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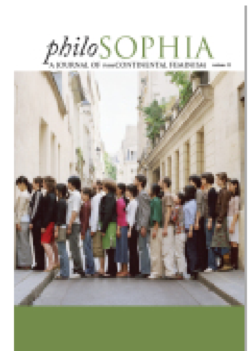

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Clarice Lispector

A Retro Ethics of Errors

Caio Yurgel

Abstract: If there's a riddle scholarship has not yet cracked, it is what Clarice Lispector—arguably Brazil's most notorious writer—meant when she dedicated the entire Chinese nation to a single egg ("To the egg I dedicate the Chinese nation"). Lispector's infatuation with China, by way of the Daodejing (道德經), the I-Ching (易經), and the work of philosophers such as Lin Yutang (林語堂) has also not yet been sufficiently explored. Following Lispector's own evocative—rather than overly analytical—writing style, this article posits that her fascination with Chinese philosophy and mysticism is deeply rooted in a (Daoist) distrust toward mundane and forward-looking notions of success, opting instead for embracing failure as a counterintuitive, "proregressive" politics of resistance—or, as Lin Yuntang (he himself a very retro figure at this point in time) would put it: "the Chinese are cynics and poets only when they have failed." Drawing from the little-explored Chinese influences in her writings, this article sheds light on the Daoist roots of Clarice Lispector's worldview and the role failure plays in her oeuvre.
Keywords: Daoism, China, failure, ethics, teleology

> Cristina told me: "Crime doesn't pay. Does literature pay?" Absolutely not. Writing is a way of failing. Cristina was surprised. She asked me then why did I write. And I didn't know what to say.
>
> —Lispector, *Todas as crônicas*

"To the egg I dedicate the Chinese nation" (Lispector 1964, 82). I am consumed by this sentence. This sentence keeps me awake at night: What does it mean? What does it mean to dedicate an entire nation—the Chinese nation, no less—to a single egg? What color is this egg? And what does it even mean to utter the word "egg"? In Portuguese, the word "egg" (*ovo*) already looks like a chicken staring you straight in the eye. Is this the answer to the riddle? This sentence consumes me.

"To the egg I dedicate the Chinese nation." Other writers, lesser writers, might have more reasonably dedicated the egg to the Chinese nation, and not the other way around, but Clarice—as she is affectionately known in Brazil—is not like other writers. Clarice knows that nothing surpasses the egg in size or mystery, with perhaps the single exception of faraway China. From faraway China and the inscrutable egg, Clarice codes a message that lies at the very core of her work: the chicken always knows that the failure is already inside of her.

"The egg is the chaos of the chicken," has once written Brazilian poet Hilda Hilst (2002, 46), perhaps thinking of Clarice, but most likely not. Because Clarice doesn't deal in chaos, she deals in creation—or rather: in the time that immediately precedes creation. Pan Gu (盤古) is one of the creators of the universe according to Chinese mythology. Heaven and Earth were but an egg inside of which Pan Gu slept alone for eighteen thousand years. Then one day he woke up and felt suffocated. So he grabbed a hatchet and with a single strike cracked the egg from the inside, thus forever separating Heaven from Earth. And the only question that remains unanswered here is: where did the hatchet come from?

In any case, Pan Gu slept alone for eighteen thousand years. I often wonder if Clarice was aware of that. I wonder if this is what she had in mind when she dedicated China to a single egg. I wonder if she felt some kind of connection to Pan Gu, as Clarice was exactly the type of person to have waited for eighteen thousand years inside of an egg—if only she could.

But to say "China" is to already fall into another trap: there are so many Chinas that to boil them down to a single entity seems either too scientific or just plain absurd. Clarice, never one for singular ontologies, had little interest for a monolithic China or a China bookended by dynasties: she mixed and matched, she namedropped it unnecessarily, she dealt in clichés. Throughout her work she frequently makes little in-passing references to the millenary nation: the Great Wall (Lispector 1999, 143), the skeptic wisdom of the ancient Chinese (1981, 126), the Emperor of China (1999, 60–61), Chinese torture (1981, 23), and even funnier quips, such as, "We may not have the ancient Chinese civilization but we do have a set of 'ways' that are our own" (2014, loc. 153). These remarks, except for the last one, are all mundane and uninteresting, and that is because Clarice was not interested in China as a source of content—she was rather interested in China as a method.

When she passed away, in 1977, at age fifty-six, Clarice had 896 books in her personal library. Perhaps there were more; perhaps some titles were subtracted, or lost, or offered to the mysterious gods that rule over inheritances, like socks in a washing machine. I like to think about the accuracy of this number, 896, a number so random—so divisible!—that it serves me as a mantra: by the sheer force of repeating it, I end up believing that it represents more than three mere digits.

These 896 books—just consider again how apprehensible this figure is—are now kept at the Instituto Moreira Salles, in Rio de Janeiro, where one—provided one has made an appointment—might peek at the human being behind the myth: works of high literature (Mansfield, Kafka, Woolf) standing side by side with fitness manuals (*Let's Eat Right to Keep Fit*, by Adelle Davis) and books of popular science (Jerome Meyer's *Fun with Mathematics*). The titles I was interested in, however, lay somewhere in between: an array of books dedicated to Chinese mysticism and philosophy, chief among which an American edition of the *I-Ching* that Clarice would frequently—and famously—consult.

Her handwriting, forever imprinted onto the margins of these books or on loose pieces of paper stuck between the pages, was in the business of asking questions, not of offering assurances: "What does my future look like, broadly speaking?" ("Qual é o meu futuro de um modo geral?"), "It is favorable to find friends" ("É favorável achar amigos"), or even "How should I write my book?" ("Como devo fazer meu livro?").[1] Her pen seems to have been particularly moved by the *I-Ching* (or *The Book of Changes*): a number of handwritten, rectangular cards can be found stuck between specific pages from where they will never, ever leave (such is the price to pay to the gods of inheritance). Clarice was famously partial to the *I-Ching*, a book she would consult in moments of crisis and anxiety and which she would recommend to those who, like her, were in need of guidance: "Grab the *I-Ching* and follow the *I-Ching*" (Malavolta Pinho 2016, 12), she used to say. That's why I went to Rio: to grab the *I-Ching*, to confront the oracle.

But then came regret. Clarice's annotated *I-Ching* didn't tell me anything I didn't already know—that is to say: that she was a human being who had her own share of personal problems ("It is favorable to find friends") and that, as an artist, her interest in China was spiritual rather than analytical, method and not content. To peer into her private notes was like being made privy to a secret not worth the confidentiality it entailed. When revising a text, one should remove a third of the adjectives and half of oneself.

The good oracle, like the good shrink, should speak as little as possible. It was therefore not Clarice's *I-Ching* that helped me find the way, but rather a more obscure book (by today's standards): *The Importance of Living* (生活的藝術), originally published in English in 1937 by the Chinese writer and

philosopher Lin Yutang (林語堂, 1896–1976), who at this point in time had already immigrated to the United States and become a rather well-known translator of Chinese classics and mediator between East and West. Clarice references this book in a 1941 letter written to her sister Elisa, the same year when its first Brazilian translation (by renowned poet Mário Quintana) came out:

> Elisa, think of these holidays as the "great opportunity." Live as a princess would, that is to say, without a care, without any worries. Sleep or at least lie down after lunch. Go for a little stroll in the morning. And be happy and well-rested. Remember Li-Yutang's [*sic*] "tranquilism" ("*tranquilismo*"). "Not doing anything" is one of the most productive occupations of mankind. (Lispector 2007, 16)

Two things are to be noted in this letter written by a young Clarice Lispector: the first is that she misspells Lin Yutang's name, and the second is that she is turning Lin Yutang's elegant and complex examination of Chinese philosophy and way of life into somewhat generic life advice. And in order to do that, in order to trivialize something, one needs to feel very comfortable with this thing. And Clarice did, in a way and from an early age, feel very comfortable with a certain idea of China that she had concocted through books such as an English version of the *Chinese Horoscopes* or a Brazilian edition of an *Introduction to Zen-Buddhism*—an idea of China that gained maturity with time, as it found echoes in the mysticism of the *I-Ching* and in the ethics of the *Daodejing*.[2]

When Clarice writes "*tranquilismo*" (a word Lin Yutang doesn't employ as such in his book), she is giving her own spin to the translation of the translation of a monolith: *wuwei* (無爲), inaction, or natural and effortless action—a central precept of Daoism, one that the moral philosopher Michael Slote derides due to it being "very critical of the whole idea of rational control" (2018, 78). But it is precisely this letting go of "rational control" that makes it such a powerful notion, this retro movement away from the illusions of an all-knowing and all-seeing Reason and toward the entangled complexity of trust, as explained by philosopher Robin Wang:

> Relying, as a form of nonaction or *wuwei*, indicates the importance of trusting the rhythm, patterns, timing, and opportunities that have an inherent tendency to unfold in a given moment. This relying is different from a causal relationship that articulates a linear sequence between events. Relying is embedded in complexity; it is relying in the context of associations. (Wang 2012, 144)

Wang is beautifully hinting at the fact that nobody needs to have poured over the *Daodejing* to already know a thing or two about *wuwei*. *Daodejing*'s greatest

strength as a system of ethics, as a book of philosophy, lies in its porosity[3]—and also perhaps in its hesitation: the *Daodejing* is not a book for one to read and then immediately systematize, but rather a book for one to read and then look around, take a deep breath and say, much like Laozi himself did: *I don't know* ("吾不知其名，字之曰道") (Chen 2008, ch. 25). And this hesitation, this inaction, this millenary staggering, this letting go of the siren song of rational control is neither pessimism nor defeatism: it is, rather, a letting be, a permission for things to be as they are and to grow as they may. What these things are or may become I do not know, luckily by then I will have already died, and only dead will I have learned what the *Daodejing* so tried to teach me: that nothing is more arduous than suspending our belief in our own centrality, and therefore nothing more necessary.

Immanuel Kant, who is lucky enough to have already passed away, was one of the architects of the Anthropocene: with his wholesale ethics he managed to detach emotions from duty, and thus turn other people's needs into a function of our own egocentrism (Wohlfart 2015): we help others not out of altruism but out of the imperative of fulfilling our moral duties (Kant has never really come to terms with the impure whims of empathy, of simply "relying"). I would have a newfound admiration for his work if he at any point—say, bang in the middle of his *Critiques*—had stopped everything to say, "Look, I'm not so sure about this." But that is perhaps too much to expect from a man of the eighteenth century.

Feminist philosopher Kyoo Lee very astutely spots this ambivalent intersection between Daoism and Kantianism when building on the concept of "proregression" by way of the ancient Daoist ritual of *yubu* (禹步): "a twisted bi-directional movement composed of stepping forward once and backward twice" (2019, 98). This very visual image of something "in the making," moving without advancing, rocking back and forth, speaks of this ambiguous attempt at both disrupting time and tempo and pace while keeping intact—in name at least—Enlightenment's magic work: progress. A speculative tug-of-war that offers not a victor (for it dislocates subjectivity) but a starting point.

Pulled simultaneously backward and forward, it is only *in media res* that Clarice's literature can begin. And this *res*, this *thing*, this *it*, this "proregression," is failure. Clarice's literature can only begin *after* her characters and narrators *and even herself* have accepted the inherent failure of language, the inevitable gap between *being* and *narrating*, between fingers and page, between *eidos* and *hyle*. Clarice's characters and narrators—to paraphrase a beautiful text by Olga de Sá—find themselves performing the impossible task of being *against language* while at the same time *making language* ("contra a linguagem mas fazendo linguagem") (de Sá 1993, 124–125). What makes Clarice's texts so unique and odd, like an egg, is that she is not writing an ode to language. Quite on the contrary. Clarice's language is a language of distrust (Nunes

1995, 111–112): every sentence hanging by one's fingertips, like a cockroach one wishes to get rid of but not kill; every word written as if its meaning might completely shift and deceive us five minutes from now, and then once again five years afterward. And this lack of stability, this joyful lack of guarantees is, once again, the very essence of failure.

One of Benjamin Moser's—Lispector's biographer and ambassador in the English-speaking world—most intriguing claims regarding her is that "she came from a tradition of failure" (Lispector 2015, loc. 21), a statement that he fails to explore beyond the historical catastrophe that drove her and her family from Ukraine to Brazil. Moser also conflates "failure" with "success," thus blunting the edge of a concept otherwise capable of cutting against the grain of neoliberalism. It is a shame, I think, that Moser should succumb to the narrative traps that call for round and redeeming stories, for stories with their clearly defined beginnings, middles, and ends, their winners and losers, stories of an edifying neoliberalism that Lauren Berlant might have called—and I hope she did indeed call—"the cruel optimism of a political fetish" (Berlant 2011, 259). It is a shame because ultimately it seems like Moser is no longer speaking of the same writer who one day wrote, "Why publish things that aren't worthwhile? Because worthwhile things aren't worthwhile either. Besides, things that evidently aren't worthwhile always interested me very much. I have an affectionate fondness for the unfinished, the poorly made, whatever awkwardly attempts a little flight and falls clumsily to the ground" (Lispector 2015, loc. 1002). In Moser's hands, a writer who came from a tradition of failure is made into a heroine.

*

Clarice bookends one of her best novels, *The Passion According to G.H.* (1964), with six unbroken lines: three preceding the first word and three following the last. Put together, these six unbroken lines (i.e., six *yang*—the male, light, active side, as opposed to the feminine, dark, and earthly *yin*) (Wang 2012, 3) represent the very first hexagram in the *I-Ching*, called *Qian* (幹), a hexagram connected to creation and creativity ("How should I write my book?"), to the heavens and to perseverance. Each line of each hexagram has a title and a short explanation associated to it. The sixth line of this hexagram reads: "The dragon that flies highest, repents" (亢龍有悔). The sixth line of this hexagram was written by Clarice herself back when she was still living inside an egg.

"The Chinese are cynics and poets only when they have failed," writes Lin Yutang (1940, 112) in the book Clarice quotes to her sister Elisa. Like any good mannerist writer, Lin Yutang cannot avoid a compelling turn of phrase even when it doesn't completely match his own beliefs. In his heart of hearts, Lin Yutang saw something immature in Daoism, preferring instead

the reasonability of a Confucian middle ground. But what on the surface may look like reasonability can deep down turn out to be a trap: the golden mean is golden for a reason, there is a high price to pay—the endless keeping up of conventions, protocols and appearances—for something as seemingly harmless as the middle ground. Lin Yutang was—perhaps unsurprisingly—an advocate of the values of the middle class as the "sanest ideal of life."[4]

But neither is Lin Yutang completely averse to the teachings of the Dao, and with characteristic elegance he highlights one of Daoism's driving forces: its (conceptual and discursive—and "proregressive," one should perhaps add) capacity of slowing down the tempo of life (Lin 1940, 112). It is quite interesting that Clarice should be quoting an author, and, more specifically, a book (*The Importance of Living*) that preached for a de-acceleration of life (which Lispector called "*tranquilismo*"), a movement that was anathema to both the 1930s (when the book was written) and the 1940s (when it was being consumed by Clarice), and that now acquires foreboding tones. Lin, who was extremely popular in the West around the middle of the twentieth century, fell slightly out of favor as the century advanced—only to be rediscovered in mainland China and turned once again into a bestseller (Zhang 2016, 164). In typical proregressive fashion, his body of work seems to be tapping into a scarce resource in present-day China: respite. Even if not a die-hard Daoist, Lin's oeuvre nevertheless channels that *yubu*-like disavowal of constant pro-gression, it dispels dreams of perpetual (forward) motion, it reminds us of the necessity of slowing down the tempo of life, of walking backward two steps at a time.

And in that sense he was opening up a door to Clarice back in 1941—a backdoor, certainly—to what later in her career, toward the 1960s and '70s, would blossom into a full-blown embrace of Daoism and its commitment (and the *Daodejing*'s in particular) of going against the grain of commonsensical knowledge—a commitment that is already built into its language, and that Clarice was slowly but surely building into hers: complex and counter-intuitive, for sure, at times punishingly hermetic, but one that never yields to the temptation of the patronizing metaphor, or the easy recourse to self-help.

The difference between a good and a bad poet lies in their ability of grabbing a word by its least-handled side and running with it, of taking one step front and two steps back in search of an "other" writing (Lee 2019, 99), and one of the figures that best embodies this Daoist maneuver—and whose work I can no longer dissociate from Clarice's own writings—is the poet Yu Xuanji (魚玄機, 844-896), one of Tang Dynasty's (618-908) rare female voices.[5]

Yu Xuanji was everything I want from a poet: independent, stubborn, elusive, deeply melancholy, rebellious against social conventions, someone who comes—and writes—from below, someone who dances to the beat of her own drum, someone who lives and dies by her mouth (Yu Xuanji was decapitated). Her few surviving poems survived only because they were collected in a Qing

Dynasty anthology of Tang poetry that also included some "curiosities": poems written by ghosts, monks, priests, foreigners, women, and others whose efforts "might provide amusement" (Yu 1998, x). She was a courtesan, a concubine, and a Daoist monk. Her posthumous life yielded more than adventures: it yielded biographies, movies, and novels, each furthering the myth, but also—and above all—rescuing the poetry. Yu Xuanji's poetic voice, already current in her own time, gains in actuality and prophecy as present-day China doubles down on the more moralistic and patriarchal values of a late Confucianism of sorts. Yu Xuanji's poetry, in the best spirit of Daoism—and also in the best spirit of any poetry worth its mettle—upsets Confucianism's obsession with lineage and linearity, and, in doing so, her work, like Clarice's, fails.

The title of the poem is "Visiting the South Pavilion at Chongzhen Temple Where the Civil Service Exam Results Are Posted" ("遊崇真觀南樓，睹新及第題名處"), and the title is not good. The title is not good because it explains too much, unlike most of Yu Xuanji's poetry, which merely insinuates. It helps us, however, to situate what is at stake: until very recently in China, if one was not of noble birth, the only way for one to move beyond manual labor—provided one was born a man, of course—was through bureaucracy, through passing the extremely difficult and sought-after civil service exams and going to work for the emperor. Yu Xuanji's poem follows:

> Cloudy mountains fill my gaze
> I think they enjoy the spring
>
> under skillful fingers
> great calligraphy is born
>
> I wish my woman's clothing
> didn't obscure my poems
>
> raising my head in vain
> admiring the names on the honor rolls. (Yu 1998, 23)[6]

In her poem, Yu seems to be saying: in vain I raise my head (for I know a woman's name will never make it there) and admire the fate of those listed above the imperial seal. I then look around and find myself surrounded by spring, mountain-shaped clouds everywhere I look—or are they cloud-shaped mountains? We are here stuck inside a poem in an infinite loop, in a constant state of proregression: from the landscape to the honor rolls and back to the landscape, and what keeps us stuck in this endless loop is the combination between relief and an envious kind of admiration (so well captured by the Chinese character 羨): I admire (and envy) those who were approved and shall now lead a life of relative

comfort serving the emperor, but then I look around and am reminded that I am a poet, that my days will not be spent in tedious audiences nor will my calligraphy be consumed by official reports. This veiled suspicion that passing the civil service exams is ultimately a futile and somewhat narcissistic endeavor says a lot about Daoism, a suspicion that can be further subsumed in the idea—formulated by the writer Justin Hill in a novel based on Yu Xuanji's life and work—that "Bad poets win public offices. Good poets hide in the hills" (Hill 2004, 321). What Daoism suggests to its followers, if it suggests anything at all, is that they should seek the exception over the rule, failure over heroism.

This is Daoism's counterintuitive invitation to failure, an invitation that finds its best formulation in the 29th chapter of the *Daodejing*:

> If one wants to take hold of the world,
> and act on it—
> I see that one will not succeed.
> Well,
> the world is a sacred vessel,
> and not something that can be acted on.
> Those who act on things will be defeated by them.
> Those who take things in their hands will lose them. (Miller 2017, xix)7

One of the promises of meritocracy, in its current gig economy mode, is that everything can be ours—be it success or the latest iPhone—provided we be willing to let go of all protection, like trapeze swingers jumping without a safety net. Instead, we should try to grasp things directly and shape them according to our individual needs. The *Daodejing* and the ingenious reading James Miller makes of it remind us that "there may be some situations where handling things (like a sacred vessel) with delicacy, skill, and respect might be more important than directly manipulating a situation to one's immediate advantage." Rather, warns us Miller, the astute Daoist among us "should be alert to situations in which the exception may prove to be more useful than the rule" (Miller 2017, xix)—a counterintuitive maneuver (and hardly an analytical one at that) that does indeed yield its share of seemingly paradoxical statements ("The perfect square has no corners," "the greatest form has no shape," etc.). But instead of promptly dismissing these statements and labeling them as hermetic (file under: "The inscrutable East"), one should—as Clarice did—see in them a provocative and much-needed way of resisting obvious meaning, or—as Wang puts it (2012, 224)—of "emerg[ing], exist[ing], and endur[ing]."

This constant effort to resist obvious meaning, to endure in the doubt, to move beyond the linear and banal, is what Miller calls "the confrontational hermeneutics of Daoism," and which I place at the root of this notion of failure that I posit as being central to Clarice's own work. Daoism—much like Clarice's

oeuvre—carries within itself its own critique and its own self-doubt (Wang 2012, 131). Its basic mode of operation is counterintuitive and polemical. The Daoist tradition simultaneously encourages a withdrawal from conventional society *and* a commitment to engaging in debate and conflict. Whence a notion of failure that should not be construed as a defeatist stance toward life and society, or as political apathy, but rather as quests to articulate an alternative ethical system that may be, at first sight, completely counterintuitive (Miller 2017, xix–xx).

This counterintuitive politics of resistance, of endurance, of conceiving a world that is not linear and binary but infinitely complex, is perhaps what Slote had in mind when once again rather awkwardly criticizing Daoism: "I can't prove that Daoism is wrong, but it is a view that goes against much of what we believe about leading a good or successful life" (2018, 78). It is rather in this sense that Lispector comes from a tradition of failure: philosophically, counterintuitively, questioning the very essence of what the words "good" and "successful" might mean—questioning what meaning there still remains in these words in our days, and who they serve in the first place.

A recurring leftist criticism of Clarice's work revolves around claims of it being "apolitical" (Santiago 1997), of there lacking openly partisan and engaged positions in her fiction, of her predilection for venturing into maid's quarters and finding there insights and epiphanies, but no class consciousness. These criticisms paint Clarice as a bourgeois writer of bourgeois sensibilities, and there is some truth to that, but only if we read her words at face value, only if we forget that hers is a language of doubt and distrust. Clarice's language is not well equipped to portray class struggle—it lacks realism; it lacks analytical patience. To wish *The Passion According to G.H.* were less metaphysical and more Marxist is to wish for it to be an altogether different book—and not a very good one at that. What Clarice's language is equipped to do, and what she does as few others have, is to resist: to resist obvious meaning, to resist the didacticism of closure, to resist finishing the sentence: the moral of the story is. Hers is a language that is kept porous and open not because there isn't a best side to take or path to walk at a given moment in time, but because it recognizes things are in a constant state of flux, and there is a balance to be achieved in always tugging the rope from its weaker end. To say her work is apolitical is to misunderstand how politics work, but it is also somewhat reasonable: we wish to see things changing in the direction of our beliefs. Progress is a very addictive horizon that forever recedes.

"To live," philosopher Yuk Hui reminds us, "is to maintain a subtle and complicit relation with Dao, even without fully knowing it" (Hui 2016, 69). If forced to choose just one passage from Clarice's entire oeuvre, I would most likely choose this one:

> Deheroization is the grand failure of a life. Not everyone can fail because it is such hard work, one must first climb painfully up to get to the height to

> fall from—I can only achieve the depersonality of silence if I have first built an entire voice. My cultures were necessary to me so that I could climb up to have a point to come down from. It is precisely through the foundering of the voice that one hears for the first time one's own silence and that of others and of things, and accepts it as the possible language. (Lispector 1988, 169)

This passage, toward the very end of *The Passion According to G.H.*, sums up the subversively discreet charm of Clarice's work: the transition from failure not to its opposite, but to its subversion: failure as the birthplace of a language and a vocabulary to resist the commoditizing discourse of winners *versus* losers. It comes as no surprise that this passage should coalesce in *The Passion According to G.H.*, a novel written and published in the first half of the 1960s, a decade in which China—through the *I-Ching* and the *Dadodejing*—started to appear more decisively in Clarice's writings, both as form and content. It is from the '60s onward that Clarice fleshes out the underlying ethical system behind her oeuvre, an ethical system that sees in failure not an invitation to self-help, not a window to edification, not a shortcut to redemption, but a letting-go of guarantees and a deep dive into the painful state of doubt that Kant so tried to silence through categorical imperatives: failure, in the strong sense of the word, means the ability to say, Look, this here I do not know.

Thus an ethics of errors, an ethics of failure, the same that guides Clarice herself as she tries, through inaction ("vegetative attention," "non-thinking"), to get down to the very texture of life (Lispector 2018, loc. 880).[8] The same ethics of errors that presided over the construction of Brasília, "the apocalyptic" (2015, loc. 919): "Brasília is a joke, strictly perfect and without error. And the only thing that saves me is error. . . . Brasília is the failure of the most spectacular success in the world" (2015, loc. 907, 911). The same ethics of errors that a nameless character in *The Via Crucis of the Body* (1974) abides by, even when—or especially when—the poet Cláudio, the very handsome Cláudio, a failure "like all of us"—or even more so for being a poet—tries to read out loud one of his creations. And what to say to a poet who reads us one of their poems if not exactly what this nameless character felt like crying out: "Oh Cláudio—I felt like crying out—we're all failures, we're all going to die some day! Who? but who can sincerely say they've realized their potential in life. Success is a lie" (Lispector 2015, loc. 839–840). Confronted with a poet who reads us their poetry, is there a more perfect, more empathetic, more contemporary answer than this one?

There was a time when I thought Clarice too serious, too self-important. Today I realize I was misreading her. Some of her texts have me in stitches, especially those published from the 1960s onward, starting with *Family Ties* (1960) and *The Foreign Legion* (1964)—leading all the way up to *The Via Crucis of the Body* (1974), an absolutely preposterous collection of slightly disjointed,

seemingly rushed or incomplete, and yet strangely disarming short stories. The more I delve into the last seventeen years of Clarice's output (crowned by her very best novel, 1977's *The Hour of the Star*), the more I try to figure out what exactly prompted this shift from existential epiphany to ethical doubt—in other words, what caused narrator and narration to part ways. In Clarice's early output, narrator and narration are ontologically linked: the world is their bellybutton. It is only when this chain is broken that Clarice's work achieves maturity—but what causes this chain to break? Going back to Clarice's first novels, 1946's *The Chandelier* and 1949's *The Besieged City* (which do not benefit from the explosive genius of her début novel, 1943's *Near to the Wild Heart*), I am struck by how monolithic—to the point of being almost impenetrable—they seem: self-assured in spite of all appearances, works that read like the closing arguments of a lawyer who isn't very convinced of her client's case.

Clarice studied Law from 1939 until 1943. Was this what coalesced in the 1960s, the time that it took for her to shake off the more binary implications and infallible language of her academic training?[9] Was it her well-documented bouts of depression, worsened after she suffered an accident in 1966 that engulfed her apartment, papers, and own writing hand in flames (Gotlib 2007, 581)? Was it the gradual constraints imposed by the military regime (1964–1985) that forced her—like any other artist—to be extra mindful of her own language in order to avoid censorship and still convey her message? Was it her dwindling financial situation, made even more precarious after she was sacked from the *Jornal do Brasil* in 1974 for being Jewish (Gotlib 2007, 400)? Or was it something that predates all of that, something that can be traced to a falsely distant land? When Clarice was born, in present-day Ukraine, China was the country next door; between China and her native Chechelnyk there was but one border. Clarice left Ukraine before she could realize where she was, a privilege not extended to her parents: they had to forever carry Russia and the horrors they endured in Russia with them. We have no testimonies to this effect, but we can assume her parents knew a thing or two about China, in the same way that Chinese people tend to know a thing or two about Russia, two nations fraternally intertwined in an everlasting case of love and hate (Lukin 2015, xi–xii).[10] This would account for, and perhaps even help explain, why Clarice was reading Lin Yutang as early as 1941, and why she would later become an avid reader of the *Daodejing* and a practitioner of the *I-Ching*. These books have served as a filter through which Clarice's later writings went through, as they eventually flowed—in her own syncretic way—into error, into failure, into a "retro" kind of pleasure for the unfinished and imperfect text. The more mature her output, the more her individual texts look like they were pulled out of a drawer five minutes ago and published as such: erratic, counterintuitive, exposed—as if she was trying to put into practice the very ethical system on which she anchored her work.

Clarice wrote most stories that make up *The Via Crucis of the Body* in one go over the course of a long weekend in May of 1974. The author lets us know by way of an "explanation" that the book contains thirteen stories, and not fourteen, simply because she didn't feel like it (Lispector 2016, 528). Just like that. She was first commissioned to write three stories about things that had "really happened," and was shocked not only by her ability of making up stories on commission, but also by their hard-hitting reality—even though these stories hadn't happened to her, or to her family or friends. And how does the author know that? Well, knowing—"artists know things" (2016, 527). The makeshift nature of her arguments—fragile, contradicting, unsustainable before the court of reason—sets the stage for the equally reticent, ironic, outrageous short stories that follow. These short stories offer very little resistance: their language is accessible, their scenes quotidian, their dialogues straightforward, but deep down they are truly grotesque in that they try to bring down all that is held too high, like a repented dragon. There's a level of incoherence to these stories—they only barely fit together thematically—that hints at the absence of an organizing principle, of an all-knowing and all-systematizing entelechy. Some things are better left to their own devices, and *The Via Crucis of the Body* is one such thing: a sacred vessel (the answer was already in the title)[11] that Clarice handles with the tips of her fingers, mindful of being, leaving space for failure, refusing to use certainty and efficiency as a leverage for building a normative worldview. "For the Daoists," Yuk Hui reminds us, "the refusal of mechanical reasoning is a refusal of a calculative form of thinking, in order to stay within the freedom of the inner spirit. We might say that they refuse all efficiency in order to prepare for an opening" (Hui 2016, 115). And what was Clarice doing in the 1960s and '70s if not precisely that: preparing herself for an opening.

On March 26, 1977, the year of her death, Clarice got a letter from her friend and artist Maria Bonomi. Among other things, the letter said:

> Forgive me if I have tired you with all this chitchat. Go and do as you please. If you need anything, let me know. I wish you the best—I know you have been feeling a bit overwhelmed lately, but pay no mind because only imbeciles can be happy and therefore, according to the Chinese, only the smart ones are unhappy and only the fools unhappy and happiness is but a promise of capitalism . . . and so forth and so on. (Lispector 2002, loc. 482)

Among other things, the letter said: Success is a lie. And so forth and so on, one step front and two steps back.

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Notes

1. For further documentation of and commentary on Clarice's *marginalia*, see Marília Gabriela Malavolta Pinho, "Do dorso à cauda do tigre: trilhando a linguagem de Clarice Lispector" (Araraquara, UNESP, 2016), 79.
2. It would perhaps be prudent—as a side note—to mention that the *I-Ching* (易經) and the *Dadodejing* (道德經) are not the same book. They do share a common word in their titles, "jing" (經), hence the eventual confusion. Jing means Classic, Canon, or Book. So *I-Ching* (or *Yijing*) means the *Book of Changes* or the *Classic of Changes*, and it is a mystical text written in the ninth century BCE, with no discernible author, and which provides exoteric guidance for moral decision making. The *Daodejing*, on the other hand, was written a bit later, in the fourth century BCE, and is attributed to Laozi (老子). "Dao" (道) means the way, the path, "de" (德) means virtue or integrity, so *Daodejing* means the *Book of the Virtuous Path*, or, in other words, better words: a book of ethics.
3. For an in-depth and evocative discussion on the concept of porosity within this context, see Zairong Xiang's "Transdualism: Towards a Materio-Discursive Embodiment."
4. ". . . in short, it is that ideal of middle-class life which I believe to be the sanest ideal of life ever discovered by the Chinese. . . . the happiest man is still the man of the middle-class who has earned a slight means of economic independence, who has done a little, but just a little, for mankind, and who is slightly distinguished in his community, but not too distinguished. It is only in this milieu of well-known obscurity and financial competence with a pinch, when life is fairly carefree and yet not altogether carefree, that the human spirit is happiest and succeeds best" (Lin 1940, 113, 115).
5. For a thorough analysis of the position of women within Daoism through Chinese history, see Catherine Despeux and Livia Kohn's excellent *Women in Daoism*.
6. "雲峯滿目放春晴 / 歷歷銀鉤指下生 / 自恨羅衣掩詩句 / 舉頭空羨榜中名。"
7. "想要把持，/ 干扰天地的运行，/ 我知道那是办不到的。/ / 不可把持，打扰它，只能按其规律，调整它，应用它。/ 强力而为的人必定败乱天下; / 强力把持的人必定失去天下。"
8. "O processo de viver é feito de erros—a maioria essenciais—de coragem e preguiça, desespero e esperança de vegetativa atenção, de sentimento constante (não pensamento) que não conduz a nada, não conduz a nada, e de repente aquilo que se

pensou que era 'nada'—era o próprio assustador contato com a tessitura do viver—e esse instante de reconhecimento (igual a uma revelação) precisa ser recebido com a maior inocência, com a inocência de que se é feito" (Lispector 2018, loc. 880).

9. A choice that Clarice herself deemed a mistake: "Quanto a mim, a escolha do curso superior não passou de um erro. Eu não tinha orientação, havia lido um livro sobre penitenciárias, e pretendia apenas isto: reformar um dia as penitenciárias do Brasil" (Lispector 2018, loc. 886).
10. "For centuries, the image of China has played an important role in Russian thought. While influencing foreign policy concepts, China (sometimes as part of a more general notion of 'the East') has played the more general role of reference point for Russian thinking about Russia itself, its place in the world, its future, and the essence of Russianness."
11. A reading of the mental and visual representations of the body in Lispector's *The Via Crucis of the Body* by way of Catherine Despeux's *Taoism and Self Knowledge: The Chart for the Cultivation of Perfection* is long overdue.

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