

**The Language of Abjection: Impurity and Identity in  
Clarice Lispector's *A hora da estrela***

**Aarti Madan  
University of Pittsburgh  
Department of Hispanic Languages and Literatures**

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In writing this story, I shall yield to emotion and I know perfectly well that every day is one more day stolen from death. In no sense an intellectual, I write with my body. And what I write is like a dank haze. The words are sounds transfused with shadows that intersect unevenly, stalactites, woven lace, transposed organ music. I can scarcely invoke the words to describe this pattern vibrant and rich, morbid and obscure, its counterpoint the deep bass of sorrow. *Allegro con brio*. I shall attempt to extract gold from charcoal.

– CLARICE LISPECTOR

There looms, within language and analyses of language, a profound desire to be rational, to be concise, to understand and to be understood. This alleged linguistic purity—translated as cleanliness and clarity—stems in modern language from the limpidness evident in Christian tradition. It is, however, within the sphere of the impure that the present text proposes an inquiry. Language in modernity is depicted only in specialized realms—that is, via the discourse of medical, literary, religious, and artistic terminology; it is thus pure and contaminated, susceptible even to cultural contamination removed from academia. Furthermore, because of its inherent relationship to the body, language can divert from its Archaic ancestry through division and purification, or, contrarily, it can expound on this ancestry and subsequently produce resonations of the sacred, of the ritual, and of the impure. Hence, instead of simple *representation*, language acquires *action* through rhythm, pulsation, intensity—through metaphor.

It is in this vein that the works of Giambattista Vico, Clarice Lispector, and Julia Kristeva provide significant fodder for a reading of the embodiment and consequent impurification of language. While generations, gender, and geography certainly separate the three—Vico, the seventeenth-century Italian, Lispector, the early twentieth-century Brazilian, and Kristeva, the late twentieth-century Bulgarian (trained in Paris)—they harmoniously unite in what could be called a progression of non-linear relationships from the Archaic modern to a contemporary reemer-

gence of Archaic elements. Via a Vichean reading accentuated by a Kristevan analysis of the abject, this paper will center on the impurification of language in Lispector's *A hora da estrela*, published posthumously in 1977 as her final novel. Writing emerges as a constant, though at times anachronistic, process in these works as Vico's Poetic Logic dialogues with Lispector's renewal of the literary, which, in accordance with the pattern, dialogues with Kristeva's notion of the abject. The dialogues result in a departure from the either/or dichotomy common to early modernity and a subsequent return to the both/and construct evident in primitivism, in which the writers/texts reveal a unification of form and content, and by extension, of action and representation, leading readers to a radically tropological comprehension of violence.

### **Vico's Poetic Logic**

In his essay "The Tropics of History: The Deep Structure of *New Science*," Hayden White posits, "What is the nature of the creative power of language?" (203). He contends that the answer stems not from Vico's concepts of poetic imagination but instead from his theory of *metaphor*, which is developed in the context of and as the key to his discussion of poetic logic.

For Vico, poetic logic refers to the manner in which forms, as comprehended by primitive man, are signified. Because barbarians lacked the ability to analyze and apprehend abstraction, they had to resort to their fantasy to understand the world. Vico suggests that "poetic wisdom must have begun with a metaphysics which, unlike the *rational* and *abstract* metaphysics of today's scholars, sprang from the senses and imagination of the first people" (144, emphasis added). Therefore, Vico asserts that the first men's knowledge of things was not "rational and abstract," but rather felt and imagined; in this vein, he seems to denounce the metaphysics—the focus on the rational and the abstract—of his contemporaries. He states:

The countless abstract expressions which permeate our languages today have divorced our civilized thought from the senses, even among the common people.

The art of writing has greatly refined the nature of our thought; and the use of numbers has intellectualized it, so to speak, even among the masses, who know how to count and reckon. [...] We are likewise incapable of entering into the vast imaginative powers of the earliest people. Their minds were in no way abstract, refined, or intellectualized; rather, they were completely sunk in their senses, numbed by their passions, and buried in their bodies. [...] [W]e can barely understand, and by no means imagine, the thinking of the early people who founded pagan antiquity. (147)

Denouncing both his precursors Aristotle and Plato as well as his contemporaries Patrizi, Caesar, and Castelvetro, he claims that, “unlike them, we have discovered that poetry was born sublime precisely because it lacked rationality” (149).

Poetry, then, is a primitive necessity, a result of curiosity that “sprang naturally from their ignorance of causes” (144). Consequently, “the earliest people of the pagan nations” could only create by resorting to their imagination, which was “grossly physical,” indicating an embodiment of language that the philosopher suggests “made their creation wonderfully sublime” (145). Vico describes the giants’ reaction to the first “frightening thunderclaps and lightening bolts,” recounting that in their ignorance, “[the giants] imagined the heavens as a great living body, and in this manifestation, they called the sky Jupiter” (146). Then, he proceeds with the definition that “Jupiter was born naturally in poetry as *divine archetype* or *imaginative universal*” in which the concept of “imaginative universal” appears to be the predecessor of the metaphor: Jupiter *is* sky; Achilles *is* bravery—form and content are indistinguishable. Indeed, Vico declares that in Greek, “poet” means “creator,” and in order to create, the first men perceived all of nature “as a vast living body that feels passions and emotions” (145-46).

Vico opens the section with a distinction between poetic logic and metaphysics, which Samuel Beckett, in his seminal 1929 essay “Dante... Bruno. Vico.. Joyce,” explicates in near-verse: “Poetry is essentially the antithesis of Metaphysics: Metaphysics purge the mind of the senses and cultivate the disembodiment of the spiritual; Poetry is all passion and feeling and

animates the inanimate; Metaphysics are most perfect when most concerned with universals; Poetry, when most concerned with particulars” (10). As such, poetry, according to Vico, functions as the first operation of the human mind and the ultimate reason for the existence of thought; accordingly, poetry is the central condition for philosophy and civilization.

In his treatise on the origins of language, Vico suggests that in its first mute form, language was nothing more than gesture, but that with animism, the word came into existence as another necessity. That is, “[a]t first, pointing mutely, [the theological poets] interpreted [Jupiter, Cybele, and Neptune] as the substances of the sky, earth, and sea,” another exemplification of the *poetic archetypes* mentioned earlier (158). Consequently, because of their inability to conceive of abstract ideas, the first people personified physical bodies, even “bodies as vast as the sky, earth, and sea,” in order to comprehend and process the concepts. In tracing this evolution, however, Vico denies the dualism of poetry and language and suggests that poetry is the foundation of writing. He refers to the sacred language of hieroglyphics, suggesting that it too is the result of primitive necessity. Thus, Vico contends that this primitive correlation between the familiar attributes of human nature and the unfamiliar characteristics of the natural world results in the origins and meanings of the myths and fables common to present day.

It is, however, ineffective to read these myths as simple allegories. Beckett states:

Myth, according to Vico, is neither an allegorical expression of general philosophical axioms (Conti, Bacon), nor a derivative from particular peoples, as for instance to Hebrews or Egyptians, nor yet the work of isolated poets, but an historical statement of fact, of actual contemporary phenomena, actual in the sense that they were created out of necessity by primitive minds, and firmly believed. [...] If we consider the myth as being essentially allegorical, we are not obliged to accent the form in which it is cast as a statement of fact. But we know that the actual creators of these myths gave full credence to their face-value. Jove was no symbol: he was terribly real. (12).

Indeed, in his sermonic distinction between Vico’s concept of writing and direct expression,

Beckett refers to the inseparability between *form* and *content*. Included in his exemplification are medals of the Middle Ages, which, sans inscription, symbolized a testimony to honor and valor; in addition, he includes flags of present day. Thus, Beckett claims that because of the primitive peoples' inability to comprehend abstraction, they did not distinguish between the symbol and its referent. Myths, therefore, are equated with direct expression, and he contends that, "[i]t was precisely their *superficial metaphorical character* that made them intelligible to people incapable of receiving anything more abstract than the plain record of objectivity (12, emphasis added).

Accordingly, Vico's contention that every metaphor is a miniature myth leads us to his conclusion regarding language: all figures of speech may be reduced to four tropes: metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony. Within this tropological configuration of consciousness, the convergence of form and content provides the structure; the human body produces metaphor (*head* equals top or beginning, *back* signifies behind, *mouth* suggests opening, and so forth), author and work unite in metonymy (whole represents part), and roof and house become one in synecdoche (part represents the whole). Irony, Vico indicates, only became possible after the recognition of disparities between these figurative expressions of reality and the objects they were meant to literally characterize.

White suggests that while Vico's argument is in the same line as Aristotle, there exists a subtlety:

He makes of metaphor a kind of primal (generic) trope, so that synecdoche and metonymy are viewed as specific refinements of it, and irony is seen as its opposite. Thus, whereas metaphor constitutes the basis of every fable (or myth), the escape from metaphorical language and the transition into the use of a consciously figurative language (and thus into literal and denotative, or prose, discourse) are made possible by the emergence of an ironic sensibility. It is thus that the dialectic of figurative (tropological) speech itself becomes conceivable as the model by which the evolution of man from bestiality to humanity can be explained. (205)

## Lispector's Renewal of the Literary

Vico's return to the primitive is precisely the link to Lispector's renewal of the literary; his rationalist perspective on the evolutions of languages and men are inscribed—inadvertently or subconsciously—in the subtlest of corners in *A hora da estrela*. In her consummate final novella, Lispector employs the narrator Rodrigo S.M. to dictate the tale of young Macabéa, a downtrodden native of Brazil's barren Northeast, a region that, by means of its tortured landscape and harsh reality of droughts and severe economic ills, has lured the pens of various Brazilian writers. Lispector's orphaned protagonist, tubercular and illiterate, is a recent arrival to Rio de Janeiro; as such, her speech and dress betray her backwoods origins. Macabéa's future is determined by her lack of experience, by her immense anonymity, and by her utter unsightliness—she is a creature conditioned from birth to flounder in the survival of the fittest. Indeed, her existence is a paltry one. She is an abysmal typist destined to cower in the face of a bullying employer, an ugly virgin in cahoots with a philandering boyfriend, and a loyal fan of imperialist Coca-Cola. In accordance with her simple life, Macabéa exits the world simply, succumbing to the wheels of a yellow Mercedes in an ultimate feat of irony: she has just learned from the psychic Madame Carlota that she is soon to meet her love, a blonde German named Hans. Instead, a German car of the same color tramples her, leaving her moaning her last words to no one in particular: “As for the future” (84).

In the telling of this haunting tale, Lispector maintains fine threads that weave together the novella as she returns to the simplicity of primitive language, blending the borders between form and content, in which every word becomes literal instead of figurative—she returns to metaphor. Indeed, Macabéa's last words appear in the novel in three separate incidences, providing the parenthetical structure through which the text develops. First, the phrase appears as one

of the titles in the several that Clarice offers us, placed directly after the author's prominent signature and before "Singing the Blues" (9). The title is curious in Giovanni Pontiero's 1986 translation: it appears with a period before and after—.As for the Future. However, in the Portuguese original, the periods do not appear.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, they are significant insofar as pages later, Rodrigo informs us that the phrase is one of the secrets that the narrative contains explicitly, not a chance whim but rather a necessity:

A story that is patently open and explicit yet holds certain secrets—starting with one of the book's titles 'As For The Future', preceded and followed by a full stop. This is no caprice on my part—hopefully this need for confinement will ultimately become clear. (The ending is still so vague, yet were my poverty to permit, I should like it to be grandiose.) If, instead of a full stop, the title were followed by dotted lines, it would remain open to every kind of speculation on your part, however morbid or pitiless. (13)

In her essay "*The Hour of the Star: How Does One Desire Wealth or Poverty*," Hélène Cixous suggests that to begin with a period implies that there is neither beginning nor end—an indirect but nevertheless clear allusion to the Vichian cycles of man; present, past, and future coalesce in a text that is certainly inscribed in the present. Cixous contends that "between two final periods, one has perhaps a calling and a future that would be the 'result of a gradual vision,'" referring to Rodrigo's declaration that the story will emerge steadily from his vision (161). This interpretation, then, is rather convenient for the purposes of the present text. Though the Vichian cycles unfold elsewhere in the novella, in this instance I believe that the enclosure of the phrase between the periods in effect denies a future for both Macabéa and Rodrigo. Indeed, Rodrigo claims that he does not follow the title by dotted lines specifically because of the text's ending: the protagonist is dead, and the narrator stoically states, "Macabéa has murdered me" (85). Lispector thus uses punctuation to unite form and content in the denial of a future, enclos-

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<sup>1</sup> See Clarice Lispector, *A hora da estrela* (Rio de Janeiro: Francisco Alves, 1977).



ing the present within literal full stops.<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, the Vichian cycles function elsewhere in the text in order to suggest not necessarily the denial of a future but instead the acknowledgement of what Cixous refers to as “nonbeginning” (160). She states:

The text of *The Hour of the Star* does not begin. All along, Clarice, while almost theorizing it, speaks of nonbeginning. She says so from the first page, throughout incessant unfoldings. The dedication precedes the titles. The titles themselves are an ensemble of folds that do away with the title since there are only titles. The first page of the story tells us something that could reassure us [...] (160)

Cixous referent is the first line of the novel: “Everything in the world began with a yes” (11). It seems, then, that Lispector does not obey orders of temporality and spatiality—though she states that the world began with a yes to open the text, she ends the world, and the novel, with precisely the word “[y]es” (86). In this sense, she allows the figurative to morph into the literal, allowing the form and layout of her text to shed light upon its content: the cycles of mankind continue, and “before prehistory there was the history of the prehistory of prehistory and there was the never and there was the yes” (11). The novel *is* history.

That the text adheres to a specific form is seen nowhere better than in the aforementioned title page. The amalgamation of fragmented titles that produce one text is “a good example of a form carrying a strict inner determination,” as states Beckett in regard to Joyce’s *Work in Progress* (13). Indeed, the title is composed of fifteen titles and none of these titles is *the* title; Cixous declares, “[t]he title explodes with titles,” reminding one of the “bangs” that curiously appear in parentheses throughout the text, indicating onomatopoeically yet another moment gone awry in Macabéa’s life. Once again, we see unification of action and representation, of form and content. The explosion of titles occurs in the shape of an obtuse egg-timer—the shape

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<sup>2</sup> See Lesley Feracho, *Linking the Americas: Race, Hybrid Discourses, and the Reformulation of Feminine Identity* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2005), p.78 for different interpretations regarding Macabéa’s last words. Feracho undertakes a lengthy analysis of the entire title page, paying regard to Maria Cristina Vianna Figueiredo’s work in particular.

expands in its midsection instead of cinching through the waist. Each title is separated by the word “or,” allowing the reader the discretion of selecting a fitting title for his or her reading of the novel because, as Cixous suggests, “[e]ach title could function as a key to the text” (146).

It is, however, the signature of Clarice Lispector between the titles “The Right to Scream” and “.As for the Future.” that particularly draws the reader’s eye. Cixous states:

In a certain way, Clarice is the scream of the text. In the typography of this astonishing page, in place of “or,” we have Clarice’s signature. Under the signature, the printed signs continue. It is like a piece written in the tradition of Cordel, a kind of oral literature, with a special rhythm, that we find throughout the text consisting of a system of inversions and almost a kind of metrics. It reminds us of ancient ballads, of the origins of theater as well as of nursery rhymes. Clarice recreates a genre, a kind of literary space that disappeared long ago. (146)

This statement suggests that Lispector’s language is not written, that it is not to be read—that is, it is not solely to be read—but that it is meant to be *looked* at and *listened* to as an aesthetic experience that takes us back to the Archaic modern and to metaphor: Clarice *is* the scream. Through her signature, the author is superimposed in the titles of the creation, indicating that she is not only the creator of the novel but rather a part of it—she is renewing the literary. Indeed, in the same vein that the figures of Macabéa and Rodrigo often seem to fade into a single fuzzy portrait of Lispector herself, Marta Peixoto’s explanation of three interlocking “textual interactions” that structure *The Hour of the Star* suggests an explicit diagram to elucidate the authorial involvement: the first involves “the implicit connection between Lispector and her male narrator, Rodrigo S.M.”; the second deals with Rodrigo’s complex relationship with his “creation,” Macabéa; the last focuses on the interaction between the metafictional narrator Rodrigo and the “encoded reader,” or narratee, who effectively represents the Brazilian literate public (40). By extension of these textual interactions, the relationship between author and reader manifests itself into a three-fold subtextual process that hints at the non-linear, resulting in a cyclical and ancient pro-

gression that is reminiscent of Vico insofar as it gives form to his three ages of man.

In effect, Lispector delves into the depths of the text as her presence is a constant accessory to a novel that soars effortlessly between prose and poetry. In a style reminiscent of Brechtian drama, Lispector opens her novel to the reader and makes no effort to hide in the curtains, insisting that the reader be aware at all times that he or she is immersed in a work of fiction. Cixous contends that when we read the novella, “the music and the narrative have already started, at the same time that the story itself has not quite begun. However, the musicians, the drummers, are already fully engaged in activity” (153). Meanwhile, the protagonist is awaited, and this anticipation is part of the spectacle Lispector so effectively creates. The intention of this stylistic device is the return to the ritualistic, to the aspect of performance that undoes the distinction between inside and outside—it is a return to the primitive nature of language.

That said, Lispector’s renewal of the literary is nowhere near as evident as in her lauding of the Archaic, of the primitive, of the prehistory. She opens the novel questioning, “How does one start at the beginning, if things happen before they actually happen? If before the prehistory there already existed apocalyptic monsters?”, thus indicating both a desire to return to the primitive in addition to a speculative stance regarding the same (11). However, it is by extension of her descriptions of Macabéa that one is readily aware of her choice: Macabéa is “transformed into mere living matter in its primary state, [...], composed of fine organic matter, [...], pure and simple” (38). She is “undeniably a primitive creature” who has the “weirdest dreams with visions of immense prehistoric animals, as is she were living in some more remote age of this violent territory” (46, 60). It is through these vivid descriptions of pre-modernity that Lispector establishes her impurification of language, intending to turn away from what Vico refers to as the “rational” and “abstract” of his contemporaries and return to felt and imagined of primitive

language.

Furthermore, Lispector unites *action* and *representation* by means of an impurified language. In the article mentioned earlier, Hayden White suggests that, “whereas the modern poet is capable of distinguishing between figurative and literal language and of using the former self-consciously to gain specific kinds of poetic effects, primitive man is presumed to have been at first to speak only figuratively and think in allegories, and to have taken these figures and allegories as literal truths, or denotative representations, of the world external to himself” (207). Lispector, despite being a modern poet, opts to employ the language of primitive man in which there is a renewal of the literal: the language imitates that which it intends to communicate—it acts and represents in tandem. If the content is sleep, the form—that is, the words—go to sleep. If the action is abrupt, the form is abrupt, as witnessed in Rodrigo’s descriptions of both Macabéa and his relationship with her:

My story is almost trivial. The trick is to begin suddenly, like plunging into an icy sea and bearing its intense coldness with suicidal courage. I am about to begin in the middle by telling you that—  
—she was inept. Inept for living. She had no idea how to cope with life and she was only vaguely aware of her own inner emptiness. (24)

The above passage is a commonality of the language in *A hora da estrela*. Lispector startles the reader with the abrupt chilliness implied in the second sentence, and then with the plunge from the third to the fourth line, she imitates the plunge into the icy sea. Additionally, the narrator states that he is going “to begin in the middle,” thus the author cuts the sentence in the middle, yet again demonstrating a unification of action and representation, of form and content.

By extension of her intensely vivid language, Lispector inadvertently yet aptly applies Vico’s return to the ritualistic, to the archaic modern, though not to the pre-modern. Indeed, her poetry is the antithesis of what Vico suggests is “the *rational* and *abstract* metaphysics of to-

day's scholars" in that it employs "simplicity" and "action," thus maintaining both rituality and sophistication (Vico 144; Lispector 14-16). In a return to the sacred language of the first men, Lispector beckons the impurity and the incontrovertible clarity of the primitive man's inability to speak: painting, gesture, and hieroglyphics produce lucid significance in both their time and in her modernity. The author achieves a writing that brings life back to language, personified in descriptions of Macabéa that allow the reader to *feel* lack:

That was how it was: she was starving but not for food, it was a numb sort of pain that rose from her lower abdomen, making the nipples of her breast quiver and her empty arms starved of any embrace came out in goosepimples. She became overwrought and it was painful to live. At such moments, she would shake with nerves and her workmate Glória would rush to get her a glass of water with sugar. (44)

Why, one might ask, does Lispector desire a return to Vico's ritualistic dimensions, to the embodiment and impurification of language?

Clarice Lispector—wittingly or unwittingly—contracts the concepts of Vico's *New Science* as a means to change modernity's literature; she desires a renewal of the literary by means of evoking the life in language. Language is heterogeneity: form *and* content; action *and* representation; charm *and* wit—each are dichotomies that glide into and out of one another, producing a text in which tropism is pervasive. Via this heterogeneity and rituality, Lispector proposes a return to community in order to recover both the religious potential in modern discourse and the religiosity of primitive peoples. Furthermore, in her unknowing application of Vico's poetic wisdom, she achieves not only theory but rather a reality, allowing Vico's notion to be a possibility in contemporary life. While it is redundant to state that Lispector employs tropological language—all language is tropological—it is indeed through the tropism of *A hora da estrela* that she displays the fundamental truths of Vico, impurifying language to the extent that the text itself is a constant metaphor. Yet again, the creative power of language returns to metaphor as Lispec-

tor denies the limitations of monologic discourse.

## **Kristeva's Notion of the Abject**

Kristeva too is concerned with both the confines of monologic discourse as well as the politics of marginality: her approach is heterologic—she desires the rational and the abject at once. In her quest for a language that constantly confronts the impasse of itself, she moves us to think language against itself, perhaps her interest in *Lispector*. While most Kristevan readings of *Lispector* stem from branches of poststructuralist semiotics, of particular importance to this inquiry are both Kristeva's notion of the abject from her study *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* as well as its presence in *Lispector's* novella. Certainly, Kristeva presents a preoccupation with language on a theoretical level because horror and the abject do not inherently fit into specialized discourse; she contends, however, that the abject can be domesticated within the sphere of literature, declaring that nearly all “[g]reat modern literature unfolds over that terrain” (18). In particular, Kristeva privileges poetry due to its ability to contort grammar, meaning, and finally, metaphor. The question arises: why does the abject produce great literature?

According to Kristeva, the abject refers to the human reaction—be it horror, vomit, or perspiration—to a potential breakdown in meaning caused by the inability to distinguish between self and other; that is, the abject lies in the ambiguous space separating subject [ and ] object. She indicates that the most archaic form of abjection is food loathing, stating, “[w]hen the eyes see or the lips touch that skin on the surface of milk—harmless, thin as a sheet of cigarette paper, pitiful as a nail paring—I experience a gagging sensation, and still further down, spasms in the stomach, the belly; and all the organs shrivel up the body, provoke tears and bile, increase heartbeat, cause forehead and hands to perspire” (2-3). While food loathing is the most elementary form of abjection, other items can elicit the same reaction, particularly violent images in the language of the

abject, such as “corpse,” “a wound with blood and pus,” “refuse,” “body fluids,” “defilement,” and “shit” (2-3). Kristeva stresses the distinction between the form and content of abjection, emphasizing that whereas a “flat encephalograph” *signifies* death, a corpse *is* death: yet again, metaphor (3).

The author contends that within the abject lies ambiguity; it is not the unclean but rather what “disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules,” that causes abjection, such that she refers to Auschwitz, a Nazi crime that distorts all reality—clearly, childhood and science are not tantamount to the realization of death. Indeed, Kristeva proceeds to accentuate the violence inherent in the abject, suggesting that “abjection is elaborated through a failure to recognize its kin,” exemplifying her statement via a child “who has swallowed up his parents too soon” (5). Again, she stresses that his fear must be given content via the abject in order to allow discourse; that is, she refers to the word “fear” as a “fluid haze, an elusive clamminess,” suggesting that it “permeates all words of the language with nonexistence,” thus indicating that as a phobia, there only exists a pre-lingual confrontation with the abject, a moment that precedes the recognition of any actual object of fear. Accordingly, the abject must be disguised from desire because it is associated with both fear and *jouissance*: “It follows that *jouissance* alone causes the abject to exist as such. One does not know it, one does not desire it, one joys in it [*on en jouit*]. Violently and painfully. A passion” (9). Paradoxical though it may seem, Kristeva insists that we are repeatedly and consistently drawn to the abject, such that to experience the abject in literature produces a certain pleasure, albeit one that is quite distinct from the dynamics of desire. She associates this aesthetic experience of the abject, rather, with poetic catharsis, which is “an impure process that protects from the abject only by dint of being immersed in it” (29).

Therefore, the abject, according to Kristeva, is intimately intertwined with religion and

art, both of which she perceives as methods of purifying it: “The various means of *purifying* the abject—the various catharses—make up the history of religions, and end up with that catharsis par excellence called art, both on the far and near side of religion” (17). This art includes literature, which Kristeva proposes is the privileged space for both the abject and the sublime—“the abject is edged with the sublime. \It is not the same moment on the journey, but the same subject and speech bring them into being” (11).

Thus, Kristeva’s contention is that modern language has been traumatized by contamination and the abject due to Christian marginalization of the body and bodily fluids. Abjection persists as exclusion or taboo, specifically when coalesced with nutrition or sexuality, and the impure of the violent body threatens: blood, urine, tears, and feces are consequently shunned. Indeed, in her claim that “modernity has learned to repress, dodge, or fake” abjection, she confirms that purity in modernity is associated with reason, enlightenment, and discursive sophistication, whereas impurity stems from the body (26). As such, she extols those writers who incorporate the abject into their language in their defiance of the opposition between reason (pure, rational, and specialized discourse) and body (impure, abstract, and sexual discourse).

In *A hora da estrela*, Lispector portrays an image of abjection that inevitably resides in all related to Macabéa, a character whose entire existence is lived in the shadow of the abject—perhaps, as might suggest Kristeva, why readers are drawn to her. She is “nauseated by the thought of food,” a loathing that Kristeva’s describes as the most elementary form of abjection (39). Moreover, Macabéa’s humble beginnings as a “mere accident of nature. A foetus wrapped up in newspaper and thrown onto a rubbish dump,” are evidence enough that the whole of the text is entrenched in the violence of the abject (36). In fact, Lispector’s meek protagonist is the cause of abjection on more than one occasion: upon the abrupt halt of Macabéa and Olímpico’s



affair, he attempts to offer her words of comfort before saying goodbye, hopelessly failing with his declaration, “Macabéa, you’re like a hair in one’s soup. It’s enough to make anyone lose their appetite. I don’t want to hurt your feelings, but you might as well know the truth. Are you offended?” (60). The impulse to intertwine Macabéa’s image with abjection continues until her untimely death, in which Rodrigo callously comments: “Was she suffering? I believe she was. Like a hen with its neck half-severed, running around in a panic and dripping blood” (80).

Lispector’s incessant focus on the body seemingly zeroes in on that which causes a profound reaction, and at that, a profoundly negative reaction. In her study *Passionate Fictions: Gender, Narrative, and Violence in Clarice Lispector*, Marta Peixoto contends that, “[b]lood and vomit, obsessively frequent in this text, signal the opening up of the body and the rupture of its self-enclosed system,” therefore, “bleeding and vomiting contribute to the grotesque image of the body”(94). In a return to the impurity of the body, Lispector embraces these grotesque images via descriptions of Macabéa, who despite being nauseated upon the sight of blood in the cinema, “especially liked films where the women were hanged or shot through the heart with a bullet” (53, 58).

In addition, blood appears in scenes quite unfitting for violence, including an image of Macabéa’s attempt to redden her lips like Marilyn Monroe: “The thick lipstick looked like blood spurting from a nasty gash, as if someone had punched her on the mouth and broken her front teeth” (61-62). Then, in an act of violence inscribed in sacred rituals, Madame Carlota discusses the sacrifice of “a black pig and seven white hens,” but Macabéa cannot handle the thought of the blood that nauseates her so. It is, however, ironically blood that she ultimately vomits in the culmination of her life, as Rodrigo narrates: “I see that she has vomited a little blood, a great spasm, essence finally touching essence: victory!” (84). In the act of her death, the violence that

traverses the text peaks because it is no longer limited, no longer justified, no longer contained. Indeed, as Peixoto states, “[a] textual violence permeates the vertiginous doublings and mirrorings in which author, narrators, characters, and readers engage. To tell stories, for Lispector, is to give up the very possibility of innocence and to enact a knowing, guilt-ridden struggle with the mastering and violent powers of narrative” (99).

## **Vico, Lispector, Kristeva**

Functioning as a bridge between modernism and postmodernism, Clarice Lispector recovers both Vico’s concept of religiosity—the age of gods—as well as Kristeva’s—the artistic experience. The writer forays into differing interpretations of religiosity by means of a language that consistently returns to Vico’s original trope: metaphor. Lispector’s is a language reduced to the simplest form of speech, in which content and form, action and representation, and multiple significations constantly blur the restricting borders of homogeneity. Indeed, primitive language is an active body language, thus resulting in its impurity. Through a return to language’s Archaic ancestry, Lispector embraces this embodiment and subsequent impurification and thus produces reverberations of the sacred—of rituality. Thus, it is this embodiment that manifests the presence of the abject in Lispector’s work. In other words, while the ritual does not *equal* the abject, sacred rituals are certainly *close* to the abject: blood, sacrifice, and so forth. In depicting the violent bodily images entrenched within the language of abjection—cadavers, excrement, bodily fluids—Lispector defies the *reason* modernity inherited from Christianity; in the opposition between *reason* and *body*, she opts for the body, and thus arrives at a radically tropological conception of violence.

Through the language that encompasses abjection, we can access violence through representation—through representation, violence becomes domesticated. Certainly, Kristeva applauds

the presence of the abject in great literature because by means of it, violence is represented and incorporated into the rules of the text, thus leading to the performance aspect of language—language *acts* violently, echoing the coalescing of Vichian divine language with Benjaminian divine violence. While for Vico the Original Naming was constitutive of reality, of the act of creating reality, he suggests that in modernity, representation via language and naming has become corrupted. In the same vein, Benjamin suggests that divine violence is effectively related to the renaming of the world in order to destroy the hegemonic relationships of modernity—thus, the original role of language in culture appears the opposite of non-violent.

As such, language that is violent, *acts* violently instead of solely *representing* the violence, thus allowing language to seize on both action and representation. Lispector, via her utilization of the impure and the abject, allows language to act, breaking through fissures caused by representation. Horror and abject then become effective because they simultaneously act and represent, allowing the creation of a literature that seizes on both. Whereas modern discourse divides action and representation, Lispector slips from the realm of modernity into postmodernity via the impurification of language, uniting action and representation, and as such, slipping from the realm of homogeneous modern to heterogeneous modern.

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