A Measure of Dignity?

Age & the Abject Body in Clarice Lispector's Short Fiction

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Abstract: *This essay examines Clarice Lispector's experimentation with focalization, through stream of consciousness, with characterisation and with modal devices – ranging from the naturalistic to the incongruous and uncanny – to explore alternative representations of aging and old age; notably, adverse ones, which foreground both risk, vulnerability, and empowerment. It does so by analysing fictional representations of the unsettling experiences of ageing in short-stories from her 1974 collection, Onde estivestes de noite (Where Were You at Night), namely "A Procura de uma dignidade" (The Search for a Dignity) and "A partida do trem" (The Train's Departure). Drawing on Julia Kristeva's delineation of abjection in Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection, I argue that in these works the Brazilian author engages with the binomial association between old age and the abject body – playing on the received notion of abject as "a person, or their behaviour, completely without pride or dignity" (OED) – to redress the dichotomy between dignity and abjection and test their semiotic limits in positing an embodied sublime. Lispector's treatment of these questions will be explored partly with reference to correlative modernist experiments in ageing by W.B. Yeats – notably, in the "Crazy Jane" poems – and Virginia Woolf.*

Keywords: *Clarice Lispector; Women; Aging/Old Age; Abject Body; Embodied Sublime*

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Critically acclaimed Brazilian writer Clarice Lispector (1920–1977) is known for articulating a woman's experience in her fiction. This essay examines her depiction of aged women and the representation of aging and old age in two short-stories from the collection *Onde estivestes de noite* [Where were you last night], published in 1974, three years before her early death from ovarian cancer. Lispector's biographer, Benjamin Moser, claims that the author refers to this short-story collection as being "light" and "direct", thereby differing from the weightier tone and hermetic style characteristic of her fiction (2009: 357). He also underscores the autobiographical overlap with female characters in some of the stories, namely the woman writer in the story that entitles the collection, and the middle-aged woman featuring in one of the stories who would become the author's avatar in a subsequent fictional work (Moser 2009: 76). Therefore, these short-stories can be seen as case studies of the writer's stylistic experimentation in her late short-fiction, arguably combining semi-autobiographical self-inquiry with imaginative projection, and ranging from a realistic to an incongruous register, occasionally bordering on the uncanny and on parody.

My analysis will center on the two short-stories that open the collection, "A procura de uma dignidade" [The Search for a Dignity] and "A partida do trem" [The Train's Departure], which the author identified as the most accomplished of the collection (Moser 2009: 342). It focuses on Lispector's use of narrative devices such as characterization and focalization to portray the unsettling effects of diminished mental and bodily capacities in old age and to convey the female protagonists' perplexity and dismay over the process of aging. The women's self-perceptions and their perception of others, notably their feelings of self-doubt, abasement and deprecation, perceived uselessness and marginalization is conveyed through stream-of-consciousness narration and free indirect discourse. In doing so, I argue, she aims to convey a multifaceted representation of aging and old age as seen from the perspective of the

protagonists, through internal focalization, and that of other characters and narrators.

Additionally, in these stories Lispector troubles the conventional association between old age and the abject body, questions the dichotomy between dignity and abjection, and ultimately proposes their synthesis in an embodied sublime. In arguing this, I draw on Julia Kristeva's delineation of abjection in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982). My critical engagement with Kristeva is akin to that of Jane Duran who draws on this critic's conceptualization in her analysis of Virginia Woolf's fiction, claiming that "one of the most appropriate theoretical stances for reading Woolf is Kristeva's notion of abjection", notably with regard to "the dissociative states that Woolf is so gifted at depicting" (2007: 82). In similarly fashion, the liminal states of being and consciousness experienced by the characters in the aforesaid short-stories by Lispector can also be productively examined in the light of Kristeva's understanding of abjection as the feeling of horror or disgust brought on by the perception of self-dissonance, underscoring its relation to processes of evolving identity fashioning and perception over time, with which Lispector, like Woolf, is concerned in her fiction.

"The Search for a Dignity": Which Dignity in Old Age?

Evoking the received notion of abject as "a person, or their behavior, completely without pride or dignity" (OED) in its title "The Search for a Dignity" and theme, the opening short-story of the collection addresses the association between abjection and old age. The plot centers on the misadventures experienced by the protagonist – Mrs. Jorge B. Xavier, an elderly woman of high social standing – during the course of a day, which lead up to her realization of the lack of dignity brought upon her by her old age. According to Moser – for whom the fact that the protagonist "doesn't even have her own name" and is referred to by that of her husband, attests to her social insignificance –

the story's title also signals the woman's attempt to find a new life for herself beyond her role as wife and mother (2009: 341). Through free in-

direct speech, which conveys Mrs. Jorge B. Xavier's stream of consciousness, the reader finds that she

> made an effort not to miss anything *cultural* because that was how she kept herself young inside, since even on the outside nobody imagined that she was almost 70, everyone guessed she was around 57. (Moser 2009: 341)[2]

However, on her way to attend a conference near the Maracanã Stadium she finds herself "lost in the internal and obscure meanders of the Maracanã" (Lispector 1990: 8).[3] The narrator's choice of adjectives to describe the corridors of the famous stadium in Rio de Janeiro suggests that her ordeal has a psychological quality, and the choice of the term meanders points to her bewildered state of mind, which is equated to being lost in a labyrinth. Hence, the expected (and initially suggested) naturalistic register suited to a realistic portrayal of a well-to-do aged woman's routine of attendance of cultural events to socialize and try and delay mental aging, is subverted by an incongruous register which betrays the deterioration of her mental condition, as the narration closely follows the stream of consciousness of her confused thoughts.

Mrs. Xavier's perception of the deteriorating effects of aging encompasses her physical condition. Hence, though she thinks herself younger-looking than her age, as the excerpt above shows, when she loses her way in the Maracanã, she finds herself "shuffling her heavy feet of old woman" (Lispector 1990: 8). Her ordeal gains a symbolic *pathos* when, in a stream of consciousness free indirect speech mode, the narrator claims "her physical health now already destroyed, for she shuffled the feet of many years of walking through the labyrinth. Her *via*

2 Translation of excerpt from *Onde estivestes de noite* quoted in Benjamin Moser's biography, *Why this world: a biography of Clarice Lispector*. The emphasis in this passage is in the original text and, by highlighting the term "cultural", seeks to convey the stress ascribed to it in the character's mental reflections so as to underline the importance she ostensibly assigns to that facet of existence.

3 My translation of excerpt from *Onde estivestes de noite*. Unless otherwise stated, henceforth all translations from the short-story collection are mine, based on the Portuguese edition, entitled *Onde estiveste de noite: contos* (1990).

crucis." (Lispector 1990: 9–10). The latter expression draws an allegorical parallel with the passion of Christ, heretically comparing with it the aged woman's physical and emotional suffering. As a metaphor for the hardships experienced over the course of a long life it prolongs the process of aging, ascribing it a metaphysical scope which is reinforced by the allusion to the labyrinth, another metaphor for a lifespan's perplexing progression in non-Christian classical culture. The dissociation felt between her idealized self-perception and her realization of her actual physical, mental and emotional deterioration leads into a growing self-estrangement which is analogous to the sense of being "radically separate" which, according to Kristeva, "harries" the subject following a "massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness" (1982: 2).

The eruption of the uncanny in Mrs. Xavier's life is described as "the black magic of the corridors of Maracanã" (Lispector 1990:12). She eventually escapes them, though not without being taken for "mad", "not well in the head" (Lispector 1990: 9), by a stranger she meets there, who eventually guides her out of the stadium. To this humiliation, a set of others follow, such as forgetting the address of the lecture hall when she boards a taxi (Lispector 1990: 10). Even when she accidentally finds the lecture hall, she feels like an outsider and cannot concentrate on the lecture, concluding that "she didn't much care for culture" (Lispector 1990: 11). These mishaps and her feelings and reactions can result from her confused state, to an extent, but can also be seen as effects of her old age condition, displaying signs of senility such as forgetfulness, lack of concentration, especially regarding more abstract activities, and of patience for social gatherings.

Her self-abasement is complete when, already at home, she gets on her knees to look for a misplaced financial bond her husband had given her, which leads the narrator to make the following remark: "Mrs. Xavier was tired of being a human being. She was being a bitch on all fours. Without any nobility, with the last haughtiness lost" (Lispector 1990: 13), in a scene that ends with the old lady crying. This passage, which evokes the grotesque image of the dog-woman, displays a radical otherness akin to Kristeva's configuration of abjection as that which is "Not me", and which she characterizes as "loathsome" (1982: 2). The recognition of Mrs.

Xavier's lessened condition, therefore, takes on a self-deprecatory tone. Examining herself in the mirror, she describes her facial appearance as ridiculous: an inexpressive "mask of a 70-year-old woman" which "with light make-up, seemed to her that of a clown" (Lispector 1990: 14). In effect, her self-perception seems to concur with and corroborate Simone Beauvoir's claim that "Old age is life's parody" in *La vieillesse* [Old Age] (1970: 565).

However, despite this apparent emotional numbness and her advanced age, Mrs. Xavier is overcome with sexual desire upon seeing her music idol, Roberto Carlos, on a TV show – "*That*, now without any modesty, was the painful hunger of her entrails, a hunger to be possessed by the unattainable TV idol" (Lispector 1990: 14) – and its strength is such that it produces a powerful, ostensive effect of self-dissociation:

> Outwardly – she saw in the mirror – she was a dried thing like a *dried fig*. But inwardly she was not dry. On the contrary. Inwardly, she seemed a *damp gum*, soft like a toothless gum. […] And all out of season, an out of season fruit? Why hadn't other old women warned her that it could happen until the end? She'd seen lusty glances in old men. But not in old women. Out of season. And she *alive* as if she were somebody, she who was nobody. Mrs Jorge B. Xavier was nobody.' (Lispector 1990: 15, my emphasis)

The vivid imagery in this passage, with its dichotomy of dryness and moistness to signify lack and abundance of desire, eloquently shows the extent to which giving into the body, to bodily desires and sensations can be enlivening, liberating and empowering in old age, countering the misogynous myth of the frigid elderly woman. It recalls the "transgressive female desire" conveyed in W.B. Yeats's "Crazy Jane" poems and in the sequence "A Woman Young and Old", which, as noted by Heather Ingman, "run directly counter to the Victorian emphasis on mastering old age through self-discipline and self-control" (2018: 41, 38). This fully embodied version of Mrs Xavier, liberated from the taboos of a false morality, is a stark contrast to the self-effacement that she is made to acknowledge at the end of this excerpt, through stream of consciousness, and an

ostensibly more effective, rewarding response to the growing limitations of old age.

The code of conduct of the Victorians remained to a great extent in Christian societies up to the twentieth century, and had also been that of the prude and conventional Mrs. Xavier, who was fairly unfamiliar with the instinctual and regarded all things to do with the body as abject and potentially dangerous. But the ironic lusting she experiences in her old age has her infatuated with a popular romantic crooner, for whom she feels uncontrollable lasciviousness, even while perceiving it as a damnation:

> And because of Roberto Carlos she was enmeshed in the darkness of matter where she was profoundly anonymous. Standing in the bathroom, she was as anonymous as a chicken. [...] And now she was enmeshed in that deep and mortal well, in the revolution of the body. Body whose depth was unfathomable and the malignant darkness of her live instincts like lizards and mice. [...] Then she wanted to have beautiful and romantic feelings in relation to the delicacy of Roberto Carlos's face. But she couldn't: his delicacy only took her to the dark corridor of sensuality. And the damnation was lasciviousness. It was lowly hunger: she wanted to eat Roberto Carlos's mouth. She wasn't romantic, she was lewd with regard to love. There in the bathroom, in front of the washbasin mirror.
>
> With her age indelibly soiled. Without even one sublime thought to guide her and render her existence noble. (Lispector 1990: 15)

The reference to the fact that her age is "indelibly soiled" shows that she regards her infatuation with Roberto Carlos as abject, which is underscored through the epithet's association with lack of cleanliness. However, this soiling affects her morality, as the reference to the "revolution of the body" suggests, causing a profound moral crisis which is analogous to that described by Kristeva when she argues that abjection "disturbs identity, system, order" (1982: 4). This account attests to a state of being which, through the lens of her Christian morality, is perceived as a fall from grace into the hellish domain of the instinctual and described through a series of images of disgust reinforced by grotesque imagery,

namely through association between the Body and repellant animals, such as lizards and mice.

Furthermore, as the claim of absence of "even one sublime thought" suggests, succumbing to carnal desire leads her to question the received concept of old age as a gradual refinement of emotions and, given its proximity to eternity, the advent of a state of blessedness, enlightenment and exultation often referred to as the spiritual sublime. Conversely, rather than these intimations of the soul's salvation after death, according to Christian belief, Mrs Xavier experiences a soiling of her emotions and puzzlement, dismay and desolation, which she associates with the soul's fall and damnation:

> There she was, trapped in an out-of-season desire just like the summer day in the middle of winter. Trapped in the tangle of the halls of the Maracanã. Trapped in the mortal secret of old women. She wasn't used to being almost seventy years old, she lacked practice and didn't have any experience at all. (Moser 2009: 341)

Her bewildered condition ultimately leads to the revelation of what she terms "the mortal secret of old women" – that of experiencing lust, with its youthful urgency to quench the pressing call of nature, and realizing that it cannot be quenched due to the taboo of old age. This extreme dissociative state is accompanied by disgust over the deterioration of her body due to the aging process – as conveyed in the passage, "Were her lightly rouged lips still kissable? Or was it by chance disgusting to kiss an old woman's mouth?" (Moser 2009: 341) – corresponding to Kristeva's understanding of abjection as the feeling of disgust brought on by the perception of self-dissonance.

Therefore, Mrs Xavier's epiphany can be regarded as the intimation of an embodied sublime, whose poignancy is presented by Lispector as a distinguishing feature of a woman's experience of aging and old age, precisely due to the onus of beauty and desirability placed on women. In ascribing an essentiality to the body, this category of sublime subverts the teleological Christian narrative of the soul's salvation. Hence, the life-shattering effect it has on the story's protagonist, leading to a startling denouement which is the story's climax:

It was then that Mrs Jorge B. Xavier bent brusquely over the sink as if she was going to vomit out her insides and interrupted her life with a shattering muteness: there has! to! be! an! exiiiiit! (Moser 2009: 341).

The narrator's choice of words suggests that she committed suicide, but (in)conclusive though her actions may be, nonetheless, the sense of despair they convey have a horrific, tragic quality comparable to that evinced by the notions of abjection and of the terrible sublime proposed and discussed by Kristeva in *Powers of Horror*.

"The Train's Departure": a Variation on the Theme of Aging

"A partida do trem" resumes the same theme as "A procura de uma dignidade", which it immediately follows in the collection, and also features as main character a woman in her seventies. Dona Maria Rita is described as a "dignified old lady" (Lispector 1990: 26), an epithet that echoes the theme of dignity central to the previous short story, with which it establishes several intertextual links, not least in her characterization, which resembles that of Mrs Jorge B. Xavier both physical and psychologically:

> The well-dressed old woman with jewelry. The fine shape of an ageless nose, and a mouth that would have once been full and sensitive, cropped out of the wrinkles that disguised her. But what does that matter. You get to a certain stage and what was does not matter. A new race begins. An old woman is unable to express herself. (Lispector 1990: 17)

As this excerpt shows, despite addressing similar issues to the previous story, regarding the trials and limitations of old age, they are complexified through narratorial devices such as dual focalization, whereby the narrative voice is shared by the two female protagonists, Dona Maria Rita and Ângela Pralini, a woman in her late thirties traveling on the same carriage of the train leaving from São Paulo's Central Station. Evoking a scene from the previous story, this passage underscores the ravages of time and aging upon Dona Maria Rita's face, ostensibly conveying the

musings of the younger woman seating across from her, while scrutinizing the old woman. However, this third-person narratorial voice shifts to a subjective focalization which follows the old woman's stream of consciousness through free indirect speech, conveying her perception of old age as a separate racial category that sets the aged apart from other individuals, not only isolating them but also rendering them unintelligible to others. This claim introduces the main theme of the story, which centers on the abyssal communication gap between old and younger aged people, illustrated by the misunderstandings experienced by the characters, especially the two female protagonists, for the duration of the train trip.

Dona Maria Rita's abased self-perception likely derives from her feelings of rejection over having to leave her daughter – who is cold towards her and makes no accommodation for her mother in her life – to live with her son in the countryside. Distraught, she is startled by Ângela's offer, when the train starts, to swap seats with her so she can face forward and, surprised by the younger woman's act of kindness towards her, Dona Maria Rita fails to express herself clearly and blunders an attempt to thank her. Puzzled by the old woman's odd reaction, Ângela has trouble understanding her and deciphering the meaning of her facial expressions, as her face is so heavily wrinkled that it is transformed into an expressionless rictus – "While she laughed, the wrinkles had gained some meaning, thought Ângela. Now they were again incomprehensible, overlaid in a face again untraceable" (Lispector 1990: 18). In turn, from Dona Maria Rita's perspective, she can only communicate effectively if she assumes a stereotypical old person's tone and appearance that render her intelligible to her interlocutor:

> She seemed to think and think, and find with tenderness a fully-fledged thought to which she could barely fit her feeling. With the care and wisdom of an elder, as if she had to take on that air to speak like an old woman, she said: Youth. Kind youth. (Lispector 1990: 21)

Once she does so, she is able to express herself and the two women warm to each other. Hence, this episode addresses ageist preconceptions and prejudices on the part of the younger aged about and towards the old aged, which are responsible for the so-called generation gap. The extent

to which old age misconceptions affect communication between people of different ages is apparent in the misunderstandings that mark the women's exchanges, initially preventing them from communicating and bonding.

Overall, "A partida do trem" offers a fairly realistic social comment on the limitations of aging and old age as perceived by women at different stages in life. It does so by using consecutive focalization to alternate the narratorial perspective between the two women and by interweaving each woman's stream of consciousness to follow particular chains of thought that reveal their contrasting views and concerns, seamlessly shifting between third person and first person free indirect speech. The story's experimental quality in terms of narrative technique is best exemplified by the intertextual allusion to the protagonist of "A procura de uma dignidade" and meta-textual allusion to the author of both stories in the following passage:

> The old woman was as anonymous as a hen, as a certain *Clarice* had said on the subject of a shameless old woman who was in love with Roberto Carlos. *That Clarice* made people uncomfortable. She made the old woman shout: there! has! to! be! an! exiiiiit! And there was. For example, that old woman's exit was the husband who would be back the next day, it was the people she knew, it was her maid, it was an intense and fruitful prayer when faced with despair. Angela said to herself as if biting herself in rage: there has to be an exit. For me as for Maria Rita. (Moser 2009: 342, my emphasis)

By alluding directly to the plot of the previous story, namely its abrupt ending, and questioning the old woman's suicide, suggested by the expression "interrupted her life", Ângela proposes alternative endings as plausible exit doors not only out of Mrs Jorge B. Xavier's desperation, but also of Dona Maria Rita's and her own existential dilemmas. This story's denouement, in turn, thwarts the expectations set at the beginning in that neither of the two women are as alone as it would seem (nor is Mrs Jorge B. Xavier in Ângela's rewrite), since Dona Maria Rita is travelling to be with her son and Ângela is returning to the farm of the loving uncle and aunt, and leaving an unfulfilling amorous relationship she re-

views during the course of the trip. The life-changing travels of the two protagonists of this story is a characteristic plot device of the so-called *Reifungsroman*, a fictional genre that focuses mostly on the female experiences of aging which, as noted by Barbara Frey Waxman,

> defy the outmoded social expectation of passive senescence by taking charge of their lives, making changes, and traveling – inward, backward, forward into fuller, more intense lives and richer, philosophical deaths. (1990: 183)

However, the characters' ability to empower themselves and change their destinies is ostensibly sabotaged by the author, as suggested by the opening remarks of the passage quoted above: "The old woman was as anonymous as a hen, as a certain *Clarice* had said on the subject of a shameless old woman who was in love with Roberto Carlos. *That Clarice* made people uncomfortable." (Moser 2009: 342, my emphasis) This statement revisits the grotesque imagery of the previous story by associating the old woman with a chicken, a metaphor used in this collection (and in other instances of Lispector's fiction) as a symbol of the anonymity and lack of self-worth experienced by women – in this instance due to old age. Ângela, the character who assumes the narratorial voice in this passage, conveys precisely as much, adding:

> The old woman was nothing. She looked at the air as you look at God. She was made of God. That is: all or nothing. The old woman, thought Ângela, was vulnerable. Vulnerable to love, love for her son. (Lispector 1990: 32)

And indeed, the old woman's vulnerable condition leads her to feel love for and loved by her son, as the following free indirect rendering of her musings shows, "The old woman thought: her son was so kind, so warm hearted, so tender!" (Lispector 1990: 30). Not only is she able to express and elicit tender feelings as a mother, but she also displays warm feelings towards Ângela in appreciation for her display of concern. Hence, despite being a diminishing feature, the physical and emotional vulnerability of the aged can also elicit sympathy and empathy towards oneself and from others, be it from loving relatives, like the son Dona Maria Rita

is travelling to live with, be it from strangers met on a train, like Ângela. This realization is the younger woman's epiphany:

> And the result was that she had to disguise the tears that came to her eyes. [...] Ângela was loving the old woman who was nothing, the mother she lacked. Sweet, naïve and suffering mother. Her mother who had died when she turned nine years old. Even ill but with life she had some worth. Even paralyzed. (Lispector 1990: 32)

In effect, her empathy with the old woman gains a further layer in ostensibly being motivated not just by the sympathetic treatment of elders encouraged by social norm, but also by psychological factors, namely Ângela's association of the old woman with her mother. The subsequent emotional transfer and evocation of her loss due to her mother's fatal illness causes her to project her strong emotional response onto Dona Maria Rita. However, the reference to Ângela's mother being paralytic also establishes a bond of identity between this character and the author, since the biographical details reported in this passage are those pertaining to Lispector's life and mother. This projective characterization, alongside the imbrication of narratorial voices in this story and the imagery and thematic linking of the two stories, reinforce the emotional communion between the characters and constitute formal strategies to underscore the sense of inquiry into shared experiments in aging among women, including the author. The communal identification between these characters, particularly Ângela, and the author is overtly established through the ironic reference to *Clarice*, which entangles the author in her own fictional web and, by extension, enmeshed in the same bewildering experience of living and aging as her female characters, namely Ângela who, as noted earlier, became the author's avatar in another fictional work, *Um sopro de vida* [*A Breath of Life*], which was Lispector's last work of fiction, published posthumously.

As I hope to have shown, in "A procura de uma dignidade" [The Search for a Dignity] and "A partida do trem" [The Train's Departure] Lispector fictionally addresses the dichotomy between dignity and abjection underpinning conventional representations of aging, challenging and subverting it by equating the vulnerability of old age with self-empower-

ment, compassion and empathy. This analysis of the stories has underscored the role of expressive characterization in representing unsettling experiences associated with aging and old age. It also examined the way in which inner and outwardly oriented focalization is used as a means of conveying both experienced and imagined sensations and emotions from different standpoints. The multi-perspective effect produced, I argue, enhances the readers' appreciation of the complexity of the process of aging and of its implications and effects, and facilitates their empathetic identification with the aged protagonists. Hence, through these devices, Lispector dramatizes and problematizes established prejudices about old age, offering a critique of ageism from a distinctly feminine standpoint, while exploring alternative representations of old age by deploying the *reifungsroman* mode in her short-fiction.

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