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# Language as Poetry and Drama According to Benedito Nunes

**Abstract:** Benedito Nunes was a Brazilian philosopher and literary critic who developed his activities in the second half of the twentieth and the first decade of the twenty first centuries. A graduate in law, he was, in the beginning of his intellectual career, an autodidact in philosophy, until he could attend Merleau-Ponty's and Paul Ricouer's courses in France, in 1960. His publications, ranging from didactic books to treatises and anthologies of essays, approach mainly topics of aesthetics and philosophy of art (particularly philosophy of literature). In this article special attention is given to two of his most relevant books: *Passagem para o poético. Filosofia e Poesia em Heidegger* [*Passage to the poetic. Philosophy and poetry in Heidegger*] – winner of 1987's Prêmio Jabuti award – and *O drama da linguagem. Uma leitura de Clarice Lispector* [*The Drama of Language. A Reading of Clarice Lispector*].

**Keywords:** Heidegger; Clarice Lispector; Brazilian philosophy; contemporary Brazilian aesthetics.

## Who was Benedito Nunes?

Benedito José Viana da Costa Nunes, or simply Benedito Nunes, was a philosopher and literary critic born on November 21, 1929 in Belém, capital of the state Pará in the north of Brazil (in the Amazon basin), where he was a professor at the Federal University of Pará from the 1960s to 1998, when he retired and received the title of Professor Emeritus. He died due to complications originated by a gastric ulcer on February 27, 2011 in his hometown Belém.

Before Nunes decided to embrace philosophy and literature critique, he published fictional texts and poems, but his theoretical production of poetry and reviews of novels progressively overtook his own literary endeavors. By 1952 he wrote essays on Tolstoy and Camus, as well as a set of aphorisms in Nietzschean style, which prefigured his philosophical and aesthetic studies. Around that time, he decided to quit writing poetry in order to concentrate on the writing of philosophical texts. This may not have been an easy decision, since some of his best friends, such as Max Martins and Mário Faustino, were then promising young poets and shortly thereafter became prominent as such. Nevertheless, his older friend (and afterwards his professor in the

law school) Francisco Paulo Mendes convinced him to give up literature creation and to concentrate on philosophy and literary criticism.

Although he was not fond of legal matters, he began studying law in 1947, for at that time there was no formal higher-education possibility of graduating in philosophy in Belém. His uncle Carlos Alberto Nunes, who worked as a physician in the state of São Paulo, but had acquired nationwide fame as translator of Homer's *Odyssey* and *Iliad*, Plato's *Opera Omnia* from the Greek, Virgil's *Eneida* from the Latin and the complete plays by Shakespeare into Portuguese, recognized Nunes' talent and was willing to bring him to São Paulo, where there was an excellent course of philosophy since the 1930s, depending only on the funding to be provided by another uncle of Nunes, who was a banker. This project was aborted because the latter went bankrupt, which led Nunes to finish his studies in the regional law school in 1952. To be sure, Nunes compensated his lack of philosophical training in law school – with the exception of some epistemological content – becoming a voracious autodidact in philosophical matters, thus acquiring an expertise far superior to the average of philosophy graduates at that time in Brazil.

Not willing to make career as a lawyer (or any other activity in the field of law) in 1954 Nunes began to teach philosophy and history at an independent college, termed “Faculdade de Filosofia”. After being hired as a professor by the Federal University of Pará, by 1960 he began making efforts to create a superior course of philosophy in the university, which happened only in 1974.

His international academic experiences began in 1960, when Nunes's wife, theater director Maria Sylvia Nunes, received, as a festival award, a trip to France. There he attended Paul Ricoeur's courses, with whom he also had enriching personal contacts. In the same occasion he attended Maurice Merleau-Ponty's courses at the Collège de France, in Paris. Between 1967 and 1969, Nunes and his wife went again to France, where he attended graduate courses at the Institut d'Estudes Portugaises et Brésiliennes de la Sorbonne, in Paris.

After he had already become quite known and respected as a philosopher and professor, Nunes also lectured at other universities in southeastern Brazil (Unicamp, in Campinas, and UFMG, in Belo Horizonte, among others) and abroad. In France, he taught as a guest professor at the Université de Haute-Bretagne – Rennes II; in the United States, he lectured at the University of Texas at Austin, at Vanderbilt University, in Nashville, and at the University of Stanford. In Canada, he was invited professor at the Université de Montreal. He had personal contact also with Michel Foucault, who was twice in Belém: the first time on vacation and the second, in 1976, to give a series of lectures which had an enormous repercussion, since it occurred during the time of the military dictatorship in Brazil, the political representatives of which considered the French philosopher an ideological enemy.

For his publications on aesthetics, philosophy of art and literature theory, Nunes got some very important distinctions: In 1987, he was awarded the Prêmio Jabuti, considered one of the most prestigious literary prizes in Brazil, for his book *Passagem para*

*o Poético – Filosofia e Poesia em Heidegger* [*Passage to the Poetic – Philosophy and Poetry in Heidegger*]. In 2010, he was again awarded the same prize in the category of “literary studies” for his book *A Clave do Poético* [*The Key of the Poetic*]. In the same year he got the Prêmio Machado de Assis (Machado de Assis Prize), conceded by the Academia Brasileira de Letras (Brazilian Academy of Belles Lettres) for the ensemble of his work. This prize was meritorious, since Nunes was one of the most respected and influential thinkers in the field of aesthetics in Brazil in the second half of the twentieth century. His research was especially relevant, because he approached in a very original way many issues of the contemporary Brazilian culture, with an emphasis on the work of Brazilian modernism in literature. His writings about Clarice Lispector are now considered masterpieces about this important novelist and will be discussed below.

Since the middle of the 1960s Nunes began to publish books that comprised over twenty titles, among which three didactical works (*A Filosofia Contemporânea* and *Introdução à Filosofia da Arte* – both in 1967–, as well as *Heidegger e Ser e Tempo* – 2002), treatises, such as *Passagem para o Poético – Filosofia e Poesia em Heidegger* (1986), *O drama da linguagem – Uma leitura de Clarice Lispector* (1989) and *Hermenêutica e poesia – O pensamento poético* (1999), and anthologies of essays, like *O Dorso do Tigre* (1969), *No tempo do niilismo e outros ensaios* (1993) and *A Clave do Poético* (2009).

Given that Nunes’ work is quite vast and the space here is limited, I chose two of his most significant books to comment briefly on: *Passage to the poetic – Philosophy and Poetry in Heidegger*, first published in 1986, and *The Drama of Language – A reading of Clarice Lispector*, which appeared in its definitive form in 1989. A testimony of the centrality of both books in the work of Benedito Nunes is given by himself in the following passage of an interview given a few years before his death:

I knew Heidegger from transversal readings. I thought that it was not right, it was not something authentic to write about Heidegger without knowing German [...]. So at the same time I started to re-read Heidegger, I took a German teacher. This was in the seventies. [...] As a matter of fact, subjects become important to me and I do not honor deadlines, I learned to honor them just a short time ago. So I missed all deadlines, until I got to the moment in which the book was ready. [...] In that time I met many people and the book was retaken by the [publishing house] Ática, and it is this one you know as *Passagem para o Poético* [*Passage to the poetic*]. This was the most exhausting thing I ever did, in terms of dedication. This was because I was very much taken by the subject. As it happened in the case of Clarice. For the first articles that were collected in this volume, published in Manaus were completely reformulated. I had given Claricea too existentialist outlook. I thought this was not right and so I reformulated everything and it resulted in that book *O Drama da Linguagem* [*The Drama of Language*], which is a remake of a first one

I had published in São Paulo, *Uma leitura de Clarice Lispector* [A reading of Clarice Lispector] in a small collection that did not last long. So you can see an oscillation between literature and philosophy, Clarice Lispector and at the same time Heidegger... An oscillation that began a long time ago and in which I find myself until today.”<sup>1</sup>

### **Benedito Nunes’ Passage to the Poetic (Heidegger in the Amazon Basin)**

In spite of the relevance of many Benedito Nunes’ publications, *Passagem para o poético* stands out as a very important book in terms of philosophical depth and density, and it is not by chance that it was awarded with the Prêmio Jabuti. The reasons for the praising of this book are multiple but I will focus briefly on two of them, strictly linked to each other.

This first one is that not only *Being and Time*, but all the immense work of Heidegger’s is scrutinized in the more than three hundred pages – divided into sixteen chapters – of the book and every discussion the German philosopher undertook around authors of the Western tradition is carefully reconstructed, taking into account their key texts for the topic respectively considered. To be sure, Nunes focuses on passages from Plato’s *Opera Omnia*, Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, Descartes’ *Discourse of the Method*, Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* and *Critique of Judgement*, Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Mind*, Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling*, and Nietzsche’s *Birth of Tragedy* and *Götterdämmerung*, among others. In this sense one could say that Nunes’ approach to Heidegger’s thought is one of the most complete ever done and it is a pity that until now it is available only to a Portuguese reading audience.

I have intentionally omitted Husserl’s phenomenology in the list above, because, obviously, Nunes’ presentation of Heidegger’s philosophy begins with a very sharp analysis of the former’s thought, which leads to what Nunes proposes to be the very starting point from which the latter constructed his phenomenological ontology, namely Husserl’s conception of “categorical intuition” in his *Logical Investigations*. According to Nunes, this notion prefigured what in Heidegger would become the ontological rooting in every form of logical judgement:

*Sense* arises from the articulation of meaning by means of the copula. What then, Heidegger could ask – which was the same as asking about the meaning of the “is” – is the *sense of the sense* (das Sinn des Sinnes)? (Cf. *Frühe Schriften*, p. 112). Preluding the question of the being, the *categorical intuition*, which is the singular intuition, pre-predicative of this meaning, in fact unfulfillable, and which makes predication possible, brought him the first answer.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ernani Chaves and Márcio Benchimol, “Entrevista com Benedito Nunes,” *Trans/Form/Ação* 31, 1 (2008): 14.

<sup>2</sup> Benedito Nunes, *Passagem para o poético. Filosofia e poesia em Heidegger* (São Paulo, Editora Ática, 1986), 55.

From the quotation above, one can infer that, for Nunes, there was not a “trauma”, as most interpreters seem to believe, but a kind of continuity, between Husserl’s phenomenology and what was destined to be Heidegger’s fundamental ontology, since, for him, “in the phenomenology there is not a topic other than the ontological.”<sup>3</sup>

A curiosity in Nunes’ approach to Heidegger’s thought is the proposal of making fruitful for an ontological understanding of language in general the distinction, between “ser” e “estar” in Portuguese, when he analyses the “being-in-the-world”. He suggests that, differently of “ser”, “estar”, which means someone finding him/herself in a certain situation, points to the risk of inauthenticity in everyday life: “From the ontological viewpoint, the difference of meaning between the two verbs, *ser* and *estar*, would correspond to the distance that severs the authentic from the inauthentic, the originary from the derived. *Being* [*Ser*] and *being-in-the-world* [*estar no mundo*] incorporate the antithetic polarity of the everyday existence.”<sup>4</sup>

The second big draw of Nunes’ book is that he focuses on the most complex ontological notions in Heidegger’s first philosophy with an eye to what would become the primacy of the poetic element in his second philosophy. This connection is, on one hand, so to speak, subterranean, identifiable only due to the numerous epigraphs throughout the book by poets such as Paul Valery, Clarice Lispector, Carlos Drummond de Andrade, Fernando Pessoa, Octavio Paz, Baudelaire, Camões and Mallarmé, among others. A more conceptual link between ontology and poetry happens, on the other hand, when Nunes analyses, for instance, the three dimensions of the ontological opening [*Erschlossenheit*]: the *disposition* [*Befindlichkeit*], the *understanding* [*das Verstehen*] and the *discourse* [*die Rede*]. Nunes’ approach to the latter points, in the midst of an arid ontological environment, to the phenomena of communication and expression and their aesthetic potential, thus prefiguring the leading role art is going to play in the last phase of Heidegger’s thought. According to Nunes,

The being-in-common precedes and determines the empirical phenomenon of communication. Spoken language is inserted in this circuit, both expressive and communicative – origin of the symbolic and expressive forms – in which listening connects with speaking, for which it is exchangeable in the measure of the silence that strengthens discourse.<sup>5</sup>

The relationship between the, up to this point, still somehow evasive reference to the artistic expression reappears much more strongly, when Nunes focuses on language from an ontological viewpoint, reaching thus a much clearer statement about the role of poetry in modern culture:

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 80.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 86.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 102.

The thematization of language interweaves the fact – also the fate – of the modern lyric: language made theme as threshold of consciousness, one moment triumphant and the other in agony, a mix of hopeful adherence and perplexed commitment, to the power of words, marking the historical advent of our *poetical modernity*, from which the expressionist movement, that rediscovered Hölderlin, was one of the paths.<sup>6</sup>

As is well known, the intertwining between language, from an ontological viewpoint, and poetry in general constitutes an important aspect of Heidegger's approach to art in the second period of his philosophical career and Nunes' analysis also helps to understand in what way poetry can be the very ground of every artistic expression and at the same time preserve its identity as a separate branch in the pantheon of the arts.

To consider that, due to its origin, every art is poetic does not mean that music, painting and sculpture be subordinated to poetry or that they be reduced to the poetry in the system of the arts. The eminent place that poetry *stricto sensu* occupies in the whole of forms to the reach of the *poiesis* in the language and starting from the language, as a threshold of every artistic experience, in the art of the words itself, which is determined by the cultural institutions of the genres and by the literary conventions [...].<sup>7</sup>

As Nunes himself said, his intellectual career was always being determined by an oscillation between literature and philosophy, more explicitly between “Clarice Lispector and [...] Heidegger”<sup>8</sup>. That is why in this brief presentation of Nunes' thought, after drawing the attention to some aspects of his most important book on Heidegger, it is advisable to focus on his approach to Clarice Lispector's novels, which from many viewpoints can be seen as a very well succeeded application of some Heideggerian ontological categories to literary works.

### Ontological Density in “Dona Clarice's” Novels

The mutual relationship of these two major works by Benedito Nunes, *Passage to the Poetic* and *The Drama of the Language*, is not only a matter of the above alluded “oscillation” of his between Heidegger and Clarice Lispector, but of having finished their respective books in the same spatial and temporal situation: It draws the attention to the fact that the end of the last chapter of both books mentions “Austin” as the

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 198.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 260.

<sup>8</sup> Chaves and Benchimol, “Entrevista com Benedito Nunes,” 14.



location and the beginning of the decade of 1980 as the moment in which they were finished.<sup>9</sup> Another sign of the close relationship between both books is that a very emphatic quotation by Clarice Lispector serves as the epigraph of a central chapter (“The problem and the Question of the Being”) of the work on Heidegger: “But the most important word of the language has only one letter: é [is]. É [Is].”<sup>10</sup>

It is interesting to know how Nunes got acquainted with Lispector: it was not primarily through the reading of her novels, but by hearing about a certain “Dona Clarice” – a writer coming from South Brazil – who lived some months in Nunes’ hometown Belém and had become friend of Francisco Paulo Mendes (the same older friend who convinced Nunes not to do literature but philosophy and literary criticism), who maintained a lively cultural circle at the “Café Central”. Victor Sales Pinheiro reports the situation vivaciously:

The conversations of the group, into which Benedito Nunes integrated, had a free rhythm, moving from literature to other spheres of thought, having started from articulations of Professor Mendes, the heart of the discussion, who attracted, due to his intellectual range, a diverse amount of people. One of Professor Mendes’ interlocutors was to be Clarice Lispector, who lived in Belém in 1944, at the same Hotel Central, where the famous café was located. But at that time the fourteen years old Benedito Nunes did not frequent Professor Mendes’ circle and just heard about “Dona Clarice”, of whom he would become a friend and one of the major interpreters, the first to dedicate to her a book entirely about her work and to concede to it philosophical dignity.<sup>11</sup>

For those who do not know who Clarice Lispector (1920–1977) was: she is an internationally acclaimed Brazilian writer, author of very innovative novels and short stories, having also had activities as a journalist. She was born to a Jewish family in Podolia, Western Ukraine, and brought to Brazil as a baby, when her family fled from their native land following the difficulties faced by them after World War I. She began publishing her first journalistic work and short stories at age 23, while in law school in Rio, and achieved sudden fame with the publication of her first novel, *Perto do Coração Selvagem* [*Near to the Wild Heart*], conceived as an interior monologue in a style and language considered revolutionary at the time. Having lived abroad (U.S. and Europe) between 1944 and 1959, she produced her most famous works, including *Laços de Família* [*Family Ties*], *A Maça no Escuro* [*The Apple in the Dark*] and *A Paixão Segundo G. H.* [*The Passion According to G. H.*], among others. She died

<sup>9</sup> “O jogo da identidade” (*The Game of Identity*) partially elaborated in (1981): 160. *Passagem para o poético* supposedly also finished in Austin (1980): 294.

<sup>10</sup> Nunes, *Passagem para o Poético*, 34 (It is a quotation from Lispector’s *Água Viva*).

<sup>11</sup> Victor Sales Pinheiro, “A formação de Benedito Nunes,” in: *O pensamento poético: a obra de Benedito Nunes* ed. by Victor Sales Pinheiro and Luiz Costa Lima (São Paulo, Azougue, 2011), <https://www.dialetrico.com.br/2018/10/11/a-formacao-de-benedito-nunes/>, acc. on May 24, 2021.

prematurely in 1977, after more than ten years poor health, the consequences of an accident she suffered in 1966.

Differently from the process of writing his work on Heidegger, which lasted more than a decade and was published only when Nunes decided it was ready, the book about Lispector had successive publications with slightly different titles, re-worked texts and some additional material: in 1966, when *O mundo de Clarice Lispector* [*The World of Clarice Lispector*] appeared, in 1973, with the publication of *Leitura de Clarice Lispector* [*A Reading of Clarice Lispector*] and in 1989, when *O drama da linguagem. Uma leitura de Clarice Lispector* [*The Drama of the Language. A reading of Clarice Lispector*] presented the definitive form of Nunes' approach to the Lispector's novels.

I propose to focus on Nunes's approaches about the topic of language in two novels by Lispector: *The Apple in the Dark*<sup>12</sup> and *The Passion According to G. H.*<sup>13</sup> The former tells the story of Martim, who was convinced that he had murdered his wife, not knowing that she had escaped death. Fleeing the police, he wanders through a forest until he comes across an outlying farm run by Vitoria and her cousin Ermelinda, for whom he works until the day the police arrive to arrest him. The interest of this novel with a quite simple plot is the deep reflection on language that happens particularly during the interior monologue of Martim, in which guilt, longing, hope and faith are mixed up in the confused mind of the protagonist. According to Nunes:

Thus the itinerary of the character is also a path throughout words – but in a circular pilgrimage that comes back to the starting point: to the common language, made of fixed phrases and verbal clichés. [...] The space of communication is no other than the *common place*. [...] The character is, therefore, submitted, from the beginning to the end of his itinerary, to the ordeal and provocation of language. By means of the silence, to which he retreats, he escapes from the enticing force of the saying, from the exorbitance of the symbol over reality, but loses his individuality in a life that is sensitive and animal-like [...]. Words are what form and deform him, veiling and revealing him, making him a person and expropriating his identity.<sup>14</sup>

In an explicit reference to Heidegger's ontology, Nunes speaks of a “fallen language”,<sup>15</sup> when he comments on the complex behavior of Martim in relation to verbal expression, understood as potentially “inauthentic” and his incapability of reaching the mastery of written language in the hope of thus reaching what could become an

<sup>12</sup> Clarice Lispector, *The Apple in the Dark*, trans. by Gregory Rabassa (Texas: University of Texas Press, 1986).

<sup>13</sup> Clarice Lispector, *The Passion According to G. H.*, trans. by Ronald W. Sousa (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

<sup>14</sup> Benedito Nunes, *O drama da linguagem. Uma leitura de Clarice Lispector* (São Paulo, Editora Ática, 1989): 52–53.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 110, note 18.



authentic existence. This is made explicit when Nunes states:

But our vision of Clarice's figures would be incomplete if we let aside the impulse to expressive saying, which is the link between the desire of being and the question of the *I*, previously approached under the aspect of the authentic existence. If the *I* of such figures, threatened with reification, is an imaginary construction, a center or a set of poetic centers, this is due to the formative function of language, thematized in *The Apple in the Dark* [...], related to the identity of Martim – by us designated as rhetoric or verbal – in two plans: the *written language* and the *stereotyped or objectified significations*.<sup>16</sup>

As for the other novel to be briefly taken into account here, *The Passion According to G.H.*, it is remarkable how Lispector, making use of a single character, is able to transform a quite banal situation into a stage for deep philosophical investigations. This first Lispector's first-person narration tells the story of a well-to-do sculptress from Rio, designated simply as G. H., that begins when she enters her maid's room and sees a cockroach crawling out of the wardrobe; panicking, she slams the door, crushing the insect, and watches it die. This fact triggers in the woman a process of existential and mystic crisis that leads her to chew the dead animal while she reflects about life, god, love and other matters indispensable to human experience. Among other relevant aspects of G. H.'s reflection along the novel, Nunes draws the attention to her viewpoint on the quality of art depending on its non-expressive element rather than on something related to what could be expressive and be understood as its beauty. Nunes points out that, astonishingly, the primarily anti-aesthetic act of chewing a dead cockroach allows for a deep consideration on the relationship of art and language:

A will that goes in an opposite sense, diminishing and reducing, shall protect art, "because art is good when it has touched the inexpressive; the worst art is the expressive one, the one that transgresses the piece of iron and the piece of glass, and the simile and the cry" [...]. Instead of beauty, the irradiation of the word, G.H. seeks the inexpressive through the ascetic divestment of particular feelings, an equivalent to an anti-aesthetic depuration of art itself. [...] We can, thus, distinguish, in *The Passion According to G. H.*, an agenda of the discourse about the topic of art and language – an agenda crosscutting to the para-theological one, including the meditating practice about God and existence, which we approached previously.<sup>17</sup>

I hope it has become clear for the reader that Nunes' approach to the ontological features of language both in Heidegger and in Lispector's novels is not a topic

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 109–110.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 72.

capable of being considered more fully in a short article like this. However, its author is going to be satisfied if it has accomplished the task of pointing out the relevance of Benedito Nunes in the scene of Brazilian contemporary aesthetics and awakened in the reader the desire to know more about him.

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