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### Feminine Dislocations: Good, Dobyns, and Lispector

We can read ourselves against another people's pattern, but since it is not ours . . . we emerge as its effects, its errata, its counternarratives. Whenever we try to narrate ourselves, we appear as dislocations in their discourse. (Said 140)

I purchased a copy of Kenneth Good's Into the Heart on the strength of a laudatory New York Times review, despite a subtitle that should have given me more pause (Into the Heart: One Man's Pursuit of Love and Knowledge Among the Yanomama). The reviewer, Tim Cahill, calls the book "the archetypal cross-cultural love affair" and finds the story of middle-aged Kenneth Good and his barely-pubescent wife Yarima to be "the realization of a fine and gentle fantasy, a shining affirmation of an essential and perhaps failing human grace" (29). Good's title, already hinting at the romantic fantasy to be developed within the pages to follow, certainly and non-coincidentally echoes the title of Joseph Conrad's famous novel about a trip to Africa, with its darker dislocations of human passions. Indeed, Good is sent down to the Amazon, to what anthropologists considered the heart of that dark region, to study a dark and dangerous tribe known for its ferocity. After spending many years among the Yanomama, Good confidently debunks the prevailing myth; the Yanomama are not nearly as violent as portrayed, usually have good and culturally-consistent reasons for occasional acts of violence, practice ritual cannibalism only in a deeply respectful and spiritual manner, and are a wise and loving people. Generally, then, Good counterposes a "noble savage" reading of the Yanomama to the demonizing characterization of current scholarship (and he savagely demonizes a former academic advisor in the process). By choosing to share with us a popular--rather than academic--account of his stay in the Amazon, Good implicitly sets up one set of counternarrative expectations; in setting his Heart against Conrad's Heart of Darkness, he hints at another.

There is much of interest in this chronicle. What I find most compelling, however, is the title's stated focus. Good goes into the heart of the Amazon to discover his own heart. He performs the eminently masculine task of a pursuit of information, and along the way finds he is also pursuing love; love for the Yanomama people in general, love for his child-wife, Yarima, in particular, and the love of knowledge that signals true scholarship. The journey into an exotic locale is also a journey within the self. As he learns more about "his" people, so to he grows in self-knowledge. Thus, disconcertingly, the exotic "there" reveals itself as another face/mask of the Western "here." The counternarrative speaks against two well-established literary/scholarly traditions, and so incorporates itself into a larger pattern of narrative expectations as the bright light that dispels the previous shadowy interpretations of these heartlands.

The dislocations, as Said has it, in Good's framed narrative of life among the Yanomama come almost exclusively from the females of the community. Good intersperses his chronicle at key moments with brief quotes/comments from Yarima. These comments, never integrated into the text, and necessarily mediated by the translator-husband, nevertheless hint at a radically different reality from that loving and harmonious family-grouping Good tries to emphasize. One example will stand for the whole. At one point Good states baldly, "there isn't a Yanomama woman who hasn't been raped." This practice, he comments, represents a real problem for the man who has to live in the same dwelling as his wife or daughter's rapist (199). In an earlier passage, he writes,

Shortly after we began living together, Yarima had her period, so I knew that at least she wasn't pregnant. But I still wasn't sure what had happened in my absence. I knew Yanomama men, however. They will grab a woman while she is out gathering and rape her. They don't consider it a crime or a horrendously antisocial thing to do. It is simply what happens. It's standard behavior. In such a small, enclosed community this (together with affairs) is the only way unmarried men have of getting sex. (158)

We can leave aside the questionable, and unquestionably masculinist traditional bias that finds rape an acceptable social practice, describing it as a slightly deplorable but understandable outlet

for sexually frustrated young men: boys will be boys, after all. What the interstices of the narration allow us to glimpse, however, is that the women of the tribe do not view rape with nearly the equanimity of their male counterparts. They band together for protection. In one scene witnessed by the author, a group of older women struggle unsuccessfully to free a young woman from a group of teenaged boys who want to take her into the forest to rape her (102). Later in the narrative, Yarima is mutilated, and nearly dies of pain and anguish when she is gang-raped during one of her husband's periodic absences. Her response is not to accept what happened to her as "standard behavior"; instead, she determines to leave the marriage with her periodically absent white husband for another marriage, with a better protector (281). The story has a happy ending; Kenneth Good, and presumably his resilient wife, are able to put the past behind them, and go forward to a happy and fulfilled life in the United States with their two children.

Good's Into the Heart intimates that it is a limit text. It suggests that this is as far as we can go into the jungle, that this book depicts the farthest possibilities of a white man's experience in a piece of writing dis-identified with that experience and reaching towards the very limits of representability. In fact, Good's book marks only the first threshold we must cross. In her reading of J. M. Coetzee's novel, Foe, Gayatri Spivak points to the way that even such an acutely self-conscious, sympathetic, post-colonial awareness is articulated by the very same system of authenticity that it struggles to disallow. She suggests that "there can be no politics founded on a continuous overdetermined multiplicity of agencies" (166), and she continues: "perhaps that is the novel's message: the impossible politics of overdetermination (mothering, authoring, giving voice to the native 'in' the text; a white male South African writer engaging in such inscriptions 'outside' the text) should not be regularized into a blithe continuity, where the European redoes the primitive's project in herself" (174). Coetzee is a complex and difficult writer who refuses easy answers to difficult problems. Sometimes his refusal is both politically astute, and yet to some degree counterproductive--an impossible politics of noncooption. Implicitly, then, we could point to that quality in Coetzee's text in which dissident politics, his need to resist

apartheid, creates a state of implicit self-exemption and re-regularizes--if from the site of an acutely displaced consciousness--the Western re-writing of the primitive. Together Spivak and Coetzee point to precisely what is lacking in Good's counternarrative account of life in the Amazon. Like Coetzee, Good is displaced, but in no such acutely self-conscious manner. What he leaves unexplored is the deployment of the West in his counter-representation of otherness, and he neglects coming to terms with his use of the exotic woman as a key to inscribing his text from a simultaneous position of inside and outside at the same time.

In her Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives, Marianna Torgovnick examines just such multifarious ways by which certain societies in the Third World (those coded as "primitive") and their artifacts are not only consumed, but also constructed in the West, thus displacing the societies from the very matrix of meaning that, in Western eyes, should have positioned them as identities and licensed their voices in a shared dialogue. The primitive is that patina of the alien that allows Westerners to project their own dreams and fears elsewhere, and to thereby see themselves that much more clearly. It is much less a dialogue with another culture than a strained monologue about some detached and rejected essence of a Western self. Thus, she finds, "To study the primitive is . . . to enter an exotic world which is also a familiar world. . . . The primitive does what we ask it to do. Voiceless, it lets us speak for it. . . . The real secret of the primitive in this century has often been the same secret as always: the primitive can be--has been, will be (?)--whatever Euro-Americans want it to be. It tells us what we want it to tell us" (8-9). Such texts, then, speak for --rather than to or of-- the margins, and speak to a receptive Western audience that finds in them a comfortably exoticized version of "eternal" or "universal" "truths." The marginal, non-Western person is mediated, homogenized, packaged, and sold to a Western audience.

Torgovnick's book ends on an intriguing note, suggesting the need for a companion study to this one: "The present study has traced, in essence, a male-centered, canonical line. . . . But I can imagine alternative lines of primitivism. . . . Some of those texts would be produced by women; many (whether by men or women) would probe alternative versions of knowledge and

social order, including many marginalized in the West” (248). The non-western woman, therefore, is doubly distanced in Western studies of the “primitive.” Too often, as Sulieri notes, the Orient “has traditionally been represented as a figure of seduction, duplicity--and, more darkly, rape” (109). The exotic landscape is itself feminized, and thus open and available to conquest, as are the non-Western women who inhabit this land. Jostling against this generalized perception is another, in which the Westerner struggles to maintain control against powerfully duplicitous, seductive forces. In both cases, postcolonial feminism needs to reckon with the legacy of such sexualized imperialism, in which the colonized place circumscribes her, yet defines its political existence as predicated upon her oppression, silence, or absence. Her words, Yarima’s words, are written elsewhere. Censored in the Amazon, or raped out of her, they are translated and fragmented and mediated in the metropolitan space, ventriloquized in her husband’s voice.

Good’s memoir opens the discussion, but it charts only the fringes of a discourse that needs to be at least doubly inscribed. In this paper I will explore two variations on this bitter feminine heritage; one whitemale Western in orientation, one by a Latin American woman. Strikingly, in all of these works, a male narrator/writer constructs himself through the construction/dislocation of a female figure who is made passive in the text, and who serves as the ostensible focus of the narrative. In Good’s text, the woman is literally dislocated. Among her own people she is pulled between potential rapists and potential protectors. After his wife’s rape, Good realizes he can no longer leave Yarima safely in the Amazon in his absence, and so takes her out of the Yanomama region and dislocates her into his Pennsylvania suburbs. In Stephen Dobyns’ novel, The Two Deaths of Señora Puccini, the most violent of the three texts, the woman is abducted and raped, only to find her revenge after long years of suffering the whims of her rapist. Finally, in Clarice Lispector’s short story, “The Smallest Woman in the World,” an African woman is dislocated metaphorically in the writings and photography of the French explorer who makes the first European contact with her people.

Stephen Dobyns' The Two Deaths of Señora Puccini is of particular interest to me here because the chummy atmosphere of a Anglo-European male bonding ritual is displaced into a deliberately exoticized location. The novel takes place in a Buenos Aires-like metropolitan, cosmopolitan setting and is focused through the feminine. In Dobyns' novel, the murder/suicide of an exotic and perverse couple while revolution rages in the streets outside becomes the piece de resistance at an elaborate banquet, a rich dessert for jaded palates glutted with an excess of other food. Death is also the pay off--the inevitable outcome as well as the desired culmination--of an intense conversation/translation between men. And a mysterious and powerful woman mediates that sensual exchange of food, narrative, and murder.

Dobyns' book opens onto a scene of extreme contrasts, as the narrator, Nicholas Batterby, arrives at Daniel Pacheco's house for a biennial gourmet dinner with nine old school friends. In order to reach that house, he has had to undertake a hazardous journey through a city darkened by the haze of burning vehicles and made tense by the the distant sounds of machine-guns. Curiosity drives him; he has known (and disliked, and been fascinated by) Pacheco for forty years, and had not seen him in the last decade: "he was famous for his little dinners. Indeed, the food editor of the paper claimed he had the best cook and the finest wine cellar in the city. In addition to being a distinguished surgeon, Pacheco was said to have made love to a thousand women. Perhaps he raped them. Possibly they begged him for it" (3). We soon discover that his information is strictly accurate, and that the association of rich food, violent sex, and distinguished professionalism is to be a constant in the novel. Pacheco's blind cook is an extraordinary artist of the palate; the novel follows the progress of the long, impeccably prepared and served meal with loving attention to every detail. Batterby's intuition about his friend's relationships with women is also correct, on both counts. Pacheco is a supremely self-confident and highly successful Don Juan; he is also self-involved and self-indulgent to an extreme that permits him to justify rape and attempted murder, and to brag to his admiring guests about his prowess. The casualness with which Batterby links the question of rape and the offhand suggestion that perhaps the abused women "begged him for it" also sounds a warning bell as a

straightforward statement of one of the most persistent myths used to rationalize such violence, and echoes in another key with Good's excessive attempt at an anthropological objectivity in his discussion of similar violence perpetrated against Yanomama women by their men. It is, in fact, the story of Pacheco's successful rape and prolonged physical and psychological torture of Señora Puccini, that provides his admiring audience with the narrative glue that renews their nearly-lapsed schooldays bonds.

As the prolonged banquet proceeds, course by course, Dr. Pacheco entertains his fascinated audience of old school chums with the story of his obsession for a beautiful young woman whom he wanted, and who refused him because she loved another. In revenge for her rejection, he ruined her life, converted her fiancé into a quadriplegic, and blackmailed and bullied her for twenty years into acceding to his every unspeakable fantasy, every self-admitted and richly savored perversion. His uncritical, enthralled audience enthusiastically continues to eat its way through a gourmet meal, reinforcing the co-extensive consumption of women and food and narrative at every level.

In Pacheco's telling of the story, the lovely young Antonia Puccini, now the middle-aged and no longer attractive housekeeper, permits herself to be drawn into Pacheco's fantasy of erotic obsession. He abuses her, and she hates him with an unreserved passion; he rapes her, and she loves the act of rape, if not the rapist. Her silent, disapproving presence at the dinner, counterpointing the presence of his old school friends, empowers him, reminds him of her fled resistance, allows him to vanquish her former, rebellious self by repeatedly in calling up the image of the woman he has already destroyed. She is something less than human, something other than animal, but if she were in fact only a body that the doctor manipulates at will the game would be ended. Pacheco requires something, woman or object, to violate, and while there is progressively less of "her" to rape, the remainder of her original self taunts him with the challenge to make her will, and not only her body, totally his. At the same time, if she had retained the integrity of her original identity, the violation would be of the body only; her mind would remain intact: hers, not his. It is because she is both his creation and his enemy that he

can continue to violate her so ambiguously. Her resistance to meaning, any meaning, feeds her passivity but also establishes her non-cooptibility:

I would catch her on the stairs and strip her clothes from her. I would find her making the beds and again I would take her. I would find her in the garden and I would push her down in the dirt and drag up her skirt. And she too would be carried away. She would bite and suck at me and fondle me and scratch and nuzzle and pretend to escape. She would grunt and moan like any pig, then scream out or sink her teeth into her lip. She would yank at my hair or try to drive her knee into my groin as I would evade her or drag her back by her hair or slap her face. . . . Nothing was offered or given freely. . . . And of course once we had begun our lovemaking and the passion was upon her, then she would do many things. (220-1).

The woman disappears in the supreme alienation of/from her body, in forfeiting her humanity and becoming piglike. In so doing, paradoxically, she insures her integrity, and her inviolability. Pacheco maps his housekeeper's body, but an undefinable surplus escapes his cartography. Her body denies his even as it welcomes him; he experiences only a fascinated pleasure in the act of possession instead of the satisfaction he demands.

Even further, Antonia Puccini is in the novel not so much a person as a disturbing image of the violence waiting to erupt within the house to match the violence out on the street. The story of that other, revolutionary violence, significantly, remains untold except insofar as death itself enters the house; it remains untold as Antonia's own story remains untold, though it clearly exists in the interstices, and as the inverse, of the abominable history of the doctor. But that untold or forgotten story, Antonia's story, retains a silent power in the counterpoint of food and tale, in her very presence interrupting and punctuating both eating and storytelling, and when she wheels in the amazing dessert--a wedding cake with bright red frosting--the ominous sense of menace redoubles. The stark contrast of red and white is Dobyns' consistent marker of a tainted sensuality. Red is the color of the blood running in the streets, and the color of the Ping-Pong paddle Malgiolio provides the woman who beats him. In other vignette using similar imagery,



Dobyns describes the schoolboys as pale and frightened during another bonding ritual, their joint initiation into sex. This memorable occasion--unsurprisingly, sponsored by Pacheco--matches the inexperienced boys with an enormous Indian whore who displays her body on a bright red towel: "'You boys.' she said in a rather masculine voice, 'it's like eating too much white cake'" (40). The ominously red, poisonously sweet, mammoth wedding cake folds metaphor back into event, foreshadowing Antonia Puccini's murder of her enemy, her lover, her tormentor, and her own subsequent suicide.

Pacheco is not only her cartographer but her creator; in the violation of her mind and in the circumnavigation of her body he has constructed, as Batterby intuits, a living work of art analogous to the obscene wedding cake: "Again, I had the sense that he made the evening as a painter might make a canvas" (254). His storytelling, and his stripping of the housekeeper before his friends, constitutes his public assertion of rights to a space traditionally coded as personal and private, but even more, it is his ritual autobiographical act, and one that demands consummation in the sharing of the story with his oldest companions. More still: it is Pacheco's unveiling of his artistic masterpiece. In her silent serving of the cake, and in her shooting of Pacheco with his own revolver, the housekeeper intimates the outline of her counternarrative, for the first time taking the initiative for herself, both to kiss, and to kill. It is she who brings the revolution, already creeping into the house with military demands and wounded soldiers, forcefully home.

One of the particular forces of Dobyns' novel resides in the imposition of political repression over a scene of bourgeois excess; in focusing on the tale of Antonia Puccini, he reminds us that, on one level, the unequal relations between the sexes always retains the propensity to slip into a microcosmic dictatorship, or into madness, and recalls as well, on the level of more directed political critique, that one of the horrors of the interactions between a torturer and his victim is the degree to which they rest on and recuperate for the scene of torture the facsimile of the most conventional domestic arrangements. Very simply, The Two Deaths of Señora Puccini highlights the darker side of traditional domestic arrangements, where ties of

sensuality or custom show their hidden affinity with violent repression, and where the home mimics and anticipates the torture chamber so as to increment the charge of horror.

In the course of the evening, Revolution has touched all the participants in the banquet. Pacheco's house has been turned into a hospital, and of the group of former schoolboys, at least three are dead, all killed violently, all by treachery: Pacheco, the doctor, is murdered by the woman that obsessed him for twenty years; Kress, the soldier, "killed when his regiment tried to link up with mutinous air force regiments" (248); Schwab, the policeman, shot down in an armored car by his own men. Antonia Puccini is dead too, as is her quadriplegic ex-fiancé, Roberto Collura, and the blind cook who prepared the fabulous meal. Batterby leaves the doctor's house, first taking with him another slice of cake: "Even though the sugar was like poison to me, I couldn't help myself. That cake was so good, so sweet" (260). The open-ended ambiguity of the gesture recasts the conflict from the point of view of the agent to that of the not-so-innocent bystander, who is trying at one and the same time to rescue nothing from the collapse of a corrupt society, and who is looking forward to the re-establishment of that society, with its reinaugurated round of ceremonial banquets and human destruction.

"Ask him about his son," suggests Antonia Puccini in one of her rare exchanges with the guests (235) in response to Batterby's question as to whether or not she ever contemplated revenge against her lover/tormentor. Her demand deflects the question onto another question, onto another person--a small dislocation that provokes a swerve into another violent counternarrative. As Kumkum Sangari writes in another context, "The unanswered question is not an invitation to further guesswork, but addresses itself to whether the question itself is worth asking or is necessary to answer, whether the question itself is not the first in a series of violations of which the murder is a culmination." (171). Certainly Sangari's perception rings true in this case. Implicitly, Antonia's aborted son parallels that other son of dubious parentage, born to Batterby's wife after her affair with Pacheco, the lover she preferred to her husband. Batterby, the cuckold, the second-hand storyteller, asks all the wrong questions, it seems, and fails to explore the commonality of victimization between his wife and Señora Puccini. Worse: because

Batterby himself does not rape women, neither can he write. Batterby divorces his wife over the affair; Pacheco is unrepentant about his role in blighting the lives of his friend and his friend's family. Batterby could have had her and the child back if he wanted, Pacheco tells him: "You could have had all that I've wanted for myself but you drove her away" (225).

With his housekeeper, Pacheco knows a frustrated longing, but no bonds of affection or of shared parenthood. Señora Puccini cedes all rights to her body to Pacheco, but refuses to bear his son when she becomes pregnant. Her revenge, the revenge of the powerless, is to assert that minimal control over reproduction that comes at a cost up to and including that of her own life. She denies Pacheco the child he so urgently wanted in order to reinforce the pretense of family he requires for obscure purposes of his own, demanding an abortion, attempting suicide when he refuses. The incipient, unnatural family self-destructs; to the degree that a son, or the potential of a son, exists, the parents are driven apart; where there is no son, or only an aborted son, the father is bound to the mother by a heritage of shared evil: "No matter how much I wanted the child, I wanted her more. So I performed the abortion. . . . I had to induce delivery. She wanted something for the pain but I refused. . . . I knew I was hurting her dreadfully but she didn't make a sound" (239). The double coding of the signifier, "mother," the violently non-maternal mother of a five-month's aborted child of rape, unhappily linked to the abyssality of the signifier, "father," the rapist, the abortionist suggests the impossibility of recovering the lost text of the enabling ritual. Their aborted child, like Batterby's rejected son, points towards an aporia, the deeply ambiguous ending of a ruined homosocial (rather than heterosexual) bond. At the same time, in this rewriting of a domestic fiction, the metaphoric underpinnings of the family come undone.

Dobyns' novel is shocking in this excess on all levels: of love, food, death, exoticism, etc. What I find most interesting for my purposes here is how the idea of writing/constructing in a postcolonial setting is linked on the one hand to an aesthetics of consumption/cannibalism (of the female) and on the other to the telling of rape as a bonding ritual. With the mysterious and emblematic Señora Puccini, Dobyns offers one version of how Westerners might tell stories of

self as representations of otherness, and hints as well at the destructive consequences of such factitious otherings. In Clarice Lispector's short story, "The Smallest Woman in the World," a similar set of key issues construct the text. In that story, as in Dobyns' novel, the central figure is a mysterious woman who serves as the receptacle of interpretation and the motive of storytelling. In Lispector's story, too, this alien, feminine presence enables an interaction between the narrator/colonizer/lover and the audience/consumer. Likewise, these two very different texts frame the issues of literary construction and of political appropriation through the metaphor of cannibalism. The resolution of that story, however, is entirely different.

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Kenneth Good's book on his life among the Yanomama speaks of the "splendid seductions" of the Amazon that leave him "vividly alive" (9, 13). In these few words he encapsulates several of the typical modes of representing a non-Western otherness; it is wild, dangerous, feminine, and seductive. The Amazon speaks to his desire for a life lived more intensely than is possible in the staid and overly known metropolis, to his ambition as an anthropologist to be the first white man to contact --and bring home knowledge about-- peoples unknown to the West. On his way into the jungle, the seductions of knowledge and the encounter with the feminine coalesce in his interest in the child-woman, Yarima. Her photograph in Yanomama (rather than Western) body decorations graces the cover of the book, and her presence within it (photographed body and translated voice) at important points guarantees authenticity. Fredric Jameson might say that she represents the collective experience that enables her husband's tale, but only insofar as she remains marginal to it:

The only authentic cultural production today has seemed to be that which can draw on the collective experience of marginal pockets of the social life of the world system: black literature and blues, British working-class rock, women's literature, . . . the literature of the Third World; and this production is possible only to the degree to which these forms of collective life or collective solidarity have not yet been fully penetrated by the market and by the commodity system. (148)

Jameson's list of marginal social/cultural pockets is nothing if not heterogeneous. I don't want to take issue with the list, however, but merely point out that the pockets Jameson describes are authentic only as long as they are marginal, and they are marginal if they can be categorized and defined to a certain extent, but lose their authenticity if "fully penetrated." Furthermore, the possibility of dialogue never arises: marginal cultural products are authentic as long as they remain passive, penetrable, feminized objects. When they are fully penetrated, they lose authenticity, but not their status as passive objects. Yarima, once removed from the Amazon, retains her signifying power only so long as her strangeness, her untranslatability re-verifies itself in Pennsylvania. It is at precisely this intersection that Clarice Lispector begins her 1960 story.

An intrepid French explorer, manfully forging his way through the depths of Africa, hears from a tribe of pygmies about the existence of even smaller people, the Likouala people. So he goes off to discover them, and when he does, he writes about them in an article which appears--to the great interest of Western readers--in the Sunday supplement of a popular newspaper. Lispector's story involves a Westerner's first penetration into a marginal cultural pocket, his personal reaction to the woman he finds, the formal testifying to that encounter (which ratifies the act of "discovery" for the Western audience), and the Western audience's reaction to that testimony. His "discovery" provokes an analogous "discovery" in his Western audience: "she was even smaller than the most penetrating imagination could ever have invented" (92). Lispector's story, then, includes within it a traditional Western tale of discovery of the woman that is, noncoincidentally, the object of that exploration. The explorer's reaction is the archetypal story of an appropriation. He is "surprised" to learn of the smaller race, and his surprise translates into a need to see and to categorize those people. The first encounter is a severe shock--"it was as if the Frenchman had unexpectedly arrived at the end of the line" (89)--his explorations theoretically could be over, the ultimate limit discovered, the origin pinpointed. Immediately, he sets up borders: "it was only because he was sane that he managed to keep his head and not lose control. Sensing a sudden need to restore order, and to give a name to what

exists, he called her Little Flower. And, in order to be able to classify her among identifiable realities, he immediately began to gather data about her” (89). His need to categorize is also a need for a hierarchy of power, and his need for control over his surroundings obscures ambiguities. This need keeps him from questioning himself and his own role in relation to the woman, even as he asks the woman questions, the answers to which he cannot accept, as they would establish her as an equal partner in a dialogue with him, as they might remind him that she is not just a feminine object, but a woman, and one, moreover, who is capable of penetrating his shield of objectivity, of penetrating him and provoking a sexual response:

It was probably upon adjusting his symbolic helmet that the explorer called himself to order, returned severely to the discipline of work, and resumed taking notes. . . .  
 Marchel Pretre experienced a few difficult moments trying to control himself. But at least he kept occupied in taking notes. Anyone not taking notes had to get along as best he could. (95)

One of the explorer’s modes of control is to take recourse in the established system of authenticity; he is the discoverer, and he takes notes. In his notes he envelopes the woman, brings her into being, and displays her to his world. At the same time, we are meant to see the note-taking as both dispassionate and as a repressed passionate response.

The notes desexualize her and place her outside the human. She is “as black as a monkey” Marcel Pretre says in the newspaper interview (89). The Western audience to the writing picks up on this analogy very clearly. Upon viewing her life-size picture in the Sunday paper, readers describe her as looking “just like a dog” (90), with “the sadness of an animal, not of a human” (91). Even more frequently, she becomes a “thing”: “that minute and indomitable thing” (92), or “the unique thing” (93-4)--a phrase repeated prominently and frequently to signal both the typical Western response to the unknown and the narrator’s own ironic commentary on that response.

The woman, and her whole rich life, reduces, for the Western audience, to a retinal impression, neatly categorized, about which Eurocentric questions can be asked and comments

made. “Just imagine,” says one mother, “melting with pleasure” as she comments on the woman to her family, “just imagine her waiting on table here in the house!” (93). Not only does Lispector flay the middle-class Latin American racism and lack of imagination, she also hints, once again delicately, that the intensity of the appropriative gesture derives from a denied or repressed sexual desire.

As in Dobyns’ novel, one desire stands in for another, and the relation between the Westerners and the Bantus figures a slippage between literal and figurative cannibalism. Marcel Pretre and his audience see a “monkey,” a “thing,” an object of speculation and consumption that must remain both penetrable and sufficiently distanced for the freeplay of imagination to continue. The Bantus are more straightforward: “The Bantus pursue them with nets as they pursue monkeys. And they eat them. Just like that: they pursue them with nets and they eat them” (89). The woman is a magical commodity for the Westerners, an object of lust and a mechanism for dream, a found thing that feeds an over-refined and obstinately abstract spiritual hunger. For the Bantus, she is dinner.

In Lispector’s story the penetration and the discussion is not wholly one-way, nor is the Westerner the only active agent in the encounter. Kumkum Sangari writes, “the stereotype of the enigma . . . is at bottom dialogic. Again the colonizer’s notations of the enigmatic ‘other’ are systematically accompanied by vigorous attempts . . . to penetrate into the substratum of truth” (171). Lispector cannily codes her story for at least two different audiences, from both within and outside the cultural pockets of marginalization that Jameson describes. It is, after all, another tribe of pygmies that sends the Westerner on his way to the “discovery” of the smallest woman in the world. They tell him about something familiar to them, and merely unknown to other Westerners; he observes and reports on his observations to a similarly ignorant Western audience. Secondly, the smallest woman in the world is not an object, but a character with her own thoughts, feelings, and reactions, all of which are inaccessible to the explorer, who for the reader of Lispector’s story is placed in the position of being the object of a Likouala woman’s analysis. Thus, while the main axis in the story would seem to involve the explorer and his

appropriation of the woman through writing, his notetaking is disturbed by his displaced desire, by his need to invent a superior stance for himself in relation to her. “You are Little Flower,” he says, delicately, still in ecstasy over his discovery, defining himself as he who awards identity, thus articulating being and bringing being into existence in his naming. He is, in his own terms, declaring himself her master, her creator. But in Lispector’s story, the woman responds: “at that moment, Little Flower scratched herself where one never scratches oneself” (90). By the terms of his construction of her, the woman’s action is a culturally-recognized, if vulgar, repudiation of his appropriation. It is also the first gesture (of ignoring the Frenchman, of establishing communication with him) that the woman makes in the story.

She smiles at him, and he responds with an uncertain smile of his own. Her smile, Lispector tells us, comes from her deep love; she constructs him as the object of that attention, and he responds to her discovery of him, her bringing of him into existence on her terms. It is a smile that he is incapable of classifying, and for this reason, the smile hovers somewhere between existence and nonexistence in his terms. He cannot “discover” something that he cannot name. And yet, communication exists. As Lispector delicately puts it, he “became disturbed as only a full-grown man becomes disturbed” (95). The two moments of other-construction are strictly parallel. In the first moment of encounter, the man defines the woman in terms his culture has established as proper for establishing discovery--he was told something was there, he went and saw that thing, and he gave it a Western name. She responds with a gesture. In the second moment, the woman defines the man in terms of her culture--she makes him into a thing, an object of her love, along with his ring and his boots. He responds with a gesture. In both moments the responses represent real communication, and they involve, on another level, profound miscommunication deriving from abyssal differences of culture.

The woman, suggests Lispector, has no recourse but honesty; the Western man, on the other hand, represses his response under the guise of scholarship. A similar process of deflection prevents the audience for those notes and that photograph from gaining access to the woman’s alien reality except through distortion and dislocation. The Likouala woman’s love penetrates



the viewer through the photographic surface, but the audience shunts that intensity of emotion onto another realm of experience. Thus, the photograph references a desired ideology figured in the audience's perverse deciphering of its signification. Nowhere is this reaction clearer than in the narrator's reported responses to the Sunday supplement article with its lifesize photograph of the smallest woman in the world. The smallest woman's silent response to the Frenchman, the response captured in the newspaper photograph, says "it is nice to possess, so nice to possess" (95), and each Westerner who sees the dark eyes of the photographed woman becomes filled with "the gnawing desire to possess that minute and indomitable thing" (92). One woman finds the picture vaguely distressing, another feels "a perverse tenderness" and passes the rest of the day "overcome . . . by desire." A young girl feels frightened; the smallest woman's size puts her into an implicit contest for her parents' affection. Another child suggests making the woman her toy, or putting her in her baby brother's bed. For a long-married woman contemplating her daughter's upcoming marriage, the photograph reminds her of defeat (90-91). Another mother considers "the cruel necessity of loving," ponders "the number of times when we murder for love," and turns to her own small child:

She obstinately dressed up her toothless child in fancy clothes, and obstinately insisted upon keeping him clean and tidy, as if cleanliness might give emphasis to a tranquilizing superficiality, obstinately perfecting the polite aspect of beauty. Obstinate removing herself, and removing him from something which must be "black as a monkey." Then, looking into the bathroom mirror, the mother smiled, intentionally refined and polished, placing between that face of hers of abstract lines and the raw face of Little Flower, the insuperable distance of millennia. (92)

The penetrating desire and loss that these Western people feel shift into an effort to establish superiority. They fall back upon the recourses of abstraction, refinement, polish, and superficiality in order to establish a distance between themselves and the communication that calls to them from the Likouala woman's simple depth, her direct expression of love. The "gnawing" desire, however, reminds them of their hunger--a spiritual hunger that the Likouala

woman feeds even as she awakens their appetites by the very fact of her newly revealed existence.

Lispector comments on the poverty of a colonizing system organized according to an implicit grammar that defines the Westerner as agent and the unexplored territories as a passive block of writing matter. This system privileges the active over the passive voice--eating/constructing/discovering has value, whereas the objects of that action exist to be eaten/constructed/discovered--and disallows exchange between the poles. In this respect, she hints, the "obstinately polished" Westerners differ only rhetorically from the Bantus' more straightforward expression of their needs/wants/desires. At the same time, Lispector complicates her critique of the colonizing impulse with an implicit analysis of the effects of Western patriarchal society on the female subject. The women who see the photograph of the Likouala woman respond with fear and desire and rejection partly because the photograph of the African woman, and the explorer's interpretation of that photograph and that woman--"black as a monkey," reminds them of how male subjectivity has tended to appropriate femininity and to oppress women. The Frenchman's construction of the woman at all times interferes with and complicates the communication between the Likouala woman and the Western women, between Western women and Western men. Such appropriations are so deeply embedded in Western culture that they influence all interpretations of cultural phenomena, preventing any comprehension of the Likouala woman's objectless expression, "it is so nice to possess" except on the most visceral level, where "possession" is linked to possession of some other: man of woman, woman of child.

The young Western mother's ferocious response to the Likouala woman involves insisting upon her right of possession over her child. She obstinately appropriates that child for the cruel and binding love that will turn him into a polished and superficial abstraction. No contrast could be stronger than the one Lispector establishes with Likouala cultural practices. In Likouala custom, says the narrator, "When a child is born, he is given his freedom almost at once" (89), even though this freedom may have the frequent consequence of the child being eaten by beasts

or Bantus. Since the smallest woman in the world is very obviously pregnant, we can assume that her “nice to possess” refers not to some material possession, nor to any appropriative gesture towards either the Westerner or the child within her, but rather, to a kind of self-possession. She is content with her tree, her love, the warmth around and within her, and with enjoyment of “the ineffable sensation of not having been devoured yet” (93-4).

The blocked exchange between the Western women and the Likouala woman nevertheless opens up a line of communication between Lispector and her reader in which Lispector demands that her audience not only register the lines of discourse but that we also engage critically with them, and in so doing generate other ways of seeing, other ways of defining human relationships. In so doing, we are forced outside the restrictive narrative spaces defined by active-passive poles. In one of her brief commentaries on her own process of writing, Lispector says, “it is perfectly lawful to become attractive, except that there is the danger of a picture becoming a picture because the frame made it a picture. When it comes to reading, I clearly prefer the attractive. It tires me less and entices me more, confining and encircling me. In order to write, however, I must distance myself” (116). The woman’s unclassifiable secret smile is unclassifiable for the explorer partly because it escapes this binary definition of discourse possibilities: active vs. passive, picture vs. frame. The woman is enjoying herself, Lispector tells us, because she is not being devoured: “Not to be devoured is the most perfect sentiment. Not to be devoured is the secret objective of a whole existence. While she was not being devoured, her animal smile was as delicate as happiness” (94). “Not-to-be-devoured” is an unimaginable situation that cannot situate itself, although it evokes the threat of contact with the other, and the impossibility of avoiding that contact. “Not-to-be-devoured” reminds us of the passive voice of a verb and of a woman’s body, and it rejects passivity, defining subjectivity in terms of that rejection and pointing towards a still-deferred moment in which devouring might take place. The key to “not-to-be-devoured” for the Westerner would have to involve unlearning agency and allowing space for a mode of being other than written, a classification other than photographic. The Likouala woman, then, is not a limit point or a border or an origin, as the explorer fears and hopes; she is

herself, secure in her possession of the key to existence. Yet in the very depth of her self-assurance--Lispector says she is “reduced to depth” by lack of other resources (94)--she interrupts Western discourse and imposes unreality, unclassifiability onto it. Grammatically speaking, she is nontransitive.

Nontransitivity, repressed, redistributes itself into distinctions of active and passive--this is one of the lessons of Lispector’s readers’ reaction to the Western women’s reaction to the explorer’s interpretation and photographing of the Likouala woman. I do not want to enter here into a discussion of the problematics of Western anthropology, either actual or fictionalized. What interests me more is Lispector’s call, specifically located in the feminine, to try to imagine a grammar or an order of existence outside that imposed by the active/passive, picture/frame opposition. But beyond “unclassifiability” or “distance” in terms of the Western patriarchal paradigm, what might the rudiments of such an interpretation involve?

I go for assistance to the classical 1950 essay by Emile Benveniste, “Active and Middle Voice in the Verb,” which provides--at the very least--a useful metaphor for describing this process. In this essay, Benveniste proposes that the modern distinction between the active and the passive voices derives from an earlier distinction between active and middle voices. The distinction is a crucial one, since the shift from an active/middle distinction to an active/passive opposition transforms utterly the fundamental grammatical structure of the language, and with it the way that relationships between subjects and objects can be thought. Furthermore, Benveniste theorizes that the middle voice has both a logical and a chronological priority in human speech. He writes:

In the active, the verbs denote a process that is accomplished outside the subject. In the middle . . . the verb indicates a process centering in the subject, the subject being inside the process. . . . Starting from the middle, actives are formed that are called transitives, or causatives, or factitives, and which are always characterized by the fact that the subject, placed outside the process, governs it thenceforth as agent, and that the process, instead of having the subject for its seat, must take an object as its goal. (148-49).

It is the (now) unthinkable union between subject and process that Lispector evokes in her description of the woman as the one who has not been devoured yet. Crucially, the abstraction of agency from process, very evident in the examples the narrator offers of modern Western women, provokes extreme alienation from their bodies (the woman who looks in the mirror precisely in order to find an artificial face as unlike as possible the face of the Likouala woman) and their emotions (the inability to articulate fear, desire, love or to even recognize their loss). In this way, the powerful and silent communication of the smallest woman in the world sets up a framework of symbolic interaction that, potentially at least, challenges modern Western modes of purposive, rational action. And it poses a challenge to ethics-talk based on a model of subject/object relations. Curiously, from the point of view of Lispector's reader, it is only in fiction that the metaphysics--or metaphoric--of a repressed middle voice can be adduced, and therefore only in literature that this particularly nuanced ethical question can be asked. To push it further: literature becomes the only truly revolutionary mode of political discourse, and it is effective insofar as it also refuses the active/passive, picture/frame distinction. The point, then, is not to posit some lost-utopic-originary language as a model for contemporary change, but rather to uncover the constructed nature of ethics-talk and ascriptions of agency. It is not to propose the authenticity of a repressed middle voice, but to re-examine the question of supposedly universal values involving the most basic relations of agent, process, and object. Lispector poses a crucial question about how individual relations devolve into relations of oppression, making clear the link between discourse and the strategies of oppression. The Likouala woman has become visible, and her major effect upon the women reading the newspaper is to make visible as well the invisible modes of operation of mainstream Western culture.

These distinctions will not simply evaporate once recalled to mind, since they involve deeply imbedded structures of knowledge and hierarchically organized power relationships. Lispector's story ends with a comment that is also a warning:

“Well, it just goes to show,” an old woman suddenly exclaimed, folding her newspaper with determination, “it just goes to show. I’ll say one thing though--God knows what He’s about.” (95)

The old woman returns to the stereotype of the enigmatic native, and safely categorizing the alien woman with a stereotype and a cliché, she cuts off further discussion. She cannibalizes the fragments of an already cannibalized discourse on the smallest woman in the world, and digests the selected morsels, refusing others, reinvoking the coherence of the Western worldview. The old woman at the end of the story mirrors the constructions and constrictions of Western imagination. And yet, for Lispector’s reader, this determined closure--of the newspaper, of the story--and this refusal of dialogue cannot end speculation.

I want to end with the words of another non-Western woman, Kenneth Good’s wife, the object of his notetaking and his lovemaking, a woman cannibalized by and seen only in the interstices of his text. In her first italicized commentary on Good’s narration, Yarima says, “I was a little girl when I first saw Kenny. I had never seen a nabuh before. . . . He couldn’t speak to us, so we called him ‘Ghost Tongue’” (37). Ironically, much later, when Good is the only human being in Pennsylvania who speaks her language, it is Yarima whose tongue is ghosted, for the marriage ceremony that legalizes their union for Western purposes, and for this book. Yarima, Señora Puccini, and the Likouala woman all articulate--through their voices and their silences, their bodily form and the poses they endure--issues of dislocation in excess of the dislocations already effected in the narratives of the West and in emerging masculinist postcolonial counternarratives. Each of their stories is a parable of othering and of consumption, mediated through a male narrative voice. Good’s memoir outlines the issues at stake in the most straightforward manner; Dobyns’ novel pushes these issues to their most violent extreme. The ambiguous ending of Lispector’s story reminds us just how much hard work needs to be done still.

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