“Writing by Ear”: Clarice Lispector, Machado de Assis, and Guimarães Rosa and the Mimesis of Improvisation

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“You just need the soul to hear / And the heart to listen.”
Caetano Veloso, “Sou Seu Sabiá”

“I hear the ancient music of words upon words. Yes, it is so.”
Clarice Lispector, The Hour of the Star

Introit

In this article, I suggest that, at the heart of Brazilian literature, we can hear the pulse of an “auditory writing.” In The Hour of the Star, published two months before her death, Clarice Lispector made a complex connection between written words and the sense of hearing: “The question is: how do I write? I can verify that I write by ear, just as I learned English and French by ear” (The Hour 18). Around the same period, Augusto de Campos wrote “O Pulsar” (“The Pulsar/The Pulsion”) a poem in the form of a telegram from the stars, as suggested by the title of the series in which it appears, “Stelegramas (1975-1978)” (published in the 1979 collection VIVA VAIA). The words of the poem appear in white on a black background with two letters transformed into patterns: the “o” is a small white solar circle and the “e” is replaced by the image of a star, acting as punti luminosi. The poem asks the observer/reader to “open the window” and “see the near-mute pulsar”—a message spread across the sky of the page (VIVA VAIA 242). The pulse of the pulsar was heard by Caetano Veloso, who in 1975 set the poem to music, accentuating the connection among writing, vision, and hearing as part of the “verbi-voco-visual” program of the “poets of fields and spaces.” The stars found in Lispector’s “writing by ear” and de Campos’s near-mute pulsating resonate together with a message from de Campos to be decoded by readers: “wherever you are / on Mars or in El dorado / open the window and see / the near-mute pulsar / a light-year embrace / that no sun warms / and that the dark echo forgets” (idem). De Campos’s poem ends on a somber note, as if the stars were being snuffed out; likewise, in Lispector’s novel, the death of Macabéa coincides with the hour of the star that shines in the darkness and with the written word that pulsates silently. Years later, on the back cover of his collection Despoesia, de Campos once again reaffirms the pulsar/pulsating and its relationship with the poetic act: “The flower flowers / The spider spins / The poet poets / Seen or unseen, it pulsates / The near-mute pulsating.” That same near-mute pulsating is affirmed by Lispector in relation to the meaning of her writing about Macabéa: “Macabéa is dead. The bells were ringing without making any sound. I now understand this story. She is the imminence in those bells, pealing so softly” (The Hour 97). A similar quality appears in the description of another Lispector character: “Ângela is the vibrating quake of a tense harp string that has been touched: she remains in the air still, saying to herself, saying—until the vibration dies out, spreading in foam on the sands. Then—silence and stars” (A Breath of Life 41).

Connecting Lispector’s writing by ear with Augusto de Campos’s near-mute pulsating is part of a larger project intended to describe a distinctive quality of Brazilian literature: its sharp sense of hearing, or the way its writing captures timbres and nuances, accentuated within a culture where orality and musicality are predominant. The project, focussed specifically on the presence of the hearing in writing, calls for thinking about a sense that has largely been unexplored in the relationship between orality, music, and literature in Brazil, and joins a theoretical current that, at least since Paul Zumthor, has been examining the importance of voice and listening in written texts. I propose thinking about the fictional text as a closed music box that pulsates and reverberates what is experienced and what is thought in a written form that resounds anew with each rereading, recuperating what has been lost while also spreading new resonances into the future each time it is opened. Wai Chee Dimock’s “A Theory of Resonance” advances this argument, contesting the primacy of vision in philosophical thought and arguing for a turn to hearing in order to redefine the literary text as an object with an unstable ontology that changes over time.

My purpose in this article is to understand what Lispector means by “I write by ear” and to suggest that this
notion can also be applied to two other Brazilian writers, Machado de Assis and João Guimarães Rosa. I will connect "writing by ear" to two processes that recur in the work of these writers: the multiplication of authorial voices, when the writer is no longer that individual who writes but becomes that individual who hears; and the defense of improvisation as a method of literary composition (real or feigned). If this description is valid, then I suggest that writing by ear is a potentially useful concept for understanding a dominant quality of literary writing.1

Clarice Lispector: Writing by Ear and by Improvisation

The expression "I write by ear" that appears in The Hour of the Star is the fictional version of a personal note that Claire Varin found in one of Lispector’s notebooks, which became a point of departure for Varin’s study Langues de Feu: “I live ‘by ear.’ I live by having heard speak” (25). This development was perhaps not by chance: it was essential that the Canadian Claire, who traveled to Brazil to study Clarice and learn Portuguese, capture something that was largely silent to Brazilian ears: the importance of the voice and listening in her writing, or, as Varin so beautifully put it, the "ecstasy of the voice before all apprehension" (69). Varin’s study opened up possibilities for new work in this area, such as the present article, focused specifically on understanding the term writing by ear (something not analyzed in Varin’s work) and its possibilities for wider application.

What can “writing by ear” mean? Playing music by ear means reproducing a sound on an instrument without reading the notes; learning a language by ear means hearing the sounds of the words and learning their meanings and grammatical structures through immersion rather than reading and study. In both cases, it is a method of trial and error, a process of immersion that is more unconscious than conscious, which progresses blindly. Lispector’s writing by ear is connected to Keats’s “Darkling I listen” (in “Ode to a Nightingale”), which in turn recalls one of Lispector’s important expressions, one revealing about her method of writing: “Searching for the word in darkness” (The Hour 70). Blindness, then, is another fundamental aspect of Lispector’s visionary writing, accentuating the sense of hearing, which becomes more developed in order to capture timbres and nuances. As the narrator of The Hour of the Star says, “The words are sounds transfused with shadows that intersect unevenly, stalactites, woven lace, transposed organ music. I can scarcely invoke the words to describe this pattern, vibrant and rich, morbid and obscure, its counterpoint the deep bass of sorrow. Allegro con brio” (16).

Writing by ear also requires readers who are able to “hear” a written text, in order to capture precisely that which passes between the lines, like the form and design of an intonation, a tone, or a timbre. In the expression “I write by ear,” which is akin to a self-discovery, Clarice Lispector opens the doors to a world that is still little explored in the literary universe: the study of the acoustic properties of writing, present not only at the moment of fictional creation, when the writer “hears” voices and inscribes them, but also during silent reading, when an imaginary world is awakened by the vibrations of the words’ sounds and images. A similar definition of reading is given by Peter Sloterdijk: “reading means to hear or hallucinate voices from different speakers” (“Interview”).

The question of the foreign is also important to consider when defining writing by ear. Clarice says that she writes by ear like someone who is learning a foreign language: “I can verify that I write by ear, just as I learned English and French by ear” (The Hour 18). The daughter of Yiddish-speaking Jewish immigrants, Clarice was born en route from Russia to Brazil in 1920, during her family’s escape from growing Jewish persecution. Portuguese, the language that she learned by ear when she arrived in Brazil at age one, is, like English and French, her non-maternal language. This particularity makes Lispector an exemplary case of someone who writes in her language as a foreigner, making her especially capable of hearing nuances, timbres, and intonations (material that precedes semantic comprehension): “the word is my instrument and must resemble the word. Or am I not a writer? More actor than writer, for with only one system of punctuation at my disposal, I juggle with intonation and force another’s breathing to accompany my text” (22-23). To “juggle with intonation” is to write by ear like a foreigner who mentally repeats the sonority of the language he or she hears in order to learn how it can be played with. The punctuation of Lispector’s text wants, then, to capture intonation, which is why it is so difficult to write: “It’s going to be difficult to tell this story [. . .] Facts are sonorous but among the facts there is a murmuring. It is the murmuring that frightens me” (24).

Writing by ear means writing with pre-conscious language, with language that is heard before its meanings are understood, with language that is signified before becoming signifier—with language that is, above all, tone, nuance, and vibration. This is confirmed by Lispector’s readers who know that her writing acts as the
constant capture of a vibration—what is said, wanting to inscribe what is unsaid. As a writer, Lispector is not satisfied with her material, the words that are chosen and used: as a writer, she wants her reader to look at the written word and be able to read—or, better still, to hear—all the words that were not chosen, which remain as non-realized virtualities, as if it were possible to write not according to syntagmatic lines, but rather simply according to the line of the paradigm. Lispector's writing is a writing in suspension, which hovers like silence, unheard but still present. This is why colors (vision) and sound (hearing) are her principal paradigms. This is also why reading Clarice can be an experience that is as difficult as it is pleasurable. Her words reach us first as sounds, with the body, and touch unexpected regions, like the music to which The Hour of the Star is dedicated. Thus, writing by ear can be understood as a sensorial and intuitive technique of writing that is driven by sound and rhythm, as well as by the echoes of the unconscious, before being dominated by logical and semantic preparation. I suggest that, in Brazilian literature, writing by ear is allied with improvisation, which is understood as the closest possible way to capture an impression of expression.

Improvisation

I choose to define improvisation through the equation impression = expression. This equation means that improvisation longs to create a symbolic expression that is the closest possible rendition of the sensorial impression, as if it were possible for the body not to distinguish itself from its surroundings. Clarice Lispector is also a source for this definition: in The Besieged City, the narrator describes the character Lucrécia as follows: "In her and in a horse the impression was the expression" (20). This sentence was later explained in a letter as a way of being that aspires "to the kind of spiritual integrity of a horse, not 'sharing' what he sees, not having a mental or 'vocabular' vision of things, not feeling the need to complete an impression with an expression—a horse, in which there is the miracle of the impression being total—so real—that in him an impression is already an expression." This comparison with a horse should not surprise us. Lispector stated at one point that she would like to have been born a horse, and she uses the image of the horse to describe her relationship with the Portuguese language—or, more precisely, the Brazilian language, which she considered a language in the process of formation, a language to be worked on by thought in order to generate subtleties—a language-animal to be tamed:

This is a confession of love: I love the Portuguese language. It is neither easy nor flexible. [...] Sometimes it reacts when confronted by some complicated process of thought. Sometimes it takes fright at the unpredictable nature of a sentence. I love manipulating it—just as I used to enjoy riding a horse and guiding it by the reins, one minute slowly, the next at a fast gallop. (Discovering the World 134)

I suggest that writing by ear is allied with an improvisational method that aims to reach an ideal state of integration between exterior and interior, between words and things, to capture living and unrepeatable material. Improvisation suspends or eliminates weighed, measured, and controlled thought and acts as the most immediate reaction to the stimuli present. The less programmed it is, and the more the performer lets him- or herself be carried away by the stimulus of the moment, the better the results. This is what happens with improvisation during a music or theater show: what counts is the immediate reaction to what is happening here and now. This reaction certainly includes prior knowledge and training, but in the act of improvisation all of this repertoire must be almost forgotten in order to look and sound renewed, unprecedented, and surprising—for the audience as well as for the performer. That is why the result of improvisation is often attributed to divine inspiration, similar to how Clarice finds spiritual meaning in the horse's impression.

Thus, improvisation is a question of movement, quick or slow, always in tune with the event that awakens the concomitant and simultaneous reaction, so the thing perceived is also the thing that is thought, said, and read. "Just as I am writing at the same time as I am being read" (The Hour 12). In this magnificent declaration, Lispector synthesizes what will be the distinctive feature of her last works: texts in fragments, which are later unified and reworked, without losing the freshness, vividness, and immediacy of lived experience. It is here that improvisation begins to be mentioned more and more in her works, along with the concept of writing by ear. Following her, I suggest that improvisation can be defined as an act of reaching an ideal state, in which impression (sensorial, physical, corporal) can immediately become expression (symbolic and artistic), so that (utopically) there is no separation between what is seen and what is painted, what is said and what is written, what rumbles and what is heard.
**The Hour of the Star**

The multiplication of voices in this narrative can be related to improvisation and writing by ear. In *The Hour of the Star*, Lispector morphs into Rodrigo S.M., presented as the author of a book about the character Macabéa, a poor migrant from the Brazilian Northeast living in Rio de Janeiro. Half-illiterate, Macabéa works as a typist. Having also lived in the Northeast and Rio de Janeiro, Lispector situates herself in the middle: between the fictional male author who occupies her place (Rodrigo S.M.) and the character of Macabéa, whose name evokes Lispector’s Jewish origins with its similarity to the term “Maccabees.” Thus, in this final book published during her lifetime, Clarice mixes her Jewish-Ukrainian origins with the Northeastern life of this Everywoman, Macabéa. With this, she combines echoes of Yiddish from her childhood with the sounds of the Brazilian Northeast, composing a book in which one of the thirteen subtitles is “A Tearful Tale.”17 The entirety of the book is produced as if it were written in an echo, where Bach and the sound of the clock radio, the text of the male author and the female voice, resound in dissonance. A double voice is established between Lispector and Rodrigo S.M. to better speak about a character without a voice (Macabea is described as “extremely mute”) who has, or should have, “The Right to Protest” (another subtitle of the book).

This process of authorial duplication is also repeated in *The Stream of Life*, with the character who is a painter transforming herself into the writer of the text that we read. This is also the case with *A Breath of Life*, which establishes the play between the author (again male) and the character Ângela, also a writer.18 Carlos Mendes de Sousa coined the term *livro exposto* or “exposed book” to describe books that expose the behind-the-scenes of creation, with writer characters who experience and express the dilemmas, anguishes, and delights of writing and narrating. As we will see, this same expression, “exposed book,” can also be applied to the work of Machado de Assis and Guimarães Rosa, as well as that of Lispector.

The duplication or multiplication of authors and voices also highlights another characteristic: the text that is constructed without control, through improvisation: “this story has no technique, not even in matters of style. It has been written at random. [. . .] During the day, like everyone else, I make gestures that are unobserved even by me. One of my most unobserved gestures is this story, which comes out as it will, independent of me” (*The Hour* 35-36).

*The Hour of the Star* calls itself an “unfinished book” (8), a book in the process of being written, and the whole first part is devoted to a self-exposure about the writing of the book, a metafictional essay prior to the action of the narrative, which begins suddenly: “The trick is to begin suddenly, like plunging into an icy sea. [. . .] I am about to begin in the middle by telling you that” (24). In Lispector, improvisation goes so far that it is not a method, but rather a “way of life.” This is what we find in another reflection offered by Clarice herself about the freedom found in writing: “Improvisation as a way of life. Even discursive narratives have within them a freedom—if not breaking free from conditioning, then improvising a destiny” (Borelli 44). In other words, in improvisation, the plot structures itself in a way that pretends not to have a structure, as if events were developing by chance.19 This process, combining improvisation with the multiplication of voices, is synthesized by Clarice/Ângela: “Ângela is so new and unfamiliar that it frightens me. I am alarmed, dazzled, and terrified when faced with her improvisation. Do I imitate her? Or does she imitate me? I don’t know: but the way she writes is a fierce reminder of the way I write, just as a son can look like his father” (*A Breath* 101).

We will see that, in the work of Machado de Assis and Guimarães Rosa, writing by ear and improvisation are also brought together in an oblique discursive link, creating a logic of the sinuous, tortuous, and indirect. Similarly, improvisation is also present in their texts, which pretend to have been written without planning, in the here and now, while the narrators converse with their readers.

**Machado de Assis and “Auditivity”**

Abel Barros Baptista has carefully analyzed, in the work of Machado de Assis, the recurrent duplication of the writer in characters who then assume authorial functions. Brás Cubas, who writes his memories from the grave in *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*, and Bento Santiago, who writes *Dom Casmurro*, are two Machadian characters that Baptista calls “supposed authors.” Throughout *Dom Casmurro*, the reader is informed that the book is being written right here and right now, before being printed, as if the reader were witnessing the moment of creation: “I might take this out when the book is printed” (*Dom Casmurro* 95); “and
now I am composing this narrative” (105); “I beg your pardon, but this chapter should have been preceded by another, recounting an incident [. . .] but it’s a great nuisance to alter the page numbers; I’ll leave this as it is, and then the narration will go straight on to the end” (220). Thus, Bento Santiago is a “supposed author” who pretends to be writing the book as the reader is reading it, which leads him to define it as a “book with gaps in it” (112), gaps that are to be filled in by the reader.

For Baptista, this is the key to Machado de Assis’s worldwide renown as a master of the metafictional process, anticipating what would come to be known as the “death of the author” in the twentieth century. I would add that in this case, the role of the writer is no longer principally that of writing the text, because it is “written” by its characters: the idea of listening to other voices becomes important, thus creating a “scattered work” in a “free form.” These are the terms used by Brás Cubas when he defines his book: “The truth is that it’s a question of a scattered work where I, Brás Cubas, have adopted the free-form of a Sterne” (Brás Cubas 5). As Baptista shows us, this definition is repeated by the actual author, Machado de Assis, who quotes his character with the voice of authority when defining this book that is, or should be, the property of the real author, who is now deprived of the power of being the only voice.

The book’s “scattered,” dispersed form can also be related to what Roland Barthes argues in “Listening” when he defines modern listening based on the paradigm of psychoanalytic listening, attentive to nuances of speech and intonation rather than the literal meaning of the sentences uttered:

> what is listened to here and there (chiefly in the field of art, whose function is often utopian) is not the advent of the signified, object of a recognition or of a deciphering, but the very dispersion, the shimmering of signifiers, ceaselessly restored to a listening which ceaselessly produces new ones from them without ever arresting their meaning: this phenomenon of shimmering is called signifying [significance], as distinct from signification [. . .] it compels the subject to renounce his “inwardness.” (259, boldface emphasis mine)\(^2\)

In my view, Machado de Assis’s “scattered” work appeals to a kind of listening that is also diffuse or dispersed, obligating the subject (author or reader) to renounce his or her privacy and enter a zone of whispers and secrets in the collective unconscious, which are now laid out and exposed to view. It is here that the question of auditory writing in Machado de Assis is related to the term “auditivity” and to a gestural form, a way of moving the body, transcribed and imitated in the play of writing. Thus, Brás Cubas, who narrates his life from beyond the grave, announces one of the principal features of auditivity in a writing that is sinuous, not following the “regular and fluid style” preferred by readers, but rather following bodily gestures: “this book and my style are like drunkards, they stagger left and right, they walk and stop, mumble, yell, cackle, shake their fists at the sky, stumble, and fall” (Brás Cubas 111).

### Auditivity and “Capoeira Style”

I consider the term audi tidividade or auditivity (and its constitutive ambivalence, as we will soon see) fundamental for understanding the methods of composition particular to Brazilian lettered culture. This term was coined by Luiz Costa Lima, first in an article on the historical situation of intellectuals in Brazil published in the 1980s, and later revisited in the 1990s in a piece on Machado de Assis. In the first article, Costa Lima analyzes the situation of the lettered individual from colonial times to the nineteenth century in relation to both a predominantly illiterate general population and a dominant elite that always marginalized or demeaned black, caboclo, and indigenous cultural practices. In this context, the presence of the auditory element in writing has a negative connotation, one linked to demagogic oratory destined to persuade the public rather than to the creation of a writing intended for the difficult task of argumentative and conceptual convincing. In the second article, auditivity takes on positive connotations and is connected to the incorporation of Afro-Brazilian cultural practices into literary writing. The example, now, is Machado de Assis. In Costa Lima’s reading, Machado de Assis’s chronicles are characterized by a style that uses evasive word play in an intellectual dance, disorienting the reader while also allowing the author to evade the possible censorship of his perspective on the political events of the time. Costa Lima terms this “capoeira style” and names Machado de Assis the “capoeira master,” establishing a previously unnoticed relationship between literary writing and the Afro-Brazilian play of the body.

According to Costa Lima, “the Machadian auditory element injects capoeira g inga [“swing”] into the ink on the page” (335). Machado de Assis’s word play is similar to the play of the body in capoeira, with its dodges and feints, its dribles and negaceios. In the written text, the negaceio or negation is carried out “by
dismantling propositional logic” (332). Thus, reversing any linear argument, a loose, constellational chain of sentences appears, forming a “writing that is impregnated with auditivity” (335). Costa Lima then poses the question, “Can we understand capoeira as the beginning of the individuation of a way of writing?” (331). Far from weak or inconsistent reflections, what we see in the highly developed poetic composition of writers like Machado de Assis is a writing that incorporates another, more allusive connection, full of meanderings and nuances: an auditivity that is conscious and practiced experimentally.

If Roberto Schwartz sees the volubility of Machadian narrators as critical representations of the local elite, Costa Lima perceives the verbal dodges and feints of the author’s chronicles as parallel to the more popular forms of bodily expression in Brazil, close to what José Miguel Wisnik finds in his study of the presence of the African-originated *maxixe* sound in Machado de Assis, through which the author reveals his mixed-race heritage. Recalling that Machado de Assis was the descendant of slaves, it must be made clear that this is not a relationship of cause and effect, but rather a conjunction in which inconsistent roots come into existence with the emergence of aesthetic configurations to invent them. This clarification is important.

Thinking about “writing by ear” in relation to “Brazilian expression” in capoeira or in popular music does not mean that there is an expression present in a reality that exists prior to the creation of the text wherein the author gives it shape. Rather, what Lispector calls “our Brazilian mode of expression” (qtd. in Varin 28) emerges from an immersion by contact and contagion, similar to the way in which children learn the language of the place where they are born or raised. Thus, according to Costa Lima, capoeira as a writing style does not mean “any form of nativist inspiration” (338). Machado de Assis’s writing has different models of inspiration, and capoeira is one of the components related to the “expressive-communicative practice that he captured in his own country” (339). Like an internal component, capoeira as a style, from the point of view of a native, “is perhaps the richest aspect and the most complicated to describe, because it is still mixed up with our presence” (339). In this way, it becomes more important for “foreign” ears, capable of distancing themselves from the local, to be able to perceive possible unexpected resonances. Thus, I would say that writers, in their work, give voice to the communicative practices of the collective body of which they are part and retransmit this practice to readers who can perceive it between the lines of their texts.

Thus, auditivity is understood not only as the presence of the oral in the written, but also as a loose, constellational linking of sentences. Thinking about the question of “auditory writing” based on Lispector, I would also add one more element to the meanings of the term “auditivity.” Auditivity also means a way of listening to that which is the most intimate in language and to that which is the most difficult to learn and repeat: its intonation and its accents; additionally, it means the writer’s ability to transmit this subtle presence of the voice and its reverberations through the written text.

**Guimarães Rosa and Guerrilla Writing**

Just as the “supposed authors” in Machado de Assis are characters from the Rio de Janeiro of the second half of the nineteenth century, the same device of authorial doubling is found in João Guimarães Rosa, representing the vast space of the Brazilian interior known as the *sertão*. In Guimarães Rosa’s 1956 novel *Grande Sertão: Veredas* (*The Devil to Pay in the Backlands*), the character Riobaldo narrates his life in one long and uninterrupted speech to the city doctor who listens to him. Thus, we have a novel that exposes metafictionally the formation of an author coming from an oral experience. Riobaldo narrates his life, and meanwhile, we suppose, his interlocutor is taking notes about what the speaker is telling him about the backlands (as Guimarães Rosa himself did on his research visits to the area). The situation is akin to one of fictional ethnographic writing in which the author hears what his character tells him, pretending not to have control over the order of the narrative, which follows the ebb and flow of orality.

Much has already been said—and much is still left to say—about orality in Guimarães Rosa, but for an analysis of auditivity, we must recall the key episode of Maria Mutema, the character who kills through the ear, in the same way that the uninterrupted speech of Riobaldo kills or silences the speech of the city doctor. The book opens to the sound of a gunshot, “Those shots you heard were not men fighting,” indicating that the reader is entering into dangerous discursive territory (Rosa 3). While Euclides da Cunha, in his *Os Sertões* (*Rebellion in the Backlands*) (1902), denounces the crime committed by the city against the *sertão*, in *Grande Sertão: Veredas* the backlands fire shots to stay alive and to be heard by the man from the city. The novel is thus a discursive war machine. Like the trackers and *jagunços*, or backlands cowboys at war, Guimarães Rosa uses rhetorical guerrilla tactics including auditory weapons (speech, orality, listening) to disarm the traps of lettered writing when it speaks or keeps silent in the place of the illiterate.
The structure of Grande Sertão: Veredas, a book without chapters, imitates an improvised speech that lasts for close to five hundred pages and which appears aimless and uncontrolled. As the narrator says, his speech takes “the wrong turn” without clear direction precisely because it is not like the speech of the man from the city who knows how to write “a story in a book” (48, 69). However, what appears to be improvisation, like a narrative that pretends to be constructing itself aimlessly, does in fact obey a certain order—a disorganized order, but an order nonetheless. In other words, imitating orality or improvisation has an order that is not fixed, but mobile, contingent and dependent on the ways in which it is read, privileging this or that aspect of the story. Individual readers then, each time they want to retell the story in their own words, will organize (or disorganize) the narrative in their own way: the book will appear to be an uncontrollable sea (one of the preferred metaphors of sertanejo narratives), always renewed with each wave of readings. Thus, applying the words of Machado de Assis, we find in Guimarães Rosa a “scattered work” in a “free form.”

Coda

In the duplication or multiplication of authors and voices, a common characteristic appears in the works of Machado de Assis, Clarice Lispector, and Guimarães Rosa, albeit in different ways: their works seem as if they are being written at the very moment in which they are read, as if they are being created here and now, impromptu, without the prior establishment of control by their authors. The authors thus seem to be almost overtaken by their writing and stunned by the doubles who take away their authorial control. What I am interested in highlighting here is that in this uncontrollable affiliation, the voices of these characters/supposed authors are what guide the construction of the narrative: thus, the authors themselves (Lispector, Rosa and Machado) are no longer writing, but rather listening and following the directions indicated by their characters/authors. The writers then act as ethnographers listening to their culture as if it were foreign, making it strange in order to better invent it in their fictions and dictions. Although such authorial duplication is a common device in many literatures, its use by at least three major names in Brazilian literature seems to be of a piece with a tendency in Brazil for expression to be strongly characterized by orality, and consequently, auditivity. As a result of this tendency, “writing by ear” emerges as a distinctive (or “auditory”) and dominant feature of literature in Brazil.

Notes


2 [Translator’s note: The poem plays with the word “pulsar,” which in Portuguese means both pulsar and pulsating.]

3 [Translator’s note: English translations mine unless otherwise noted.]


5 In the vast and important bibliography on music and literature in Brazil, see Wisnik (1977, 2004, 2008), Perrone (1996, 2002, 2010), and Tatit (2004).

6 For a recent synthesis of this theoretical current (which includes Havelock, Ong, McLuhan, and others), see González (2010). For a perspective from the field of musicology, see Carolyn Abbate (2004).

7 My use of the term “quality” follows that of Roland Barthès in “Music, Voice, Language”: “Then what is music? [. . .] a quality of language. But this quality of language in no way derives from the sciences of language (poetics, rhetoric, semiology), for in becoming a quality, what is promoted in language is what it does not say, does not articulate. [. . .] Music is both what is expressed and what is implicit in the text: what is pronounced (submitted to inflections) but is not articulated: what is at once outside meaning and non-meaning, fulfilled in that signifying [significance], which the theory of the text today seeks to postulate and to situate” (284). Music as a quality of language is also a metaphor par excellence used for thinking about the possibilities of written text: “Perhaps a thing is valid only by its metaphoric power; perhaps that is the value of music, then: to be a good metaphor” (285). [Translator’s note: English version of quote taken from

8 See the study by Gabriela Lírio Gurgel (2001).

9 Here I am thinking about the presence of the blind man in the story “Love,” published in the collection *Family Ties*, as the ultimate example of the importance of blindness in Lispector’s work. For an analysis of vision in other works by Lispector, see the study by Regina Pontieri (1999). Also, Eyal Peretz (2008) examines vision and blindness in art.

10 The most accurate description of Lispector’s family and the circumstances surrounding their arrival in Brazil is found in the recent biography of Lispector by Benjamin Moser.

11 Interviewing Lispector’s eldest sister, Varin discovered that their parents spoke Yiddish at home, a language that Clarice heard but never learned, and which remained, like her Judaism, a voice that was hidden yet present with resonances in her writing: “Final truth, or first hidden truth: Yiddish, a language wandering among other languages” (Varin 61).

12 Cf. the comment by Deleuze (1997), based on a quote from Proust in *Against Sainte-Beuve*: “beautiful books are written in a sort of foreign language.” [Translator’s note: English version of quote taken from Proust, Marcel. *Against Sainte-Beuve and Other Essays*. Trans. John Sturrock. London: Penguin, 1994.] Regarding the notion of belonging to a language as a foreigner, see the comment by Benjamin Moser and his quote from Ledo Ivo: “She is both Brazil’s greatest modern writer and, in a profound sense, not a Brazilian writer at all. The poet Ledo Ivo captured the paradox: ‘There will probably never be a tangible and acceptable explanation for the language and style of Clarice Lispector. The foreignness of her prose is one of the most overwhelming facts of our literary history, and, even, of the history of our language. This borderland prose, of immigrants and emigrants, has nothing to do with any of our illustrious predecessors. [. . .] You could say that she, a naturalized Brazilian, naturalized a language’” (Moser 10).

13 Speaking of poverty, “when everything was more austere and honourable,” the book is dedicated to composers: Schumann, Beethoven, Bach, Chopin, Stravinsky, Strauss, Debussy, Marlos Nobre, Prokofiev, Carl Orff, Schoenberg, the “twelve-tone composers,” the “electronic generation” (*The Hour 7*).

14 [Translator’s note: English version of quote taken from Moser (181).]

15 Text cited by Pontieri (17) and Moser (181).


17 Nelson Vieira (1989) found in *The Hour of the Star* a “Talmudic style” of composition.

18 In this last book, one more element becomes prominent: the presence of Lispector’s friend and secretary, Olga Borelli, who, after Lispector’s death, collected the scattered fragments and published them in *A Breath of Life*, thus contributing an additional voice to speak for and with Lispector.

19 For an excellent analysis of Lispector’s final books, see Sônia Roncador’s *Poéticas do empobrecimento: A escrita derradeira de Clarice* (2002). Roncador questions the notion of improvisation applied to Lispector’s texts, especially *The Stream of Life*, the book that resulted from the revision of a prior manuscript titled “Screaming Object.” However, she relates Lispector’s last texts to the practice of chronicles and to the informality of a conversation: she finds in these texts not a unity of action but a continuity of theme and tone (Roncador 72). I think of improvisation as a method that is strictly related to the production of a tone and not as a synonym of spontaneity or a text published without revision.


23 Cf. study by Walnice Nogueira Galvão.


25 I am thinking about the example of another writer, Graciliano Ramos, and his character-author Paulo Honório in *São Bernardo* (1936).

**Works Cited**


