

The Use of Literary Metamorphosis in Clarice Lispector and Sevim Burak

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Abstract This essay discusses two texts by two literary avant-garde women writers in terms of their use of literary metamorphosis. Although coming from different geographical, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds, interestingly, Turkish author Sevim Burak (1931-1983) and Brazilian author Clarice Lispector (1920-1977) share a common interest in their tendency towards the modernist aesthetic geared towards an experimental literary style. This essay aims to bring Lispector's experimental novel *The Passion According to G.H. (A Paixão Segundo G.H.; 1964)* and Burak's short story "The Window" ("Pencere"), from her short story collection titled *Burnt Palaces (Yanık Saraylar; 1965)*, together in light of their use of the metamorphosis trope. Both texts challenge desire in fixed signification and closed interpretation, calling instead for a decentered and displaced hermeneutics. In this study, I discuss the use of metamorphosis as a literary trope in *The Passion* and "The Window" as their major literary tool in the deconstruction of subjectivity in different ways. The study argues that the trope of literary metamorphosis can also be an effective narrative vehicle for opening oneself to different forms and positions of alterity, be it ontological or epistemological alterity.

Key words Clarice Lispector; Sevim Burak; metamorphosis; alterity

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Introduction

The aim of this article is to bring together two texts produced by two contemporary Jewish women writers from two different linguistic traditions: the novel of Ukrainian-born Brazilian writer Clarice Lispector (1920-1977) *The Passion According to G.H.* (*A Paixão Segundo G.H.*; 1964) and the Turkish writer Sevim Burak's (1931-1983) short story "The Window" ("Pencere"), from her short story collection titled *Burnt Palaces* (*Yanık Saraylar*; 1965). Although coming from different geographical, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds, interestingly, Burak and Lispector share a common interest in their tendency towards the modernist aesthetic geared towards an experimental literary style. Clarice Lispector did not enjoy the global reputation that she has now during her lifetime. Her international fame came especially after her work was used by Hélène Cixous in her promotion of "feminine writing" (for a review of Cixous's interest in the writings of Lispector, see Klobucka). Cixous finds in Lispector's texts a kind of literary fluidity and openness that she associated with "feminine writing." Sevim Burak's texts, unfortunately, still do not enjoy the privilege of an international readership since there are neither translations of most of her works into other languages nor a wide critical scholarship of them. My frame of discussion in this study will be the use of metamorphosis as a literary trope in these two texts. The article will discuss how women writers from two different contexts use metamorphosis as a literary tool to deconstruct subjectivity. As will be explored in the rest of the article, the study argues that the trope of literary metamorphosis can also be a narrative vehicle for opening oneself to different forms and positions of alterity, be it ontological or epistemological alterity.

Metamorphosis as a Literary Trope

In stories of metamorphosis, in one way or another, human beings escape their imposed forms that put restrictions on the body and the self. In several examples of metamorphosis in literature, people turn into animals (as in Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, for instance), into other beings, or even parts of themselves, as we see in Gogol's *The Nose*. Irving Massey, one of the earliest major scholars working on forms of literary metamorphosis, for instance, states that

metamorphosis is . . . a process of exchange, in which ‘body’ connects the two forms. . . . [in stories of metamorphosis] form changes directly into another form, circumventing the process of conceptual translation that we usually think of as necessary for the grasping and the effecting of change. Man is reborn by himself without having made the excursion through the ‘other’ (through language). (51)

Therefore, Massey reads the classic examples of metamorphosis as a character’s way of reacting to problems in language.

In another study on the theory of metamorphosis, Kai Mikkonen, in his article “Theories of Metamorphosis: From Metatrophe to Textual Revision,” gives a brief survey of the “theorization of the literary or artistic representation of metamorphosis” (309). Mikkonen states that in recent years there has been a great interest in the theorization of literary metamorphosis; according to him, this is partly due to metamorphosis’s potential to pose complicated questions in relation to not only subject and language but also perception, knowledge, and textuality. He asserts that “if metamorphosis problematizes the boundaries between the subject and its other or between language and nonlanguage, it also challenges the limits of conception” (310). Therefore, he says, most of the studies of metamorphosis emphasize “epistemological and ontological questions concerning the subject’s relationship to the world and to others, as well as the subject’s knowledge of itself and the world” (310). These ontological and epistemological implications in relation to perception of the self and the other offer very exciting possibilities in narrative. That is, metamorphosis as such can be not only the exploration of the limits of being but also the vehicle of potential agency of the suppressed, the other, and the unconscious. Both *The Passion According to G.H.* and “The Window” narrate the female subject’s questioning of herself and the identity as a given fact to her, and the literary means for this is metamorphosis. In both works, metamorphosis not only exposes an awareness of the female subject of her confined position in the world but also offers possibilities for subject positions open to encounters with the other.

Rosemary Jackson’s book *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, on the generic features of fantastic literature, also offers stimulating insights for the study of metamorphosis as a trope. There is, in fact, an inevitable relationship between metamorphosis as a trope and fantasy as a genre. If metamorphosis is essentially the trope of underscoring the mobility of one form into another, then the narrative tool of this is mainly the fantastic. According to Jackson, “the fantastic exists in the hinterland between “real” and “imaginary,” shifting the relations between them through

its indeterminacy” (35). Thus, metamorphosis can be seen as the hinterland where normally disparate realms intermerge with each other as metamorphosis as a trope plays with received notions of “appearance” and “disappearance” and “interiority” and “exteriority.” Jackson states that fantastic narrative has a metonymical rather than a metaphorical process in that “one object does not *stand for* another, but literally becomes that other, slides into it, metamorphosing from one shape to another in a permanent flux and instability” (42). She categorizes the themes of the fantastic mainly into four, and it seems that at least the first three of these themes apply to the nature of metamorphosis as well: “1) invisibility, 2) transformation, 3) dualism, 4) good versus evil” (49). The metamorph in its new form, most often, is invisible. When we think of the earliest examples of literary/mythological metamorphosis, in many cases, characters are transformed so that they become invisible — as is the case in Ovidian metamorphosis, for instance. The second item, the transformation theme, constitutes the core of metamorphosis. The third theme, duality, is the very nature of metamorphosis in that the metamorphosed character carries, to a certain extent, its former body/self, in addition to its possessing a newly gained form. As Jackson asserts:

Behind metamorphosis (self becoming another, whether animal or vegetable) and pandeterminism (everything has its cause and fits into a cosmic scheme, a series in which nothing is by chance, everything corresponds to the subject), the same principle operates, in a sense of correspondence, of sameness, of a collapse of differences. Doubles, multiple selves, are manifestations of this principle: the *idea* of multiplicity is no longer a metaphor, but it is literally realized, self transforms into selves.... Other persons and objects are no longer distinctly other: the limit between subject and object is effaced, things slide into one another, in a metonymical action of replacement. (50)

Metamorphosis, as a literary trope, may underscore two different ontological positions. The first can be to underline the subject’s exile from the usual body/self as the self is imprisoned and framed to another form, generally an unwanted and undesired one. This might also suggest alienation of the self, as we see in some of the classical examples of metamorphosis such as Apuleius’s *The Golden Ass*, Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, and Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*. However, metamorphosis can also be a trope for subversion, enabling the self’s freedom, self-assertion, breaking the frame, and deconstructing the given identity, thus possessing the real identity/self. In this paper, I will focus on the second category of implications: metamorphosis as a literary tool

for exploration of the limits of being/self and as a vehicle for giving a voice to the suppressed, the other, and the unconscious. It seems that especially female writers (since being female, most of the time, entails existing within a historically, socially, and politically oppressed and framed position) use metamorphosis in this sense, as a strategic way of expressing issues such as breaking the given identity/frame and asserting a different self/identity. In both of the texts that I discuss, both of which not only have female authors but also are about the experiences of female characters, metamorphosis has this subversive function.

Reading Clarice Lispector with Sevim Burak

Though they come from very different cultural contexts (Burak coming from a majority Muslim country and Lispector from a majority Catholic country, for instance), similarities between Lispector and Burak in terms of their author and subject positions in their own literary cultures and their approach towards literature and the literary are striking (on Lispector's life and works, see Moser and Peixoto; on Burak's life and works, see Güçbilmmez). Likened to Kafka in their respective literary cultures, both Lispector and Burak are considered literary modernists, producing aesthetically challenging and innovative works. Associated with avant-garde literature that does not necessarily aim at direct communication but instead is associated with transgression at many different levels, both writers opted out of social realism, the dominant literary styles of their periods and literary contexts. In Lispector's case, she was removed from the mainstream Brazilian fiction of her times, in which "regionalism," which tended towards social realism, was the preferred narrative mode; instead, she explored more experimental forms of writing. Similarly, the works of Burak have been associated with "avant-gardism" and found by many radical, experimental, and, at times, even idiosyncratic.

Both Lispector and Burak bring an original, different, and foreign voice to the mainstream literatures of their own literary traditions at the time. Both of their prose styles are characterized by their unconventional use of language and their linguistic and structural experiments. As such, they move away from a mimetic representation and develop open, mystical narratives. Interestingly, as they developed a new way of using language and constructing a text, both writers relied on several aspects of Jewish cultural heritage and literary expression (for a short piece on the influence of the language of the Old Testament on Burak's short stories, see Koçakoğlu; for the impact of her Jewish background on Lispector, see Vieira). Their uniqueness in their respective literary traditions originates from an unsettling writing style, which is based on indeterminacy. By examining their works from a perspective of their use

of literary metamorphosis, we can gain insight about the possibilities that this trope brings to women writers who write from a position of alterity. In offering a reading of texts produced by two authors from different linguistic and cultural contexts, I claim not only an ontological and literary kinship between the two writers, but also a similar perspective on their understanding and practices of writing and literature as two women of Jewish heritage writing outside the dominant literary and cultural hegemonies of their times. The “otherness” both felt and experienced in their own cultures is also infused in their literary and linguistic styles. Both share a deep distrust in the capacity of language in being able to express the human experience; both see the language as a “strange” medium that cannot be trusted for meaning.

Both texts under study here challenge desire in fixed signification and closed interpretation. Instead, they call for a decentered and displaced hermeneutics. It is stated that Lispector’s own Portuguese sounds strange in Brazilian Portuguese (Klobucka 47). Her English translator, Pontiero, notes the peculiarities of her writing style. He refers to her “unorthodox use of syntax and punctuation. These are subordinated to the demands of her fleeting perceptions, her own idiosyncratic rhythms, the subtle patterns of sound that have become the hallmark of her prose. Even the pauses create what Benedito Nunes has defined as an ‘awesome silence’ — the refuge of a writer who sees and knows too much” (Pontiero 78). Her inspiration for writing is also generally considered “idiosyncratic”: in one of her interviews, she says that while writing, “I use my intuition rather than my intelligence. One writes as one loves. No one knows why they love just as they do not know why they write”. She also says “I have a real affection for things which are incomplete or badly finished, for things which awkwardly try to take flight only to fall clumsily to the ground” (Pontiero 75). Lispector was interested in the breakdown of structures and unities: “What cannot be expressed only comes to me through the breakdown of language. Only when the structure breaks down do I succeed in achieving what the structure failed to achieve” (Pontiero 78). Similarly, Burak’s working process often involved a cut-and-paste technique that she developed during a period before word processors and computers (for details on her idiosyncratic writing process, see Güngörmüş). Her texts were truly a collage, not only in terms of their production processes but also their inclusion of different kinds of texts, including non-literary ones, such as drawings, advertisements, recipes, texts from prayer books, and medical reports.

Hélène Cixous studies women’s complicated relationships with writing and their subject formation in her various works. As she remarks:

If woman has always functioned ‘within’ the discourse of man, a signifier that has always referred back to the opposite signifier which annihilates its specific energy and diminishes or stifles its very different sounds, it is time for her to dislocate this ‘within,’ to explode it, turn it around, and seize it; to make it hers, containing it, taking it in her own mouth, biting that tongue with her own teeth to invent for herself a language to get inside of. (“The Laugh of the Medusa” 316)

Within this context, I consider both *The Passion* and “The Window” as examples of female writers deconstructing given identity and existing linguistic conventions, mainly through their original use of language, narrative structure, and the use of metamorphosis as subversion. Both *The Passion* and “The Window” poeticize prose in such a way as to give a voice to the uniqueness of the female characters’ experiences, which would not be properly and effectively expressed with the legitimated words and the conventions of the patriarchy. Because they have often been decentered and muted, fragmented on the periphery of the dominant discourse, women writers usually take refuge in poetic discourse in order to subvert the inherited language of men. This is why women’s texts often tend more towards the poetic in search of a unique way of expressing the female experience.

In an attempt to establish her own language, not tainted by the patriarchal view of the world, Sevim Burak’s radical technique of subversion is to poeticize prose. Language as a unifying principle, language as something to make one an integrated whole, fails. Language in Burak’s text cracks, and with it, the illusion of integrity cracks. The languages of others creep in, destroying ‘the poetic nature of the narrative. Paradoxically, the reconstruction of a unified self is possible only after complete fragmentation.

“The Window” is a story of a split self. Clarke remarks that “Transformation narratives are regularly produced by the uncanny doubling or bifurcation of an individual character” (104). Similarly, in “The Window,” the narrative gives the impression to the reader that two women exist in the story; only at the very end of the story do we understand that there is only one woman. This narrative strategy provides the writer with an effective way of voicing fluctuations within the self. This technique of the split self also enables the writer to give voice to both of the selves, one monitoring the other: “I have an idea that she deliberately started playing this game because she knows that I’m spying on her behind the window” (“The Window” 7); “Whatever I can see — I can grab — FROM HER LIFE is enough for me; I make a tiny hole in the middle of my curtain — so she can’t see me — and I observe HER”

(“The Window” 7-8).

“The Window” is built on the conflict between integrity and fragmentation, unity and dissolution, which finds its expression not only in images but also in the way Sevim Burak handles language. The movement of the contraction and expansion of the self creates a rhythm in the story, which finally culminates in the scattering of the self into a thousand pieces when the narrator jumps. The female narrator in “The Window” is torn between the inherited discourse of patriarchy and her own voice, which she strives to make heard and fails to do so within the inherited patterns of patriarchal discourse. Here the desire is not to insert her feeble voice into the dominant discourse, but to dominate it throughout. As Foucault has very convincingly shown, “speech is not merely the medium which manifests – or dissembles – desire; it is also the object of desire. ... [it] is no mere verbalization of conflicts and systems of domination, but it is the very object of man’s conflicts” (149). Because discourse makes possible disciplines and institutions, which, in turn, sustain and distribute their discourses, it is closely related with power. Patriarchy, as a system of domination, imposes its own discourse on women. Women who try to encode their own meanings and experiences within the legitimated language of patriarchy have to use subversive strategies like poetic language in prose or the use of metamorphosis.

“The Window” is the story of a woman who is on the brink of suicide, living on the dangerous borderline between life and death. The story opens with a scene in which the woman narrator watches from her “window” another woman who lives across the street, hoping that she will commit suicide. However, it soon becomes apparent that the two women are the same self, split into two. One aspect of the self, which is embodied in the woman across the street, is ready to die, while the other aspect, which is embodied in the narrator, is willing to monitor the act. The only time the narrator finds her voice in the story is the moment of identification:

I see the woman for the first time-
Without lies
Without a curtain (9)

But it is also the moment when she sees in the other her own mirror image:

She appears in front of the window like a puppet moved by strings.
Her mouth is distorted; she is saying things that are incomprehensible. (9)

Speech, then, when it truly belongs to her, is simply illogical and incomprehensible. On hearing her speak like this, two fat women rush upstairs, holding onto the woman's arms, imploring her to go back to her apartment. They finally take her away, but grotesque images of the distorted mouth and the "empty and impassive eyes" saying "help me" remain in the memory of the narrator (11). She knows that the woman across the street is saved only to scream again:

In the dining room
 In the kitchen
 In the storage room

She will go back to her daily routine of self-effacement, doing the housework and hanging her laundry on the terrace – a set of activities which the world calls "wisdom" (10).

However, during that brief moment of contact, before their communion is interrupted, they both realize that true wisdom would be death — that is, abandoning language altogether. Only then would the woman across the street be able to make a statement. But this is not just any kind of death. "The most beautiful death for her among the innumerable deaths that occupy" the narrator's mind is jumping from that high terrace, because it must be a literally revealing death:

I think about how her body would fall onto Streetcar Avenue with a big thud and cover the whole avenue, stopping the passers-by. In a magical couple of seconds her body would become sacred and it would grow bigger and everything would end happily.

...

Soon her body would be broken into pieces; she would tell her friends: "See, you didn't know me ...;" she would bare her secret, covered parts to those gathered around to watch her die, and she would make the parts of her face, hands and knees quiver with passion. Everybody would run to see this uncovering—they would only be able to take it for a few minutes but they would never forget it... (8)

This fascination with physical disclosure is also expressed in the following: "The bandage will be removed, and underneath I'll see some truth that I've been searching for for a long time. My whole being is shaken by quivering pink flesh of a wound not yet healed and bones not yet set" (8). The obsession with the physical

wound, the almost sadistic delight taken in the destruction of the body, is symptomatic of the intense desire to destroy the image of the self-constructed by others — something that cannot be done through others' language.

However, the narrator makes one last attempt to use language in order to reconstruct a unified self before she yields to the idea of suicide. After the unmediated confrontation of the narrator with her true self, the sporadic eruptions of poetic discourse in her narrative become systematic and she retreats more and more into the unifying discourse of the poet. The narrative line is disrupted altogether and time is dislocated. There is neither a chronological nor a causal relationship in the traditional sense between the events that follow. The story is taken out of the temporal plane of narrative discourse and placed on the spatial plane of poetry, a movement that culminates with images like “I hang around my feelings, fine as hair, I'm like a spider, face to face with the flowers of death,” or “I spread over the house like a huge stain” (11). What is happening in this climactic part of the story can be summed up as the narrator's failed attempt at appropriating language for her own intentions.

“Language, for the individual consciousness,” says Bakhtin, “lies on the borderline between oneself and the other It becomes one's 'own' only when the speaker populates it with his own intentions, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention” but “not all words for just anyone submit equally easily to this appropriation, to this seizure and transformation into private property: many words resist, others remain alien, sound foreign in the mouth of the one who appropriated them and who now speaks them; they cannot be assimilated into his context and fall out of it; it is as if they put themselves in quotation marks against the will of the speaker” (293-294). It is doubly difficult for a woman to appropriate language, to make it her own, because all language is male, and it is inevitably put in quotation marks in her mouth. This is why the narrator in “The Window” is defeated by language and the idea of baring “her secret, covered parts” to the world with her dead body broken into pieces on the pavement seems more appealing than striving “to get a reading on [her] own word and on [her] own conceptual system that determines this word” (Bakhtin 282). She finally submits to the call of the ever-growing crowd in the street to join them and jumps from her window. She jumps because she can establish her integrity only after complete fragmentation, and her final act of self-destruction turns into a powerful act of self-assertion.

Similar to the closed narrative space of “The Window,” *The Passion's* narrative takes place almost exclusively in a closed room, in which the female protagonist, G.H., the eponymous narrator of the novel, experiences a transformative encounter

with a cockroach; she becomes one with it, in a sense. The novel includes very few characters: G.H., a black maid named Janair who has left but is referred to, and a vague reference to a “you.” There is no dialogue. The whole narrative is told a day after G.H. entered the maid’s room. Lispector does not try to give any overt meaning to her narrative. G.H. claims that she does not even try to make sense. As she states, her narrative is a resistance to “start ‘making’ a sense” (7). Her writing is what she calls “graphism” (13), which seeks “an effort ... to let a sense, whatever it may be, rise to the surface” (7).

In contrast to the unnamed narrator in “The Window,” about whom we have no identifying or descriptive details, relatively more detailed information is given about the narrator in *The Passion*. G.H. is a middle-class, financially independent woman, as she declares herself to be; she is a sculptor who lives in an “elegant” penthouse (22). When G.H. enters the room that belonged to her previous maid, she is forced to think about her relationship with her. As she enters the surprisingly clean room that she was expecting to be dusty and messy, G.H. is confronted with her own otherness. She sees a cockroach, which makes her confront her animal other, with which she experiences a “communion.” She tastes the body or the excrement of the body of the cockroach. The narrative circles on itself, where, at its most crucial moment, G.H. confronts her nonhuman other.

The transformation of G.H. takes place through her encounter with both her racial other (i.e. the absent presence of her maid) and her nonhuman other (the cockroach). In a racialized Brazilian society, G.H. is a white employer of a black maid; in that sense, encountering the memory of the black maid also means an encounter with the racial other. It is also significant that this encounter with the racialized other, the maid, is realized only when she does not occupy that space anymore and only through an encounter with the nonhuman other, i.e. the cockroach, and perhaps through the nonhuman. Blind to the existence of the racial other, G.H. acknowledges her position: “It wasn’t surprising that I had used her [Janair, her maid] as though she had no presence: under her small apron she always wore dark brown or black, which made her all dark and invisible” (33). Invisibility of the racial other is closely linked with the encounter with the animal other. Referring to her ignorance of the racialized other, G.H. realizes that “I ... discover that till now I hadn’t noticed that that woman [Janair] was an invisible woman. Janair had what was almost only an external form, the features with that form were so refined that they barely existed: she was flattened out like a bas-relief frozen on a piece of wood” (33). In *The Passion*, reaching a nonhuman awareness of being requires the encounter with the cockroach. As G.H. states towards the end of the text: “Through the live cockroach I

am coming to understand that I too am that which lives” (165). In this sense, rejecting the human vision, *The Passion* is also a deep criticism of the human-centered approach to life. Stepping outside of her white, privileged human self, merging with the racial and animal others, G.H. experiences the dissolution of the self, to the point that there is no self to refer to. Therefore, *The Passion* explores not only the mystical transformation of the self (as the title of the novel clearly refers to the passion of Christ), but also an epistemological and ontological transformation, where G.H. becomes literally her ontological other, the nonhuman, and, metaphorically her epistemological other, her black maid, Janair.

Both G.H. and the unnamed female character in “The Window” capture their “real” selves through transformation, although their transformations are different from each other’s and unique in the “metamorphosis literature.” Through their attempts to break their socially given frame/identity, both of these women express the loud cry of their body or other selves. They deconstruct the already-given identity and try to construct their own by confronting the other. In G.H.’s case, this other is an abject being, a cockroach, and for the female character in “The Window,” it is confrontation with her own other. As Clarke points out, “some literary metamorphoses emblemize their textuality simply by literalizing the *pharmakon*, reifying the agent of metamorphosis as something eaten or absorbed” (6). G.H.’s eating or attempt to eat and absorb the cockroach has such a ‘pharmakon’ function. Clarke also states that “Metamorphic stories reify the daemonic power of writing by making virtually deconstructive scenes that narrate the displacement or decomposition of prior determinations of bodily identity and psychological value” (21). Both *The Passion* and “The Window” are stories of decomposition of earlier bodily identities. G.H., after her drastic encounter with the other, the inanimate, disclaims her previous self and celebrates her new material being: “Up to then, I had never been mistress of my powers, powers that I neither understood nor wanted to understand, but the life in me had stored them up so that one day there would blossom forth this unknown happy, unconscious matter that was, finally, me! Me, whatever that might be” (45). For the unnamed woman in “The Window,” the idea of “decomposing” is valid in the most literal sense since, with her last act, her body literally decomposes. As Braidotti claims, “Discursive practices, like ideological beliefs, are tattooed on bodies, and unless women can change skin, like snakes, they have to take care that the process of subverting identity does not take too heavy a toll on them” (122). G.H. could change her skin successfully after her encounter with the cockroach. After her attempt to face the other, the abject, and to become the inanimate, she is ready to return to her human life refreshed. However, the woman in “The Window” is not as

successful or lucky as G.H.; she can get rid of the identity “tattooed on her body” only by dispossessing her body totally, letting it shatter into a thousand pieces.

Both “The Window” and *The Passion* play with the idea of “madness”/“schizophrenia” or “transcendence” as a new existence or vision at the expense of losing oneself within this overwhelming experience. It is going beyond the permitted border, losing the ties with the illusory reality of the “real” world that these narrators in the two texts discussed explore. By jumping out of the window, Sevim Burak’s unnamed character virtually goes beyond the borders of this world. As for G.H., like the experience of the mythological phoenix, she should burn in “the core of life,” in the “Hellish laboratory,” so that she can reborn: “The first tie had already involuntarily broken, and I was loosening myself from law, even though I suspected that I would be going into the inferno of living matter—what sort of inferno awaited me? but I had to go. I had to fall into my soul’s condemnation, curiosity was consuming me” (*The Passion* 51). According to Deleuze and Guattari, “the anomalous is neither an individual nor a species ... It is a phenomenon, but a phenomenon of bordering....If you change dimensions, if you add or subtract one, you change multiplicity....Moby Dick is neither an individual nor a genius; he is the borderline, and I have to strike him to get at the pack as a whole, to reach the pack as a whole and pass beyond it” (245). The cockroach for G.H. is what Moby Dick is for Captain Ahab; it is the borderline. In this context, as Braidotti claims, G.H.’s killing of the cockroach is “as much a gesture of connecting as of destruction”; it is the “transgression of all boundaries” (130). According to Hélène Cixous, “in *The Passion according to G.H.*, there is a step-by-step deconstruction of morals and of metaphysics” (“Writing and the Law” 26). Based on G.H.’s allusion to the Biblical prohibition of the unclean as a possible reason for her fear and disgust of cockroaches, Cixous links Lispector’s cockroach with the feminine and the unclean, excluded from the masculine world of the Law (*Three Steps* 111-113). In fact, as Luisa Valenzuela explains, South American women writers, writing in search of another form of writing, are fascinated with “the disgusting”: “The body has to know the disgust, absorb it meaningfully, in order to say all its words” (cited in Bassnett 4). Challenging anthropocentric and anthropomorphic subjectivity, as Pontiero remarks, in Lispector’s fiction “The ebb and flow of human passions when contrasted with the primordial existence of plant and animal tend to reveal less consistency or harmony in human beings. Animals appear to possess greater ontological integrity” (75).

Parallels between *The Passion* and “The Window” are numerous. In both texts, the characters are detached from the outside world; both of their “inner” experiences take place inside a room, suggesting their isolation from other people. Both

The Passion and “The Window” are characterized by discursive indeterminacies. In both of the texts, there are inconsistencies, paradoxes, and repetitions. They violate language conventions and are not organized linearly. Both texts are trying to find an appropriate medium that would express the intensity of the female character’s experience truly, which seems to be only possible through a non-systematic, unconventional use of language. G.H. explains this as follows:

I am going to create what happened to me. Only because living isn’t tellable. Living isn’t livable. I shall have to create upon life. And without lying. Yes to creation, no to lying. Creation isn’t imagination, it’s running the huge risk of coming face to face with reality. Understanding is a creation, it’s my only way. I shall have to painstakingly translate telegraph signals — translate the unknown into a language that I don’t know, and not even understand what the signals amount to. I shall speak in that sleep-walker’s language that if I were awake wouldn’t even be a language. (*The Passion* 13)

The belief that one can capture the truth only with a “dream-language” is expressed again in another place in *The Passion*: “Like in dreams, the ‘logic’ was other, was one that makes no sense when you wake up, for the dream’s greater truth is lost” (96). Similarly, Burak states that characters in her stories are dreaming, seeing the dreams of reality (“Hikâye” 103). The reason for this could be, as Clarke explains, the fact that “Metamorphosis plays out a dream logic undercutting imposed identities and asserting a nonverbal level of individual authenticity” (55). As Pontiero states, for Lispector the intensity of an experience can only be expressed through subversion, as she herself indicates: “What cannot be expressed only comes to me through the breakdown of language. Only when the structure breaks down do I succeed in achieving what the structure failed to achieve” (Lispector, cited in Pontiero 78).

While Sevim Burak’s female character is not able to reconstruct her “self” successfully, G.H. is lucky enough to embrace life and her newly gained self/consciousness with an affirmation of life. As Braidotti claims, “the subject is not a substance but rather a process of negotiation between material and semiotic conditions that affect one’s embodied, situated self....The subject is a process, made of constant shifts and negotiations between different levels of power and desire, constantly shifting between willful choice and unconscious drives. Whatever semblance of unity there may be is no God-given essence but rather the fictional choreography of many levels into one socially operational self” (118-9). For G.H., the time that she spent with the cockroach is a version of this reconstructing process of the self. Within this

process, the first step is being able to see the abject body, the cockroach, as it is — without having any positive or negative presumptions of it: “I, neutral cockroach body, I with a life that at last is not eluding me because I finally see it outside myself — I am the cockroach” (57). Deleuze and Guattari state that “We know nothing about a body until we know what it can do, in other words, what its affects are, how they can or cannot enter into composition with other affects of another body, either to destroy that body or to be destroyed by it, either to exchange actions and passions with it or to join with it in composing a more powerful body” (257). G.H.’s second step of constructing the self is her attempt to exchange passion with the cockroach to be able to know its body, and as a result of this exchange she composes a literally and metaphorically transformed self that is redeemed and attached to life more powerfully.

Before her encounter with the cockroach, G.H. was not a whole person. As she indicates: “I’m not up to picturing a whole person because I’m not a whole person myself” (10). And before she entered the maid’s room that morning, her conception of her own identity was based on what other people carved out for her: “That morning, before I went into the maid’s room, what was I? I was what others had always seen me as, and that was the way I knew myself” (15). She has taken others’ conception of her so seriously that “she ends up only being her name” (17), and “she treats herself as others treat her, she is what others see in her” (18). Nothing more, nothing less. Her life before the turning point of meeting the cockroach was only something made, an artistic creation like her penthouse apartment, as she says (22). Until her confrontation with the borders of becoming through her experience with the cockroach, she was not even critical of the identity given to her by others: “That image of myself between quotation marks used to satisfy me, and not just superficially. I was the image of what I wasn’t” (23). It is like accepting the illusory reality created by the ideology as if it were real. It is only after her encounter with the materiality of life, which found its representation in the primordial abject figure, the cockroach; in this case, she will be able to turn this relationship into reverse. The effect of her experience with the cockroach is both radical and fundamental for her because for her the cockroach symbolizes the essential and the ever-present element in life; it is almost like a God figure: “A cockroach is larger than I am because its life is so given over to Him that it comes from the infinite and moves toward the infinite unperceivingly, it never becomes discontinuous” (119).

Conclusion

To conclude, although they come from different geographical, linguistic, and cultur-

al backgrounds, interestingly, Burak and Lispector share a common interest in their tendency towards the modernist aesthetic and an experimental literary style. This essay discusses highly elusive texts by these literary avant-garde women in terms of their representation of different forms of alterity. The enigmatic linguistic and narrative structure of both texts invites readers to share in the uneasy experience of the encounter with the other within the self (as we see in “The Window”) or the racial other and the nonhuman other (as seen in *The Passion*). The self that seems to be embodied in both texts is a decentered self. In “The Window,” the narrative technique dissolves any possibility for an integrated authentic self as the narrative voice has no fixed center. The unknown narrator’s corpse in “The Window” signals the presence of an absence. For G.H., existence consists of a total immersion with the being of the other. The atmosphere in both texts is wrapped with an ontological insecurity in that one expects either an annihilating or a transformative end of the narrator, as actually happens at the end of “The Window” and *The Passion*, respectively.

In this study, I discuss the use of metamorphosis as a literary trope in *The Passion* and “The Window” as their major literary tools of deconstruction of subjectivity in different ways. Defying categories and traditional forms of writing, and resisting historicity and mimetic representation, both Burak and Lispector celebrate the ambiguity of life and literature in their encounters with alterity. Both writers, haunted by a sense of incompleteness, explore new forms of writing open to different forms of alterity. “The Window” and *The Passion* attempt to question all subjectivity, aiming to uncover the self, hidden under several other social selves constructed by others through their use of metamorphosis. In this sense, *The Passion*’s epigraph from Bernard Berenson reflects the representation of the dissolution of the self in both of the works: “A complete life may be one ending in so full identification with the non-self that there is no self to die.”

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