

The Littoral of Água Viva: The Lacanian Concept of the Letter through Literature

Litoral de Água Viva: O Conceito Lacaniano de Letra a partir da Literatura

Litoral de Agua Viva: El Concepto Lacaniano de Letra a partir de la Literatura

Littoral de Água Viva : Le Concept Lacanien de Lettre à partir de la Littérature

 10.5020/23590777.rs.v25i1.e16969

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Abstract

This article discusses writing as an erasure that inscribes a mark on the subject's body, taking Clarice Lispector's *Água Viva* as our point of departure. We propose to articulate the Letter and writing from the perspectives of the hole in knowledge and their production of effects of *jouissance*, using *Água Viva* as an interlocutor for a writing that is littoral. Accordingly, we examine Lacan's psychoanalytic concept of the Letter, following the logic of the signifier, which does not confine itself to classifications but slides in its meaning. The Claricean work serves as a guide for this “whole-body understanding.” To clarify the discussion, we problematize the concepts of knowledge and *jouissance* in relation to the literary text, highlighting convergences and possible similarities between psychoanalytic theory and literature. The Claricean “anti-book” *Água Viva* can orient the comprehension of the Letter insofar as it escapes literary-genre classifications and, in doing so, defines its fiction — its not-all truth — while tracing a border with the hole in knowledge and producing effects of *jouissance* through its erasures.

Keywords: psychoanalysis, Lacan, letter, Clarice Lispector, *jouissance*.

Resumo

Esse artigo objetivou discutir a escrita como rasura que faz marca no corpo do sujeito, a partir da obra literária clariceana *Água Viva*. Nossa proposta foi articular a letra e a escrita nas perspectivas do furo no saber e também como produtores de efeito de gozo, usando a obra *Água Viva* como interlocução dessa escrita que é litoral. Para tanto, discorreremos sobre o conceito psicanalítico de letra em Lacan, seguindo a lógica significante, que não se limita às classificações, mas desliza em seu sentido. A obra clariceana servirá de guia para esse “entendimento de corpo inteiro”. Problematizamos, para uma melhor compreensão, os conceitos de saber e gozo ao relacioná-los à obra literária, destacando convergências e possíveis similaridades entre a teoria psicanalítica e a literatura. O “antilivro” clareciano *Água Viva* pode guiar a compreensão da letra na medida em que foge das classificações de gênero literário e termina por poder definir sua ficção, sua verdade não-toda. Assim fazendo borda entre o furo no saber e provocando efeito de gozo em sua rasura.

Palavras-chave: psicanálise, Lacan, letra, Clarice Lispector, gozo.

Resumen

Este artículo objetivó discutir la escrita como tachadura que hace marca en el cuerpo del sujeto a partir de la obra literaria clariceana *Água Viva*. Nuestra propuesta fue articular la letra y la escrita en las perspectivas del agujero en el saber y también como productores de efecto de gozo, usando *Água Viva* como interlocución de esta escrita que es litoral. Para tanto, discurremos sobre el concepto psicoanalítico de letra en Lacan siguiendo la lógica signifiante, que no se limita a las clasificaciones, pero resbala en su sentido. La obra clariceana servirá de guía para este “entendimiento de cuerpo entero”. Problematicamos, para una mejor comprensión, los conceptos de Saber y Gozo al relacionarlos a la obra literaria, enfocando convergencias y posibles similitudes entre la teoría psicoanalítica y la literatura. El “anti-libro” clariceano *Água Viva* puede guiar la comprensión de la Letra en la medida en que huye de las clasificaciones de género literario y termina por poder definir su ficción, su verdad no-toda. Así haciendo borde entre el furo en el saber y provocando efecto de gozo en su tachadura.

Palabras clave: psicoanálisis, Lacan, letra, Clarice Lispector, gozo.

Résumé

Cet article visait à discuter de l'écriture comme une rature qui marque le corps du sujet dans l'œuvre littéraire *Água Viva* de Clarice Lispector. Notre proposition était d'articuler la lettre et l'écriture à partir des perspectives du trou du savoir, ainsi que comme producteurs de l'effet de jouissance, en utilisant l'œuvre *Água Viva* comme reflet de cette écriture littorale. À cette fin, nous discutons du concept psychanalytique de lettre chez Lacan en suivant la logique signifiante, qui ne se limite pas aux classifications, mais frôle dans son sens. L'œuvre de Clarice servira de guide pour cette « compréhension du corps entier ». Pour une meilleure compréhension, nous problématisons les concepts du savoir et de la jouissance en les reliant à l'œuvre littéraire, tout en soulignant les convergences et les similitudes possibles entre la théorie psychanalytique et la littérature. L'anti-livre de Clarice, *Água Viva*, peut guider la compréhension de la lettre, dans la mesure où il échappe aux classifications de genre littéraire et finit par définir sa fiction, ainsi que sa vérité pas-tout. En établissant un contour autour du trou du savoir et en provoquant l'effet de la jouissance dans sa rature.

Mots-clés : psychanalyse, Lacan, paroles, Clarice Lispector, joie.

This article presents the path developed in a master's thesis that set out to articulate psychoanalysis and literature, titled *Letra como Litoral de Água Viva: Reflexões Psicanalíticas Sobre a Escrita em Clarice Lispector e o Gênero*. Our aim was to discuss the Lacanian concept of the Letter from a poetic perspective, taking Clarice Lispector's *Água Viva* as our object. We pursued a psychoanalytic reading that allowed us to wander through words — sliding across meanings and signifiers — as a method for reading texts.

We approach *Água Viva* as writing, as a Letter, that writes an existence for itself. Our intent was to attend to possible relations between Lacanian-oriented psychoanalysis and this writing of *litoralterra*. We took care not to occupy the pedagogical position of teaching that would formulate an all-encompassing statement about the work; rather, we sought to show the littoral between Clarice and Lacan. In this heterogeneous encounter, we position ourselves on the shifting margin in-between. It is not a matter of delimiting knowledge about one or the other, but of letting something emerge from the experience with writing.

We selected this work among many possible ones because it is a “novel without a novel,” in which the author makes the word perform a pirouette. The “I” appears without a name and rejects any logic imposed a priori by classification: “But what harm is there in my straying from logic? I am dealing with raw material. I am after what lies behind thought. It is useless trying to classify me: I simply slip away; genre doesn't catch me anymore” (Lispector, 1998, p. 13).

In *Água Viva*, “what I say is never what I tell you but something else. Grasp that thing which escapes me and yet I live from it and float on a brilliant darkness” (Lispector, 1998, p. 14). We chose this work precisely because it speaks of what escapes—in the interlines where the subject dwells.

These passages foreground a writing that neither confines nor allows itself to be confined by labels and classifications. We therefore proceed from two strands of Lacan's teaching on the Letter — knowledge and jouissance — in order to trace the concept without collapsing it into a definition. We think of knowledge in its relation to the symbolic, drawing on the Lacanian premise of the unconscious structured like a language to articulate the fields of the symbolic. How might the *Água Viva* be seen as an “in-between,” an edge, a littoral? It is a question without a fixed answer, one we set out to theorize over the course of this work. To that end, we begin by developing the concept of the Letter in Lacan alongside the registers of the symbolic and the real — the Letter “drawn,” bordering jouissance and knowledge — and then we articulate this concept in the writing of *Água Viva*, punctuating literature and psychoanalysis.

For the concepts of Letter and writing in Lacanian theory, we start from the chapter “*Lituraterra*,” in *Seminar XVIII: On a Discourse That Would Not Be of the Semblant*. We also draw on other authors who address the Letter and writing, such as Ram Mandil (2010), to clarify the concepts of knowledge and jouissance in relation to our chosen work, highlighting convergences and possible similarities between psychoanalytic theory and literature.

First, we discuss the hole in knowledge through passages that foreground the “meaningless” word. Second, we examine the effects of jouissance produced in the relation between the subject and writing, building a bridge to some of Roland Barthes’s reflections (2015). Finally, we propose a few possible signifying slips concerning “fiction” and “genre,” articulating literature and psychoanalysis. We use excerpts from *Água Viva* as section epigraphs to underscore the articulation between the writing and the psychoanalytic topics addressed.

We recognize, first, that the knowledge psychoanalysis offers — neither limited to nor consolidated in the Oedipal resolution — is fragmentary and incomplete. Second, as Freud suggests (1933/1996c, p. 143), those who wish to know more should “inquire of your own experience of life, or consult the poets, or wait until science can give you deeper and more coherent information.”

Knowledge is by nature fragmentary; this is one of our premises. The Letter and the writings of *Água Viva* and of gender are relations we construct to keep thinking about mental life beyond the conventions of anatomy, sociology, or literary genres. We interweave poets with new studies in psychoanalysis and the social sciences, always emphasizing the premise of the not-all. Beyond consulting poets or scientists, the knowledge in this work remains incomplete and fragmentary because it points to what, in the subject, does not complement itself, makes a lack, and causes desire.

“Madness is Neighbor to the Cruellest Sanity”

Imagine any beach: sea and sand — the dry part contrasted with the wet, the mis-meeting of the two. Perhaps complementary, but heterogeneous, the littoral forms from this layered blend that is visibly separate. With this image in mind, we proceed to discuss what complements without becoming one; a difference that distinguishes and makes the singular, that allows the mis-meeting which unites and separates at once.

Clarice Lispector carried an air of foreignness and difference, regardless of her nationality. When asked about it, she replied that she belonged to Brazil. She adopted the language, the customs, the Brazilian nationality, and still, an aura of mystery followed her. Her extimacy came from elsewhere; she did not fit into classifications. She disliked superficialities; there was something mysterious, almost impenetrable, about her. For many, her writing was incomprehensible — not in the logical order of understanding, but of nonsense. In a 1977 interview with Júlio Lerner for TV Cultura, she says, “I suppose that understanding me is not a matter of intelligence but of feeling, of making contact. Either it touches, or it doesn’t.”

In this place of extimacy, no definition fits. Perhaps this impossibility of classification is what best defines her. Carlos Drummond de Andrade (2014, p. 71) made her into a poem: “Clarice came from a mystery and departed for another (...) she was not a commonplace, an ID card, a portrait. The purest portrait of Clarice can only be found behind the cloud (...) she merely fascinated us. We left understanding her for later.”

Understanding is deferred; first comes what lies behind the cloud, behind thought — that mystery in the shape of a woman, writer, journalist, mother, Jew, housewife, foreigner, or any other nomination. She distanced herself from personal accounts; she did not follow an autobiographical bent; she wanted to speak of the human: “I will not be autobiographical. I want to be bio” (Lispector, 1998, p. 12).

A lover of writing, a foreigner to the land, set free by words, her work bears this air of mystery and depth. For our purposes we chose *Água Viva*, a novel-without-a-novel that does not fit literary classification; it stands in extimacy. Inside and outside, the book is described by the author herself as an “anti-book”: it goes against literary norms and does not follow rules.

The littoral, unlike a border, reveals the heterogeneity of what composes it. Between the fluidities of sea and sand — in the ebb and flow — the difference appears. Lacan uses the littoral as a metaphor for the Letter. For him, the Letter draws the littoral between the hole in knowledge and the effect of jouissance; it makes an edge — almost a contour that prevents falling while also marking that there is a lack there. We will develop this further below.

Because our focus is *Água Viva*, we also evoke a marine figure to represent a writing that is fluid in its structure. A transparent animal, without a defined form, lacking a fixed bony structure — almost entirely water — its beauty must be admired from a distance; too close can be dangerous. We can relate this image to the hole in knowledge: it cannot be grasped, held in one’s hands, or fitted into a concept; it is fluid and escapes.

As for the work itself, perhaps Clarice was inspired by this sea creature to say her writing; those who try to trap it in classifications get a shock. Whether physical or metaphorical, the subject is jolted on being touched. Estrangement is always present. The word is not rigid bone but water. Meaning is fluid and can slide. The word gains value by shedding predetermined sense, by remaining out of reach and forever eluding understanding.

Freud founded psychoanalysis on the wager that “the subject is not master in his own house.” Self-control reaches only so far. We tend our house, but total mastery over oneself is impossible. A misplaced word, a strange dream, an action that

bespeaks a desire — these reveal the unconscious. What appears to be an error ends up revealing a knowledge that is not known.

Freud's first publication (1895/1996a), *Studies on Hysteria*, with Breuer, is situated amid a certain mystery. Patients arrived with an ailment — a cough that would not stop, a paralysis, or some other bodily symptom — for which no tangible physiological explanation could be found. Freud realized there was a reason hidden in what they said, an unconscious logic linked to their symptoms.

Since *Studies on Hysteria* (1893-5), by Freud and Breuer, the etiology of neurosis was tied to a “not-knowing,” expressed as gaps in memory about past events. Even then, Freud suspected these gaps did not result from a passive erasure of memory, but from an operation that set a “not-wanting-to-know” in motion. (Mandil, 2003, p. 64)

Across his work, Lacan returns to Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900/1996b), *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901/1996c), and *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905/1996d) to think the functioning of this psychic instance. From dreams, witticisms, slips, bungled and symptomatic acts, he discerns that a system orders this instance and thus states that “the unconscious is structured like a language,” not far from Freud's claim that “the dream has the structure of a sentence.”

This proposition is fundamental for understanding the subject's relation to unconscious formations that appear as if they were not one's own. This instance, over which the subject lacks mastery, throws open the failure of “self-knowledge.” Descartes (1637/2005) asserts through the maxim “I think, therefore I am” that existence is tied to thought. Lacan (1972/2012, p. 112), by contrast, avers: “I am where I do not think” — precisely where reason does not reach, there being exists.

While philosophy advocates self-knowledge through reason, psychoanalysis emphasizes the hole in knowledge: an incomplete, lacking subject who does not possess total control or knowledge of self. In fact, for psychoanalysis reason distances the individual from himself. In trying to rationally fill the void, one loses sight of the unconscious — the knowledge the subject himself does not know.

Often, the subject does not want to know what disturbs and unsettles. The word of the day in the contemporary West is mindset: a set of synapses that shape you, and — so the theory goes — if one only “worked the mind” properly to correct and refashion them for utility, life would change. In the neoliberal era, even the mind is trainable for success.

Within this logic of self-control and optimization, unconscious knowledge is neglected. Yet no matter how one tries to forget lack and the “stranger within,” unconscious formations do not cease by sheer will, by a new habit, or by a new mindset. We are not masters in our own house; consciousness is not conscious of everything; knowledge is holed.

Lacan writes: “They know, subjects. But still, even so, they do not know everything. At the level of this not-all there is only the Other that does not know. It is the Other that makes the not-all, precisely insofar as it is the part that from-all-does-not-know in this not-all” (1973/2008, p. 105). One cannot know totally; reason is holed — always incomplete, lacking. However much one wishes to cover lack, the subject cannot know everything.

By citing Clarice Lispector (1998) — “madness is neighbor to the cruelest sanity” — as our subtitle, we underscore a sanity whose cruelty borders on madness. Rationality has a function, an operation, and a limit. To tampon the hole with knowledge — or anything else — is to remain in a “not-wanting-to-know,” which does not stop dreams, slips, or those “equivocations” that embarrass the subject.

We proceed, contrariwise, with psychoanalysis alongside Clarice in *Água Viva*, seeking what cannot be grasped. We try to capture “that thing which escapes me and yet I live from it” (Lispector, 1998, p. 14), diving into the depths of oneself, in contact with a knowledge that is a question without an answer.

Cruel sanity is to perceive a single meaning in the word; we are moving away from that and toward holed knowledge. The hole suggests mis-apprehension, equivocation. The word has more than one meaning; it has materiality. Clarice treats the word as arrow, as stone, as something to manipulate. The hole is a mis-meeting — and the mis-meeting is the only way to bear life “full on” (Lispector, 1998, p. 70).

Mandil (2003, p. 64) recalls Lacan's assertion that “the unconscious is not losing memory but, above all, a not-remembering what one knows.” There is a knowledge the subject does not wish to utter, yet it reveals itself through unconscious manifestations. In *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (Freud, 1901/1996c), Freud describes clinical accounts of what he calls “symptomatic acts” and “blunders” committed by patients—acts that reveal a second intention, an unconscious desire.

On these symptomatic acts and blunders, Freud notes that they “express something of which the agent himself is unaware, and which as a rule he does not intend to communicate but to keep to himself” (1901/1996c, p. 199). A knowledge one does not wish to know causes such discomfort that the subject prefers to silence it. Mandil (2003) reminds us that, to speak of this suspended knowledge, Lacan refers to the biblical story of King Belshazzar, who receives an inscription on a wall calling for decipherment.

The story tells that, during a royal banquet, a hand appears and writes on the wall a phrase the king cannot decipher — an enigma. Faced with the unknown, Belshazzar summons an interpreter and calls Daniel to explain the writing. The parallel is apt: a subject dreams something he does not understand and brings this message to the analyst in search of elucidation.

Mandil (2003) argues that the writings on the wall are a “knowledge in suspension,” readable in two ways: as the

subject's enigma — whose meaning it falls to him to answer — or as the supposition that the knowledge lies in another person, who will be able to explain it. When one deposits this knowledge in the Other, one cancels the search for oneself — the subject's encounter with his hole. The writing on the wall was a message for King Belshazzar, yet he could not understand it and sought an interpreter — sought the answer in another. The hole appears, and one immediately tries to tampon it. Messages must be deciphered, if need be by others.

Paradoxically, it is through the mis-apprehended, through equivocation, that the knowledge psychoanalysis speaks of is found: “Precisely because it is a place that differs from any apprehension by the subject, a knowledge is freed, since it offers itself only through what, for the subject, is mis-apprehended” (Mandil, 2003, p. 67).

Following this understanding of the subject who plunges into the unknown of himself, we will bridge to Clarice's writing. Through the mis-apprehended — enigmatic writing — we let ourselves be invaded by what resists interpretation: a knowledge not known, yet still pursuing “the true word that has until now remained untouched” (Lispector, 1998, p. 11).

To articulate *Água Viva* with these psychoanalytic concepts, we bring the work closer as a “knowledge in suspension,” not liable to interpretation but pointing to a not-all knowledge. Our stance toward literature, guided by psychoanalysis, is difficult to fix. We follow the logic Lacan adopts when he brings Joyce into his teaching:

What truly seems to indicate a distinct perspective for the encounter between psychoanalysis and the literary work is recognizing that we would never, for instance, be able to single out the step taken by Lacan toward renewing the notion of symptom without the reading he made of Joyce. A reading, moreover, that undergoes the effects of the work, insofar as the elaboration of the notion of symptom is carried out by a Lacan who allows himself to be “Joycified,” which translates into the way his text lets itself be shaped by the very procedures and devices adopted by the writer. (Mandil, 2003, p. 20)

A certain influence of the author — the mark of her writing, a “letting oneself be shaped” by Clarice — guides our effort to elucidate psychoanalytic concepts in proximity to her text. Letter, writing, and — specifically here — the hole in knowledge, the littoral that outlines it, by plunging into the *Água Viva* that bubbles in the unknown. “From this experience of encounter, some will make poetry, others psychoanalysis” (Branco, 2011, p. 66).

Clarice does not follow conventional form, nor does she seem concerned with making herself understood; she aims to provoke questioning. In *Água Viva*, she wields a singular language: words step out of common sense and acquire the status of things. Meaning is twisted into the shape that best — or worst — fits the reader. “My effort: to bring the future into the now. I move within my deep instincts that accomplish themselves blindly. Then I feel I am near springs, ponds, and waterfalls, all with abundant waters. And I am free” (Lispector, 1998, p. 30). In the instant-now, the freedom of abundant waters. In this mix of poetry and psychoanalysis, the search for a writing of the unreachable.

Here and now, something still escapes. The pursuit is for depth — to say what reveals the hole itself; one cannot say everything. “From-all-does-not-know”: something slips; what is said is not exactly what one thinks one hears; it has another sense. “Listen to me, listen to my silence. What I say is never what I say but something else. When I say ‘abundant waters’ I am speaking of the body's force in the waters of the world. Grasp that other thing I truly speak of because I myself cannot” (Lispector, 1998, p. 30).

This “other thing” — what is not understood — is an expression of the silence that seeks to say the truth. But the truth itself is unreachable. If we recall Poe's *The Purloined Letter*, which Lacan (1971/2009) uses to discuss the Letter, we may note the moment when, while the police searched according to a fixed description, Dupin took the letter as matter — hence modifiable. The letter might have been altered in various ways; thus he found it, unlike those bound to the initial description.

“I write you this facsimile of a book, the book of someone who does not know how to write; yet in the lighter realm of speech I hardly know how to speak — much less speak to you in writing” (Lispector, 1998, p. 54). “Not knowing” how to write — or, for the reader, “not knowing” how to read — is the condition for hearing this text. Not knowing. The discomfort of not fully grasping what is being said — or what it means — is precisely the point of reading a “knowledge in suspension.”

For Lacan, the Letter functions like a littoral that draws a border around the hole in knowledge. It marks failure — truth is not attained, for it can be overshoot by the message. The Letter is thus “an essentially localized structure in the signifier” (Lacan, 1957/1998, p. 505). The signifier slides — from an oyster one may arrive at music, a waterfall, a perfume.

By way of metaphor we relate the dimension of the Letter to the signifier stripped of any signification. When meaning decants to the bottom of the well, the signifier may surface — one disconnected from the other. In other words, the word must be cast to the bottom and lose its meaning so that it may become littoral.

“But there is also the impersonal mystery that is the it: I have the impersonal inside me” (Lispector, 1998, p. 30). The it may be nothing or everything; it does not matter which sense is given, because both writing and reading summon that impersonal within, which is more personal than anything else. “What am I doing in writing to you? I am trying to photograph perfume” (Lispector, 1998, p. 54). To try to say the impossible, to trace the hole: that is writing.

Writing is both shedding and construction. On the page, something is left behind even as the subject is made — seeking the knowledge that escapes. “What I do not like is when they squeeze lemon into my depths and make me writhe. Are the facts of life the lemon on the oyster? Does the oyster sleep?” (Lispector, 1998, p. 31).

The path is that of incomprehension — the search for what makes one writhe, like lemon on an oyster. “Does what I do not see not exist? What moves me most is what I do not see, yet it exists. For then I have the unknown world, which exists fully and is full of rich saliva” (Lispector, 1998, p. 31). Here we have outlined something of the knowledge that is not known, the hole that unsettles the subject along the path of comprehension. Only by leaving the logic of classifications can one reach a knowledge of self — as not-all subjects, not full masters of our own house. We now turn to Lacan’s notion of the effect of jouissance as it pertains to the Letter.

“Pain is Life in Excess”

For Lacan (1973/2008), the Letter draws the littoral between jouissance and knowledge — two heterogeneous fields, like sea and sand, foreign to one another. “A letter, a litter”: the letter, the missive, the trash. The Letter does not merely carry an enigmatic message that bears something of the subject; it also has materiality — as refuse. Here we linger on the effect the Letter provokes: its capacity to be torn, destroyed, thrown away.

A text does not only carry a message; it carries an erasure. Handwriting inscribes itself with the body — a certain freedom to do anything with what presents itself. “I am giving you freedom. First I break the water sac. Then I cut the umbilical cord. And you are alive on your own. And when I am born, I am free. This is the basis of my tragedy” (Lispector, 1998, p. 35).

Water running down the hills carries remnants of matter; each pass gathers more. It makes a hole, a tear, a writing. The writing we emphasize here is formed by the erasures of what has been dragged along. Unlike a polished text that fits literary formats, *lituraterra* emerges from what becomes remainder — trash — what leaves a mark on the earth.

Água Viva is *lituraterra* insofar as it produces an effect of jouissance. The trace the sea leaves on the sand, the furrows opened in the ground, indicate that something was torn away and removed; they display the lack that cannot be filled. In the notion of *lituraterra*, jouissance is provoked in the erasure. The earth carried off by water writes something in the subject; the writing is effected even in what is lost of him.

A land of “litas,” of erasures — open furrows, grains swept away by water — reveals something of an impossibility. A word written and emptied of meaning becomes a mark, an effect. This writing is movement — furrows that run from ground to page. Writing that touches the point of jouissance marks by way of erasure. “Writing for me is frustrating: in writing I deal with the impossible” (Lispector, 1998, p. 72).

By this we do not mean any text, but a text as act — writing that does not end in itself but continues in the reader. It does not cease not to be inscribed. It reaches a point of impossibility — what cannot be fully said because it is not finite. Art has the capacity to lift the subject toward another perspective beyond the ordinary and, from there, to tear the veil that once concealed. But this occurs only for those who allow themselves to listen with the whole body, outside the path of mere comprehension.

In Hans Holbein the Younger’s painting *The Ambassadors* (1533; Google Arts & Culture, 2023), various symbolic elements of wealth and status are on display, yet a blur appears at the edge of the canvas. There is a skull in the painting that can be seen only from another angle; one must change one’s field of vision to perceive it. In this way, the painter highlights precisely this property of art: its power to reveal what is meant to remain hidden between the lines.

Figure 1

The Ambassadors (Hans Holbein the Younger, 1533). The National Gallery, London — via Google Arts & Culture, 2023.



The skull persists even in the most elegant painting — as a symbol of finitude, a counterpoint to emblems of royalty, a memento of life's end. The real keeps returning, devoid of meaning in itself even when bathed in signifiers, as in this canvas. “The real is what you come up against precisely because you cannot write anything of it in mathematics. The real concerns the fact that, in what is the most common function, you bathe in significance yet cannot hold all the signifiers at once” (Lacan, 1972/2012, p. 29).

Ana Maria Valle (2007) argues that art serves to point to the existence of the real — i.e., to unsettle the subject's fixed bases and reveal other angles. “One of the essential values of art lies in shaking the subject out of the everyday — unsettling the webs that guarantee meaning, prying the subject away from daily and weekly routine to elevate perception, pointing to a beyond, to something never before imagined” (Valle, 2007, p. 122).

To provoke those who allow themselves to enter into contact with the work — to see beyond what is set before them and step outside the ordinary — is one of art's capacities. Not merely beauty or the pleasure of viewing, but the provocation of what one does not understand, what is strange and incomprehensible.

Art points to the real, and so does writing. Returning to our focal work, *Água Viva*, we underscore the power of a text that produces effects of jouissance — that points to the real of the impossible. Clarice does not write with the aim of perfect intelligibility or a logical chain of ideas. The reading is meant to be undergone: “What I am writing to you is not to be read — it is to be lived” (Lispector, 1998, p. 37).

Here we recall that Lacan (1973/2008) distinguishes literature from what he calls *litraterria*. For him, literary manuals try to write something of myth to veil the real. At this point he defends the promotion of writing over speech, as if to distinguish Letter and signifier — the two dimensions of *lettre* we have been discussing: as message and as materiality.

There is a heterogeneous pair, and the Letter draws the littoral between the two fields in question — the hole in knowledge and the effect of jouissance. Jouissance is articulated to the materiality of the Letter. Mandil (2003) notes that “the passage from the letter's messenger function to its nature as object (...) does not occur without a discontinuity in articulated knowledge” (p. 49). That discontinuity appears in the two images Lacan uses to figure *litraterria*: the littoral itself and the notion of erasure — of writing as a ravining of waters, as Lispector enacts.

Lacan (1973/2008) develops *litraterria* through language, with the notion of the Letter as essential to the promotion of writing: “I shall borrow the traits that allow me, by an economy of language, to sketch what leads to my idea that literature may be turning into litter-ature” (Lacan, 1973/2008, p. 111).

Thus *litraterria* is conceived through two figures that accompany the Letter as an essential dimension of writing (Mandil, 2003, p. 49): the promotion of writing, the Letter distinct from the signifier and bearing materiality beyond any message. “The idea of erasure, as well as the written as ‘furrow,’ together with the metaphor of the ‘littoral,’ composes the tripod upon which Lacan seeks to seat the Letter at this moment in his trajectory” (Mandil, 2003, p. 49).

Litraterria, then, is bound up with effects of jouissance—with what is sensed, experienced in the body. The mark of lack is intrinsic to the human condition; emptiness and non-sense accompany subjects despite efforts to tampon them. “It is never the impossible. I like never. I also like always. What is there between never and always that binds us so indirectly and intimately?” (Lispector, 1998, p. 36). Between never and always lies the impossible we strive to write.

From this perspective of literary writing as *litraterria* — which makes erasures and reveals the real instead of veiling it — we can also perceive *Água Viva* as litter. With her writing, Lispector brings the reader to an encounter with what we have called the remains of the self borne off by the sea — to perceive Holbein's skull. “When one sees, the act of seeing has no form — what is seen sometimes has form, sometimes not. The act of seeing is ineffable” (Lispector, 1998, p. 89).

We have been discussing jouissance since its formulation “beyond the pleasure principle,” as a drive satisfaction not necessarily pleasurable. We chose “pain is life in excess” as a subtitle precisely to read Lacan with Clarice: to mark the contradiction at the heart of jouissance — the impossibility of complete satisfaction that repeats and “does not cease not to be written.” From Lispector's *Água Viva* we turn to Barthes to consider the real that presents itself, the pleasure, and the effect of jouissance in the text — articulating Lacan's *litraterria* and writing with the notion of *écriture* that Barthes elucidates.

In *The Pleasure of the Text*, Roland Barthes (2015) explores the text that summons the reader and desires him — that provokes. He distinguishes a subjective pleasure (of the one who writes and reads) from an objectal pleasure — of a substance that offers itself to be read and written. Writing steps away from the value of signification and enters materiality. Ruptures give pleasure; in erasures there is jouissance. He calls it *fruition* in this translation: “a way of cutting, of breaking discourse without rendering it nonsensical” (Barthes, 2015, p. 14).

Through cuts and irruptions of discourse, something is passed to the reader in the tone of provocation. “The pleasure of reading evidently comes from certain breaks” (Barthes, 2015, p. 11). The effect of jouissance we have been addressing can be linked to this *écriture* that operates by rupture. “It is with such profound joy. It is such an *alleluia*. *Alleluia*, I cry, an *alleluia* that merges with the darkest human howl — the pain of separation — and yet it is a cry of diabolical happiness. Because no one holds me anymore” (Lispector, 1998, p. 9).

The *alleluia* is also pain, separation. Not being held implies loss as well. No one holds her anymore; no genre captures her; classification is useless. In the cry, a diabolical happiness. The impossibility, in the ambivalence between pain and *alleluia*, emerges in a writing of what cannot be written. The unsayable remains, but in giving it words something is contoured.

The real of rupture — the leftover of the word — distances writing from “literature” and brings it closer to *litraterra*, insofar as it is made of erasure. For Lacan, writing is not merely the sum of words on a page — not just any text — but bears the real with it. “The idea I have of writing is the return of the repressed” (Lacan, 1972/2012, p. 25). And what returns is the real that insists. Hence a writing that cannot be repressed returns.

An *écriture* forged in rupture provokes unrest — which is also a pleasure. “What I write to you does not come on gently, rising little by little to a climax and then dying away gently. No: what I write to you is fire, like eyes of embers” (Lispector, 1998, p. 31). In the encounter between Barthes’s *écriture* (2015) and the writing in Lacan’s teaching we have been discussing, the convergence is evident: “In the text of pleasure, contrary forces are no longer in a state of repression but of becoming: nothing is truly antagonistic; everything is plural” (Barthes, 2015, p. 40).

To speak of writing is also to speak of the Letter. The two notions are articulated but not synonymous. As noted, the Letter — the littoral between *jouissance* and knowledge — is *pas de sens* (without sense), emptied of meaning and therefore able to confer a step of sense. Branco (2011, p. 157) ventures the hypothesis that some writers may, “through the arrangement of letters that constitutes writing, promote a *pas de sens*. At times, a true step of sense that rewrites the meaning of a text and of a life.”

Regarding the relation among author, writing, and Letter, we must distinguish the author as subject from the author as writer. Clarice herself kept her distance from her works whenever possible, insisting they were not confessional outpourings but encounters with her humanity. As if, in pursuing the intangible — that which cannot be found or said — she were writing the *pas de sens* we have been describing. “I will not be autobiographical. I want to be *bio*” (Lispector, 1998, p. 35).

Branco (2011) maintains that writing does not come after speech or words; it cannot be wholly independent of the subject who inscribes himself there, even as that subject is produced by the writing itself. “Like a Möbius strip, writing and subject maintain a relation of interiority/exteriority that does not oppose one to the other but rather conjoins them continually in movements that only seem to alternate” (Branco, 2011, p. 65).

We thus bring to the fore the materiality and the hole in the sense of *écriture*: “I want to be able to grasp the word with my hand. My unbalanced words are the luxury of my silence. I write through acrobatic, aerial pirouettes — I write because I deeply want to speak” (Lispector, 1998, p. 12).

“I Do Not Find the Answer: I Am”

Continuing our reading of Clarice Lispector’s *Água Viva*, we propose another psychoanalytic articulation of this writing. Following the logic of the signifier — apprehended as acoustic image rather than as mere common meaning — we pursue a few slippages: beginning with the literary classification “fiction,” we consider what it may reveal about gender and about the subject’s own fiction, drawing on several psychoanalytic concepts. We briefly revisit Lacan’s claim that truth has the structure of fiction to think gender as a fiction.

Early in *Água Viva*, Clarice declares: “this is not a book because that is not how one writes” (Lispector, 1998, p. 12). Writing is not fabrication; it is a construction made with the whole body. A total of 3 years after finishing the manuscript, she did not want to release it for publication; she considered it unfinished. Even so, the first edition appeared in 1973, encouraged by the editor Álvaro Pacheco.

That first edition included a section of “practical notes for the translator” and a contractual leaf for the reader — a kind of pact between author and reader. Sônia Roncador (1996) recalls a nearly erased fragment: “Form in itself is its only possible content. Content without form does not exist.” On the title page there were handwritten notes: “A person speaking”; “Letters to the sea”; “This is an anti-book”; and “If you consider this more than a letter, be aware it is an anti-book.”

What is being rejected when the author classifies the work as an “anti-book”? Is it an attempt to become the opposite, or a refusal of the initial conception of “book”? *Água Viva* speaks from behind thought — outside ordinary logic, genres, and classifications. Perhaps “anti-book” was meant to prepare the reader to set aside prior expectations. Still, to write “this is an anti-book,” however far the writing strays from literary norms, does not entirely escape classification; the “Claricean” style finds its place in literature nonetheless.

For the inaugural publication, the author asked that the work be defined as fiction, given its metaphysical tenor. Much like the “contract,” she wanted the very classification to signal difference — to ready the reader to loosen the expectations tied to labels. To call something a novel, for instance, is to invite certain expectations of form. The same holds for short story, chronicle, poetry, or any other label. “Fiction” was Clarice’s chosen genre because it opens space and permits a play with freedom. At once loose and weighty, *Água Viva* stages the volatility and the gravity of words.

The assertion “is” and the negation “anti” within the same phrase already mark the ambivalence that runs through the text. To classify the work as “fiction” or “anti-book” still binds it to the logic of framing — even if one seeks to slip it. Noting this ambivalence brings into relief the hole in knowledge and the effect of *jouissance* outlined by a Letter that draws the littoral.

Clarice speaks with silence, makes the word fly as if it were an object, and sets in play the ambivalence of human existence: to be an anti-book and yet remain caught in classification — harmoniously disharmonious. “The secret harmony of disharmony: I want not what is complete, but what is tortuously still in the making. My unbalanced words are the luxury of my silence. I write through acrobatic and aerial pirouettes — I write because I deeply want to speak” (Lispector, 1998, p. 12).

To denominate a work “fiction” may offer a certain liberty from heavy formatting. Characters need not be fixed; time and space need not be defined as in the novel. *Água Viva* is an anti-book insofar as it seeks to remain free of such bindings, yet it remains a book even as it strains against the label.

It is a fiction that portrays a painter/writer who treats words as objects—on canvas and on the page — writing as if painting. And in both media she writes as an amateur—simply “without rule.” However far from what is “common” in literature, the book can still be approached through certain literary formulations. Built as poetic-prose narrative, it features an unnamed “I” who addresses a “you.”

Without a name, narrators may be manifold, and the reading unfolds as if the reader were receiving a letter with no destination. Because no single character is fixed, identification with the addressee becomes possible — a blending of “I” and “you.” “And if I say ‘I’ it is because I do not dare say ‘you,’ or ‘we,’ or ‘one.’ I am forced into the humility of personalizing myself by making myself small, but I am the thou-you” (Lispector, 1998, p. 13).

Neiva de Souza Boeno (2017) likens the book to a “matryoshka,” those Russian nesting dolls that fit one inside another, since each reading yields another — a multiplicity of possible relations to the work. For her, *Água Viva* enacts an infinity of painted words, as if no sequential logic sustained a chain of ideas. The word echoes without sense so that it may make sense in the “thou-you” — i.e., each subject, in reading, generates a new sense.

In this matryoshka reading, the book becomes plural and generational. Curiously, Clarice gave the work two earlier titles before the final one: first *Atrás do Pensamento: Monólogo Com a Vida* (1970-71), then *Objeto Gritante* (1972). In the end, *Água Viva* was chosen to evoke something that bubbles — movement against the stasis of literary forms. Like the nesting dolls, the movement is nearly infinite, mirroring the plurality of meanings.

Sônia Roncador (1996) goes so far as to say the book amounts to a poetics of the act that perpetuates itself. The narrator-character confesses to living on the edge of climax and death, seeking to reach the *it*. Written in interruptions, the narrative insists that it does not want what is finished but what is tortuously being made — the instant-now. It asks not for reasoning but for a bodily hearing. It seeks the incomprehensible, visible in the way it is written — short sentences that refuse to explain.

In this sense, the work invites the reader to plunge into what bubbles: far from stagnation, close to the immeasurable. “Beatitude begins at the moment when the act of thinking frees itself from the need for form” (Lispector, 1998, p. 90). The quest is to be free of forms and frames. “Real freedom — as an act of perception — has no form” (Lispector, 1998, p. 89).

If we consider the label “fiction” chosen by the author, we can extend it in two directions: beyond the literary sense toward another kind of fiction — the speech of the subject in analysis. Between the said and the unsaid, bordering the void, the subject’s fiction is expressed. This speech carries within it many others, implied and encrypted between the lines.

Ana Maria Vicentini de Azevedo (2007) recalls Lacan’s formulation of this dimension of the implied, noting that “the truth of the unconscious dimension must be located in the interlines — precisely between the said and the unsaid” (p. 39). Hence reading stands out “as an act — a procedure that makes the word fold back on itself, on its traces and its absences” (Azevedo, 2007, p. 39).

Thus, between the unconscious and reading — in a speech of self articulated in the interlines — the subject appears where he does not fully speak. Lispector (1998, p. 95) gestures toward the same: “Everything ends, but what I write to you continues. Which is good — very good. The best has not yet been written. The best is between the lines.” Not written, not said — fiction, enigma — it constitutes the subject. The interplay between what is exposed and the signifying slips present there is the very relation between psychoanalysis and literature, between the unconscious and letters. Dwelling in the interlines, fiction lies in the word emptied of fixed sense; definition or interpretation narrows comprehension.

“The word. Its most intimate, extreme beauty lies in it. But it is unreachable — and when within reach, it proves illusory, for again it remains unreachable” (Lispector, 1998, p. 72). One cannot simply apply a classification; a fiction is required so that nothing is lost. The word is unreachable: to believe one has reached it — to “know” — is precisely where fiction shows itself, where the hole in knowledge opens. A writing done with the whole body must be read with the whole body. It does not reach comprehension by the path of reasoning, but by the provocation of an enigmatic message. As the writing was composed, so must it be read — by a logic beyond reason and close to estrangement. The work demands to be heard with the body, in a reading that is ever renewed and unfinished. A reader may open to any page and, in a single line, encounter something that strikes deeply.

What is essential in this work lies not in its theme but in its writing. Something is said abruptly — cast like a dart without a clear target — yet it strikes a point that provokes the reader. “Everything I write to you is tense. I use loose words that are in themselves a free dart: wild, barbarous, decadent nobles and marginal” (Lispector, 1998, p. 27).

Poetically, she wields words in a kind of savagery. Short sentences, no sequential line of reasoning — words that are, in themselves, darts and burning embers. “This is a feast of words. I write more in signs that are more a gesture than a voice” (Lispector, 1998, p. 24). Like an unplanned gesture, “I let myself happen.”

Writing moves; reading contorts. Word-pirouettes do not seek interpretation; they are objects thrown, landing in estrangement. The word reaches another sense, beyond representation, beyond the Saussurean sign. As if, in distancing herself from writing that serves the Other, Clarice sought a word of the self: “When a painting is strange to me, that is when it is painting. And when the word is strange to me, that is when it reaches meaning. And when life is strange to me, that is when life begins” (Lispector, 1998, p. 83).

Cristina Moreira Marcos (2013) argues that the very style — stripped of linear guidance — renders interpretive reading impossible, for that is not the aim. She writes as if suspending words, handling them as matter. A kaleidoscopic writing, and so too its reading: fluid, revealing something new at each encounter. *Água Viva* admits infinite senses. It does not seek a logical chain of ideas but “the freedom to say things without nexus as a profound way to reach you” (Lispector, 1998, p. 82).

Choosing “fiction” to open space and loosen literalness still imposes a form — one cannot quite step outside it; it belongs to the work’s myth. In *Água Viva*, Clarice seeks what lies behind thought — to break free of classifications. The “madness of free invention” is not without precedent.

Lacan (1995) examines the structure and function of myths. In that seminar, myth appears as a timeless narrative with the character of fiction yet bearing a stability — a notion of structure. “This fiction maintains a singular relation with something always implied behind it, and of which it truly bears the formally indicated message, namely, truth. That is something that cannot be separated from myth” (Lacan, 1995, p. 258).

Truth is the message behind the myth; the relation is inseparable because each exists in the other. If we slide Clarice’s “fiction” toward Lacan’s conception, we approach the idea of an impossible construction. The truth that sustains the myth is the gender that “catches,” the impossibility of reaching the *it*.

A literary fiction and a constitutive fiction — two narratives. “The structural necessity borne by every expression of truth is precisely a structure that is the same as that of fiction. Truth has, so to speak, the structure of fiction” (Lacan, 1995, p. 259). Between written words and the speaking subject, we may propose another slippage: this fiction-as-genre can also be seen as fiction-as-myth — the device by which the subject is constituted, a kind of *fort-da*¹ to deal with lack.

In the logic of discourses that Lacan elaborates in Seminar XVII, truth is housed under the bar; it supports the agent of discourse, yet it cannot be reached. In seeking what lies behind thought, perhaps Clarice aimed at this truth of self. Yet what the narrator confronts throughout the book is the impossibility of reaching freedom: “True immeasurability is the nothing, which has no barriers and is where a person can spread her think-act” (Lispector, 1998, p. 90).

Truth, with the structure of fiction, carries the impossibility of full attainment. To denominate a work “fiction” is a way of speaking this constitutive truth — a way of uncovering what is hidden: lack, the genre that never fully covers and yet cannot be escaped. One cannot reach or state “the whole truth”; it occurs as act. Lacan (1972/2012) calls “naive discourse” the speech that believes it tells an absolute truth. Naive, because a slight interrogation suffices for contradiction to appear and truth to slip — revealing the hole.

Thus truth and fiction might seem opposed, were it not for the perspective of the real — of impossibility. Perhaps it is enough to seek it without claiming possession, since truth is an act, not an object one holds. “Truth is somewhere, but it is useless to think. I will not discover it and, nonetheless, I live from it” (Lispector, 1998, p. 31). Where the subject does not think, he is. Truth is precisely that which one never reaches and yet lives from. “And it would be no use explaining, because explanation demands another explanation, which would demand another, and would open again onto mystery” (Lispector, 1998, p. 31).

Conclusion

Our aim was to articulate Letter and writing from two perspectives — the hole in knowledge and the production of effects of jouissance — taking *Água Viva* as the interlocutor for a writing that is littoral. We also considered the positions of writer and reader, and the construction of a *pas de sens* that is not merely an emptying of meaning but a production of rewriting effects. We conclude that in the “anti-book” lies the creation of the subject — the subject who emerges from the line of thought, “from that piece of the real that produces the effect of a comet” (Lacan, 1972/2012, p. 112). By striving to slip the nets of classification, Clarice forges her path free of genres and can define her Letter, tracing its edge between the hole in knowledge and jouissance.

¹ In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920/1996e), Freud observes his grandson repeatedly playing a game in which a spool disappears and reappears, accompanied by sounds the child makes as he throws it away and retrieves it. He interprets these sounds as *fort* (“gone”) and *da* (“there”) in German. Thus, Freud reads the *fort-da* game as the child’s dramatization of the mother’s departure and return. The play enables a shift in the child’s subjective position — from passive to active — since he can now control the object’s going and coming, rather than remain merely subject to the mother’s movements.

Between truth and fiction, there is the hole — something that presents itself and reveals what cannot be fully known. In this work we approached the Lacanian concept of the Letter through *Água Viva*, as a writing that skirts the hole and creates a fiction for itself. In doing so, we articulated the fields of psychoanalysis and literature, starting from the notion of the Letter as littoral — bordering the hole in knowledge and jouissance. We discussed inventions around holes and the subject's relation to knowledge, building a bridge to *Água Viva*.

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How to cite:

Silva, E. M. L., & Queiroz, E. F. (2025). The Littoral of Água Viva: The Lacanian Concept of the Letter through Literature. *Revista Subjetividades*, 25(1), e16969. <https://doi.org/10.5020/23590777.rs.v25i1.e16969>

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Received on: 03/23/2022.

Accepted on: 10/24/2024.