle.

<sup>2</sup> Clarice Lispector, *The hour of the star*, (New York: New Directions, 1992), 86.

I became intellectually convinced of my distrust of words during a summer of intensive humanistic research in the study of trauma, time, memory, and embodiment. My research revealed that trauma often renders people silent. Trauma is defined as an experience that shatters one's cognitive frames of reference. Since language is, perhaps, our most primary system of reference, any experience that profoundly affects our referential system is bound to defy our use of language.<sup>3</sup> Susan J. Brison, for example, a scholar of philosophy and trauma studies, writes that “the challenge of finding language that is true to traumatic experience is, however, a daunting one. How can we speak about the unspeakable without attempting to render it intelligible and sayable? Our ordinary concepts of time and identity cease to apply.”<sup>4</sup> Language fails trauma, writes Brison, as do time, identity, and all other conceptual references we have.

I first approached this project hoping for nothing more than to expound on the distress and injustice words cause us, in the everyday, the extraordinary, and authorial realms. I wanted to rage, rage, rage, and hoped to finish with the simple satisfaction of having proved words' meanness. In even a relatively short academic paper such as this, though, there is little choice than to succumb to words. A rare creative trope might ease the conscious a little; it also might cause even more agitation. At some point, it came to me that I would be happier to seek a truce with words. I erased the rage I had thus far written, rewrote it as a preface to a love that had yet to manifest, and began looking for a way to ease the pain of words.

Many had already found a way, it turned out. I looked to great authors who had mastered words – or if not mastered, then befriended. Clarice Lispector and her *The hour of the star* lay a path leading to this friendship. I tried my best to walk the path, and met a remarkable girl named Macabéa of whom the whole world is made, and in her I found both love and satisfaction.

Here are a few technical notes before I outline, and then begin, this project. I will occasionally interchange the word “language” with “word” or “words.” While I understand that the concept of language can encompass many more modes of communication than that which words comprise, in the context of this paper, “language” refers to the entire mass of and system of *words* (including syntax, diction, phonetics, morphology, pragmatics, stylistics, and poetics, though I

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<sup>3</sup> Kanna Hüdson, “The White Night: A True Story About the Violence of Language,” *University of Washington Summer Institute in the Arts and Humanities*, vol. 3 (2004). Also “Trauma, Time, and Memory,” <http://www.washington.edu/research/urp/sinst/pubs/index.html>, University of Washington.

<sup>4</sup> Susan J. Brison, *Aftermath* (Princeton: Princeton University, 2002), xi.

won't address all these components). Secondly, as this project is heavy with discussions of the individual author, I'm regrettably obliged to use pronouns, and gendered ones at that. Alas, the English language fails me. I have usually chosen the feminine pronoun because Clarice Lispector, the central literary author in this project, is female. (I am also female.) (I also think that masculine pronouns have their fair share.) Thirdly, nearly all the authors quoted in this text wrote in languages other than English, in which I am writing this paper. This is significant. In the full translated texts of these works, some sort of apology from the translator usually prefaces the main text; so I feel compelled to apologize, too, for contributing to the mutation of the original work even further, by slicing bits out of already sliced texts, which emerged from the sliced meanings of their respective sliced authors.

I'll start this project by walking down a path we all walk down, all the time. This is the path of everyday violence and it is fraught with violence. Maybe you've grinned and shrugged along your way. This is while you are being sliced and hacked at. Me, too. Grinning and shrugging is better than being miserable. But sometimes it is good to look this violence in the eye. (Maybe there is a way to stop it.) Next in this project will be the question of the author. (I've decided to save the second question of language, that of the extraordinary and language, for another project.) The author's daily work is to take the word and turn something out of it. What does she do when words are pummeling her left and right? Does she even know that this is happening? Well, how can the author have any agency in her work? Then, frustrated, I'll turn from the distress, determined to find a solution. There's no use just standing here, dopey and helpless. This means that we must think of words as something altogether different than what we've thought of them before. I'll start to think of words as living beings. They'll be our equals. We must collaborate. There are three questions about words, then, if they're living beings: what are they made of? Where do they live? And finally, what does it mean to be what they are? I'll explore these three questions respectively. Finally, the last two sections of this project will be a hopeful look into what authorial agency might be and what it might provide us, given that traditional conceptions of authorial agency have often left authors speechless and mutilated. These will be based on the success and gorgeousness of the work of several authors, especially H el ene Cixous, Maurice Blanchot, and Clarice Lispector.

## Words and Everyday Violence: A Survey

There is a universal inability to use words to describe experiences of trauma and wonder. Profound spiritual experiences and the Romantic “sublime” are like this, too. I contend that these experiences are not the anomaly of unspeakability. I contend that we simply notice that words are failing us at these times because of the relative significance of the experiences to us. The most mundane experiences are unspeakable, too. This postulate is a bit tired, I know, but I want to remind you of the singularity of your own experiences compared to those of anyone else. Take your most recent walk. It is simply not possible to match every nuance of your thoughts and emotions, each of your bodily affects, and all of your sensory perceptions, with anyone else’s walk. And that leaves out the context of your walk, which is of course not fundamentally different from your walk itself: the livelihood of the trees along the path, the thoughts of the woman walking not far in front of you, the whole of your life which led to and which will follow this walk. Since words are a system of categorization, of fitting-in, singularity must lead to unspeakability. Perhaps, for practical purposes, we could use words to represent this walk to some small degree. But, to say this shows our willingness let words destroy our experiences and even ourselves. In actuality, you cannot speak your walk in justice: you only have some-thousand words to describe your walk to me. And some-thousand words will never be enough for all the thinking and emoting, the affects and the contexts, of your walk. What, were you “contemplative” on your walk? Were you, in simile, “as contemplative as someone in her dying hour”? There you are, killing your walk with words. You will take ages, and they will always fail you.

More of words’ failures: there are the perils of translating between virtually any combination of languages, and of transcribing speech into writing. There are the infinite possible interpretations of word-made poetry and literature. Really, there are the infinite possible interpretations of any set of words at all. Every day that we vibrate our larynxes or squiggle our pens on paper, we are swarmed by a billion perceived and unperceived *miscommunications*.

The implications of this, of course, are devastating. It’s a little bit futile, too. In this very project, I am succumbing to words. These words I’m choosing – these words right here – are expository and conventional. I wish I could tell you everything I want to say without using a single word (words who destroy us so profoundly), but let me humble myself. Words are so powerful and mysterious that I can hardly contain myself! They are so *enormous*! And I have no choice but to humble myself.

Wait, I need to return to the devastation; the humility will have to wait. If I cannot use words to accurately communicate any of my meaning or being, words will fail my experiences, my ideas, and even my identity. My meaning is always killed by the unruliness of the word. We usually don't recognize this – we assume we are receiving messages via the word-medium. In fact, we feel that words serve to allow us to understand others. This is the sneaky, the vicious violence of words; they destroy meaning and being while we believe that we are all whole and well.

Author and theorist Maurice Blanchot addresses the violence of words. He writes, "I say 'This woman.' . . . A word may give me its meaning, but first it suppresses it. For me to be able to say, 'This woman,' I must somehow take her flesh-and-blood reality away from her, cause her to be absent, annihilate her."<sup>5</sup> By this, Blanchot means (How violent! But we must succumb!) that a word is so detached from its particular referent that it erases the particularity of the referent. The word "woman" is detached from the particular woman to whom Blanchot refers, partly because the word "woman" is so laden with its own historical and social contexts. Meanwhile, it knows nothing or little of the historical and social contexts of the particular woman. So the word "woman" erases the particular woman. In sum, when we speak a word, it can do a person great violence in return.

There are two questions of language here. The first one is of our general habit of words, of the annihilated woman and incommunicable after-dinner walks, and of asking for the ketchup, please. The second question is that of authors, whose livelihood rests on a sturdy command of words. If words are so very awful to those of us who need them mainly to ask for the ketchup, what about those who need them mainly to express every nuance and vigor of human existence (I am speaking of authors)? I want to talk specifically now about everyday language and its distinction from authorial language.

Blanchot tends to forgive the everyday ketchup violence. He was concerned in part with this distinction between ordinary and literary language. In *The space of literature*, he comments on the distinction between the "crude word" and the "essential word," phrases coined by French poet Stéphane Mallarmé.<sup>6</sup> The key to both terms, Blanchot writes, is silence. The crude word, which we use to communicate the immediate world to one another, is totally empty and silent.

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<sup>5</sup> Maurice Blanchot, "Literature and the Right to Death," *The Station Hill Blanchot reader* (New York: Station Hill Press, 1999), 379.

<sup>6</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The space of literature* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 39

“Nothing is more foreign to the tree than the word *tree*,” writes Blanchot, “as it is used nonetheless by everyday language. A word which does not name anything, which does not represent anything, which does not outlast itself in any way, a word which is not even a word and which disappears marvelously altogether and at once in its usage: what could be more worthy of the essential and closer to silence?”<sup>7</sup> There is the clear and endless gap between the word and the referent (the tree and the word *tree*), and there is the fact that words like *tree* disappear the moment we speak them, because we are so concerned with what the word *tree* is supposed to represent (the tall, woody, leaved thing), and so unconcerned with the actual word.

To clarify, Mallarmé likens the everyday exchange of language (speaking of trees or ketchup, for example) to the exchange of money. The words or the money disappear upon their exchange, because their sole purpose is to represent something in the world. So, this is a fairly contented turn on words’ total lack of reference to our world. In fact, Blanchot seems to frame this silence as a kind of necessary opiate for all of us. Given the unspeakable weight of the complexity and enormity of the world (those are the simplest terms I could muster), the crude word actually silences this world for us so that we can live in calm. “Thanks to this silence, beings speak, and in it they also find oblivion and rest.”<sup>8</sup> In the silence of the words themselves (the actual words – not what they purport to represent), we beings speak with our actions. Furthermore, we can rest as the great world that lay on the other side of the words is silenced.

Blanchot continues to discuss the way that words disappear in our everyday exchanges of language, in order to give us peace. “. . . the immediacy which common language communicates to us is only veiled distance, the absolutely foreign passing for the habitual, the unfamiliar which we take for customary, thanks to the veil which is language and because we have grown accustomed to words’ illusion.”<sup>9</sup> Language seems as if it’s communicating the immediate, which I might also define as our immediate surrounding reality. Two issues arise here. The first is that the immediate, or reality, is far too complex for us to perceive or discuss with any sense of calm. I mentioned earlier that sublime and traumatic experiences often render individuals speechless. As these experiences are, by definition, outside of our existing cognitive categories, they aren’t compatible with language, nor are they compatible with any other mental reference. Without a frame of reference to mediate (and thereby dim or alter) these

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 30-40.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 40.

experiences, they are likely our only contact with unmediated reality, and this unmediated reality is far too enormous for language. The second issue is that language and the idea of the “immediate” are inherently disparate. Words, by their very nature and function, carry the past with them. I’ll elaborate on this in a later section. For now, let it be said that if I invent a word right now and speak it to you, it will carry no meaning at all to you. Likewise, the word “woman” (recall the earlier quotation) annihilates a specific woman because it is so heavy with its own history. Words are too tied to the non-immediate (the past) and too untied to the immediate (or immediate reality) to meaningfully or veritably function as a communicatory medium between human beings.

I’ll return now to Mallarmé’s money analogy. We seem to be okay, generally, with representing goods with cash. We are not so offended if a strawberry goes for a number of dollars per pound. Likewise for words, we are not so offended at representing a tree, under most conditions, with the word “tree.” I can tell you that I intend to go sit next to said tree, simply and monosyllabically, without being thrown into a helpless state of wonder of the immensity of the tree and life itself. And it helps us get through life.

Sometimes we are offended, though. We are often offended at the idea of representing back-breaking, hateful labor with a number of dollars per hour (each hour which might have been instead spent loving something). Likewise, we’re offended if a “priceless” work of art is bought for some-odd millions of dollars; it can’t be far too much or far too little, it simply should not be represented with dollars. It irks us, at least. Nonetheless, as Mallarmé said, the money itself disappears in the exchange. We faithfully think that we are trading whatever work we do for what it represents: groceries, prestige, the promise of a lazy future (it’s never a stack of green paper). In those everyday exchanges of words, the same goes. The words disappear, and we seek out word-exchanges not for the words themselves, but for what they represent. Sometimes, it would help for us to recognize that in our exchange of words, the word should offend us. A particular word may not be enough to represent something. Or, something should simply not be represented with a word.

I think there is incredible violence in these everyday exchanges of language. But sometimes – maybe – it just doesn’t matter; and plus – maybe – this very violence assures us a little bit of peace. We suppress the world with words so that it does not destroy *us* with its enormity.



I'd like to clarify that this violence is not a question of the incommensurability of two consciousnesses. I expect (and would not hesitate to posit) that your consciousness and mine are respectively decisively singular, but let's not blame the thrashing-slashing-killing of words on that. Yes, words will fail if we conceive of them as mediators between our two consciousnesses, but they will also fail if we conceive of them as representatives of our own consciousnesses even *to ourselves*. This is all about the violence of representation, which means that if you use a word to represent anything, anything at all, to anyone (yourself or me or no one), the word will kill it. Maybe this is useful for us as we pass through the everyday, as Blanchot posited. But there is no question that it is words that are doing the violence.

(While I am clarifying, I'll say that this violence is also different from Reception Theory, which is a literary theory that emphasizes the reader's role in the production of meaning in a text. Reception theorists would contend that there is no ultimate meaning in any particular text, but that the meaning would change as the text passed through different eras, cultures, and communities. I am more concerned with two things, the first being the question of authorship itself, which has little or nothing to do with the text, and the second being the activity of the words themselves, rather than the activity of the reader.)

The reason we should care about the everyday violence of words is that it leads to other types of violence, outside of words. A very real political and social danger arises when we use too few or too small words to represent something large, thus suppressing some sort of enormity or diversity. A second danger arises when we use an enormous word, like "woman," to represent a very particular and nuanced individual person. All this is to say that almost all situations in which we use words are accompanied by at least one of these two dangers.

I have not figured out how to exist without being constantly subject to these dangers, but it's probably helpful to be aware of them at all times. After you ask for the ketchup, both you and the ketchup will most likely surface unscathed, but sometimes that won't be the case. The poor folks who are more likely not unscathed from their liaisons with words are the authors themselves. Let us wonder, next, how some of them do.

As for Authorial Agency

In literary language things are more complicated than in the everyday. I'll use as a case-study *The hour of the star*, a novel by Clarice Lispector. Clarice Lispector is a Brazilian author (December 10, 1920 to December 9, 1977). She was born in a small town in Ukraine and moved to impoverished Northeastern Brazil at two months of age. She wrote and published a great deal during her life, and often wrote with a stream-of-consciousness style that seems to mimic Virginia Woolf and James Joyce, though she had read neither when she began writing as such. She also wrote a great number of short stories. *The hour of the star* is a novel, and a very short one (about eighty sparse pages in English). I'll synopsise the book a little later, but first I'd like to present to you a stunning and explicit example of how words have misbehaved in this book.

Translation among languages, as I mentioned, is one of many instances in which words trouble us, and it's a fairly straightforward one to grasp. *The hour of the star*, having been written in Portuguese by Lispector (may the Portuguese language have had mercy on Lispector), has been translated the world over. This particular project is founded on translated texts, and it turns out that most of these texts have jetted around the world and transformed and procreated into such unrecognizable mutations of each other that, honestly, this project is probably founded on nothing human at all. *The hour of the star* is no exception; neither are any of the other texts referenced in this paper. In *The hour of the star*, this line appears: "More actor than writer, for with only one system of punctuation at my disposal, I juggle with intonation and force another's breathing to accompany my text."<sup>10</sup> This is a character speaking, but here, Clarice Lispector is clearly fighting through into the text to recognize the presence of another being: the translator. Let it be known.

*The hour of the star* starts with a dedication, which is part of the text itself (unlike a traditional dedication which tends to precede the text, like an author's last gasp as herself before she is overtaken by another character). In the English translation of the book, translated by Giovanni Pontiero, the title of the dedication looks like this, loosely formatted:

The Author's Dedication

(alias Clarice Lispector)<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Lispector, *The hour of the star*, 22-23.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

Then there is the original Portuguese version, translated by perhaps no one:

Dedicatória Do Autor

(Na verdade Clarice Lispector)<sup>12</sup>

*Na verdade* means, honestly, “in truth.” This is not a particularly disputable translation. The dispute here is between “alias” and “in truth,” which are opposites in English.

Here is an example of the use of the “in truth” translation in a critical essay, the more “accurate” to the original Portuguese. French philosopher and author Hélène Cixous wrote an essay called “*The hour of the star: How Does One Desire Wealth or Poverty?*” a piece about Lispector’s novel. Cixous wrote this essay in French. Verena Andermatt Conley translated this into English, and I read Conley’s translation. In the Conley translation, Cixous and/or Conley use the “in truth” translation – accurate to Lispector’s original Portuguese. But, the bibliography of Conley’s translation of Cixous’ essay indicates that Cixous and/or Conley used the Pontiero translation of *The hour of the star* (that’s the “alias” translation). The Cixous/Conley essay/translation also indicates that any modifications to cited quotations have been indicated in the text of the essay, and yet there is no indication of modification, even though the passage appears in the text as “in truth,” which has clearly been modified from the Pontiero “alias” translation, which appears in the Cixous/Conley bibliography, which is in fact resting upon my knee at this instant.

With a deep breath, don’t worry if you didn’t follow this dedication’s dizzying mutation. The point is that you cannot trust the text any longer to do what you think it’s doing, at least when it comes to translations and excerpted quotations and citations. You probably already know this, but maybe you don’t pay attention. The point is deception. Maybe it’s Cixous or Conley or Pontiero or I who are secretly slicing up words. Maybe we are hysterical with power over you, reader, as long as you assume that words are doing their duty. Or maybe we are absentmindedly listening to the radio as we toss significant passages into the paper shredder and tape them back together for publication. This is a warning; be wary of the humans. And also, this is not meant to be a critique of translator Pontiero. I’m positive that he had good reason for each of his decisions. Maybe, it’s the word itself that is being so mischievous. As for Clarice Lispector: it seems

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<sup>12</sup> Clarice Lispector, *A hora da estrela* (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil: Jose Olympio, 1977), 9.

that as *The hour of the star* was moving through the world during the past few decades after its publication in 1977, it has grown into something altogether different than Lispector's book. Lispector, who died shortly after writing *The hour of the star*, had her authorship torn from her at every turn of this text. So who did this? Authors? Words?

Rodrigo is a character in *The hour of the star*, an author by profession. He says, "No, it is not easy to write. It is as hard a breaking rocks. Sparks and splinters fly like shattered steel."<sup>13</sup> To write is often to shatter worldly things, like rocks, with words. It is often to shatter ourselves, too. But maybe this has been enough pouting. Words are terrible to us, et cetera. Stand tall, you and me both; we are going to stride forward and find a solution.

The question is really about agency. If words fail to convey the author's intended meanings, does the author have any agency over words? Meaning most certainly moves among us (look here, at these words; now look there, in your brain). Did we not invent words? What moves meaning, then? Not the author? As in many other arenas, the question of agency has become frightening and baffling in the arena of words (and words' conglomerates, texts). The question is, do authors not have any agency over words, and why is this? Since the question of agency is at stake in so many discourses at the moment, I'd like to offer a preliminary definition of common-sense agency.

I define common-sense agency as taking an action with the certainty that the intended result will ensue. I visualize it as the agent picking up an object in one location and moving it to another location. The agent has control and power over that object. If we disregard negligible possibilities that some more powerful and unexpected agent will interfere, most of us have agency over some situations. I, for example, have enough agency to remove my own shoe. I am satisfied to call this agency for all practical purposes. My body might cease to have the ability to untie my shoelaces, an earthquake might impel me to protect my body rather than remove my shoe, a psychological state might impair me from wanting to remove my shoe, someone might race in and move my shoe before I get the chance, or perhaps hold me at gunpoint and forbid me from removing my shoe.

I have common-sense agency over my shoes and their removal, but my agency over words is quite different. If an author thinks of agency over words as the ability to move meaning from herself to the text in a word-container without

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<sup>13</sup> Lispector, *The hour of the star*, 19.

interference, she will be disappointed. The shoe-situation is a shocking comparison, because while I can probably remove my own shoe, it is one-hundred-percent inevitable that words will rush in and prevent me from communicating my intended meaning.

Clearly, the author needs a new conception of agency over words. This agency must either find some way to thwart words as they impede the movement of meaning, or else find a conception of authorial agency that is not based on moving meaning around in containers (words). As I think it's impossible as well as cruel to thwart words, this project is aimed at finding a new conception of authorial agency which emphasizes neither thwarting nor containing.

Blanchot writes in *The writing of the disaster*: "Reading is anguish, and this is because any text, however important, or amusing, or interesting it may be (and the more engaging it seems to be), is empty – at the bottom it doesn't exist; you have to cross an abyss, and if you do not jump, you do not comprehend."<sup>14</sup> Blanchot's metaphor-paradox deliberately tells the reader that words are empty of meaning at their core, and one can only claim to comprehend by independently (maybe artificially) filling in pits of emptiness between those words and their intended meanings. Yet strangely, Blanchot's words embed profound meaning in his reader, by proclaiming the absence of such a possibility.

And what of this abyss which one must jump? Rodrigo, an author-character in Clarice Lispector's *The hour of the star*, feels horrified at the ease with which he is filling in the abyss between the word and reality. He writes, "I am exploiting the written word with the utmost ease. This alarms me, for I am afraid of losing my sense of order and of plunging into an abyss resounding with cries and shrieks: the Hell of human freedom."<sup>15</sup> I think this is the same abyss. Here Rodrigo is "exploiting the written word": this means that he is not respecting the written word as an entity unto itself. He is, rather, trying to write *over* language to access some reality or imagination. He has no regard for the word itself. This is something like Mallarmé's words-like-money analogy. While it's one thing for an everyday user of language to disregard words, it seems quite another for an author to do so. Here, Rodrigo, the author, is wielding his notion of human agency over words, and I think he'll find that meanwhile, words are wielding their own agency over his intended meaning. I'll continue to elaborate later on passing over words to try to attain something other than words with writing.

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<sup>14</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The writing of the disaster*, (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 10.

<sup>15</sup> Lispector, *The hour of the star*, 36.

Back to Blanchot's aphorisms: they demonstrate the eerie dynamic of words. They are able to shift and grow, and deposit meaning in their readers even while purporting to do the opposite. Words reach within themselves, revealing their absence and presence at the same time. Blanchot describes this particular phenomenon in *The space of literature*: "Words, we know, have the power to make things disappear. But words, having the power to make things 'arise' at the heart of their absence – words which are masters of absence – also have the power to disappear in themselves, to absent themselves marvelously in the midst of the totality which they realize, which they proclaim as they annihilate themselves therein, which they accomplish eternally by destroying themselves endlessly."<sup>16</sup> These words, which disappear under their own weight, evoke an entire universe's worth of meaning, which is (so twistingly) that those words themselves vanish in the presence of their manifestation.

This must be why we began thinking of words as media, as containers for our meaning. They disappear so effectively that we cease to see them, and meanwhile they are scrambling our meanings with their own volition. It dismays me to even try to unwrap Blanchot's aphorism, because it undoes its point (it undoes the power of the words).

To add more paradox, those words – which Blanchot claims are actively vanishing and realizing totalities on their own – are clearly written by Blanchot, the author. While we observe as Blanchot alternately faces words with humility and rage (perhaps), his own authorial skill (agency, even) is at work. He seems to have reclaimed bits of agency over language by using strange and delicious tropes: metaphor, paradox, and poetics, for example. Is he diverting his loss of agency over words, as an author? There is something going on, clearly, between the word and him. Is he, maybe, finding a new approach to authorial agency?

At this point, I've tended to frame words as a *medium* to communicate meaning, rather than as an entity unto themselves. This sentence marks the point at which I am shifting my conception of words from media to entities. More specifically, I will begin approaching words as bodies, just as I approach human authors as bodies. The interaction between these bodies may be where the author can hope to find authorial agency.

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<sup>16</sup> Blanchot, *The space of literature*, 43.

## The Materiality of Words or Words' Bodies

In *The hour of the star*, bodies emerge everywhere. Bodies, in fact, begin to pervade the writing. I'll now study the bodies of *The hour of the star*: those of the author, the characters, and the text. First, I'll offer context and synopsis. *The hour of the star* is about an author, Rodrigo S. M., who is writing a story about a poor, ugly girl in Rio de Janeiro. Her name is Macabéa and she is a typist by profession, and a bad one moreover. She is from a generally impoverished region of Northeastern Brazil. An orphan, she was raised by an abusive aunt and has a general feeling that she deserves nothing, while she never recognizes the injustice in her life nor does she ever seem to feel malcontented. In Macabéa's story, she likes a certain famous brand of soda, wants to look like Marilyn Monroe, and has a persistent cough. Eventually she obtains a verbally abusive boyfriend named Olímpico, who then dumps her for her co-worker.

There are many possible readings of *The hour of the star*, as is true with great texts. I've read *The hour of the star* peering straight at issues of authorship and of the body. In my reading, there are three key attributes to this text. The first is that the story of Macabéa does not start until about one-third of the way through the text. The first third consists of Rodrigo (the author in the book) discussing writing and the prospect of writing Macabéa's story. The second key attribute is that Macabéa goes to see a fortune-teller in the last third of the text, who tells her that she will have a happy future. The third attribute is that Macabéa dies right after she leaves the fortune-teller, when a yellow Mercedes hits and kills her as she crosses the street.

As for context, Clarice Lispector had a few works published posthumously, but this was the last book published during her life, in the year of her death by cancer, in 1977. This section of this paper is about bodies, and Lispector's body is significant because it was fleshy and mortal, and it was soon to die after writing *The hour of the star*. I'll continue to discuss the death of Lispector's body in a later section, however, and in this section I'll focus on the bodies of those who we tend to think of as bodiless: words, characters, and texts; as well as Lispector's body's relationship to those.

Recall my discussion of "The Author's Dedication" which begins the book (which is written by either "(alias Clarice Lispector)" or "na verdade Clarice Lispector"). The dedication beautifully predicts how you, the reader, will feel the bodily affect of the text. It begins, "I dedicate this narrative to dear old Schumann and

his beloved Clara who are now, alas, nothing but dust and ashes.”<sup>17</sup> Here, Lispector introduces the theme of music, which will permeate the text thereafter. Music and sound become the bodily venue of the text. One should hear the text speak rather than claiming to forego the sound of the words for the story purportedly beyond them. (As I’ll elaborate later, words not only speak and make sound, they *listen*, too!) Moreover, Lispector acknowledges the very bodies of the composers. Not an entity touches this text without having a body. Lispector continues, “I dedicate it to the deep crimson of my blood as someone in his prime.”<sup>18</sup> To digress, here Lispector calls herself “he,” so this must be Rodrigo, “alias” or “in truth” Clarice Lispector: we don’t know which it is, but clearly the *two* are *both* present. Remember this: Lispector *is* present in the text as is Rodrigo. (I am trying to make these words bulge; I feel their truth in my lungs; all words offer in the way of artificial emphasis is to slant forwards.) Anyway, in the quotation, here emerges the very blood of the author’s body, and an acknowledgment of the aging of the author’s body (“in his prime”). The dedication continues as such, making further dedication to many composers and the affect they induce (“to all those musicians who have touched within me the most alarming and unsuspected regions”<sup>19</sup>).

Lispector is not the only one whose ears recognize music in her writing. Hélène Cixous, much of whose work is about Lispector’s work, brings her ears to text, too. Cixous writes: “You may already know the ones whose music I hear. I have brought them with me, I will make them resound. There is *Clarice Lispector*, whose music is dry, and severe, like *Bernhard’s*.”<sup>20</sup> Cixous then remarks on her other favorites and the music she hears in them. Just as Lispector hears music in words, Cixous hears distinct music in her favorite purveyors of words.

What does this music mean? Is it really sound, rather than deliberate music, that produces bodily affect? Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari address the presence of music in Franz Kafka’s literature as such:

It is certainly not a systemized music, a musical form, that interests Kafka (in his letters and in his diary, one finds nothing more than insignificant anecdotes about a few musicians). It isn’t a composed and semiotically shaped music that interests Kafka, but rather a pure sonorous material.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Lispector, *The hour of the star*, 7.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>20</sup> Hélène Cixous, *Three steps on the ladder of writing* (New York: Columbia University, 1993), 5.

<sup>21</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Kafka: toward a minor literature* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota, 1986), 5.



This pure sonorous material – *material* – is what likely interests Cixous and Lispector, too. Any semiotic value of the music shrinks before what may be felt by the body. Rodrigo writes of the story of Macabéa, “The facts are sonorous but among the facts there is a murmuring. It is the murmuring that frightens me.”<sup>22</sup> I think the murmuring consists of the details and ambiguities of Macabéa’s life. Here Rodrigo hears Macabéa’s life, sounds and murmurs. Even further, a surreal moment overtakes as Rodrigo describes Macabéa’s affinity for obscurity: “She lived in slo-o-ow motion, a hare le-e-eaping through the a-a-air over hi-i-ill and da-a-ale .”<sup>23</sup> This is the most explicit instance of sound brought to words. We are forced to pause and hear the vowels, which we nearly always ignore in words.

Now I turn to the body of author Rodrigo, who is made of words. Recall that Rodrigo is the author in the book who is writing the story of Macabéa. He most definitely has a body, and repeatedly speaks of his body. He says in the first few pages, “The toothache that passes through this narrative has given me a sharp twinge right in the mouth.”<sup>24</sup> The toothache appears to have little literal relevance to the narrative, though it comes up twice; and yet, the toothache is a type of ache which inevitably rouses sympathetic pain in the reader. Rodrigo’s body is so fleshy and nervy I can feel it myself. While one would think an entity made of words must be made of thought, Rodrigo writes, “In no sense an intellectual, I write with my body.”<sup>25</sup> Sometimes it seems Lispector is seeping through here. She is able to talk about her own authorship through Rodrigo. Whoever it is, to write with the body is to forego power over words, and instead to approach the word, body to body. Our claim and desire to have agency over words, I think, comes from a sense of intellectual ingenuity in which we own words and their function. To be a body is to approach another body as an equal, and whether to fight, love, or collaborate may be a question of power inherent to one body, but it is also a question of mutual participation by both bodies. Rodrigo also writes, “Unlike the reader, I reserve the right to be devastatingly cold, for this is not simply a narrative, but above all primary life that breathes, breathes, breathes. Made of porous material, I shall one day assume the form of a molecule with its potential explosion of atoms.”<sup>26</sup> He wants not to create a story, but to actually relate and introduce a true living being to the world. He

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<sup>22</sup> Lispector, *The hour of the star*, 24.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

wants to be objective in order to reveal her thoroughly, and in fact, to reveal herself to her.

If someone made of words can have a body (like Rodrigo), words themselves must have bodies. And moreover, someone created by someone made of words (words are now actually creating!) has a body, too. Rodrigo (na verdade Clarice Lispector), before the story of Macabéa begins, writes the following:

Remember that, no matter what I write, my basic material is the word. So this story will consist of words that form phrases from which there emanates a secret meaning that exceeds both words and phrases. Like every writer, I am clearly tempted to use succulent terms: I have at my command magnificent adjectives, robust nouns, and verbs so agile that they glide through the atmosphere as they move into action. For surely words are actions? Yet I have no intention of adorning the word, for were I to touch the girl's bread, that bread would turn to gold – and the girl (she is nineteen years old) the girl would be unable to bite into it, and consequently die of hunger.<sup>27</sup>

Lispector repeatedly acknowledges the materiality of the word, as she does here. She also emphasizes the materiality of Macabéa herself: Macabéa clearly has a body which needs bread. As Mallarmé says that the word disappears in our *everyday* exchanges, Blanchot also says that in the poetic word (or the language of literature), “It seems rather that the word alone declares itself. Then languages takes on all of its importance.”<sup>28</sup> Here Lispector and Blanchot both give the word its own life. Lispector gives Macabéa (made of words) a body, and Blanchot gives the word its own creative power.

This is where the word startles me. The word is now fleshy. The word now needs bread. And this word is not some vegetable; the word is not just a pile of cells and organs. This body is alive: life is breathed into this body. *And the body breathes out.* This body now has a mouth to speak. This body has a will! To create and to move. Blanchot says further (I read this inter-substituting “poetry” and “literature”):

In poetry we are no longer referred back to the world, neither to the world as shelter nor to the world as goals. In this language the world recedes and goals cease; the world falls silent; beings with their preoccupations, their projects, their activity are no longer ultimately what speaks. Poetry expresses the fact that beings are quiet. But how does this happen? Beings fall silent, but then it is being that

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>28</sup> Blanchot, *The space of literature*, 41.

tends to speak and speech that wants to be. The poetic word is no longer someone's word. In it no one speaks, and what speaks is not anyone. It seems rather that the word alone declares itself. Then language takes on all of its importance . . . This means primarily that words, having the initiative, are not obliged to serve to designate or give voice to anyone, but that they have their ends in themselves. From here on, it is not Mallarmé who speaks, but language which speaks itself: language as the work and the work as language.<sup>29</sup>

It's important to recognize the first lines, first of all, where it's clear that these word-bodies are not existing in our world but someplace else, and this is what I will discuss in the next section. By operating elsewhere (allowing the world to fall silent and to recede), the word is autonomous. It speaks itself. It has initiative, it will not designate nor serve; it speaks. It lives. The final line, "language as the work and the work as language," becomes the very embodiment of text. The work (Blanchot's term for an artistic work) gives the word life, and the work is nothing but language.

Rodrigo affirms, "the word is the fruit of the word. The word must resemble the word. To attain the word is my first duty to myself. The word must not be adorned and become aesthetically worthless; it must be simply itself. . . . At the same time, I have attempted to imitate the deep, raw, dense sound of the trombone, for no good reason except that I feel so nervous about writing that I might explode into a fit of uncontrollable laughter."<sup>30</sup> Rodrigo now seems to be moving to a place where he recognizes that the word should be allowed to *be*, and discards any desire to manipulate the word's existence. To the contrary, he has also attempted to manipulate words into a sound: something heard by the body. He appears to have a sense that the word does have a bodily existence, and that he is approaching some relationship with that body, though he is both hesitant and terrified about it.

To return to Macabéa, Rodrigo says the following: "Of one thing I am certain: this narrative will combine with something delicate: the creation of an entire human being who is as much alive as I am."<sup>31</sup> He then says that he wants you to "recognize her on the street, moving ever so cautiously because of her quivering frailty."<sup>32</sup> Here is Macabéa's body to the full, quivering and frail, and Rodrigo

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Lispector, *The hour of the star*, 20.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

(the word himself) declares that he will create an entire human being, and entire living body of his own volition.

I have mentioned earlier that Macabéa is a typist by profession. This is extraordinary, because typing is very most bodily act of writing; it is writing with everything cerebral and emotional removed. It is fingers and plastic or metal. What does this mean? Does Macabéa have anything but a body? She is the very body of the act of writing. She is the body that emerges from the author and words.

This could all easily sound like a lie, because we tend to think that an author has the power to manipulate words to spring forth a “body.” The strawberry, an author might write, is flecked with pale dirt. It is full of sweet pink water that drips. This sounds like the body of a strawberry. But this is something else. When I write this, as I’ve established, the words intervene and create something else. The words will never effectively represent whatever strawberry the author has in front of her. The body of Macabéa is remarkable because she was created by someone made of words: she made of the organs and bodies of words, which have history and creative power all their own.

The Habitat (Where Words Live)

Knowing that words are not representational (“Nothing is more foreign to the tree than the word *tree*”<sup>33</sup>), where do words live? Furthermore, knowing that they are living bodies, where do they live? (Living bodies must have space to occupy.) How it ever was that words emerged in the first place, we tend to think now that we invented them intending for them to live in *our* world. We intended for each single word to sit obediently on a single word’s lap. Plump and red and sweet, or freckled and green on a vine, we demand: go sit still in these flat black curls and lines: s t r a w b e r r y. But, they’ve escaped, or never sat still, I suppose. As we saw in the translations of *The hour of the star*, they are born from an author (e.g. Clarice Lispector), but, clearly, those words have created and grown very apart from the author, and without any reference to the world, either.

“The word is my fourth dimension,” Lispector allegedly said.<sup>34</sup> Is this the place where words live? In *The hour of the star*, Rodrigo says something peculiar: “Is it

<sup>33</sup> Blanchot, *The space of literature*, 39.

<sup>34</sup> Rachel Gutierrez, “Clarice Lispector (English version),” *Vidas Lusófonas*, [http://www.vidaslusofonas.pt/clarice\\_lispector2.htm](http://www.vidaslusofonas.pt/clarice_lispector2.htm) (accessed June 24, 2005).

possible that actions exceed words? As I write – let things be known by their real names. Each thing is a word. And when there is no word, it must be invented. This God of yours who commanded us to invent.”<sup>35</sup> Is this a moment of cynicism or sarcasm? It declares the human-made quality of the word. It is as if Rodrigo is just now noticing that “actions,” or movement in the world, might be detached from words. This is a mystery; maybe it is Rodrigo’s burgeoning awareness of the life of the word, or maybe it is a moment of cynicism.

I contend that words are alive, in the most essential sense of the word. They can move, grow, and produce by some force unseen and unto themselves. The next step is to recognize that words are alive outside of *our* world. We authors often try to force the word to touch the world, we grab it by the wrists and drag it towards the world, but it never touches it, but rather by way of our dragging them there is a spectacular explosion by which the world is destroyed. Or, as Blanchot says, the world recedes and falls silent in the face of the word.

An image comes to mind. As words move around the world, perhaps they wriggle through a single author, creating a habitat. Here they flourish – they grow and change and writhe in heat and die – and perhaps here they exit on to the page. And then maybe they keep moving around the world, amassing nests and producing new pages. As they move around, they acquire creative power (based on Juarrero’s context-sensitive constraints; see the next section).

Wherever the creative conception occurs, it must be in the words’ own space, in a space that we cannot know or see or touch. Texts might be born of our pens and such technologies, but they are certainly conceived elsewhere, in language’s own space.

Blanchot said the following of words’ habitat in *The space of literature*: “. . .we discover poetry as a powerful universe of words where relations, configurations, forces are affirmed through sound, figure, rhythmic mobility, in a unified and sovereignly autonomous space. . . [The poet] creates an object made of language just as the painter, rather than using colors to reproduce what is, seeks the point at which his colors *produce being*.”<sup>36</sup> Blanchot is speaking here of a single text (not of the entire universe of language), but allows this single conglomerate of words – the text – its own space where many complex factors coexist to actually *produce being*.

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<sup>35</sup> Lispector, *The hour of the star*, 17.

<sup>36</sup> Blanchot, *The space of literature*, 42. Emphasis added.

I apply Blanchot's view of the work (i.e., the poem) as a universe to a view of all language as a universe in which mysterious and complex forces produce texts and, ultimately, being. Hélène Cixous analogized writing to H. In this most gorgeous introduction to her book *Three steps on the ladder of writing*, the H is the ladder. It's a meditation and a thanks to language, I think. To discuss it, I will return to my own seed of distrust of language (which has now bloomed into something altogether different).

As I stated in the introduction of this paper, I knew more than one language as a child. The discrepancy between the two or more words I knew for each thing, as well as the millions of things I was forced to cram into two words, made me believe there was something between and beyond words, that words were either playing tricks or failing us entirely. Cixous addresses bilingualism as such: "I have thought certain mysteries in the French language that I cannot think in English."<sup>37</sup> And why the H? The H is an I (one language) and I (another language), and there is "between the two, the line that makes them vibrate; writing forms a passageway between two shores."<sup>38</sup> I and I with a line between make an H. This vibration is the words' space, the words' sovereign universe, which I'm addressing now.

I want to tell you, too, that just as Cixous knows more than one language, Clarice Lispector's infancy in the Ukraine may be significant, too, as her native language was Portuguese. Maybe those sounds, rhythms, and relations she heard in her first two months of life made her forever aware – suspicious, sometimes? – of the materiality of language, of the discrepancies they bear to our world if we look closely. She recognized, perhaps, the vibration between the I and the I (there are infinite *I's* as well)? We cannot know, but it may be significant; Lispector may have been to the words' universe.

Back to the H, Cixous remarks, "Perhaps you were going to tell me this **H** is an *H*. I mean the letter *H* [formatting edited]."<sup>39</sup> She writes, then, that in French, *H* is pronounced *hache* (pronounced "ash"), meaning axe in English. She comments on its variable/multiple gender in French. She also gives it a body, and this body remembers:

In addition, in French, *H* is a letter out of breath. Before it was reduced to silence during the French Empire, it was breathed out, aspirated. And *it remembers this, even*

<sup>37</sup> Cixous, *Three steps on the ladder of writing*, 3.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

*if we forget* [emphasis added]. It protects *le héros, la hardiesse, la harpe, l'harmonie, le hasard, la hauteur, l'heure* from any excessive hurt. / I can only tell you these mysteries in French. But in English, there's breath; let's keep it.<sup>40</sup>

Cixous feels not only words but letters – the organs of words – with her body. The tongue knows the breath of H, the ear hears the axe. Likewise, the body of the H remembers, feels, and bears its own history in its organs. I'd add in English, the "hour" remembers its own *H*, which we forget but which forebears the word all the more.

The question of where words live is mostly unanswered, then, except to know they do not live in the world of things. Nor do they live in a specific place in any brain: because they exit and flourish outside of the brain, too, in text. Words outlive us, remembering history that we've all forgotten. They live somewhere, and not with us.

What Does It Mean To Have A Body? Companions, Constraints, and Creative Power

See the shape of this word: I. "I" is a pronoun in the English language. Whoever writes this word changes it entirely. "I" is unbounded to the severest degree. When I write "I," what do you read? It is much different than what I read, and different from what any other reader will read. In conceiving of words as bodies, an important condition is that a single word is much bigger than a page of words. A single word is so desperately full of potential that it blushes to be spoken, it sits quivering, quietly, waiting for another to ease its swollenness. One single word is endowed with the potential of infinite time, infinite space, infinite knowledge and experience and movement. It is not simply bigger than the world; it is so big that it makes the world disappear. Think of the possibilities of a single word, in addition to the word "I":

Yes.,  
Don't., or  
Strawberry.

Of course, words rarely operate as singles. They are most always surrounded by other words, and they are accompanied by humans. The most amazing thing is that bodies can listen to one another! You have always assumed that you could hear or read a word, but what if the word can also hear or read you? This raises the question of what it means to have a body. Alicia Juarrero approaches this in her book *Dynamics in ation*. She describes context-sensitive constraints, where

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

each component of a system – such as a language system – emerges under certain historical and spatial conditions within the system and its larger environment. These conditions (or context) constrain each component in some way. She writes:

Without contextual constraints on sounds and scribbles, communication would be limited to a few grunts, shouts, wails, and so forth that would be severely restricted in what and how much they could express. Language's increased capacity to express ideas rests not on newly invented grunts and shouts but on the relationships and interconnections established by making interdependent the sounds in a sequence of grunts or shouts, that is, by making the probability of their occurrence context-dependent.<sup>41</sup>

So, to be a part of a dynamic system, then, for a word or for an author, means to be constrained by context. These constraints allow for new, complex, completely unpredictable meanings to emerge. Language is so heavy with historical and spatial constraints that the author cannot expect to control how words will operate.

This also means that language's very nature and function is hinged on its own history. In the first section, I noted that if I independently invented a word right now and spoke/wrote it to you, it could not mean anything at all, because it has neither context nor history. So, a word's memory of space and time determine what it might do, leaving little or nothing to us humans. This, in other words, is a characterization of what it means to have a body. Definitively, a *component* has a body. A body is what separates something from other bodies as well as from the environment, so a recognizable unit in any system must have its own body. The key is that a body is constrained by itself, in that it has limited ability to be and move, and that the body is constrained by its companions and its environment.

Words, therefore, have bodies. They are constrained by themselves, others, and their environment, in other words, by context. Because of this, words actually have creative power. As I summarized Juarrero earlier, constraints allow for new, complex, completely unpredictable meanings to emerge. The abundance of context-sensitive constraints in language offers words their own creative power (not mine, not yours, but their *own*). And where did words get these constraints? It got them by listening – including listening to you – and what it heard is now forever incorporated – incorporated! – into its body. With these constraints, the

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<sup>41</sup> Alicia Juarrero, *Dynamics in action: intentional behavior as a complex system* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1999), 138.



word can move and flex in many directions, and you cannot predict these directions. This is because it is too complex, which in turn, makes it too autonomous. You or I may not predict what may arise out of the word's creative power. We may know that a particular word's constraints make it tend towards preceding verbs, or that a particular organ (such as the letter 'q' or the small intestine) is dynamically connected to another (such as the letter 'u' or the gallbladder). However, we cannot predict what new and dynamic meanings will emerge from these recognizable (and often not recognizable) constraints.

Juarrero uses an example of these context-sensitive constraints in nature, which is useful, because it allows us to see how words and texts operate not only *like* but *as* living material (living bodies). She writes that a complex dynamical system emerges when each molecule depends on what its neighboring molecules are doing, as well as on the past. The molecules are then context-dependent, in other words.<sup>42</sup> What makes these systems dynamic (molecule systems, word systems) is that they are sensitive to and constrained by their own past. According to Juarrero, molecules or other tiny things (such as Macabéa) gain tremendous creative and productive ability by being part of such systems. Macabéa (made only of words; don't forget) could never acquire all her unique characteristics if she existed all by herself. But, in the context of other words (other bodies), she becomes able to both become and create.<sup>43</sup>

Likewise, a molecule that is helpless and virtually identity-less on its own becomes limitlessly productive and individuated when it becomes part of its system. A clear example would be an embryonic cell which has not yet determined its place in a mammal's body. Like Juarrero would say, this cell is impossibly limited and basically dead or irrelevant (for all practical purposes) if it's alone. On the other hand, we can reverse this. Rather than framing this cell's lack of direction as a negativity (dead, irrelevant, limited), we can also endow it with infinite possibility. I am referring back now to the infinite potential of the word "I," at the beginning of this section. Likewise, the words or cells or systems that surround it give it the ability to actively move and produce; but meanwhile, it has lost its infinite potential.

I highlight this potential because I feel this incessant need to do justice to the single word. As Lispector writes, "And we must never forget that if the atom's structure is invisible, it is none the less real."<sup>44</sup> The single molecule is real and

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<sup>42</sup> Juarrero, 139.

<sup>43</sup> *Blid.*, 259.

<sup>44</sup> Lispector, *The hour of the star*, 8.

not to be disregarded, even though it tends to lack the creative power of one surrounded by companions. Moreover (I'm speaking directly to the word now): language could not exist without your contribution, little tiny word, you and your sometimes-companions.

While Juarrero's work is both gorgeous and life-giving, I am inclined to avoid any explicitly representational models of my own making, i.e. the component-system model. She also denies that her theories apply an *élan vital*, or a vital force (a term proposed first as the cause for evolution by French philosopher Henri Bergson).<sup>45</sup> Juarrero does provide a beautiful possibility of a kind of equity among various systems (the human neurological system; the Roman alphabet system). With this equity in mind, but moving ahead from the word "system," I'd like to *affirm* the word's *élan vital*. In my heart I feel the same brio and soulfulness as when I might affirm our own.

So now I again look at the word as totally and wonderfully alive. To reiterate, the word's body listens, and it has a memory. For this, I'll repeat a Cixous quotation from the previous section:

In addition, in French, *H* is a letter out of breath. Before it was reduced to silence during the French Empire, it was breathed out, aspirated. And *it remembers this, even if we forget* [emphasis added]. It protects *le héros, la hardiesse, la harpe, l'harmonie, le hasard, la hauteur, l'heure* from any excessive hurt.<sup>46</sup>

These words remember their past. Though the H, like an organ deemed unnecessary, sits untouched by the human tongue, the words remember their own history. Supposedly unnecessary organs, even if they ever are truly unnecessary (I happen to believe in the appendix), always tell a story, or give a warning about lessons learned in the past, about growings-up and changings. Blanchot, too, recognizes the word's memory: "[The crude word] is extremely reflective; it is laden with history."<sup>47</sup> In his discussion, the word serves to numb our world in our habit of it, in its usualness. If we repeat the word "woman" one-hundred times in reference to one-hundred women, "woman" erases their particularity for us; it erases the enormity and complexity of the world. The reason is akin to the comparison/contrast I detailed above. An individual word (or molecule) is unable to really *do* anything in the world without its companions, but by itself, it is infused with – literally – an infinite memory that

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<sup>45</sup> Juarrero, 131.

<sup>46</sup> Cixous, *Three steps on the ladder of writing*, 3.

<sup>47</sup> Blanchot, *The space of literature*, 40.

could allow it to manifest any one of infinite possibilities. Ultimately, it's a paradox: "woman" potentially means more than a trillion things, but left on its own, it can't really mean anything at all. I've slipped now (whoops) into suggesting a word has some representational value. To offset my blunder, I'll briefly mention the most bizarre proof of the nonrepresentational value of words, the metaphor. The metaphor is the best testimony to both the vast memory of a word, as well as its own volition. The metaphor is what makes a piece of poetry ceaselessly interpretable, full of vigor that seeps out with each new reading. Metaphors are so strange; reading a certain word can evoke the same idea in many readers, though that word is totally unrelated to the idea. It's a subject for another project, a large project, but one not to be ignored.

Based on the words of Juarrero, companionship is what endows creative power. In *The hour of the star*, Macabéa is just barely (but still definitely) accompanied by other human beings in her world. Rodrigo repeatedly observes this. She is orphaned, abused by her guardian aunt, disdained by her boss, and dumped by her boyfriend. She is scarcely connected to a half-mean coworker and her only friend, Gloria (who is now seeing Macabéa's boyfriend). These threadbare connections, though, are what make Macabéa tumble through time and space. This is despite her inclination to be perfectly still and tiny when alone. "She liked to feel the passage of time," says Rodrigo.<sup>48</sup> Also, "she relished the infinity of time."<sup>49</sup> He describes her propensity for being overwhelmed by the grace and enormity of the world. She stands in the washroom alone, smiling until the grace passes. This is the life of a lone Macabéa, perfectly quiet and ecstatic. This is Macabéa in her infinite potential. Her proximity and connection to other people, though, is what allows her to leave a mark on the world, briefly touching the consciousnesses of others and eventually leaving her own organic mass on the street in her death, ready to be reconstituted as other life.

The reader must be complicit in the suffering of Macabéa. Early in the book, Rodrigo says that the author of Macabéa's story must be a man, because a woman would be too sympathetic and cry too much. When reading *The hour of the star*, does one feel helpless? Does the urge to save Macabéa ever even occur? I think generally not, because most people fail to see that a literary character could have a real body. But Macabéa does, and it is both our place and our duty to recognize her as a real, living being.

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<sup>48</sup> Lispector, *The hour of the star*, 62.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

## The Dance and Its Excess

When two humans interact with one another, the two mutually affect one another. Additionally, something emerges during this interaction. Maybe it's a conversation (sounds budding in the air), or maybe it's a bodily embrace (cells touching). A lovely literary proof of this is in Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-five*, where of the alien Tralfamadorian race, the following is said: "When a Tralfamadorian sees a corpse, all he thinks is that the dead person is in bad condition in the particular moment, but that the same person is just fine in plenty of other moments."<sup>50</sup> I think this is a lovely and comforting philosophy in general, but also exemplifies our Western (and Earthian) conception of time as moving and perpetually lost. So, if we view time as an always-existent dimension, like the Tralfamadorians, what happens to those moments we thought were lost? Maybe, if we think of them as having made a permanent mark on the world, we can approach them to examine, recall, and – even – revisit. Sometimes, there are residues of human interaction – like a wound or a pregnancy – but often, our conception of time obliterates our ability to perceive human interaction in the past. And, the residues we do perceive always move and grow. Pregnancies turn into new moving bodies in the world, turn into more pregnancies. Wounds turn into scars turn into just one part of a decaying dead body, turns into soil.

Interactions between the author and the word are not so different from human-human interactions. In author-word interactions, though, a tangible residue more often stays in the world: a text. As we saw with the movements of *The hour of the star*, in the various translations and such, texts grow and change and procreate, just like humans. In the study of literature, it tends to be that the entity with all the star power is the text itself. I think, however, that the most interesting and important phenomenon is the *act* of authorship: the collaboration between the word and the human. I want to conceive of authorship not as simply the means to producing a text. I want authorship to be itself, alone, without regard to the text.

Though the life of the text is extraordinary, authorship itself strikes a chord which rings through every place in the world. It allows the human body to touch the nonhuman body and vice versa with love, and for the two to create together. It allows the world of the word and our own world to touch for a moment as their respective inhabitants meet to dance. Indeed, I have come to think of this

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<sup>50</sup> Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., *Slaughterhouse-five* (New York: Dell, 1971), 27.

collaboration as a dance. The dance requires this couple of the word and the human; and both contributing their bodies' creative power, they interact.

Why the dance? I have considered other terms. I have thought that the interaction is perhaps more like sex, particularly procreation and its definite and tangible product. But the partnered dance is a peculiarly apt blend of intellectual endeavor, collaborative art, and physical effort and pleasure. More importantly, there is *no* emphasis on the physical residue of dance. Dancing is done purely for the dance itself; the emphasis is not on the product, as it is in other creative activity. In painting, for example, the emphasis is put on the painting itself, rather than the act of painting. The dance is in a specific place in time. In dance, we do not attempt to manipulate our linear conception of time by leaving a clear trace behind: we simply dance and let the dance sit forever in its own particular moment of existence.

Perhaps the word used in the metaphor isn't that important, and perhaps nothing is comparable to authorship (metaphors are bizarre, as I've said). The crucial thing is to recognize that authorship is a creative act between two bodies, human and word, and that the act of authorship is something altogether different from the text, which is a residue but a separate entity altogether.

*The hour of the star's* first lines are, "Everything in the world began with a yes. One molecule said yes to another molecule and life was born."<sup>51</sup> Then, the first twenty-four pages are a narrative of Rodrigo (the word-made author) as he prepares to write the story of Macabéa. This first third of the book is like a long affirmation, a long "yes," between Lispector and Rodrigo, before Macabéa can be born. It is the introduction to the dance, perhaps even a courtship. Rodrigo writes:

My strength undoubtedly resides in solitude. I am not afraid of tempestuous storms or violent gales for I am also the night's darkness. Even though I cannot bear to hear whistling or footsteps in the dark. Darkness? It reminds me of a former girl friend. She was sexually experienced and there was such darkness inside her body. I have never forgotten her: one never forgets a person with whom one has slept. The event remains branded on one's living flesh like a tattoo and all who witness the stigma take flight in horror.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Lispector, *The hour of the star*, 11.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

Two things in this quotation reveal the word's participation in this dance, and the word is Rodrigo (the word-made author). The first is the stream of consciousness style of writing in this paragraph. It is as if Rodrigo is writing in time, writing time itself, and only something with a body can exist in time. (The body is the only record of time; the only thing that can move and bear the scars of time.) The stream-of-consciousness style also reveals Rodrigo's participation in some immediate action; rather than acting as a medium, he is participating in the dance with the author. The second thing is the startling presence of Rodrigo's body in this quotation. Rodrigo makes generalized statements about the body (one never forgets), and he recognizes others' reactions to the history of his own "living flesh."

There is a third thing, too: the imperative of solitude. Blanchot's addresses solitude in *The space of literature*, in part of a larger question of from where literature emerges. Rodrigo must be the place from which literature emerges – Lispector and Rodrigo together. Rodrigo is the night's darkness; this implies the greatest solitude. Night, and with it sleep and dreams, is the epitome of solitude. In an appendix, Blanchot writes that the world's solitude is "...the absoluteness of an 'I am' that wants to affirm itself without reference to others."<sup>53</sup> This is night, and sleep. But in authorship, there is a solitude that is not quite solitude, because the author is accompanied by the word and vice versa. There, the infinite potential of each body wanes as it touches another body, and together they produce something. Rodrigo is not afraid of natural, inhuman terrors (storms and gales), but is terrified of another body's presence (whistling or footsteps). Therein lies his own potential and power – in solitude. Maybe this is a testament to the infinite potential of the single body, or maybe it's an affirmation of the necessity of human solitude to produce writing.

At another instance, Rodrigo refers to himself as "someone who is typing at this very moment."<sup>54</sup> This brings me to the idea of "writing the now,"<sup>55</sup> which is different from stream-of-consciousness, in my opinion. "Writing the now" gives room for another participant, another consciousness: this time, it's that of the word. Lispector is famous for writing the now, as Cixous details in an essay on *The hour of the star*.

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<sup>53</sup> Blanchot, *The space of literature*, 252.

<sup>54</sup> Lispector, *The hour of the star*, 19.

<sup>55</sup> Hélène Cixous, Clarice Lispector, and Verena Andermatt Conley, *Reading with Clarice Lispector* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1990), 162.

Is *The hour of the star* a story? A story implies a set of events that occurred in our world. Whether they were real or imaginary, they happened with our flesh and our possessions. Stories imply that we gathered up these occurrences and folded them neatly into pretty word-boxes, to be unpacked and admired at our leisure. Stories imply that we have power over words; they imply a nonexistence of words. They imply that the events at hand moved either from reality or imagination and into the reader, without regard for the words. The words might sound nice, but we think that's the author's doing. So, is *The hour of the star* a story? Cixous, in "How Does One Desire Wealth or Poverty?" writes:

[Clarice Lispector] tells something that in any case cannot be captured in the frame of a story and that is reality. . . . Clarice tells what is happening *now*. . . . Nobody in the world can write and live at the same time; there is always a discrepancy. But what can write as closely as possible to the living.<sup>56</sup>

If Lispector is telling "what is happening *now*," it is because she is writing in collaboration with words. *The hour of the star* is not a story: it is the residue of a dance in 1977. Rodrigo, the word-made man, danced with Lispector, the flesh-made woman. Lispector writes *the now*. How can one not right the now? The truth is that to write *about* something is to lunge at it with a sack of words and smother it; meanwhile neither the words nor the something are themselves in the result. To dance, though, is to make life come out of writing and vice versa.

In *Three steps on the ladder of writing*, Cixous speculates on the book about act of writing. It "takes life and language by the roots," she writes. "It's the book stronger than the author: the apocalyptic text, whose brilliance upsets the scribe. How can it be written? With the hand running."<sup>57</sup> This is the clearest testament I know of the dance of authorship, allowing the body to do the writing, and to have something else present: the book stronger than the author.

Now that I've introduced the dance, I want to talk about what comes out the dance: the excess. I believe the most significant moment in *The hour of the star* is in the dedication. I hate to be bossy but I'd suggest you take a moment to clear the noise around this before you read:

And we must never forget that if the atom's structure is invisible, it is none the less real. I am aware of the existence of many things I have never seen. And you too. One cannot prove the existence of what is most real but the essential thing is to

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Cixous, *Three steps on the ladder of writing*, 156.

believe. To weep and believe. This story unfolds in a state of emergency and public calamity. It is an unfinished book because it offers no answer. An answer I hope someone somewhere in the world may be able to provide. You perhaps? It is a story in technicolour to add a touch of luxury, for heaven knows, I need that too. Amen for all of us.<sup>58</sup>

There is much here, and much I will address as I find moments of relation throughout the text. There are questions here about the word, about the world and God, about death and meaning, and the touch of another body. It's also about poverty.

The atom's structure is invisible. As Lispector begins this book, the world began with a yes between two molecules. Though their substructure is invisible, they alone started the whole wide world. I will draw three things out of this sentence. The first is the question of faith. With allusions to faith throughout the paragraph, perhaps this is a plea to the faith that must accompany imminent death, specifically that of Lispector. Secondly is the question of the medium. Whatever allows the atom to exist is nonetheless invisible; and such is whatever allows the text to exist. As Mallarmé and Blanchot said, language disappears as we exchange it; its body and its structures vanish in the face of what we purport them to represent. Finally, and I don't even believe the first two questions matter in the face of this one, this line is about the infinitely small. It is about how the tiniest things exist no matter their tininess, and – according to the first line of the text which follows shortly after – they are responsible for the creation of the entire world. Here appears Macabéa, the tiniest of the tiniest beings, a tiny life approaching nothing, whom could very well be responsible for creating the entire world.

I want to note here that in Lispector's Portuguese, she starts this same paragraph as such: "E – e não esquecer que a estrutura do átomo não é vista mas sabe-se dela."<sup>59</sup> This means, roughly, and I'm only concerned with the first few words here: "And – and not to forget that if the atom's structure is invisible, it is nonetheless real." I turned to Connelly and Cixous to verify,<sup>60</sup> and found the same stutter. "And – and not to forget." Where does this stutter come from? I wonder why Pontiero omitted it. Maybe it is a spotlight on the body, the orality of this narrative. The mouth stutters. Or maybe it is a spotlight on the now-ness

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<sup>58</sup> Lispector, *The hour of the star*, 8.

<sup>59</sup> Lispector, *A hora da estrela*, 10.

<sup>60</sup> Cixous, Lispector, and Conley, 158.



of this narrative. The unrehearsed tend to stutter. This is an unrehearsed dance. Rodrigo says of “girls who sell their bodies, their only real possession,”<sup>61</sup> that “[t]hey aren’t even aware of the fact that they are superfluous and that nobody cares a damn about their existence.”<sup>62</sup> This harks to the true superfluity of Macabéa, and how she is the excess that emerges from the exchange between word and author. That nobody cares, however, somehow emphasizes their very existence based on the other quotation which affirms the existence of the tiny and the invisible (the atom does exist).

Later in that crucial quotation above: “This story unfolds in a state of emergency and public calamity. It is an unfinished book because it offers no answer. . . . Amen for all of us.”<sup>63</sup> Lispector is writing this just a short while before her death. The emergency is a reference maybe to *The hour of the star*’s bent towards social commentary, and maybe to the imminent death of Lispector herself and others all around. She invites others to participate, and amen for all of us, because she knows that each of us is subject to death. We are all tiny little Macabéas, with each of our deaths near, inevitable, and small. And nonetheless, we each exist, just as Macabéa does. We comprise the world; atoms do. I’ll go back, now, to Mallarmé’s conception of language-exchanges as currency-exchanges. In everyday exchanges, the medium (language, cash, whatever) disappear behind whatever they purport to represent (ketchup, an hour of work). In *literary* exchanges of language (versus everyday exchanges), there is an excess. This excess is the text. Now I’ll return to the term *agency*, which earlier I defined as the ability to move something from one place to another. In a world based on exchange, there is scarce ability to do any true moving: it’s typically just a swap of one thing here to another thing there, back and forth. In other words, there is some ability to rearrange things (I’ll put my cash in your wallet if you’ll put that food in my mouth) but no ability to actually make or change anything. If the author approaches the word as a bodied partner, there can emerge a tiny excess: the text. Macabéa here is the excess, the mark left on the world. This excess is where we can find a way to authorial agency.

The thing about this excess is that it has volition and life. As I’ve detailed, the text – the word – is a living being-body who has the creative ability as well as the will to *do* and *make* in the world, and it has the ability to do this on its own. So this new authorial agency is quite secondary. It require that the author agree to act as an equal participant in a dance with the word, and the excess of this dance

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<sup>61</sup> Lispector, *The hour of the star*, 14.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

(the dance requires both parties), the text, will give both of them agency in the world. Where does this excess come from? The question brings to mind Juarrero's systems, in which the system provides its own context, and thus retains autonomous creative power. In authorship, though, two bodies (units from altogether separate systems) collaborate: author and word. So, this is a different situation where something emerges as something greater than the context of either one, and something greater than the context of the two put together, but a living being unto itself which now serves as a liaison between words and humans everywhere.

Maybe it doesn't seem as if Macabéa, tiny as tiny can be, can constitute any sort of agency in the world. The keys are to remember that the world (the entire world) began with a yes between just two molecules, and that the even smaller structures of the even smaller atom do exist, whether our eyes can see them or not. The molecule, though not infinitely small, is one of our smaller units in the world. Macabéa is so, too. Molecules, for most purposes, make up everything of which our bodies are aware. They are the units of our bodies' world. Might I say that they are everything? Well, Macabéa may be everything. She is the residue, the little bit leftover, the evidence that the dance between the word and author ever occurred. She is the only mark that humans can ever hope to make on the world with words, and only insofar as they will give half of the credit to the word, just as Lispector gives credit to Rodrigo. Perhaps, then, our worldly world is made *only* of these residues: the bits leftover from interactions past. Perhaps our entire world is made of Macabéa.

The Body's Death and Authorship: "The Hour of the Star"

**I** move now to recognize the hope that lies within this new conception of authorial agency. It has been said over and over in history that authorship does promise life to writers. Now, authorship can also promise agency, the life of which will extend beyond the author's bodily death.

Many, many authors and artists have said that through the eternal life of their work, they can deny death's finality, much as a hero is immortal in cultural memory. Blanchot dismisses this as "not only small-minded but mistaken," as well as self-glorifying and vain.<sup>64</sup> I agree, and I certainly hope that if my favorite authors wrote for these reasons, they were polite enough to keep it quiet. Once, in a letter, Kafka had written that he would die content. Blanchot initially asserts

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<sup>64</sup> Blanchot, *The space of literature*, 94.

that this was a lie on Kafka's part.<sup>65</sup> Blanchot finally arrives to say that to die content means not to be content in death, but to be content with a lack of life, and to be separated from other people and life itself. This reflects, for Blanchot, the solitude necessary for writing that I discussed above. Ultimately, he arrives at a paradox. One writes in order to die content, and one must be able to die content to write. Of the two types of authors described (those who seek eternal heroism and those who write to die content), Blanchot says the following: "They are set in one perspective, which is the determination to establish with death a relation of freedom."<sup>66</sup> *The hour of the star* is very much about death, and perhaps about finding a relation of freedom to death. This section will be about death.

Much has been made about the content of the form (as is titled historian Hayden White's recent book, *The content of the form*). Rodrigo writes, "[I]t is the form that constitutes the content."<sup>67</sup> It means that the way and shape of a conglomerate of words determines the meaning of the text. The form, I think, is just one aspect of the use of language which does the world violence. The narrative form does history violence, for example, because it imposes a meaning on an event by giving the narrative a decisive beginning and end, and most typically a climactic moment in the middle. The actual history, to the contrary, clearly does not bear these decisive beginnings and ends: history does not begin or end or change pace. It moves, unpunctuated, and it is our imposed narrative that does it violence.

Rodrigo writes, "A traditional tale for I have no desire to be modish and invent colloquialisms under the guise of originality. So I shall attempt, contrary to my normal method, to write a story with a beginning, a middle, and a 'grand finale' followed by silence and falling rain."<sup>68</sup> I bring this up because of the almost incredible parallel to another contemporary piece of literature about tiny yet monumental women, *Beloved* by Toni Morrison. The final chapter is a very brief kind of epilogue, punctuated thrice by "It was not a story to pass on" or "This is not a story to pass on."<sup>69</sup> It's after the death or disappearance of a tiny girl to whom the world had done unfathomable injustice, much as the world did to Macabéa. Among the last lines are as follows: "By and by all trace is gone, and what is forgotten is not only the footprints but the water too and what is down there. The rest is weather. Not the breath of the disremembered and

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>67</sup> Lispector, *The hour of the star*, 18.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Penguin, 1987), 274-275.

unaccounted for, but wind in the eaves, or spring ice thawing too quickly. Just weather. Certainly no clamor for a kiss.”<sup>70</sup> This is one of those things that make me fall to my knees. But isn’t it remarkable how closely the stories of Macabéa and Beloved (the other tiny girl) align? And after it all, what is there? In *Beloved*, there is just weather, just seasons and wind and ice. And in *The hour of the star*, there is just “silence and falling rain.” And what’s more, the last line of *The hour of the star*, “this is the season for strawberries. Yes.”<sup>71</sup> What is there to make of this? Both of these stories are monuments to the way that tiny, suffering women push through the weather and constitute the whole world, to the point where what remains after their death are the seasons and weather: time and life itself. This is a digression. It’s a remark. But, as Morrison writes, “this is not a story to pass on.” I could not pass by.

*The hour of the star* begins, on the page after the infamous dedication, with a strange title page. “THE HOUR OF THE STAR,” it starts. (In the original Portuguese, this title page occurs *before* the dedication.) Then there is a list of thirteen subtitles, including: “The Blame is Mine / or / The Hour of the Star / or / Let Her Fend For Herself / or /.”<sup>72</sup> Then there are ten more. One of these subtitles is “.As for the Future.,” with a period on either side. The periods imply that nothing lies beyond this subtitle on either side. Everything is contained in the narrative to follow, which is all about the future, and yet loops around and around contained within itself, so its own future would be itself. This is how the world “began with a yes,” and the last word of the text is “Yes.” Over and over, *The hour of the star* circles around, made of nothing but Macabéa. “As for the future” are Macabéa’s last words, too,<sup>73</sup> marking the phrase with a special significance as well as completing one cycle through. I can’t help but think of the weather, of the seasons, that both Morrison and Lispector allude to in the final lines of their respective great works. The lives of these atoms, these tiny girls, circle around and around, comprising life itself. Birth, death, birth, death, and what is more but the seasons? It evokes perpetuity, something that perhaps Lispector is considering in her last year in her body. “[Macabéa] was nourished by her own entity, as if she were feeding off her own entrails,” writes Rodrigo.<sup>74</sup> Here, again, the entire world could be made of Macabéa, circling around and around, feeding only on itself and procreating on its own: a whole world made of atoms, eating atoms.

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 275.

<sup>71</sup> Lispector, *The hour of the star*, 86.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 37.

The beginning-middle-end narrative form, with the weather following, most obviously mimics human life: birth-life-death. The title of *The hour of the star*, in fact, alludes to the moment of death, when every human masters the drama of her death (without learning how, without rehearsal, but simply knowing) to become the star of the hour. And this is the hour of the star. Even the tiniest of the tiny, Macabéa, is a veritable movie star as she lay dying in the street. From the text:

Suddenly it's all over. / Macabéa is dead. The bells were ringing without making any sound. I now understand this story. She is the imminence in those bells, pealing so softly. / The greatness of every human being. / / / / Silence<sup>75</sup>

being. As she dies, a cinematic image takes over: bells pealing silently. Profoundly cinematic images appear moments before this, too: “suddenly the anguished cry of a seagull, suddenly the voracious eagle soaring on high with the tender lamb in its beak, the sleek cat mangling vermin.”<sup>76</sup> These images, almost clichéd, evoke the satisfying drama and distress of cinema. Macabéa, the poor little lamb or the vermin, the tiny helpless being, is nonetheless the ultimate and celebrated movie star in this hour of her death. Much earlier, just as Macabéa's story was being born, Rodrigo wrote: “No one would teach [Macabéa] how to die one day: yet one day she would surely die as if she had already learned by heart how to play the starring role. For at the hour of death you become a celebrated film star, it is a moment of glory for everyone, when the choral music scales the top notes.”<sup>77</sup> And indeed, Macabéa does so, sprawled on the street and doused in melodrama, surrounded by onlookers (they're just passersby) – a fascinated audience for the only time in her life.

But what caused Macabéa's death? I believe it's the fault of the author. Authorship is an immediate act, a dance, a productive enterprise in which one dare not predict the creative path of another body. Macabéa went to see a fortune-teller, or perhaps Rodrigo/Lispector pushed her to do so, and we all heard her future. The author gave the reader Macabéa's future, which – unfairly and truly unfathomably – can *only* – only – be death. Whatever the fortune-teller said, the future must be death. Nevertheless, to predict the outcome of authorship is to destroy the dance, because the creative, collaborative process of the dance has now been destroyed. To predict the future is for the author to purport to have power over the word, to have the power to push it in whatever

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 28.

direction she pleases. So both author and word die along with the story. Rodrigo writes moments before Macabéa's death:

Alas, all is lost, and the greatest guilt would appear to be mine...I try forcing myself to burst out laughing. But somehow I cannot laugh. Death is an encounter with self. Laid out and dead, Macabéa looked as imposing as a dead stallion.../ Macabéa has murdered me. / She is finally free of herself and of me. Do not be frightened. Death is instantaneous and passes in a flash. I know, for I have just died with the girl. Forgive my dying. It was unavoidable.<sup>78</sup>

They die because they dared predict the future. Much earlier, Rodrigo had, in fact, promised not to make predictions. He writes in the first pages, "I ask myself if I should jump ahead in time and sketch out an ending immediately...I also realize that I must proceed step by step in accordance with a period of time measured in hours...This, too, is my first condition; to proceed slowly notwithstanding my impatience to tell you about this girl."<sup>79</sup> And when he broke this promise, this requisite condition, he and she died. Macabéa died in a fit of deceit by the author and the word, whereby they deceived one another as well. They forewent the dance in favor of impatience and death.

Back in the introductory pages of the book, Rodrigo is introducing Macabéa's habitat. "Those polluted docks made the girl yearn for some future. (What's happening? It's as if I were listening to a lively tune being played on the piano – a sign perhaps that the girl will have a brilliant future? I am consoled by this possibility and will do everything in my power to make it come to pass.)"<sup>80</sup> The cinematic premonition of the *allegro con brio* piano tune makes Rodrigo vow to give Macabéa a good future; but of course, any vow at all feels bound to fail. Besides, if Rodrigo claims this power, he is absolutely bound to fail; it's necessary.

I return now to the "Alas, all is lost" quotation. Despite the deceit that occurred, how wonderful that in life, Macabéa was tiny as a germ; but in death, she is immense and powerful even in her prostration: a dead stallion. It's – of course – a lie that she's dead at all. She's continued to move and grow on her own, per the aforementioned translations (just one example) and the thousands of readings and analyses and essays (More texts! New beings!) that was conceived in her. But

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 29.

of the deaths in *The hour of the star*: if Rodrigo is dead now, who continues to write? Lispector, maybe? And maybe she is living her death, too, in this passage?

I do not know when Clarice Lispector learned of the cancer that caused her death on December 9, 1977. I do not know whether it was before or after she wrote *The hour of the star*. All I know is that this book was published the same year as her death, and I can do nothing but assume that she either had enough diagnosis or premonition or maybe just natural human foresight to address her own approaching death with this text. We do all die. *The hour of the star* is a book about death, and ultimately perhaps only about death. The questions of authorship, of the body, of finiteness, are there to provide hope in death.

Writing and death tend to collide often. Blanchot drew a strange correlation between suicide and art, and a beautiful one. He acknowledges that the comparison is “shocking,”<sup>81</sup> perhaps for the trembling reader’s sake. Following a lengthy discussion of various author’s relationships to suicide, Blanchot says the following of suicide:

Suicide is an absolute right, the only one which is not the corollary of a duty, and yet it is a right which now real power reinforces. It would seem to arch like a delicate and endless bridge which at the decisive moment is cut and becomes as unreal as a dream, over which nevertheless it is necessary really to pass.<sup>82</sup>

I recognize Rodrigo standing on this delicate and endless bridge. “To be frank,” writes Rodrigo, “I am holding her destiny in my hands and yet I am powerless to invent with any freedom: I follow a secret, fatal line. I am forced to seek a truth that transcends me.”<sup>83</sup> I see the bridge in Rodrigo’s secret, fatal line. And as I discussed earlier, Rodrigo died most probably because he wanted to jump ahead to the end of the bridge, after the cut. Blanchot, accordingly, writes that “all these traits [of suicide] can be applied equally well to another experience, one that is apparently less dangerous but perhaps no less mad: the artist’s.”<sup>84</sup> Art and suicide here make a shocking (as Blanchot acknowledged) but most apt comparison.

A question then arises, of whether or not Rodrigo did commit suicide by Macabéa’s death. Blanchot, referencing Friedrich Nietzsche’s philosophy and

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<sup>81</sup> Blanchot, *The space of literature*, 106.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>83</sup> Lispector, *The hour of the star*, 20.

<sup>84</sup> Blanchot, *The space of literature*, 105.

Fyodor Dostoevsky's fiction, surveys the humanity as well as the security to be found in suicide. "Natural death is death 'in the most contemptible conditions, a death which is not free,'" writes Nietzsche.<sup>85</sup> Blanchot remarks, also, that in considering the possibility of human immortality in the future, "suicide would constitute perhaps the only chance to remain human, the only way out toward a human future."<sup>86</sup> I think that Lispector must have been disinclined to suicide, but she may have wanted to die.

In the early pages of *The hour of the star*, Rodrigo writes that the person who would write this story "would have to be a man for a woman would weep her heart out."<sup>87</sup> Of course, the truth is that Lispector is writing the story, so this does not offend. It does feel like Macabéa's death is all Rodrigo's fault. Who killed whom? I want to give Lispector the greatest deal of dignity possible in her death, with none of the gorgeous melodrama that emerges in Macabéa's death. Of course I have no idea about the conditions of neither her death nor what she wanted out of it. I am simply struck by the corollaries between this work of authorship and suicide, and know little of what to do with it.

Rodrigo, perhaps a word-embodiment of Lispector here, seems inclined to the kind of despair that accompanies imminent death. He writes, "I write because I have nothing better to do in this world: I am superfluous and last in the world of men. I write because I am desperate and weary. I can no longer bear the routine of my existence and, were it not for the constant novelty of writing, I should die symbolically each day. Yet I am prepared to leave quietly by the back door. I have experienced almost everything, even passion and despair. Now I only wish to possess what might have been but never was."<sup>88</sup> What might have been but never was can only be death, the end of that bridge that one cannot see and never reaches, but the crossing must be done, anyway. Cixous, too, writes that for something to be written, for something to happen, something must die. "We Need a Dead(wo)man to Begin," she titles a section of her book. Based on a passage from Rilke's *Malte*, Blanchot writes, "In order to write a single line, one must have exhausted life."<sup>89</sup> The consensus seems to be that to write, one must be content to leave life (recall Blanchot's discussion of Kafka, earlier). Of course, we do all die, and shortly, too. This is where Macabéa can provide us hope.

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>87</sup> Lispector, *The hour of the star*, 14.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>89</sup> Blanchot, *The space of literature*, 89.



This is an excerpt from Lispector's notebooks from the time that she was writing *The hour of the star*, cited in Cixous' work:

The only way to know if life exists after death is to believe while still being alive. I wanted to die once and come back to life – simply in order to know the juice of life that is death. . . . God acted on a large scale. To do this he wasn't concerned with individual or even collective death. . . . And we – we have a little flame of life that lights up and dies out. We must grow up counting on the fact that we are the tiniest particle of Great Time That Does Not End.<sup>90</sup>

Here is the differentiation between the desire to die and the temptation of suicide.<sup>91</sup> Lispector wants to die (she says it more explicitly at another time) because it defines life.<sup>92</sup> Lispector's deeper discourse about death happens through Macabéa, so Macabéa and the above quotation from her notebooks must be read in conjunction. Knowing that Lispector did have a desire to die, and that she was aware of her own death and her own tininess, I think I can ascertain that *The hour of the star* is an exercise in Lispector's own death. It's an affirmation, too, of her own tininess as well as her own brief spark of life. Even in her death, and her death by words in *The hour of the star*, there lies hope in her tininess (the same tininess we all have). I turn now to Blanchot to further affirm tininess.

For one to endure in history, one must become minimal (like a molecule). Rather than subsisting "in the leisurely eternity of idols," one should want "to change, to disappear in order to cooperate in the universal transformation: to act anonymously and not to be a pure, idle name."<sup>93</sup> Who is more anonymous than Macabéa? With grace, Lispector has turned to the word as her partner in order to leave behind a tiny, anonymous body as her own fleshy body dies. And even more so, Lispector has let her writing be written by another author, Rodrigo. As *The hour of the star's* authors write, "The action of this story will result in my transfiguration into someone else and in my ultimate materialization into an object. Perhaps I might even acquire the sweet tones of the flute and become entwined in a creeper vine."<sup>94</sup> What she leaves behind is a body, material life, sounds and plants. She leaves behind a tiny atom, which alone comprises the whole word.

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<sup>90</sup> Cixous, *Three steps on the ladder of writing*, 33-34.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>93</sup> Blanchot, *The space of literature*, 94.

<sup>94</sup> Lispector, *The hour of the star*, 20.

“We Are the Tiniest Particle”

The violence of words slicing at humans seems nothing compared to the real bloodletting in this world, and the peace we might sign with them seems useless, at best. But then I remember that if Clarice Lispector and Rodrigo had never met, if they had never done the authorship dance, I never would have encountered the tiny and ugly and so profoundly beautiful Macabéa. The violence words do us *is* true, and real, and the power their world has over ours can heal beyond anything else. Macabéa is a real person. Rodrigo said, “In a street in Rio de Janeiro I caught a glimpse of perdition on the face of a girl from the North-east,” and this Macabéa is a body who needs bread like you and me. This is about how the tiny and the invisible nonetheless exist and they are responsible for creating the whole wide world.<sup>95</sup>

Last of all, in all of this, there is so much joy and life and sweetness – plants, light, strawberries – in the way that molecules can make the whole world. A tiny poor girl is what makes our world live and breathe! And each of us is just the same as that tiny poor girl; we are all the tiniest particle. We flare up and die like minute sparks.

I will say that I am happy and hopeful, even having learned that I, too, am a molecule. There is hope, now. The human body is small, but in its smallness lays infinite potential. A word’s body is small, too. Together, the author and the word, two bodies, have the ability to leave everlasting life and – even – agency in the world long after their tiny sparks flare up and die. In the words of Rodrigo, “Dear God, only now am I remembering that people die. Does that include me?”<sup>96</sup> I feel too frightened and overwhelmed to leave you with more here.

May Macabéa’s tiny frail body, a very stallion in her death, continue to bloom and ripen and sound bells the world over.

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 86.