

ROBERT GLÜCK

The Passion According to G.H.

The topic of this panel was strategized, I suppose, to make it easy on us panelists, and perhaps also hard for us to decline—at least that’s how I feel. I detest writing papers because whenever I sit down to write I start at zero, and it’s really too much psychic expense. Instead of plucking ideas from a head full of them as though gathering a bouquet or stringing pearls, I see impossibilities. In fact, I am not really interested in my subject—it doesn’t hold my attention—until I find a way to place it beyond my capacity to understand and articulate. G.H. says it exactly: “What was happening to me? I shall never be able to understand it, but there must be someone who can. And I shall have to create that someone who can inside myself.”

I had been reading Clarice Lispector’s *The Passion According to G. H.* for about a year. You could say I am still reading it, since I stopped last May about three pages before the end, and I finished it yesterday because I thought it would be too cute to report on a book I hadn’t finished. I read thoroughly before abandoning the book, every sentence at least twice. I felt compelled to underline and to make notes, mostly ideas generated by Lispector’s text for the book I am writing now, *About Ed.*

The Passion According to G.H. finished me more than I finished it. It’s a drastic book, a take-no-prisoners book, ungainly, with a nervous, laughable plot, dubious psychological insight (G.H. can stand for *gênero humano*—human kind), even more dubious social critique, and amazing sentences—the kind of book I love and aspire to. *The Passion According to G.H.* doesn’t exactly come together except to wonder at its own disjuncture. The novel may be the literary form that most conveys empathy, which is a kind of demand. But this is a drastic novel, and as Lispector says, “This book expects nothing of anyone.” Right.

I used Lispector's book to set the bar in *About Ed*, a novel and my version of an AIDS memoir. By setting the bar, I mean that there was little distraction in *The Passion According to G.H.* from the mighty sentences that convey Lispector's truth.

In my writing classes, I used to show the students the gnostic gospels, especially *The Gospel of Thomas*. Sometimes I asked Bruce Boone to visit the class and make a presentation about them. Then I gave the students a horrid assignment: Write the truth. Tell me what the truth is. In an MFA workshop sense, it's an extra-literary problem. I left it to them to decide *what* truth, but they had to respond sincerely, without irony or parody. I wanted them to have that experience. Lispector could have been responding to that assignment.

I don't really want to make a book report, but I do need to tell you a few things so we can be on the same page. Clarice Lispector was a Brazilian writer, a Jew, who lived from 1920 to 1977. She became middle class, a wife and mother, and she wrote about that life from the age of nineteen to the end. She was also a journalist and she wrote children's books. *The Passion According to G.H.* was published in 1964; it's from the second half of her work, which is more extreme than the first. Like Gail Scott's heroines, Lispector's are often situated in one place, by an open window, say, or on the floor of the maid's room. The internal monologue is aimed at an absent you, or addressing an inner other, and sometimes the reader. I would compare *The Passion of G.H.* to Gail Scott's *Obituary* in its daring sadness, its structure derived from the brokenness of experience.

The set-up of Lispector's book—addressing parts of the book in quotes to an absent lover—is not really credible because the absent lover never stops being more than that, and the sections addressed to him are no different from the sections not addressed to him. He never steps forward. Meanwhile, Lispector muscles through epistemological problems to arrive at a spirituality that is akin to other such manifestations (Georges Bataille, Zen) but also all its own.

Lispector weaves the chapters together by using the last line of each chapter as a first line the next chapter. Sometimes the result is interesting, more often exasperating. But it does point to the sentence rather than the paragraph.

The maid has quit after six months, her dark-skinned face forgotten after one day, and G.H. ventures into the maid's room, where G.H. perhaps has never been, in order to straighten it up. The room is immaculate, but G.H. discovers that the maid hated her. At least G.H. imagines the maid hated the very qualities G.H. will abandon in that room: sensibility, taste, talent for living, for making arrangements of all kinds. G.H. mysteriously deduces the maid's feeling from some outlines the maid did or didn't draw on the wall of a woman, a man, and a dog. This secondary plot is not developed or resolved. G.H. tries to hitch her spiritual progress to awareness of social evil—but it's only by proximity, like the maid's room, attached to the rest of the house but never entered by her. G.H. comes to understand her own privilege, though when she is pushed to the brink she abandons this notion without conflict, to go further, to the discovery of a non-self and a non-personal spirituality.

In the spotless room, a cockroach half emerges from a wardrobe, and G.H. crushes it with the wardrobe door so that its rear half is flattened by the door and its front half faces outward. Throughout the story white gunk—the cockroach's gut—extrudes from a crack in its shell. G.H. is also pinned to the room, on the floor, held fast by the cockroach. G.H. contemplates the cockroach, and works through versions of impurity. She begins to live in the present. Then she learns about the neutral, and with a jump in scale, sees the neutral world—and so she should be neutral to her own death or fate: "And there is also at times the exasperation of the atonal, which is a profound happiness: exasperated atonality is flight rising—nature is exasperated atonality, thus it was that worlds were formed: atonality became exasperated." She is freeing herself from her morality. In this context—she wants to know love and to be touched.

She writes to her lover about tasting the salt in his tears. Perhaps this is a preview, eating the substance of the one who is sought. Silence comes next—that of the neutral cockroach without a name for love or suffering. Its only differentiation in life is that it has to be either male or female. “I had been thinking of it only as female since whatever is caved in at the middle must be female.” With an address to her mother, G.H. expels fear and with it the desire to be helped. Now she must let go of her lover’s hand in order to return with a love that does not include self, or even the organic—that does not include, accrete, or self-enlarge

“Only in an unexpected rippling of the lines, only in an anomaly in the uninterrupted continuity of my culture, did I for an instant experience life-giving death”. 7 (This resembles the *Clinamen*)

“A cockroach is larger than I am because its life is so given over to *Him* (God) that it comes from the infinite and moves toward the infinite unperceivingly, it never becomes discontinuous” (which resembles Bataille, even the vocabulary). On page eighty-nine someone new appears, an appearance I really have to think about. Someone I don’t want, who collects ideas hard to reach, hard to grasp and supplies them with a non-face—God. “I was afraid of God’s face, I was afraid of my final nakedness on the wall.” Now we see that the ideas being gathered are demonic in Blakean reversal. “For the unexpressive is diabolical. If that person has the courage to leave her feeling behind, she discovers that huge life of an extremely busy silence, the same sort that exists in the cockroach, the same as in the stars, the same as in herself—the demonic is *prior* to the human. And if that person sees that newness, she sings herself, as though she saw God.”

Lispector resituates suffering and even martyrdom inside the human, insofar as the human is an animal, and outside of God, though they are things to offer God as unwanted gifts.

This annoys me. There is too much about God. God is described more than her lover: *God is greater than goodness and beauty... I fear that not even God comprehends... Even Christ himself ... God is what exists, and all the contradictions are within God, and therefore they don't contradict him.* I am afraid she really is serious about God. I prefer for God to exist as a ghost does, part of the plot so we can feel and think certain things. Perhaps as ecstasy that does not have culmination. "What I speak to God about has to make no sense. If it makes sense, it is because I err."

With God comes hell: "Hell is the mouth that bites and eats living flesh that has blood, and the one eaten howls with delight in his eye: Hell is the pain like pleasure of matter, and with the laughter of delight tears run in pain." God is a profound abyss that re-absorbs everything. A grandiose Indifference.

I felt betrayed. As though G.H. were unfaithful to me. We were doing just fine—what do we need *Him* for? I kept myself from throwing the book across the room. I was taught not to let a book touch the floor in case God's name was written in it—and was it ever! Though religious injunctions and self-irony did not keep me from throwing *Mrs. Dalloway* across a different room at a much earlier date. For a month or so I avoided looking at *The Passion of G.H.* where it sat by my bed. Then I wondered, Must I feel betrayal in order to recognize myself in the story of faith?

I suppose in any ghost story—even one about the Holy Ghost—the least important thing is my belief in ghosts. The important things are what we need from the story: terror, the unwanted knowledge of the ease with which the sentient and the inorganic change places. Perhaps there are two kinds of belief; the first is undoubtedly bound up in a story, the second attempts to negate story itself. Of course we assume the later is more authentic because it is impossible to achieve with a conscious mind, or, let's say, a finite mind. "All sudden understanding is in the last analysis the revelation of a clear non-understanding."

Obviously we need whole arsenals to repress the knowledge that the world wants us to become the world. Rejecting the knowledge that Ed had stopped being human, animal, cellular, living, organic, was self-preservation in the purist form. Lispector's vision of the future is very close to Ed's—"In a hundred thousand years—we finally won't be what we feel and think anymore: we shall have something that more closely resembles an 'attitude' than an idea. We shall be living matter manifesting itself directly, unmindful of words, going beyond always-grotesque thinking." Lispector cautions me to be wary of beauty—it's a distraction; and she chastens me—don't reject the tedium of love, the drabness of illness. Perhaps I have prepared for Lispector's book all my life—the morbidly good girl scrubbing my smudged fingerprints off the void.

When I was a lot younger, for a brief time, my life-plan was to become a Catholic saint. I wonder if my almost complete isolation reduces a little the pretentiousness of my plan. I started reading mystical texts in preparation. These texts were written by women for the most part; I took for granted they would be more receptive to the divine—whatever that is—and more porous in general. I reasoned saints have to come from somewhere, even Cleveland Heights, which might equal a Biblical backwater like Bethlehem, and certainly needed an infusion of spirit. Being Jewish was a stumbling block that grew so large it became an impasse. But here is Lispector in the glory of her abjection and ascendancy, finding a kind of salvation. Her book has the feel of a 15th century mystical tract, long on meditation and abjection, short on plot. G.H. says, "I am the priestess of a secret that I no longer know." Didn't G.H. retreat to a cell, confining herself during the course of her meditation? Just like the anchoress Julian of Norwich? The title of Julian's book, *Showing of Love, or Revelations of Divine Love*, could be a translation of *The Passion According to G.H.* The object of G.H.'s meditation is not the hyper-reality of god's wounds, but the wounds of a cockroach. "For redemption must be in the thing itself. And the thing itself would be putting into my own mouth the white paste from the cockroach."

Oh no, she's eating the cockroach! She swallows the guts exuding from the wound as a sacrament, a weird vitalism, a non-transubstantiated, materialist host. Consuming is an ancient and common way of becoming, incorporating. This event embarrasses me, it's laughable, our narrator spends the day on the floor of the maid's room, coming to the conclusion—after long hours of existential riffing—that she should eat part of a cockroach. Yet I read it on the edge of my seat, like a ghost story. A horror story, screaming with awareness.

Honestly, you have to wonder how Lispector decided this cockroach-eating story would be a good idea. At what point did she recognize herself in this story, and see that the story could accept everything she needed to put in it—her loss, her despair, her faith—that she could succeed through the power of her sincerity.

Even as Lispector makes the limit of language a theme, she seems to believe that language can convey experience through her strength and sincerity: “But I am going to tell you something that must be said, that must be said.” “I am going to tell you what I have never told you before—” She is fearless, or she is afraid and she goes on anyway: being pretentious, writing badly, writing nonsense, the indescribabilia. Her sincerity may be her faith in language, which I like to consider when I think about her. She ends her book with an envoi to language itself, about the power of language at its limit. “I don't understand what I am saying. Therefore, I adore.”

I think about Lispector's faith in language. During eras when the paradigm is changing—as it is now—people often feel weak before language and representation. This was true of the late 14th and 15th centuries. People literally did not know how to understand representations, or where they would stop. People felt weak before images. If a married woman wore a white dress, was she a Whore, Lollard, Deceiver of the People? Did it mean that civil war was at hand, or the end of the world? Then we had

better burn her. When I encounter shrill and toxic discourse on social media, I am reminded of the 15th century, and also how far we have come from Lispector's confidence and the trust.

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