

WHY THIS WORLD

A Biography of Clarice Lispector



Benjamin Moser

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A BIOGRAPHY OF
CLARICE LISPECTOR



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To Arthur Japin and Lex Jansen

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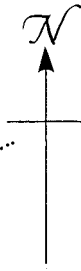
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Western Ukraine
circa 1920



POLAND

VOLHYNIA

.Kiev

Lvov.

U K R A I N E

GALICIA

PODOLIA

Haysyn

Teplyk

Chechelnyk

Savran

Pervomays'k

KHERSON

BESARABIA

Kishinev

R. Dniester

Odessa

0 50 100 miles
0 100 200 km

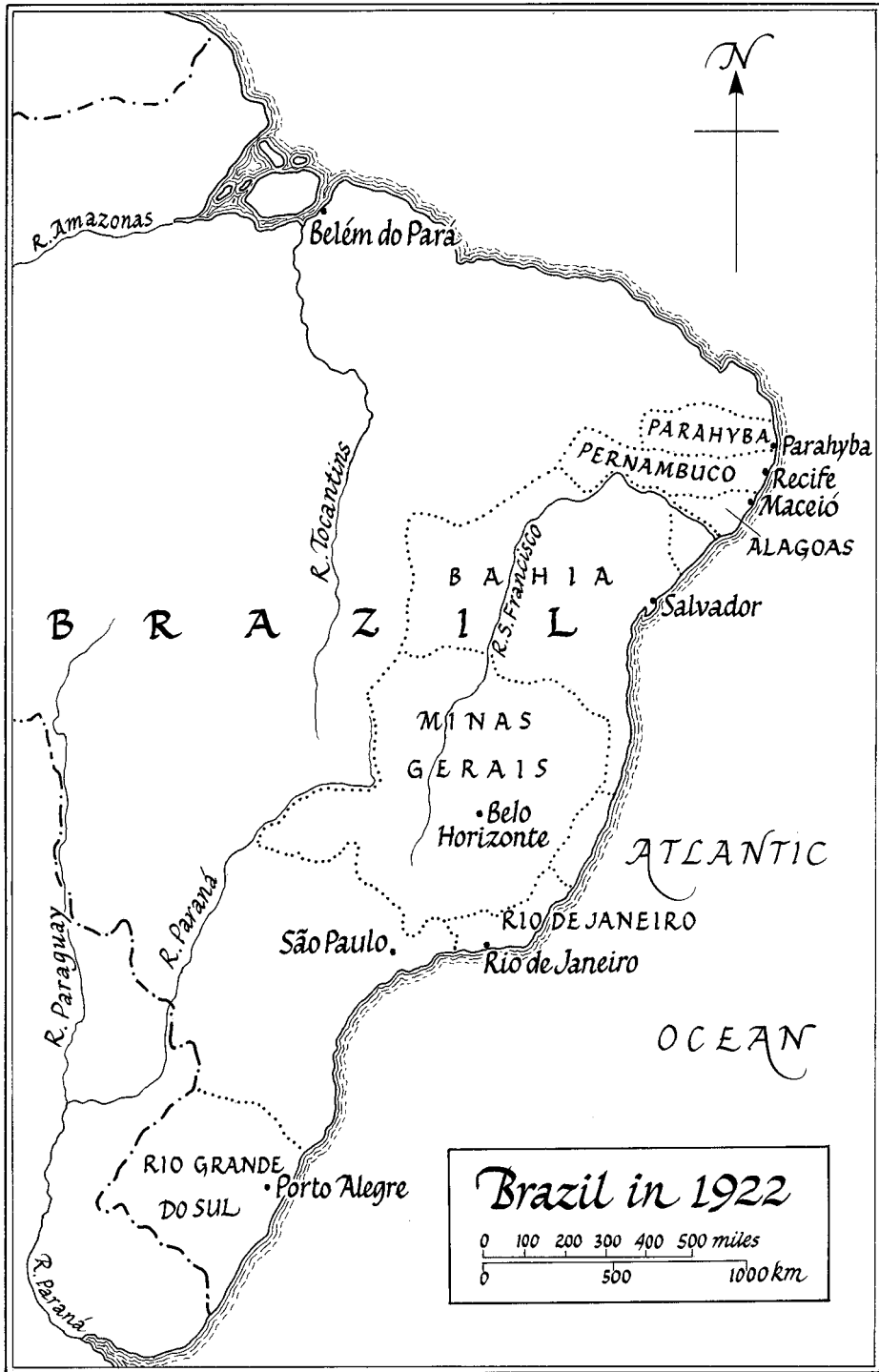
ROMANIA

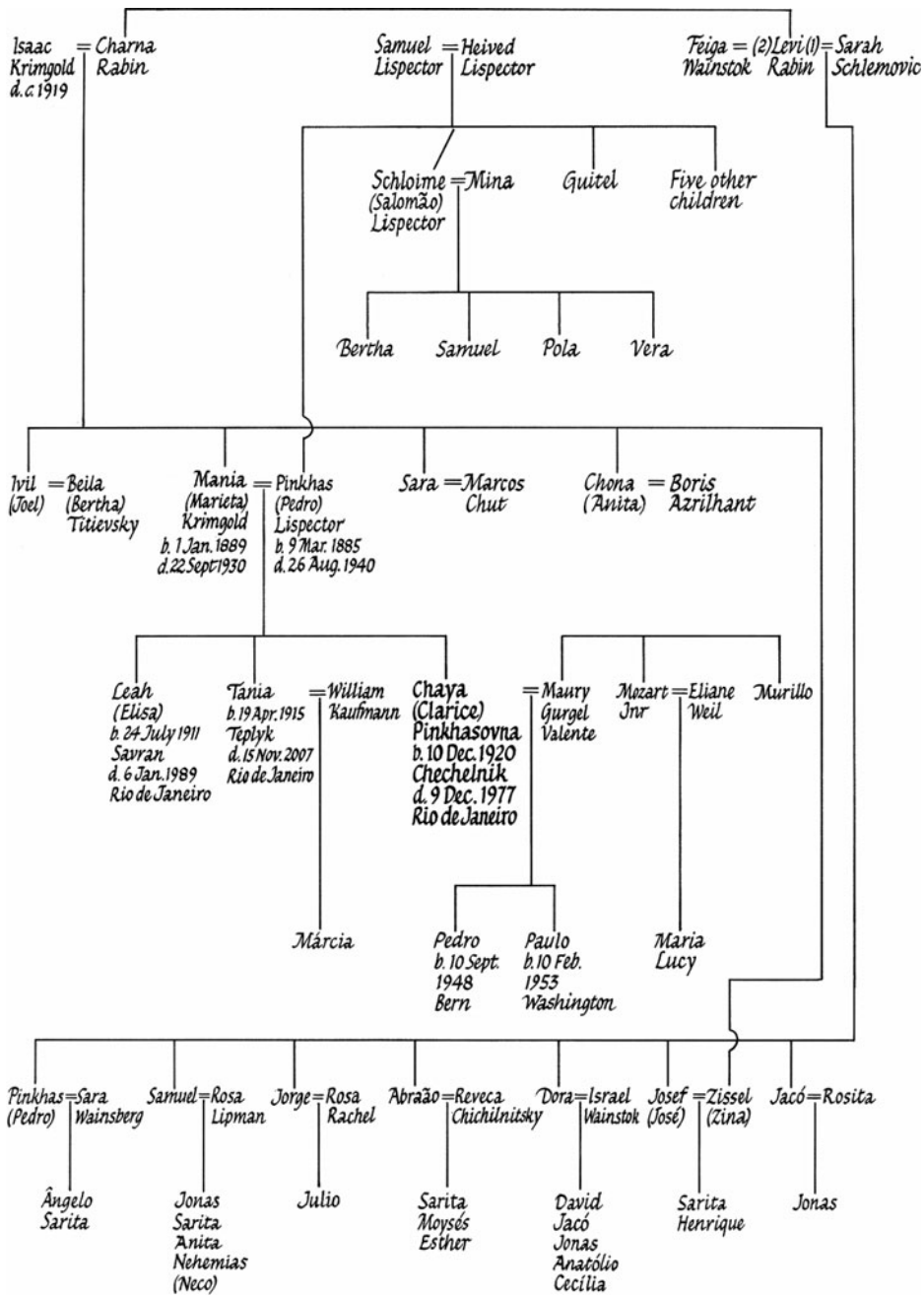
.Bucharest

R. Danube

Black
Sea







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WHY THIS WORLD

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Cleanse thy clothes, and if possible, let all thy garments be white, for all this is helpful in leading the heart towards the fear of God and the love of God. If it be night, kindle many lights, until all be bright. Then take ink, pen and a table to thy hand and remember that thou art about to serve God in joy of the gladness of heart. Now begin to combine a few or many letters, to permute and to combine them until thy heart be warm. Then be mindful of their movements and of what thou canst bring forth by moving them. And when thou feelest that thy heart is already warm and when thou seest that by combinations of letters thou canst grasp new things which by human tradition or by thyself thou wouldst not be able to know and when thou art thus prepared to receive the influx of divine power which flows into thee, then turn all thy true thought to imagine the Name and His exalted angels in thy heart as if they were human beings sitting or standing about thee.



—ABRAHAM ABULAFIA
(1240–after 1290)

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INTRODUCTION: THE SPHINX

In 1946, the young Brazilian writer Clarice Lispector was returning from Rio de Janeiro to Italy, where her husband was vice consul in Naples. She had traveled home as a diplomatic courier, carrying dispatches to the Brazilian Ministry of Foreign Relations, but with the usual routes between Europe and South America disrupted by the war, her journey to rejoin her husband followed an unconventional itinerary. From Rio she flew to Natal, on the northeastern tip of Brazil, then onward to the British base at Ascension Island in the South Atlantic, to the American air station in Liberia, to the French bases in Rabat and Casablanca, and then via Cairo and Athens to Rome.

Before each leg of the trip, she had a few hours, or days, to look around. In Cairo, the Brazilian consul and his wife invited her to a cabaret, where they were amazed to see the exotic belly dance performed to the familiar strains of a hit of Rio's 1937 Carnival, Carmen Miranda's "I Want Mommy."

Egypt itself failed to impress her, she wrote a friend back in Rio de Janeiro. "I saw the pyramids, the Sphinx—a Mohammedan read my palm in the 'desert sands' and said I had a pure heart. . . . Speaking of sphinxes, pyramids, piasters, it's all in horribly bad taste. It's almost immodest to live in Cairo. The problem is trying to feel anything that hasn't been accounted for by a guide."¹

Clarice Lispector never returned to Egypt. But many years later she recalled her brief sightseeing tour, when, in the "desert sands," she stared down no one less than the Sphinx herself.

"I did not decipher her," wrote the proud, beautiful Clarice. "But neither did she decipher me."²



By the time she died in 1977, Clarice Lispector was one of the mythical figures of Brazil, the Sphinx of Rio de Janeiro, a woman who fascinated her countrymen virtually from adolescence. “The sight of her was a shock,” the poet Ferreira Gullar remembered of their first meeting. “Her green almond eyes, her high cheekbones, she looked like a she-wolf, a fascinating wolf. . . . I thought that if I saw her again I would fall hopelessly in love with her.”³ “There were men who couldn’t forget me for ten years,” she admitted. “There was an American poet who threatened to commit suicide because I wasn’t interested.”⁴ The translator Gregory Rabassa recalled being “flabbergasted to meet that rare person who looked like Marlene Dietrich and wrote like Virginia Woolf.”⁵

In Brazil today, her arresting face adorns postage stamps. Her name lends class to luxury condominiums. Her works, often dismissed during her lifetime as hermetic or incomprehensible, are sold in vending machines in subway stations. The Internet is alight with hundreds of thousands of her fans, and a month rarely goes by without the appearance of a book examining one side or another of her life and work. Her first name is enough to identify her to educated Brazilians, who, a Spanish publisher noticed, “all knew her, had been to her house, and have some anecdote to tell about her, as the Argentines do with Borges. Or at the very least they went to her funeral.”⁶

The French writer Hélène Cixous declared that Clarice Lispector was what Kafka would have been had he been a woman, or “if Rilke had been a Jewish Brazilian born in the Ukraine. If Rimbaud had been a mother, if he had reached the age of fifty. If Heidegger could have ceased being German.”⁷ The attempts to describe this indescribable woman often go on in this vein, grasping at superlatives, though those who knew her, either in person or from her books, also insist that the most striking aspect of her personality, her aura of mystery, evades description. “Clarice,” the poet Carlos Drummond de Andrade wrote when she died, “came from one mystery / and departed for another.”⁸

Her indecipherable air fascinated and disquieted all who encountered her. After her death, a friend wrote that “Clarice was a foreigner on earth, going through the world as if she’d arrived in the dead of night in an unknown city amidst a general transport strike.”⁹



“Maybe her closest friends and the friends of those friends know something about her life,” an interviewer wrote in 1961. “Where she came from, where she

was born, how old she is, how she lives. But she never talks about that, 'since it's very personal.'"¹⁰ She gave very little away. A decade later another frustrated journalist summed up Clarice's responses to an interview: "I don't know, I'm not familiar with it, I've never heard of it, I'm not aware, That's not my area, It's hard to explain, I don't know, I don't consider, I've never heard, I'm not familiar with, There isn't, I don't think."¹¹ The year before her death a reporter who had come all the way from Argentina tried to draw her out. "They say you're evasive, difficult, that you don't talk. It doesn't seem that way to me." Clarice answered, "Obviously they were right." After extracting monosyllabic replies, the reporter filled the silence with a story about another writer.

But she said nothing. I don't even know if she looked at me. She stood up and said:

"I might go to Buenos Aires this winter. Don't forget to take the book I gave you. There you'll find material for your article."

[She was] very tall, with auburn hair and skin, [and] I remember her wearing a long brown silk dress. But I could be wrong. As we were leaving I paused in front of an oil portrait of her face.

"De Chirico," she said before I could ask. And then, at the elevator: "Sorry, I don't like to talk."¹²

In this void of information, a whole mythology sprang up. Reading accounts of her at different points in her life, one can hardly believe they concern the same person. The points of disagreement were not trivial. "Clarice Lispector" was once thought to be a pseudonym, and her original name was not known until after her death. Where exactly she was born and how old she was were also unclear. Her nationality was questioned and the identity of her native language was obscure. One authority will testify that she was right-wing and another will hint that she was a Communist. One will insist that she was a pious Catholic, though she was actually a Jew. Rumor will sometimes have it that she was a lesbian, though at one point rumor also had it that she was, in fact, a man.

What makes this tangle of contradictions so odd is that Clarice Lispector is not a hazy figure known from shreds of antique papyrus. She has been dead hardly thirty years. Many people survive who knew her well. She was prominent virtually from adolescence, her life was extensively documented in the press, and she left behind an extensive correspondence. Still, few great modern artists are quite as fundamentally unfamiliar. How can a person who lived in a large Western city in the middle of the twentieth century, who gave interviews, lived in high-rise apartments, and traveled by air, remain so enigmatic?

She herself once wrote, “I am so mysterious that I don’t even understand myself.”¹³



“My mystery,” she insisted elsewhere, “is that I have no mystery.”¹⁴ Clarice Lispector could be chatty and forthcoming as frequently as she was silent and incomprehensible. To general bemusement, she insisted that she was a simple housewife, and those who arrived expecting to encounter a Sphinx just as often found a Jewish mother offering them cake and Coca-Cola. “I need money,” she told one journalist. “The position of a myth is not very comfortable.”¹⁵ Late in life, explaining why she gave up on interviews, she said, “They wouldn’t understand a Clarice Lispector who paints her toenails red.”¹⁶

More than anything, she wanted to be respected as a human being. She was mortified when the famous singer Maria Bethânia threw herself at her feet, exclaiming, “My goddess!”¹⁷ “My God,” exclaimed one of Clarice’s protagonists, “but it was easier to be a saint than a person!”¹⁸ In a melancholy piece called “Profile of a Chosen Being,” she describes her rebellion against her image: “The being attempted an underground work of destroying the photograph: he did or said things so opposite to the photograph that it bristled in the drawer. His hope was to make himself more vivid than the photograph. But what happened? It happened that everything the being did only retouched the portrait, embellished it.”¹⁹

The legend was stronger than she was. Toward the end of her life she was asked about an unkind comment that appeared in a newspaper. “I got pretty annoyed,” she admitted, “but then I got over it. If I ran into [its author] the only thing I would say is: listen, when you write about me, it’s Clarice with a c, not with two s’s, all right?”²⁰

Still, she never entirely gave up hope of being seen as a real person, and her protests against her own mythology surface in unexpected places. In a newspaper piece that she wrote about—of all things—the new capital of Brasília, an odd exclamation appears: “The sacred monster has died: in her place was born a little girl who lost her mother.”²¹



“Facts and particulars annoy me,” she wrote, presumably including those surrounding her own curriculum vitae. She went to lengths, in her life and her writing, to rub them out. Yet on the other hand few people have exposed themselves so completely. Through all the many facets of her work—in novels, stories,

correspondence, and journalism, in the splendid prose that made her “the princess of the Portuguese language”—a single personality is relentlessly dissected and fascinatingly revealed in perhaps the greatest spiritual autobiography of the twentieth century.

“Alongside my desire to defend my privacy, I have the intense desire to confess in public and not to a priest.”²² Her brand of confession was concerned with the inner truths she painstakingly unearthed throughout a life of unceasing meditation. This is the reason Clarice Lispector has been compared less often to other writers than to mystics and saints. “The novels of Clarice Lispector often make us think of the autobiography of St. Teresa,” *Le Monde* wrote.²³ Like the reader of St. Teresa or St. John of the Cross, the reader of Clarice Lispector sees a soul turned inside out.

She emerged from the world of the Eastern European Jews, a world of holy men and miracles that had already experienced its first intimations of doom. She brought that dying society’s burning religious vocation into a new world, a world in which God was dead. Like Kafka, she despaired; but unlike Kafka she eventually, and excruciatingly, struck out in search of the God that had abandoned her. She recounted her quest in terms that, like Kafka’s, necessarily hearkened back to the world she had left, describing the soul of a Jewish mystic who knows that God is dead and, in the kind of paradox that recurs throughout her work, is determined to find Him anyway.

The soul exposed in her work is the soul of a single woman, but within it one finds the full range of human experience. This is why Clarice Lispector has been described as just about everything: a woman and a man, a native and a foreigner, a Jew and a Christian, a child and an adult, an animal and a person, a lesbian and a housewife, a witch and a saint. Because she described so much of her intimate experience she could credibly be everything for everyone, venerated by those who found in her expressive genius a mirror of their own souls. As she said, “I am all of yourselves.”²⁴



“There is much I cannot tell you. I am not going to be autobiographical. I want to be ‘bio.’”²⁵ But even a universal artist emerges from a specific context, and the context that produced Clarice Lispector was unimaginable for most Brazilians, and certainly for her middle-class readers. It is no wonder that she never spoke of it. Born thousands of miles from Brazil amid a horrifying civil war, her mother condemned to death by an act of unspeakable violence, Clarice’s background was unimaginably poor and violent.

By adolescence, she seemed to have triumphed over her origins, and for the rest of her life she avoided even the vaguest reference to them. Perhaps she feared that nobody would understand. And so she held her tongue, a “monument,” a “sacred monster,” bound to a legend she knew would outlive her and which she reluctantly, ironically embraced. Twenty-eight years after her first meeting with the Sphinx, she wrote that she was considering paying another visit.

“I’ll see who devours whom.”²⁶

1



FUN VONEN IS A YID?

“Clarice was called alienated, cerebral, ‘intimist’ and tedious by hard-line Communist critics. She only reacted when offended by the stupid accusation that she was a foreigner.”¹ “She always got very annoyed when people suggested she wasn’t entirely Brazilian,” her closest friend wrote. “True, she was born in Russia, but she had come here when she was only two months old. She wanted to be Brazilian in every way.”² “I am Brazilian,” she declared, “and that is that.”³

I was born in the Ukraine, my parents’ country. I was born in a village called Chechelnik, so small and insignificant that it isn’t even on the map. When my mother was pregnant with me, my parents were heading toward the United States or Brazil, they still hadn’t decided. They stopped in Chechelnik so I could be born and then continued on their journey. I arrived in Brazil when I was *only two months old*.⁴

Though she had arrived in earliest infancy, Clarice Lispector always struck many Brazilians as foreign, not because of her European birth or the many years she spent abroad, but because of the way she spoke. She lisped, and her rasping, throaty r’s gave her an odd accent. “I am not French,” she explained, which is how she sounded. “This r of mine is a speech defect: I simply have a tongue-tie. Now that my Brazilianness has been cleared up . . .”⁵

She claimed that her friend Pedro Bloch, a pioneer Brazilian speech therapist, had offered to carry out an operation that would fix the problem. But Dr. Bloch said her pronunciation was natural enough for a child who had imitated her foreign parents’ speech: the throaty r’s, if not the lisp, were, in fact, common

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