



THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA  
Department of French, Hispanic & Italian Studies

# RMST 202

Romance Studies,  
Modernism to the Present

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*The Passion According  
to G. H.:* Lispector on  
Difficult Passions

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## *The Passion According to G. H.:* Lispector on Difficult Passions

with Jon Beasley-Murray

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Some books are easier to read than others.

**“This book is like any other book.”**

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For we never fully exhaust any book,  
however simple it may appear at first sight.

Lispector’s novel makes its difficulty  
apparent, turning difficulty into a theme.

The book's narrator risks abjection—  
becoming neither subject or object—in an  
encounter with exclusion and disgust.



# LEARNING FROM DIFFICULTY



There are many ways a book can be  
hard to read.



“I am not understanding whatever it is I’m saying, never! Never again shall I understand anything I say [. . .]. Life is just for me, and I don’t understand what I’m saying. And so I adore it.” (189)



“I am well aware of what the so-called true novel is. Yet when I read it, with its webs of facts and descriptions, I am simply bored. And when I write it is not the classical novel. But it *is* a novel.” (qtd. in Moser 261)



It is precisely because the plot is so minimal, and the characters and setting so reduced that G. H.'s reverie has so much space in which to expand. The minimalism of the book's basic elements enables a maximalism of theme and content.



The blank walls of the maid's room become a screen on which anything and everything can be projected.



Such novels play with our sense of scale and our assumptions about what is important, about hierarchies of value and attention. As Lispector's narrator puts it, her brief time of angst and epiphany facing a dying, detested insect turns out to be "the most powerful thing that had ever happened to me" (188).



This is thus a novel that is both spare, pared down and almost skeletal, and at the same time excessive, bursting at the seams. It has too much, perhaps unbearably much, for the narrator or the reader to take in.



“Language is my human effort.  
My destiny is to search and my destiny is to  
return empty-handed. But—I return  
with the unsayable. The unsayable can  
only be given to me through the  
failure of my language.” (186)



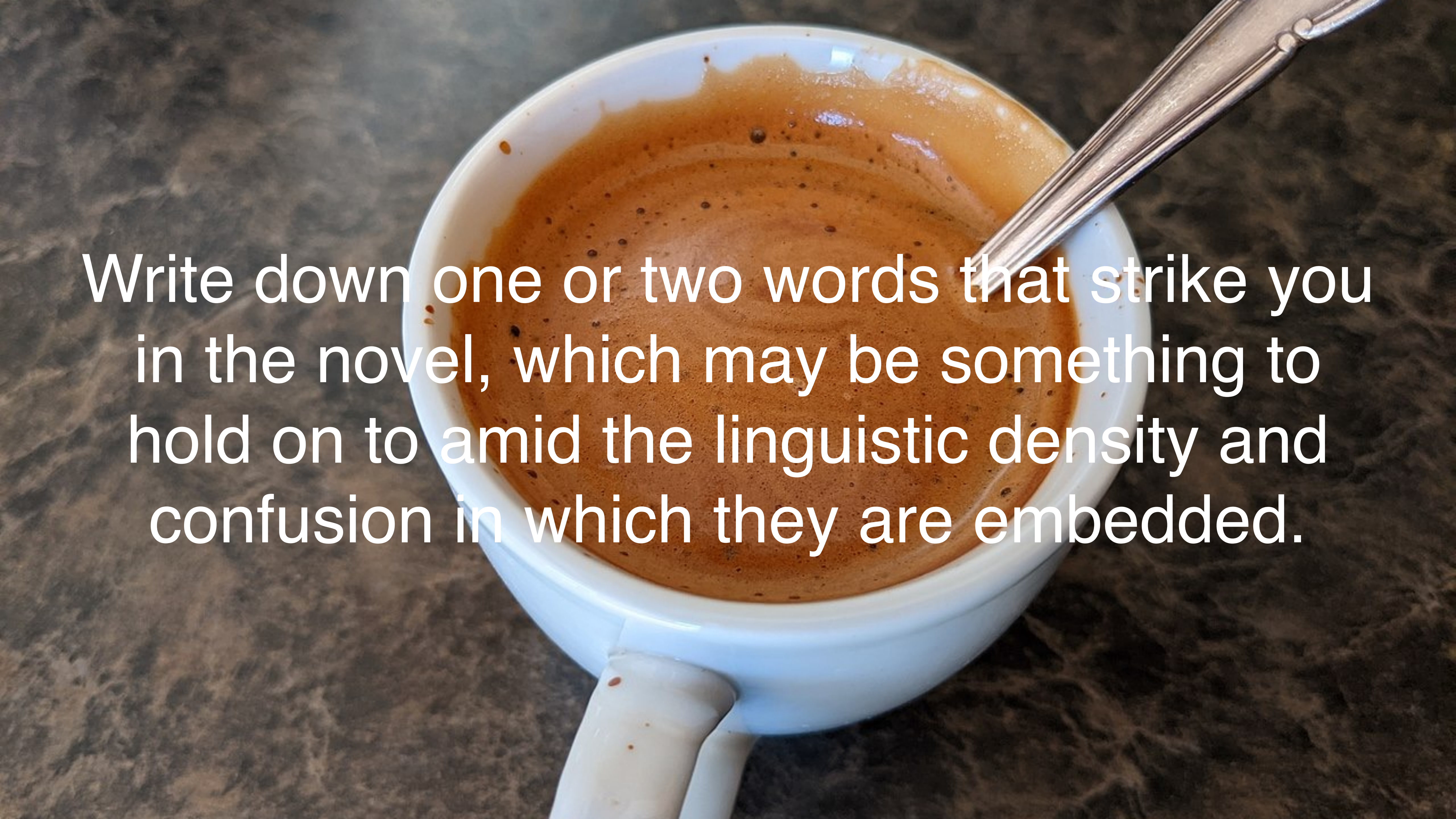
“Give me your unknown hand, since life is hurting me, and I don’t know how to speak—reality is too delicate, only reality is delicate, my unreality and my imagination are heavier.” (26)



With difficult texts, we should not worry that we are not grasping everything. But we should try to grasp *something*. One tactic is to follow a particular word or image, to see how it crops up and recurs or unfolds at different points in the narrative. If we focus on a detail we may find a path towards the whole.

Write down one or two words that strike you in the novel, which may be something to hold on to amid the linguistic density and confusion in which they are embedded.



A close-up photograph of a white ceramic mug filled with a frothy, brown coffee beverage. A silver metal spoon is partially submerged in the coffee, with its handle extending towards the top right corner of the frame. The background is a dark, textured surface, possibly a table or countertop. The lighting is soft, highlighting the texture of the coffee foam and the smooth surface of the mug.

Write down one or two words that strike you in the novel, which may be something to hold on to amid the linguistic density and confusion in which they are embedded.



“I also would have liked to ask her about the various words that recur throughout the book like the subjects in a fugue, returning each time at a slightly different pitch.” (Novey 191-2)





# **PASSION BETWEEN SUBJECT AND OBJECT**

The book's title is a reminder of the protagonist's role as narrator, and the text's status as a book, as a written account of an exceptional experience for which G. H. is both witness and advocate.



“This effort I’m making now to let  
a meaning surface, any meaning,  
this effort would be easier if I pretended  
to write to someone.” (7)

The speaking or writing “I” co-exists,  
barely, with its dissolution.



“The human condition is  
the passion of Christ.” (185)

G. H. sacrifices her own humanity by recognizing her commonality with the cockroach, with the universe.



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Humanity, the notion of a specifically “human” nature, holds us back from such recognition.

“Giving up is the most sacred choice  
of a life. Giving up is the true  
human instant.” (186)



“Depersonalization as the dismissal of useless individuality—losing everything one can lose and, even so, being. Little by little stripping, with an effort so mindful that one does not feel the pain, stripping, like getting rid of one’s own skin, one’s characteristics.” (184)

“We shall be inhuman—as the loftiest conquest of man. Being is being beyond human. Being man does not work, being man has been a constraint.” (182)



Passion combines and eludes both  
subjectivity and objectivity.

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But in all cases, active or otherwise, passions involve intensity, immoderation, excess. A passion can be too much, can sweep us away. As well as ecstasy, it can denote disturbance or even illness.

“I’m afraid of passion.” (7)



“I’m afraid of passion.” (7)

But by the end G. H. accepts, even embraces, passion, if at the price of accepting that she is neither subject nor object but, like the cockroach, abject.





*Periplaneta americana*



Traditionally, fiction is often about the constitution and affirmation of the subject: he or she who has the capacity to act.



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But Lispector's novel is about the decomposition of the subject, as it is both disgusted and seduced by the abject, neither active nor passive.

“What is *abject* [. . .], the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me to the place where meaning collapses. [. . .]

On the edge of non-existence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me.”

(Julia Kristeva)

This is the risk taken by G. H., and the path traced by Lispector's novel: the annihilation of the subject, self, and individual identity for the sake of participation in a cosmos in which God and Nature are one. And yet somehow she lives to tell the tale.



“I would be happy if [this novel] were only read by people whose souls are already formed. Those who know that the approach, of whatever it may be, happens gradually and painstakingly. [. . .] To me, for example, the character G. H. gave bit by bit a difficult joy.”

This is a book that associates difficulty with life. It portrays a “world of a great vital difficulty” (164); but this is also a world in which “the divine promise of life is already being honored” (154). For life is passionate, suffering and joy inextricably combined, or it is no life at all.



# MUSIC

Pianochocolate,  
“Romance”





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# PRODUCTION

[jon.beasley-murray@ubc.ca](mailto:jon.beasley-murray@ubc.ca)

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