

**ROMANCE STUDIES:  
Readings in Excess and Betrayal, from Modernism to the Present**

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

Some books are easier to read than others, and the Brazilian Clarice Lispector's *The Passion According to G. H.* (*A paixão segundo G. H.*, 1964) is more difficult than most. Yet its author, in a brief note at the text's outset, reminds us that "This book is like any other book." For we never fully exhaust any book, however simple it may appear at first sight. It is just that Lispector's novel makes its difficulty apparent, turning difficulty into a theme that deserves its own investigation. It is, after all, about a woman who unexpectedly finds herself in difficulties, and about what, by losing her self, she gains as a result: a passion that encompasses both endurance and enthusiasm, suffering and joy. Taking a leaf from religious narratives, and also a kind of pantheistic cosmology, the book's narrator risks abjection—becoming neither subject or object—in an encounter with exclusion and disgust.

### *1. Learning from Difficulty*

There are many ways a book can be hard to read. Its vocabulary or technical jargon, for instance, may hinder our understanding or appreciation. Or it may have a complex or labyrinthine plot, with many characters and much to remember. But the plot, at least, of *The Passion According to G. H.* is easy enough to summarize. Its protagonist and narrator is a middle-class woman, who we know only as "G. H." She lives in an apartment in Rio de Janeiro, and her live-in maid has just quit and left. So G. H. resolves to clean up the maid's quarters, ready for its next occupant. But she finds, to her surprise, that the room is almost immaculate, pristine except for an odd drawing in charcoal on one of the walls, of a woman, a man, and a dog. Then, in a cupboard, G. H. spies a cockroach, a creature that she almost irrationally finds disgusting. Quickly closing the cupboard door, she intends to kill the insect, but succeeds only in pinning it, half alive and half dead, causing a sticky white substance to ooze from its damaged body. The narrator is transfixed by the wounded beast, and enters a half-delirious reverie about (among other things) the nature of existence and her own identity, which culminates with her ingesting the object of her fixation, putting part of the dying cockroach's innards in her own mouth. The book ends with a confession of bewilderment ("I am not understanding whatever it is I'm saying, never! Never again shall I understand anything I say") and at the same time with an

affirmation of life: “Life is just for me, and I don’t understand what I’m saying. And so I adore it” (189).

In short, Lispector avoids the “webs of facts and descriptions” that, she claims elsewhere, constitute “the so-called true novel” but leave her “simply bored. And when I write,” she tells us, “it is not the classical novel. But it *is* a novel” (qtd. in Moser 261). So what kind of novel is this, what makes it difficult, and how should we read it?

It is precisely because the plot is so minimal, and the characters and setting so reduced (a woman and an insect in a white room), 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, as the narrator’s mind wanders from contemporary Brazil to Ancient Egypt, from her particular anxieties to the human condition as a whole, from the cockroach’s tiny features to the vastness of the universe. Lispector makes a lot out of a little—just as Proust’s madeleine opens up an entire half-remembered world, or Joyce packs an Odyssey into a humdrum Dublin day. 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). The Afro-Brazilian maid’s room, set apart from the rest of her penthouse apartment, is where, however briefly, she abandons her otherwise frivolous pastimes (the “Top-Bambino” club; “crevettes à la whatever” [170]), to confront life, death, and being itself.

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. The prose darts this way and that, ascending high and swooping low, from the banal to the divine, the concrete to the abstract, the material to the ethereal, and back again. It is both fragmented and repetitious, as the chapters overlap (each last line of one chapter returning as the opening line of the one that follows), full of wordplay and contradiction as the narrator wrestles with language itself: “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). It is as though she were returning from a journey and grasping at words to recount her experience. Hers is a “difficult story” (78) and she is

tempted to give up on it. But she perseveres, asking for help from an interlocutor: “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). In so far as we, too, are interpellated or hailed by this second-person address, what is our role as reader?

With difficult texts (and, again, any text can be difficult in its way), 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. Just as G. H. finds significance in the microcosm, in the insect, in the instant, if we focus on a detail we may find a path towards the whole. So pause the video, and 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. While you do that, I’ll have a double espresso, but I’ll be right back.

As Mark Prendergast notes, “Coffee made modern Brazil, but at an enormous human and environmental cost” (*Uncommon Grounds* 22). The most important crop during the colonial period was sugar, grown in the country’s Northeast, but when sugar prices dropped in the 1820s attention shifted to coffee, cultivated in the Southeast, near Rio de Janeiro. Both sugar and coffee were harvested and processed by slave labour, and as coffee boomed the number of Africans imported annually actually rose over the first half of the nineteenth century, even as elsewhere the slave trade was coming to an end—Britain and the USA had ended the transatlantic transport of enslaved Africans (if not slavery itself) in 1807, but trade to Brazil continued (legally until 1831; illegally thereafter) until the 1860s. Slavery was not abolished until 1888, later than any other country in the Western hemisphere. Prendergast quotes a Brazilian member of parliament: “Brazil is coffee [. . .] and coffee is the negro” (23). As for the environment, coffee cultivation led to the wholesale destruction of the Atlantic forest. When the land around Rio was exhausted, the industry simply moved south and west towards São Paulo. The frontier of dissolution moves on, just as a strong coffee keeps sleep temporarily at bay.

There are many words you may have chosen. Feel free to put them in the comments. Idra Novoy’s “Note” appended to her translation of the text takes up the example of the Portuguese word *preso*, which means variously “imprisoned” or “pinned,” “bound” or

“stuck.” She points out that this is one word among many that “recur throughout the book like the subjects in a fugue, returning each time at a slightly different pitch” (191-2). If you feel stuck in your reading, one way to get unstuck would be to trace what the novel has to say about stuckness itself. Novey also muses on Lispector’s use of the definite article—“the”—in a phrase such as “*o Deus*,” “the God.” Even the shortest and lowliest of terms repays investigation and reflection.



*Periplaneta americana*

## 2. *Passion between Subject and Object*

Consider the novel’s title, “*The Passion According to G. H.*,” which immediately invokes a religious tradition: the Bible books referred to as the gospels “according to” Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The name “G. H.,” then, takes the place of the names of these apostles. The title is also therefore 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. Such self-reflexiveness, such awareness not only of what is being told but also of the form in which it is told and of its possible effect on a reader, pervades the text. “This effort,” the novel’s narrator tells us early on, “to let a meaning surface, any meaning, this effort would be easier if I pretended to write to someone” (7).

So she conjures up a reader, someone to whom this account is addressed, “inventing your [their/our] presence” (10). However much her encounter in the maid’s room leads G. H. to an examination and re-evaluation of her own identity (“I, whatever that was” [46]), her purpose is ultimately, like that of the apostles, to communicate a matter of great importance. The speaking or writing “I” co-exists, barely, with its dissolution.

In a redoubling of religious allusion, what G. H. is endeavouring to describe is “the passion.” Though the novel’s range of reference is far from exclusively Christian—the site of G. H.’s encounter with the cockroach is several times compared to the “minaret” of a Muslim mosque, and Lispector, born to a Jewish family in the Ukraine, also draws extensively on the Old Testament, not least the prohibitions on uncleanness found in Leviticus—the term “passion” refers in the first instance to the suffering of Christ on the cross and to the narration of that suffering (“passion, n.,” sense I1a). But where, for mainstream Christianity, in the crucifixion Christ takes the place of humanity, bearing the punishment our sinful nature deserves (“He was delivered over to death for our sins” [Romans 4:25]), in Lispector’s novel it is humanity that undertakes this sacrifice: “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, with what she terms a “neutral love” (182) that radiates through all existence. Humanity, the notion of a specifically “human” nature, holds us back from such recognition. Hence, “giving up is a revelation,” we are told. “Giving up is the most sacred choice of a life. Giving up is the true human instant” (186). G. H. achieves her (in)human potential only by giving up her sense of herself as a person: “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,” G. H. concludes, “as the loftiest conquest of man. Being is being beyond human. Being man does not work, being man has been a constraint” (182). With this assertion, the novel echoes the great seventeenth-century Dutch philosopher, Benedict de Spinoza, from the Portuguese Jewish community in Amsterdam, who identified God with Nature and argued that “joyful passions” (see *Ethics* III, P17) help us recognize our immanence to a single divine Substance.

Passion combines and eludes both subjectivity and objectivity. In its original meaning, passion is about becoming object, allowing others to have their way with you; it is an

exercise in resignation, in renouncing the illusion of free will. The word (in Portuguese, too: *paixão*) comes from the same Latin root that gives us both “patience” and “passivity.” Yet, in everyday speech, passion refers to invigorating emotion, enthusiasm, drive, desire, even frenetic activity: to be passionate about something is to pursue it with great energy, to seek it out at every opportunity; we are encouraged to follow our passions, never give up. At the same time, passion is also more specifically sexual desire, or even sexual performance: “a night of passion”; it indicates ardent affection or adoration. 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: the word’s Ancient Greek cognate also gives us both “pathos” and “pathogen,” “pathology,” and so on. No wonder that, at the outset, G. H. tells us that she is “afraid of passion” (7). *But by the end she accepts, even embraces, passion, if at the price perhaps of accepting that she is neither subject nor object but, like the cockroach, abject.*

Traditionally, fiction is often about the constitution and affirmation of the subject: he or she who has the capacity to act. The object, then, is what is acted upon. This is so even when, as in Alberto Moravia’s *Agostino* or Joseph Zobel’s *Black Shack Alley*, that process of elucidating the subject and distinguishing it from the object is ultimately (inevitably) incomplete or ambivalent. But Lispector’s novel is from the outset about the decomposition of the subject, as it is both disgusted and seduced by the abject, neither active nor passive, which theorist Julia Kristeva defines as “the jettisoned object, [which] 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” (*Powers of Horror* 2). 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, to write this account as both non-object and non-subject.

There is nothing easy about any of this! Lispector is unabashedly difficult, which is not for every reader: her author’s note tells us she “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.” But she also tells us that “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): a world of sacrifice, pain, and

disgust, of giving up illusions of hierarchy, independence, and subjectivity; 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.

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Song: “La cucaracha” (Los Dorados de Villa)