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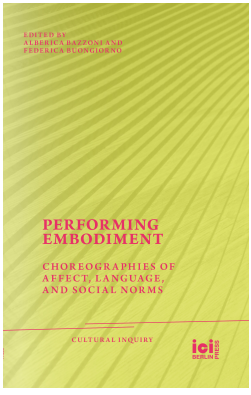


*Performing Embodiment: Choreographies of Affect, Language, and Social Norms*, ed. by Alberica Bazzoni and Federica Buongiorno, Cultural Inquiry, 39 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2026), pp. 49–73

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# Performing the Living Present

## Clarice Lispector's *Água Viva*

CITE AS:

Alberica Bazzoni, 'Performing the Living Present: Clarice Lispector's *Água Viva*', in *Performing Embodiment: Choreographies of Affect, Language, and Social Norms*, ed. by Alberica Bazzoni and Federica Buongiorno, Cultural Inquiry, 39 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2026), pp. 49–73 <https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-39_03>

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ABSTRACT: This chapter reads Clarice Lispector's *Água Viva* (1973) as a performative text that strives to capture and put into language the fleeting, flowing, and embodied temporality of the living present. From a phenomenological perspective, the constitution of temporality lies at the heart of experience and of the co-constitutive encounter of self and world, which is an embodied experience in time and of time. The first part of the chapter analyses Lispector's concept of the present in *Água Viva* and interprets her use of written language as performative, highlighting the libidinal propulsion of writing as an affirmative force. The second part looks at how the temporality of the living present is performed in the text, focusing in particular on five elements: 1) the combination of philosophical and poetic language; 2) the open frame of beginning and end; 3) improvisation; 4) impersonality; and 5) the metaphor of birth. Devoid of plot, sustained by a rhythm of variations within repetitions, *Água Viva* mixes poetic and philosophical language to delve into the temporality of the present, which is, performatively, the present of writing.

KEYWORDS: Lispector, Clarice; literary experimentalism; temporality; present; improvisation; impersonal; metaphor; birth; attunement

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# Performing the Living Present

## Clarice Lispector's *Água Viva*

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### INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I read Clarice Lispector's *Água Viva* (1973) as a performative text that strives to capture and put into language the living present.[1] By *performative* I mean here a text that makes something happen, a text that embodies and enacts a certain configuration of experience, rather than a text that represents something that already exists, real or imaginary, as in a referential (semantic) use of

1 The text was first translated into English as *The Stream of Life*, trans. by Elizabeth Lowe and Earl Fitz (University of Minnesota Press, 1989); the title *Água Viva* literally translates as 'living water'. A later translation keeps the original title in Portuguese: see Clarice Lispector, *Água Viva*, trans. by Stefan Tobler (New Directions, 2012). In this chapter I use the latter translation (e-book edition).

language.[2] Bridging linguistic, theoretical, and aesthetic approaches, the investigation of the performativity of a literary text also asks questions of *how* it realizes its performance, that is, questions of form and literary devices — metaphor above all. *Água Viva* is an attempt to speak of time as it passes in and through writing; it is 'the story of instants that flee', in which the speaking voice writes 'the flow of the words' and counts 'the instants that drip and are thick with blood'.[3] It is a philosophical-poetic meditation on, and staging of, the fleeting, flowing, and embodied temporality of the present.

Lispector is an experimental writer whose literary work engages with existential and aesthetic questions about language, representation, temporality, love, loss, joy, contradiction, the organic interconnectedness of humans and the world, and every nuance of thought and feeling. She was born in 1920 in Ukraine to a Jewish family, but she

2 Classical points of reference for this specific understanding of performativity are J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Harvard University Press, 1975), and Judith Butler's redeployment of the concept in the fields of gender and collective political identities, in Judith Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory', in *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theater*, ed. by Sue-Ellen Case (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), pp. 270–83; Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (Routledge, 1997); and *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Harvard University Press, 2015). For an up-to-date, comprehensive map of the concept of performativity in the study of narrative, see Ute Berns, 'Performativity', in *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, ed. by Peter Hühn and others (Hamburg University Press, 2009–13) <http://lhn.sub.uni-hamburg.de/index.php/Performativity.html> [accessed 14 November 2025]. For a thorough philosophical investigation of the performativity of language, see also Lucilla Guidi's chapter 'Language as Embodied Practice: Notes on Performative Processes of Subjectification with Reference to Ludwig Wittgenstein, Stanley Cavell, and Judith Butler', in the present volume, pp. 15–48.

3 Lispector, *Água Viva*, pp. 66, 15, and 29.

grew up in Brazil, where the family moved soon after.[4] At the age of nine she lost her mother — an early encounter with death and mourning which left an indelible mark on her that can be traced as an underlying structuring force in all her writings. She married a diplomat, with whom she travelled and lived in several European countries and in the US for over ten years, writing novels and short stories in Portuguese and becoming an internationally acclaimed author. She then returned to Brazil, to Rio de Janeiro, where she died prematurely in 1977. Today, Lispector is considered one of the most significant twentieth-century Brazilian writers and her works are translated and read all around the world.

Alongside *A Paixão Segundo G.H.* (*The Passion According to G.H.*) (1964), *Água Viva* is Lispector's literary masterpiece and represents her highest aesthetic-philosophical achievement. It is a short, experimental text, in which the voice who says 'I' addresses a nameless 'you' with an uninterrupted flow of images, reflections, invocations, descriptions, short narrative fragments, and unanswered questions. Completely devoid of plot, sustained by a rhythm of variations within repetitions, *Água Viva* mixes poetic and philosophical language to delve into the temporality of the present, which is, performatively, the present of writing.

The question of temporality is central to the phenomenological enterprise. In reading Lispector's *Água Viva*, I draw attention here to the present as the kinaesthetic awareness of the flowing of life, where temporality itself is formed. From a phenomenological perspective, the constitution of temporality lies at the heart of experience and of

4 See Benjamin Moser, *Why This World: A Biography of Clarice Lispector* (Penguin, 2014).

the co-constitutive encounter of self and world, which is an embodied experience *in* time and *of* time.[5] The experience of the living present comes to the fore as an intensified awareness of the ever-changing and embodied experience of becoming. Such a heightened experience is temporary and intermittent, as other dimensions of temporality — namely chronological, linear time, which organizes the temporal continuum into memory and projection — intervene to make life possible and to shield life from its own all-encompassing intensity. In the living present, however, only the present matters; past and future do not exist as such as there is — temporarily — no outside to the experience. The living present is therefore expansive and not organized chronologically, while at the same time constituting the foundation of temporal experience. *Água Viva* is an extraordinary exploration of the experience of the living present in its happening and of the possibilities of language to grapple with an experience that defies the very fabric of language itself.

In the first part of this chapter, I analyse Lispector's concept of the present in *Água Viva*, which is characterized as embodied, open, relational, and dynamic. I interpret Lispector's use of written language as *performative*, and reflect on what such performativity entails in terms of the relationship between enunciation and experience and the libidinal propulsion of writing as an affirmative force. In the second part, I look at how the temporality of the living present is performed in the text. I focus in particular on

5 In this chapter, I expand on the theoretical investigation of temporality and the aesthetic of the living present that I developed as part of my project at the ICI Berlin (2020–22), published in my essay 'Reduction in Time: Kinaesthetic and Traumatic Experiences of the Present in Literary Texts', in *The Case for Reduction*, ed. by Christoph F. E. Holzhey and Jakob Schillinger, Cultural Inquiry, 25 (ICI Berlin Press, 2022), pp. 191–212 <https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-25_10>.

five elements, which are in no way meant as exhaustive of the text's strategies, but which effectively illustrate Lispector's *mise en scène* of the living present. These are: 1) the combination of philosophical and poetic language; 2) the open frame of beginning and end, which cuts the flow of language while at the same time only temporarily delimiting it — in fact, writing is presented as having no beginning and no end: the frame of the book works as a phenomenological reduction, a circumscribed experience of intensified attention to temporality in its happening; 3) improvisation as a form of openness to the unknown, which is discovered as it is created in writing; 4) the undoing of the distinction between subject and object, towards the achievement of an impersonal experience and an experience of the impersonal; and 5) the metaphor of birth.

## LISPECTOR'S CONCEPT OF THE PRESENT AS LIVING WATER

Temporality is at the centre of Lispector's meditations in *Água Viva*. In the book, the voice who says 'I' makes the temporality of writing materialize on the page by speaking in the present about the present:

> I am a little scared: scared of surrendering completely because the next instant is the unknown. The next instant, do I make it? or does it make itself? We make it together with our breath. [...]
>
> Let me tell you: I'm trying to seize the fourth dimension of this instant-now so fleeting that it's already gone because it's already become a new instant-now that's also already gone. Every thing has an instant in which it is. I want to grab hold of the *is* of the thing. These instants passing through

> the air I breathe: in fireworks they explode silently
> in space.[6]

Each fragment of the text contains Lispector's entire philosophy of time, reformulated in infinite variations throughout the book. In this passage, the core elements of the living present are convoked: the narrator speaks in the present, and wonders whether time is her own creation, or something that creates itself; in order to answer, she needs an interlocutor, the reader, and an embodied experience, breath: 'We make it together with our breath.' The time of writing and the time of reading are brought together as a material act that creates the next moment, that is, the continuity of the flow of the present. Lispector wants to capture the becoming of being, 'the *is* of the thing', in writing, which is 'the fourth dimension of this instant-now', a material existence that constantly *is* and constantly *becomes*. This operation is scary, she says, because it requires abandoning control and a full immersion into the unknown that is to come: 'I am a little scared: scared of surrendering completely because the next instant is the unknown.' As Marília Librandi remarks, '[a]gainst the fixity of the written text, her consistent (even obsessive) aim was to create texts able to capture the instant of time in movement.'[7] Performativity, embodiment, openness to the unknown, and relationality emerge as the constitutive elements that define Lispector's concept of the living present, which *Água Viva* stages by mobilizing an impressively creative sequence of images and reflections.

The kind of present that Lispector performs in the text responds to a fundamental awareness of the inces-

6 Lispector, *Água Viva*, p. 3; emphasis in the original.

7 Marília Librandi, *Writing by Ear: Clarice Lispector and the Aural Novel* (University of Toronto Press, 2018), p. 21.

sant movement and transformation of life as it happens. Lispector's textual performance of the living present shares some aspects with a modernist understanding of time exemplified in the literary device of 'epiphany', as both are intensified experiences that have their origin in the mundane, each emphasizing temporality through the prism of the instant, and having to do with accessing a different, often overwhelming, plane of cognition.[8] However, while modernist epiphany is a revelation happening in an instant that is abstracted from its temporal sequence, Lispector's intensified experience of time is rooted precisely in duration, in staying as close as possible to the realization of the becoming of being. The living present is not an epiphanic moment out of time, an instant that coincides with a metaphysical eternity, but the embodied experience of time as flow: 'More than the instant, I want its flow.'[9] Bringing desire into the picture ('I want'), Lispector's performance of the living present is a sustained experience and a sustained practice that has to do with an interrogation of time itself, which is intrinsically linked to its aesthetic production through writing. Lispector does not pursue transcendence, but rather embraces full materiality, exploring the living present as the foundational experience of embodiment.

Lispector's concept of the present as embodied, open, relational, and flowing, brings her close to thinkers such as Henri Bergson, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari,[10] and to an extent

8 See Terry E. Palls, 'The Miracle of the Ordinary: Literary Epiphany in Virginia Woolf and Clarice Lispector', *Luso-Brazilian Review*, 21.1 (1984), pp. 63–78. However, Palls does not grasp the distinctive elements of embodiment and duration that characterize Lispector's concept of the present.

9 Lispector, *Água Viva*, p. 10.

10 See Hélène Cixous, *Reading with Clarice Lispector*, trans. by Verena Andermatt Conley (University of Minnesota Press, 1990); Hélène

anticipates neo-materialist, posthuman, and ecofeminist developments of those strands of thought by Rosi Braidotti and Donna Haraway.[11] In 'Clarice Lispector's Philosophy of Time', Paula Marchesini identifies the writer's philosophical influences in relation to temporality, which include Spinoza, Bergson, and Martin Heidegger, and analyses the original ways in which she develops her literary discourse on the present. According to Marchesini, Lispector

> conceives time as pure actuality, a relentless present, without past or future, that never stops being and that extends as wide as reality [...]. This ubiquitous present is primarily material [...]. Additionally, this present is a permanent vigilance, where material existence is ceaselessly attentive to itself.[12]

The anchoring of the present in the material world is what distinguishes Lispector from other thinkers on whom she draws in foregrounding the temporal constitution of experience. Furthermore, her concept of the present differs from other forms of temporality, 'the practical time of everyday life', 'the timelessness of religion', and 'the time-

Cixous, 'Foreword', in Clarice Lispector, *The Stream of Life*, trans. by Elizabeth Lowe and Earl E. Fitz (University of Minnesota Press, 1989), pp. ix–xxxv; Paula Marchesini, 'Clarice Lispector's Philosophy of Time', *Angelaki*, 28.2 (2013), pp. 125–35 <https://doi.org/10.1080/0969725X.2023.2192072>; Michael Marder, 'Existential Phenomenology According to Clarice Lispector', *Philosophy and Literature*, 37 (2013), pp. 374–88 <https://doi.org/10.1353/phl.2013.0032>; and Fernanda Negrete, 'Approaching Impersonal Life with Clarice Lispector', *Humanities*, 7.55 (2018), pp. 1–18 <https://doi.org/10.3390/h7020055>.

11 In fact, Lispector is a source for Braidotti. See the section entitled 'Clarice Lispector as the anti-Kafka', in Rosi Braidotti, *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming* (Polity Press, 2002), pp. 160–67.

12 Marchesini, 'Clarice Lispector's Philosophy of Time', p. 125.

lessness of rational thinking'.[13] These other temporalities are necessary as they enable prediction and control, 'protect humans from bare existence',[14] and provide the illusion of a justification of existence somewhere outside of it. However, Lispector is interested in phenomenologically suspending these other forms of temporality ('wanting to know why — I'm not interested in that, the cause is past matter'; 'The invention of today is the only way to usher in the future')[15] and aims for the very source — the very spring, to stay with the aqueous metaphor — of temporal experience, which is found in the materiality of existence in constant transformation. Being in the present, Lispector shows in *Água Viva*, demands the relinquishing of control and a posture of acceptance of what is, replacing the impulse to understand with the affect of tuning in. Importantly, this is not a transcendental experience but a deeply embodied one, which brings about a state of non-religious grace, the 'joy of being material among material things'.[16]

In Lispector's work, the question of temporality involves an epistemological and an aesthetic interrogation. How to conceptualize the experience of the living present, and how to render it into language? First, as an immersion into bare life in its flowing, Lispector is confronted with a pre-categorial experience, a continuum which precedes division and the structuring of experience into discrete portions, actors, and objects. The experience of the living present therefore exposes the subject to a constitutive cognitive limit and plunges her into the ineffable, the incomprehensible. Librandi highlights the pervasive element

13 Ibid., p. 126.
14 Ibid., p. 127.
15 Lispector, *Água Viva*, pp. 4 and 6.
16 Marchesini, 'Clarice Lispector's Philosophy of Time', p. 130.

of silence and negation in Lispector's work, pointing to the limits of linguistic comprehension, whereby 'the ineffable is expressed negatively';[17] Similarly, Negrete stresses the constitutive limits with which language has to contend: 'While only accessible through language, life begins only by writing at the extreme point of language's necessary failure.'[18]

> Beyond thought I reach a state. I refuse to divide it up into words [...]. I know that I'm scared of the moments in which I don't use thought and that's a momentary state that is difficult to reach, and which, entirely secret, no longer uses the words with which thoughts are produced. Is not using words to lose your identity? is it getting lost in the harmful essential shadows?
>
> I lose the identity of the world inside myself and exist without guarantees. I achieve whatever is achievable but I live the unachievable and the meaning of me and the world and you isn't obvious.[19]

In order to capture the present, Lispector has to push language beyond semantic and syntactic boundaries, searching for choreographies of words that are not detached from the pre-categorial realm of experience and that enact the perceptive transformations of temporal becoming — words that, in Cixous's powerful formulation, attempt to 'repair the dreadful cut between book and body'.[20]

Cognitive studies of phenomenological orientation have stressed the embodied character of thought and the continuum existing between body and language. In *Metaphors We Live By*, a seminal text that connects cognitive

17 Librandi, *Writing by Ear*, p. 9.
18 Negrete, 'Approaching Impersonal Life', p. 9.
19 Lispector, *Água Viva*, p. 64.
20 Cixous, *Reading with Clarice*, p. 15.

studies of the embodied mind to cultural constructs such as war and death, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson trace a development of thought that works by means of analogy from basic physical schemas to complex conceptual aggregates, from the concrete to the abstract, from the body to language.[21] Although cognitive studies of the embodied mind contribute immensely to rooting thought in the body, establishing a continuity (rather than a radical alterity) between body and language, the basic schema on which Lakoff and Johnson's analysis is based responds to a narrow, selective understanding of the body as a perceptive and kinaesthetic unit, which limits their description of cognition to certain specific patterns. In the case of temporality, for example, they describe two fundamental ways of conceptualizing time:

> 1) time is a moving object, the future moves towards us, and passes us by; 2) time is stationary and we move through it. [ … ] What is in common is relative motion with respect to us, with the future in front and the past behind. That is, they are two subcases of the same metaphor.[22]

The dominant metaphor of temporality explored by Lakoff and Johnson presupposes a front–back orientation, which is based on vision and walking: we have our eyes on the front, we walk forward. However, this is not the only way for a body to be oriented; what happens to our temporal understanding, for example, if we replace vision with hearing as the foregrounded sense? Hearing entails switching from a front–back orientation to an immersive and recep-

21 George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago University Press, 1980).

22 Ibid., p. 44.

tive one.[23] It is not by chance that so many metaphors that attempt to express the living present through language resort to hearing rather than sight. Furthermore, when the body is immersed in water, front–back orientation loses its dominance. Waves of water, waves of sound, *água viva*: the aqueous metaphor seems much more apt to capture the temporality of the living present, displacing or suspending the centrality of certain specific cognitive categories (linear, discrete), and demanding a different language to be mobilized.

Instead of resorting to the structures of referential language, Lispector uses the present tense and widespread deictics such as 'this' to produce an actual temporal experience through enunciation:

> This is not a message of ideas that I am transmitting to you but an instinctive ecstasy of whatever is hidden in nature and that I foretell. And this is a feast of words. I write in signs that are more a gesture than voice.[24]

The text is not a container of meaning, 'a message of ideas', but a gesture and a feast, that is, an experience in and of itself (and, specifically, a joyful, sensually pleasurable experience, although scary in the face of the unknown, as we have seen). By performing the present, approximating embodied experience in writing, the text produces pleasure — precisely what is deemed unachievable in an understanding of language as lack, as separation. As Cixous remarks, in *Água Viva* Lispector 'manages to produce a place where

23 See Librandi, *Writing by Ear*, on the aural aspect of Lispector's work and its philosophical implications.

24 Lispector, *Água Viva*, p. 17. The English translation 'ecstasy' forces the text's original meaning into a specifically connoted term. The Portuguese term used by Lispector is *volúpia*, which literally means 'intense sensual pleasure'.

to have pleasure and to say it would not be absolutely antagonistic, where pleasure would flow into saying it, would not be extinguished through the act of saying it'.[25] This is indeed the difference between representation, which presupposes the absence of the signified and its replacement in language, and performativity, which enacts a presentification in language: 'I am savoring whatever exists.'[26] In *Água Viva*, pleasure is present, the present is pleasurable.

## PERFORMING TIME

The reader of *Água Viva* is invited by Lispector to join in the writer's pleasure by relinquishing a controlling attitude, which would seek to understand and anticipate what is to come, and instead to surrender to the flowing force of the text. The text elicits an attuned reading, in small portions or all at once, starting anywhere in the text, reading some parts again, and enjoying the variations within repetitions. There is an unfolding of images of flowers, animals, caves, mundane activities such as drinking coffee and sitting on a chair, births, dawns, the short narrative inserts, the direct addresses to 'you', the unanswered questions, the alternation of intense emotional states such as joy, fear, mourning, and beatitude. Such a text, which 'escapes the first rule of text', as there is no story and no intelligible development, requires alternative modes of fruition, based on sensorial immersion rather than narrative tension or hermeneutic interpretation.[27] And in this movement of acceptance, the reader may join Lispector in a shared, pleasurable presentification.

25 Cixous, 'Foreword', p. xii.
26 Lispector, *Água Viva*, p. 67.
27 Cixous, 'Foreword', p. ix.

Part of the fascination exerted by *Água Viva* is its recourse to a combination of philosophical and poetic language. As Librandi notes, Lispector's work is both 'a case study and a source of theory'.[28] In this respect, Lispector joins other authors who pursue a mutual contamination of poetic and philosophical linguistic functions, starting from an awareness of the irreducible role of metaphor in constructing meaning, on the one hand, and of the embodied (situated, contextual, relational, and sensorial) nature of language, on the other.[29] In the case of *Água Viva*, the original interweaving of philosophical poetry and poetic philosophy responds to the author's challenge to write an experience that pushes the boundaries of language, that is, the capturing of the very forming of experience in the present, the approximation of the becoming of being: 'My state is that of a garden with running water. In describing it I try to mix words so that time can make itself.'[30] Lispector constructs a text that is a meditation on the living present

28 Librandi, *Writing by Ear*, p. 9.

29 See Giuseppe Stellardi, *Heidegger and Derrida on Philosophy and Metaphor: Imperfect Thought* (Humanity Books, 2000). See also Adriana Cavarero's extensive work on the relationship between philosophy and literature from a feminist perspective that reclaims the centrality of the body: Adriana Cavarero, *For More than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*, trans. by Paul A. Kottman (Stanford University Press, 2005). As Cavarero elsewhere puts it: 'literature is a polysemous language that undoes the arrogance of every system claiming stability. [...] Philosophy is constructed by removing from language the liveliness of the body, the communicative sense of its resonance.' See Adriana Cavarero and Elisabetta Bertolino, 'Beyond Ontology and Sexual Difference: An Interview with the Italian Feminist Philosopher Adriana Cavarero', *Differences*, 19.1 (2008), pp. 128–67 (p. 161) <https://doi.org/10.1215/10407391-2007-019>. In discussing the philosophical-literary mix that characterizes Lispector's style, Librandi mentions Nietzsche, a reference that recurs in criticism on Lispector, as the thinker who 'established the modern form of literature as a hybrid text in between philosophy and fiction' (Librandi, *Writing by Ear*, p. 21).

30 Lispector, *Água Viva*, p. 10.

and also a performance of the living present. Metaphor, the margin of philosophy, is widespread within the text, contending with the impossibility of verbalizing experience. But metaphor is also in the very construction of the text, as the text performs what it says: it is an interrupted flow with no beginnings and no ends; it connects the present tense of sentences and the present of writing and reading; it constantly transforms; it pushes meaning into the unknown. As Cixous evocatively puts it, '[t]he text is a metaphor itself, a metaphor which is not a metaphor but *água viva*, living water, a metaphor without stop. [ … ] The text is its own echo.'[31]

I wish now to provide some more detailed examples of how metaphor and performativity work in the text. The first element to highlight is that of the text's frame. If the living present is an ongoing flow, how to contain it in a book that is necessarily delimited? Lispector tries to respond to this structural limit by staging a text with no beginning and no end. From the opening line, writing is presented as already ongoing, as if picking up a stream of words that was inaudible but already there:[32] 'It's with such profound

31 Cixous, 'Foreword', p. xxii.

32 Bergson's concept of time is useful here, as it distinguishes between objective time, which is spatialized, linear, and can be divided into segments with beginnings and ends, and subjective time, or duration, which is continuous and cyclical. See Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness* [1889], trans. by F. L. Pogson (Dover Publications, 2001). It is interesting to note the affinity between Lispector's temporal performance in *Água Viva* and the work of electronic composer Caterina Barbieri, explored from a similar perspective by Federica Buongiorno in 'Reduction in Computer Music: Bodies, Temporalities, and Generative Computation', in *The Case for Reduction*, pp. 175–90 <https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-25_09>. Barbieri works on repetition and variation, immersion, improvisation, sustained attention, and the embodied negotiation with the medium of execution. What for electronic music is the necessary mediation of computers, with which the artist forms an embodied 'structural

happiness. Such a hallelujah. Hallelujah, I shout, hallelujah merging with the darkest human howl of the pain of separation but a shout of diabolic joy.'[33] The first sentence is subjectless and breaks with syntax. We are thrown in the middle of a discourse, an expression of joy intermixed with the pain of separation, as in giving birth. It is a beginning, but it comes from something else; enunciation is already in a continuum. Later in the text, she says it explicitly: 'What I write to you has no beginning: it's a continuation.'[34] The end of the book is equally open, another sequence of present-tense enunciations on the movement of 'now':

> Ah this flash of instants never ends. My chant of the *it* never ends? I'll finish deliberately by a voluntary act. But it will keep going in constant improvisation, always and always creating the present that is future. [ … ]
>
> Whatever will still be later — is now. Now is the domain of now. And as long as the improvisation lasts I am born.
>
> What I'm writing to you goes on and I am bewitched.[35]

Writing, and time with it, continues even after the word on the page ceases to be audible, Lispector suggests. The book is, of course, a frame to the event, which cuts the flow of language while at the same time only temporarily

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coupling' (p. 178), is for Lispector the mediation of writing, which performs the experience of the living present. Barbieri describes the temporality created by cycles of repetition and differential alterations in her electronic pieces as 'a dynamic and living being able to develop its own organic laws' (Barbieri, in Buongiorno, 'Reduction in Computer Music', p. 186). See (or, better, listen to) Caterina Barbieri's albums *Patterns of Consciousness* (2017) and *Ecstatic Computation* (2019).

33 Lispector, *Água Viva*, p. 3.

34 Ibid., p. 41.

35 Ibid., pp. 86–87.

delimiting it. Inside the frame, however, the frame itself is not perceivable; there is no beginning and no end, no before and no after, no externality, only the flow of the living present. The text contained in the book works as an exercise of phenomenological reduction, or else a ritual, an experience of intensified attention to temporality in its happening. The fact that the experience of the living present is delimited by the book, however, does not mean that outside of that experience time stops flowing, that there is an actual temporal interruption; it is attention that is diverted — it resurfaces and is drawn to everyday chronological time. But this is not in the book.

The creation of a present *in fieri*, with no beginning or end, is reinforced throughout the book by the continued variations on similar repeated patterns, which undo any linear, front–back development, and create a disorientating effect. 'I have the vertiginous impression never to know which page I am on,' comments Cixous; 'all these relations of false anteriority, posteriority are something of a déjà vu which is not a déjà vu.'[36] Like the reader who does not know exactly where they are, so the narrating voice writes without knowing in advance where she will go. Whereas storytelling is based on the organization of the story into sequences, distinct temporal and spatial domains, actors, actions, causes, and consequences, Lispector pursues the *mise en scène* of the sensorial experience in its becoming, which does not respond to a logic of distinction and consequentiality but follows unforeseen associations. Delving into the living present, Lispector does not organize writing according to a predetermined plan. Writing is not the representation of a pre-existing reality, but the discovery and creation of reality in its making: 'I direct nothing. Not

36 Cixous, 'Foreword', p. xxii.

even my own words. But it's not sad: it's happy humility.'[37] In this space of improvisation, by renouncing the position of a sovereign subject who orders reality, Lispector can access a different kind of reality, which precedes or exceeds thought: 'I'm slyly coming into contact with a reality new to me that still has no corresponding thoughts and not even a word that signifies it — it is a sensation beyond thought.'[38] Lispector seeks to inhabit a simultaneity of writing and the present, abandoning herself to the flow of words and the physical compenetration with life that words produce:

> This contact with the invisible nucleus of reality is of such purity.
>
> I know what I am doing here: I am telling of the instants that drip and are thick with blood.
>
> I know what I am doing here: I'm improvising.[39]

If Lispector does not direct her words, *who* is writing? If the subject gives up a controlling attitude towards reality and renounces acting as its master, how does reality emerge? The encounter with the living present, as articulated in *Água Viva*, undoes the hierarchical distinction between subject and object, replacing it with receptivity and acceptance. Writing in *Água Viva* is an exercise in actively becoming open to receiving the world and attuning to it. The subject is no longer the organizing governor of reality, but an entity among other entities, through which the world reverberates: 'I am a tree that burns with hard pleasure. A single sweetness possesses me: complicity with the world.'[40] Librandi conceptualizes this aspect of Lispector's

37 Lispector, *Água Viva*, p. 27.
38 Ibid., p. 41.
39 Ibid., pp. 15–16.
40 Ibid., p. 32.

work by focusing on the aural dimension, which she places at the core of what she defines as 'echopoetics':

> A written text founded on listening is first a receiving text rather than a producing one. By 'echopoetics', I refer to such a receptive capacity as an unconditional openness to the outside, and as a result of being completely inside in the sense of belonging, of being part of something that can be the womb, the world, and/or the planet itself, as Lispector articulates it.[41]

Such an epistemological shift is enabled by the realization that the living present is shared among everything that exists. It is an impersonal energy, in which all beings participate and which Lispector calls 'it'.[42] The 'it' of things is the continuity, the underlying, uninterrupted existence, from which Lispector extracts words through her writing. As Negrete explains, there are two perspectives: that of the writer, which is necessarily limited as it begins and ends with the book; and that of writing itself, boundless, which is the perspective of life on life itself. Through writing, the writer tries to get as close as possible to this impersonal perspective, where the separation between subject and object is abolished: 'This is life seen by life. I may not have meaning but it is the same lack of meaning that the

41 Librandi, *Writing by Ear*, p. 10. Caterina Barbieri describes her experience with music composition and performance in terms that closely resonate with Lispector's: 'You are immersed in the sound and the sound is at the same time inside and outside of you. And you cannot tell the difference, because you become that sound and that sound becomes you [...]. I really appreciate the music [...] that forces me to leave behind my subjectivity and become an object myself, fused together with the sound' (Barbieri, in Buongiorno, 'Reduction in Computer Music', pp. 178–79).

42 See Negrete, 'Approaching Impersonal Life', on impersonality in Lispector's works, which the critic reads in parallel with Deleuze's thought.

pulsing vain has.'[43] In this impersonal perspective, it is life itself that expresses itself, overflowing the boundaries of subjecthood:

> Creation escapes me. And I don't even want to know so much. That my heart beats in my breast is enough. [...]
>
> So the basis of existence turns up to wash over and erase the traces of the thought. The sea erases the traces of the waves on the sand.[44]

As Cixous comments, 'she lets her hand write and puts herself into an intense relationship of listening. [...] She transmits. [...] She considers that she is not the one that writes but that the word is already a thing in itself.'[45] We are in a mediumistic setting, although outside of any religious inclination and firmly anchored to an embodied, material dimension.

Immersing oneself into the 'mystery of the impersonal that is the "it"' requires the deconstruction of one's habits of thought, the acceptance of the limits of what can be understood with the usual tools of logic, and the courage to trust an unknown world in which one participates and belongs:[46]

> Before I organize myself, I must disorganize myself internally. To experience that first and fleeting primary state of freedom. Of the freedom to err, fall and get up again.
>
> But if I hope to understand in order to accept things — the act of surrender will never happen. I must take the plunge all at once, a plunge that

43 Lispector, *Água Viva*, p. 8.
44 Ibid., pp. 59–60.
45 Cixous, *Reading with Clarice*, p. 14.
46 Lispector, *Água Viva*, p. 23.

> includes comprehension and especially incomprehension. And who am I to dare to think? What I have to do is surrender.[47]

Words falter, and yet they are what enables the writer's and reader's experience. In this incomprehensible reality, which is beyond thought and has its own 'underlying style',[48] personal identity no longer exists in separation, but only in a co-constitutive relationship and co-determination of matter:

> I'm myself.
>
> [...] I have the impersonal inside me and isn't something the personal that sometimes floods me can corrupt or rot by the personal that sometimes floods me: but I dry myself in the sun and am an impersonal of the dry and germinative pit of a fruit. [...]
>
> The transcendence inside me is the living and soft 'it' and has the thought that an oyster has.[49]

And elsewhere:

> I surpass myself abdicating myself and am therefore the world: I follow the voice of the world, I myself suddenly with a unique voice.[50]

The last element I wish to foreground here is the theme of birth, which recurs throughout the text and is deeply connected to its performance of the living present and its act of presentification in language. Birth is commonly a leading metaphor for creation, but is also connected to separation and metamorphosis, as well as, obviously, to death.

47 Ibid., p. 61.
48 Ibid., p. 65.
49 Ibid., p. 23.
50 Ibid., p. 17.

The process through which Lispector puts herself and the reader in *Água Viva*, as we have seen, is a deconstruction of a subject position, so that a different world can emerge and be heard, and is an encounter with life in its happening, with the joint 'birth' of temporality and experience. In this context, the metaphor of birth — and widespread associated images of dawn — speaks to the incessantly generative force of life, by which the writer herself is created through writing. Literary autogenesis, that is, self-creation through writing, is indeed a frequent trope in autobiographical texts, especially by subaltern subjects who are traditionally excluded from a speaking position and embrace writing as a way to assert their gaze on themselves and the world. The metaphor of birth also has particularly rich connotations for several women writers and thinkers, who confront the patriarchal association of 'womanhood' with the ability to give birth, but who also, in many cases, elaborate their actual experience of gestation and giving birth. In Lispector, there is certainly a drive towards giving birth to herself in writing, a performative act of creation through words:

> I slowly enter my gift to myself, splendor ripped open by the final song that seems to be the first. [ … ] It is a world tangled up in creepers, syllables, woodbine, colors and words — threshold of an ancestral cavern that is the womb of the world and from it I shall be born.[51]

However, what moves Lispector is not the achievement of a strong authorial position, but rather the attunement to impersonal life, which binds writer and world together, annulling the roles of subject and object. Thus, the writer is born out of her own writing, but does not give birth

51 Ibid., p. 8.

to herself. Being born and giving birth are both impersonal events, generated by the force of life in its ceaseless becoming:

> I am not objectivizing anything: I am having the real birth of *it*. I feel faint like someone about to be born.
>
> To be born: I've watched a cat give birth.[52]

> And walking in complete darkness in search of ourselves is what we do. It hurts. But these are the pains of childbirth: a thing is born that is. Is itself. It is hard as a dry stone. But the core is soft and alive, perishable, perilous *it*. Life of elementary matter.[53]

As a constantly renewed beginning, the metaphor of birth is the expression of the generative force of life. At the same time, as violent separation, birth is also intimately connected to loss, absence, and death.[54] Birth and death form a cycle that cannot be effaced, but can be subsumed within the wider flow of transformation and becoming. 'This natal dimension', Negrete writes, 'inhabits each and every instant; it is the stuff of the event.'[55] It gives rise to a

52 Ibid., p. 28; emphasis in the original.

53 Ibid., p. 39; emphasis in the original.

54 Cixous points out the significant role of the absence of the mother (who died when Clarice was nine years old) in all of Lispector's works, inflecting her search for the present and belonging with an acute sense of loss and mourning: 'The question of birth is an intensification, a metaphorization of a situation that is read as painful. [...] There is a continuous emergence, a separation or a struggle of the subject in order not to lose the enveloping contact with the living. At the same time, it must be lost, during an instant. [...] Clarice suffers from an originary solitude' (Cixous, *Reading with Clarice*, p. 41). In *Água Viva*, however, Lispector does not write from a place of melancholia, but rather is propelled by a joyful, affirmative desire.

55 Negrete, 'Approaching Impersonal Life', p. 15.

'nonlinear flow [ … ] interweaving being born, giving birth, writing, and the world'.[56] Mindful of the loss that comes with each birth, Lispector strives to stay in that space that precedes individuation, as close as possible to each instant in its unfolding, attuned to the flow of life that is constantly reborn and propelled by a desire for immanent pleasure.

## CONCLUSION: PERFORMATIVITY AS AFFIRMATION

In this chapter, I have interpreted Lispector's *Água Viva* as a phenomenological-poetic adventure into temporality. Lispector dives into the present and attempts to bring the bare experience of temporal becoming into language, without separating enunciation from the world, falling into complete silence, or else reducing the world to language. This is a poetic exercise of presentification — evoking, calling, summoning into existence. It avails itself of metaphors, images, repetitions, broken syntax, unanswered questions, condensed reasoning, paradoxes, and vocative acts, in order to capture the present in its happening.

The whole work is inscribed within the category of birth, and is propelled by pleasure, the joy of being and becoming together with the world. As such, it embodies what Rosi Braidotti calls an 'ethics of affirmation', which emphasizes 'the freedom to affirm one's essence as joy, through encounters and mingling with other bodies, entities, beings and forces', as complementary to an 'ethics of melancholia' which characterizes the poststructuralist linguistic turn and its focus on absence, lack, and negation.[57] Affirmative

56 Ibid., p. 15.

57 Rosi Braidotti, 'Affirmation, Pain and Empowerment', *Asian Journal of Women's Studies*, 14.3 (2008), pp. 7–36 (p. 31) <https://doi.org/10.1080/12259276.2008.11666049>.

ethics does not presuppose a strengthened identity; quite the opposite, it seeks attunement to processes of becoming, where 'becoming is an intransitive process'.[58] In *Água Viva*, writing does not compensate for an absence, it performs presence; it does not substitute experience, it embodies it. In the physical act of writing and reading, in the metaphorical dis-organization of linear temporality, language flows in and with the living present — at least temporarily, *as long as the improvisation lasts*.

58 Ibid.

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Alberica Bazzoni, 'Performing the Living Present: Clarice Lispector's *Água Viva*', in *Performing Embodiment: Choreographies of Affect, Language, and Social Norms*, ed. by Alberica Bazzoni and Federica Buongiorno, Cultural Inquiry, 39 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2026), pp. 49–73 <https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-39_03>

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