

BETWEEN HEAVEN AND HELL:
a (re)evaluation of genderic problems in Lispector's
***A maçã no escuro* and "Perdoando Deus"**

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Através do conto "Perdoando Deus" e do romance *A maçã no escuro*, proponho tratar de alguns temas fundamentais para a compreensão do complexo universo da personagem feminina, dentro da obra de ficção de Clarice Lispector. Traçando a busca pelo conhecimento da protagonista sem nome em "Perdoando Deus", observa-se que durante este processo a personagem torna-se consciente de seu papel social e opta por transgredi-lo, na medida em que impede a sua auto-destruição como ser feminino que é. Em um caminho inverso, Martim (um dos raros protagonistas masculinos na obra de Lispector) busca, em seu êxodo social, o reencontro e apreensão dos valores contidos na sociedade patriarcal, que determinam uma posição de dominação do homem sobre a mulher. É através da ideologia criada pela tradição cristã-religiosa, muitas vezes parodiando passagens bíblicas, que o protagonista masculino depara-se com a "verdade dos homens".

The thematic importance of the complex gender matter in Clarice Lispector's fiction is a question which has attracted me for a long time, in spite of the little critical attention it has received. Recent feminist analyses of Lispector's work have raised many interesting questions opening up an extensive field for study and speculation. How does Lispector portray the "generic" problem in her fiction? How does she emphasize the transgression of female conventional role as a passive being who does not questions? How does she rewrite Christian beliefs in gender division? Although this is a rich field for research, the complexity of such questions escapes the scope of this article. I propose, instead, to analyze two texts of Clarice Lispector, "Perdoando Deus" (1971) and *A maçã no escuro* (1961), concentrating on the gender-related problem, and the woman's quest for subversion of the role she is assigned in society. I intend to focus mainly on *A maçã no escuro*, although I will first analyze "Perdoando Deus" and compare it to the novel because it can enrich the analysis of *A maçã no escuro*.

By examining the female characters in Lispector's fictions, we determine that she is well aware of the most important feminist concepts. Lispector's texts always strive against the preconceived notion of woman as the "Other", to use the same idea expressed by Simone de Beauvoir in her analysis of female oppression in *The Second Sex*. Throughout history woman has been a prisoner of patriarchal societies as well as of patriarchal texts. Woman is the silent figure of our society, with no voice of her own. Patriarchal society denies her the right to construct her own images independent of male fantasies. It forces her toward a cultural structure that imposes rigid social standards of femininity and relegates her to the position of a "simple" reproducer.

Clarice Lispector's fiction explores many different aspects of woman's conflictual situation. Lispector tends to portray female rather than male protagonists in her stories, and this brings the marginal voice of discourse to the first dimension of the text. Lispector's protagonists are women in conflict. Most of them experience violent changes from an assigned "female" role to a position in which they question deeply their "function" in society. When the protagonists do so, they are seeking understanding. Although this experience may not change their subjugated condition, they start to look deeper inside themselves. Lispector's female characters become aware of their social "function" and penetrate a different dimension of understanding after experiencing an epiphanic moment. The conflicts in Lispector's female-centered fictions are basically gender-related. Most important, the protagonists respond to the conflict by setting out on their own quest for knowledge.

Most of Lispector's stories show the conflict that a preconceived female gender role brings to woman in her daily life. In fulfilling their social role, Lispector's female characters are cloistered in domestic life, and this prevents them from achieving any other role they might have chosen to make them authentic beings. Domestic life may not be a bad choice if it does exist as an alternative; however, in Lispector's fiction society imposes certain standards to be accomplished by women which interfere directly with their freedom, their right to choose. Usually in her texts, woman is portrayed in a single and closed space of her house, and the conflicting situations go no further than the boundaries of the four domestic walls. Although the subjects presented by Lispector question much more than simple domestic problems, most texts do not discuss directly situations other than home conflicts. However, in "Perdoando Deus" and *A maçã no escuro* Lispector presents, in a broader scene, problems that are not necessarily domestic-related but which emphasize aspects closely linked to the gender conflict – that is, the way male and female perceive reality in situations of conflict, and which direction they take to reach their resolutions.

While in "Perdoando Deus" Lispector's protagonist questions the idea of God as a masculine concept imposed by a patriarchal religion, in *A maçã no escuro* the whole Judeo-Christian ideology of man's supremacy over woman is

under scrutiny. In this latter work, Lispector uses parody to rewrite Genesis from a woman's perspective. She redefines the concept of God and subverts man's privileged position by introducing woman's discourse on the same level as man's. The Christian image of a male-defined God is sharply criticized in *A maçã no escuro* through the characteristics of the main character. The novel presents Martim as a dominant and insensitive man, reduces him to an inferior level, ridiculing him through the image of a person who is not highly intelligent.

In "Perdoando Deus" the nameless protagonist experiences freedom of thought while she walks through Avenida Copacabana. Suddenly, she feels something that nobody else had ever felt before. She assumes she is God's mother, the mother of the world and of everything that exists. The protagonist experiences a maternal love for God and she lets her thoughts be completely consumed by this idea. She believes that God without any pride, stinginess, or liability would let her occupy His place, acquire knowledge, and penetrate into His "intimacy" because God fully knows of her attempt to become free. However, God does not accept her boldness, and while the protagonist is walking inattentively, involved only with her liberal thoughts, she steps on a dead rat and is violently forced to give up her thoughts. She runs away, terrified by the image of the big dead rat. When she recovers herself, she begins to link the two things, her thoughts and the dead animal, and starts to question what the dead creature meant to her. Immediately she understands the whole situation, and an intense anger invades her soul – the dead rat was a punishment from God. She thinks that He has done it because she was experiencing freedom in her mind – something very unusual for a woman: "estava sendo uma coisa muito rara: livre" (40). And most important, she was subverting the patriarchal concept of the creator; that is, she was appropriating the position of the supreme mother, a position she thinks really hers. Then, as a punishment, God forces her to recognize her female fragility, by showing a dead and pale rat, an image that makes her feel weak and out of control.² In seeking understand the situation, the protagonist says in anger: "Então era assim?, eu andando pelo mundo sem pedir nada, sem precisar de nada, amando de puro amor inocente, e Deus a me mostrar o seu rato? A grosseria de Deus me feria e insultava-me: Deus era bruto"

(42). She then decides that the only thing to do is to take revenge on God. However, she does not know exactly which kind of revenge a “fragile” human being could take against a “Todo-Poderoso” God. She thinks the solution was for her to tell God’s secrets: “Ah, é assim? pois então não guardarei segredo, e vou contar. Sei que é ignóbil ter entrado na intimidade de Alguém, e depois contar os segredos, mas vou contar. . . as vergonhas Dele” (42). To take revenge on God, as the protagonist understands it, means to expose His weaknesses to everyone: “sim, vou espalhar isso que me aconteceu, dessa vez não vai ficar por isso mesmo, vou contar o que Ele fez, vou estragar a Sua reputação” (42). The nameless protagonist perceives she is “dancing through the minefield”;³ she is fully aware that to obtain God’s secret knowledge she has to transgress His law.

Analyzing God’s stunt with the rat, the protagonist is, in effect, trying to understand the very reason of His fear. She knows it happened because she was rebelling against the role patriarchy assigned to her, that is, as a woman she is “destined” to be fragile and inferior. A woman that does not accept passively what patriarchal society expects from her represents so big a threat to man’s world that it is necessary for God to interfere and protect the phallogocentric world. As the protagonist explains, she was punished because she still does not know how to live in men’s world:

[S]empre fui de brigar muito, meu modo é brigando. É porque sempre tento chegar pelo meu modo. É porque ainda não sei ceder. É porque no fundo eu quero amar o que eu amaria – e não o que é. . . É porque talvez eu precise que me digam com brutalidade, pois sou muito teimosa.(43)

In trying to fulfill the patriarchal model for femininity, women cannot assume any authentic choice, they cannot have their own voice because they would probably begin to question the position of a solitary masculine entity, as the protagonist does – an entity whose power is responsible even for giving woman the procreative right. The protagonist seems to understand that there is no female representative in the high level of divinity, which is an evident negation of the natural process of procreation.

In recognizing the hierarchy created by man as oppressive, she assumes the position of world mother. Her attitude results in immediate punishment because in her thoughts she does not occupy the role of a feminine other, she does not accept passively the logocentric God's image created by patriarchy. The protagonist of "Perdoando Deus" gives herself the right of exercising subjectivity, and consequently she becomes more possessive and proud than a woman should be. At the end, she concludes that God, as a masculine entity, is in fact her opposite image. The protagonist realizes that He is the denial of her self-image when she affirms that:

Enquanto eu imaginar que "Deus" é bom só porque eu sou ruim, não estarei amando a nada: será apenas o meu modo de me acusar. Eu, que sem nem ao menos ter me percorrido toda, já escolhi amar o meu contrário, e ao meu contrário quero chamar de Deus. (44)

Of critical significance is the protagonist's observation that her own love for Him encloses herself in a position of self-negation. As she says: "enquanto eu amar a um Deus só porque não me quero, serei um dado marcado, e o jogo de minha vida maior não se fará" (44). To love God, as the protagonist perceives, means to love only the projected image of man, which subjugates woman to men's importance and consequently denies her own image. At this point, the protagonist questions the patriarchal concept in which man is considered woman's "logical" contradiction (A/not A),⁴ and through this concept she understands that to love God means to reject her feminine self. If she loves God only because she is being forced not to love herself, then the protagonist concludes that two things happen: He truly does not exist because he is just a projection of her insecurity, and in a deep sense she also does not exist because of the self denial.

The strong sense of identification of the protagonist with her role as procreator is a sign of profound social conscience – a reevaluation of the gender problem. The protagonist thinks that since she can give birth she is, in fact, "the" creator. And as creator she is God's mother and not His child; as a result, she

(re)appropriates the position of "earth mother." The protagonist recuperates the proper (re)presentation of maternity in Western society in terms of unrecognized contribution to humanity: "pois é pelo orgulho de ter nascido que me sinto tão íntima do mundo, mas este mundo que eu ainda extraí de mim de um grito mudo" (43).

Shortly after her awakening from the bad experience of stepping on a dead rat, God reminds the protagonist that she has been returned to her proper place because of her physical fragility, which implies that weakness, as opposed to men's strength, is a bad quality.⁵ As if the protagonist of "Perdoando Deus" had committed a crime by being born a woman, God has to punish her. In accordance with the law of the Father, she is supposed to learn to be submissive and to understand that experiencing freedom can be very dangerous for a woman. But she does not give up the possibility of analyzing the whole situation and the chance to condemn God's nonsense (or the nonsense of the existence of a male God).

There is a parallel between the short story and the romance. In both texts the protagonists may be seen as criminals. In the thoughts of the protagonist of "Perdoando Deus" she kills God, the Father, takes his place, questions his law, and gives him the role of her son. Her transgression results in punishment, because she does not accept passively what her religious tradition has imposed on her.

In *A maçã no escuro* there is a "real" crime – Martim actually attempts to murder his wife. The story happens after he runs away from the scene of the crime and hides in an old hotel. When Martim suspects the owner of the hotel wants to denounce him, he leaves and walks until he finds a very isolated farm whose owner, Vitória, after some hesitation, accepts him to work and rebuild it. Martim also meets Vitória's cousin, Ermelinda, who falls in love with him and, like Vitória, wants to unveil his mysterious life. The question of difference in sexual roles and the "generic" struggle comes to surface as Vitória, Martim, and Ermelinda attempt to get closer to each other.

While the protagonist of "Perdoando Deus" is searching for independence from the patriarchal notion of gender identity, Martim's journey moves in the opposite direction. In the short story, the woman wants to liberate herself from the model

patriarchal society imposes on her. When she questions the concept of the creator, she inquires into the entire tradition outlined by a patriarchal structure. She is turning her back on this structure and, consequently, on the model she is supposed to fulfill. In her segregation from the role patriarchal society determines for her, the protagonist of "Perdoando Deus", in fact, negates the feminine model and embraces a more feminist quest.

Martim, on the other hand, takes a different direction. He seeks full consolidation with the patriarchal model, and he wants to belong to "his" social group, in other words, a men's group. As patriarchal order has created a whole system of beliefs to reinforce its law, Martim's journey is based on Christian concepts in which the word of the Father becomes a divine order given in nature to impose women's subordination to men. Furthermore, God is the ruler and has built the world through the power of his reason. Therefore, man – as God's perfect image on Earth – can only reach understanding by being rational. As a symbol of this masculine model, Martim can only live through reason and organization; he looks for symmetry as if it could make his life more meaningful. In the first part of the novel, during the time Martim stays in the hotel all he wants to do is to rest and organize his ideas.⁶ Martim dreams almost all the time. Even when he is awake up his mind is a mixture of dream and reality which brings him anxiety and incapacity to feel safe in a situation in which he cannot grasp reason. In order to feel secure Martim creates symmetry and order in his mind and around him, sometimes even in his dreams. This idea is reinforced when the narrator describes Martim's sleep: "Quando o silêncio se refez dentro do silêncio, Martim adormeceu ainda mais longe. Embora no fundo do sono alguma coisa ecoasse difícil, tentando se organizar" (12).

In the second part of the novel, Martim runs away from the hotel and little by little regains control over his reason. When Martim arrives in the farm he is already another man, totally in control of his mind. Although he is tired, hungry and thirsty his logic is sharp enough for him to make a rational criticism about what he sees in the farm. He does not understand the lack of logic on the environment that surrounds him:

o olhar do homem não conseguiu reunir numa única
visão a falta de lógica do que via: um alpendre coberto

de telhas, janelas que o simples cálculo não lhe ajudou a descobrir para onde poderiam dar, portas que estavam entreabertas para ele nada perceber senão a sombra criada pela distância; cercas delimitando cantos que não seria cantos se não houvesse as cercas arbitrárias. Via-se que aquilo tudo se fizera aos poucos, acrescentando-se à mercê da necessidade ou da fantasia. (51-52)

Martim, like the protagonist of "Perdoando Deus", looks for understanding. However, in contradistinction he does not question the pre-established "generic" social structure to which he belongs. On the contrary, Martim's only impulse toward understanding is to certify that his attitudes are in accordance with the model patriarchal society assigns to him. Martim ardently desires to fit this model in order to justify his behavior, that is, his attempt to kill his wife. He begins to understand that his attitude is associated with Christian tradition based in the Bible and developed by Western culture. Martim interprets Genesis and invokes the story of Adam and Eve in the same way that patriarchalism uses the Judeo-Christian story of creation to support its domination. The protagonist relies on the account of the creation of the world as a kind of divine order given in nature to show man's superiority over woman. The narrator speculates that Martim's murder impulse would be his salvation: "Quem sabe se com seu crime impremeditado. . . ele se tornara um inocente" (37). Such an idea shows that Martim's temptation to kill his wife is not an ordinary crime but a reinforcement of man's law. Furthermore, the murder *per se* elevates Martim to the status of a hero, for his function is the male's group protector: "Com um suspiro, abordou-se em termos claros e pensou assim: Que não cometera um crime vulgar" (123-124).

Martim runs away from the hotel during a dark night and walks desperately through a place he has never been before. He is confused because it is not possible to know precisely which way would take him away from the hotel. Later Martim gets to a field and intuitively decides to sleep. It is in the dark field of the wasteland that "a vasta idéia inarticulável" (18) is begotten. As God generates the word, in the dark night the protagonist creates the inarticulate idea as well as his own future: "Assim, quando

o último passo de seu futuro se completou. Martim mexeu-se na dureza do chão” (18). Then, when the sun rises Martim realizes he is set on an open field, as if he were the first creature to enjoy its beauty. He becomes the center, as the narrator explains to us: “qualquer lugar onde o homem experimentou se pôr de pé, ele próprio se tornou o centro do grande círculo” (21). Besides, it is Sunday, he understands, and “de um modo obscuro e perfeito ele próprio era a primeira coisa posta no domingo, o que o tornara precioso como uma semente” (24). The scene is a parody of the Biblical passage when on the first day, Sunday according to the Jews, God creates light: “And God said, ‘Let there be light;’ and there was light. And God said that the light was good” (Genesis 1:3-4).

Martim is looking for the “essence” of man, as society understands it, and he goes toward Logos – God. The protagonist’s first step toward understanding is, in fact, a journey back to the primordial time – because only through “history” could he understand his nature. Martim’s first ingress into manhood is through his personification of God. As the creator he experiences everything for the first time. Martim inaugurates the environment around him, as if he was the creator; he touches pieces of trees, as if they had never existed before him, trying to recognize what he thinks is his invention; he refuses the language of others because he is the beginning; finally, he creates “truth” according to his perspective in order to see it: “Martim estava fazendo a verdade para poder vê-la” (37).

In his journey toward man’s understanding, Martim has to experience the most primordial life stage of human creation in order to make the connection between his behavior and social gender structure. Furthermore, he has also to find out the root of the man’s “superiority” over woman. As I mentioned before, as Martim reaches understanding, he is able to exculpate himself of his crime: “Hoje deve ser domingo” – chegou mesmo a pensar com certa glória, e domingo seria o grande coroamento de sua isenção” (23). Sunday, as Martim understands, comes to reaffirm the Christian belief of men’s primacy over women: “Além do mais, domingo era o primeiro dia de um homem. Nem a mulher fora criada. Domingo era o descampado de um homem” (24).

Before Martim gets to the farm he goes to the top of the mountain to feel closer to God. Now he is not God anymore but

His son. Martim's gesture seems a parody of the ascent of Christ to the mountain. At this moment, he is trying to incarnate the eternal thought of God, through His human self. Then, as Jesus did, Martim climbs the mountain to get closer to the promised place where the Father is. At the top of the mountain, Martim experiences the deepest happiness and peace that could be given to a man. Martim is excessively proud of himself perhaps because, finally, he feels totally integrated to all human males. He thinks he was able to get the very point of man's nature, and mutely continues standing as if he had a "profecia dentro de si" (49). Next Martim becomes the messenger. As if under the influence of divine guidance. Martim understands that he is going to learn how to read the imminent and unreachable world under his feet. He has waited for this moment all his life – now he has a mission and takes up the manly role. And he finally asks the father: "Que luz é essa, pai? Que luz é essa?. . . É a do fim do dia, meu filho" (49). This is the light which represents the end of Martim's "blindness." Nothing but the principle of father and son is present in this scene. There is love and understanding between them, and in the moment of their divine union they embody the totality of man. Martim now has to go back to the world to complete his journey and fulfill his function as a supreme being. He descends the mountain.

Martim regards himself as formed in God's image, sometimes even as God Himself. The way the protagonist is projected in this image is simply the reverse of the idea of love and understanding: it is particularly ironic. If God is merely the fundamental truth that supports man's affirmation of his "superiority" over woman, as Martim sees Him, then He exists only to serve man's purpose. Lispector plays with this idea – the male dominant discourse ironically shown through a masculine character in a way that criticizes patriarchal society and its intrinsic concepts.

When Martim reaches the farm he finally gets to the place where his mission has to be accomplished. Martim's entrance on the farm may be seen as the entrance in Paradise. God and Jesus now are replaced by another man, but not an ordinary man. Martim is the hero that has to be tested, and as a hero, the protagonist has to search circumstantially, and more than that, he has to recreate the past, rename his actions and re-conquer the land:

[D]iante daquela extensão de terra enorme e vazia, em sufocado esforço Martim penosamente se aproximava. . . de alguma coisa a que um homem. . . [chamaria] de missão de homem. . . [O mundo] parecia clamar por um novo deus que, entendendo, conclusse desse modo a obra do outro Deus. Ali, confuso sobre um cavalo assustado, ele próprio assustado, num segundo apenas de olhar Martim emergiu totalmente e como homem. (108)

The protagonist is in the limit between power and submission, strength and fragility. He is in fact learning how to be a man. Certainly Martim is responsible for the reconstruction of the farm, the delimitation of physical space to divide Vitória's land from others, the extermination of what he thought was a visionary lack of logic in the view, and finally for the imposition of his concept of beauty. He is also responsible for the reinforcement of the roles and "genderic" delimitation which apparently did not exist before him. Martim's attitude is extremely ironic because before his arrival the farm's apparent "disorder" did not represent a problem to its occupants. The protagonist's imposition of beauty and order is an imposition of his own perspective which, in fact, provokes disorder. In the farm Martim thinks that nature has cunningly settled back, without any order or understanding. But he is there to change it, and he becomes so self-important in the process of reconstruction that it is as if everything around him has been called into existence by his creative agency: "ele próprio se tornara de repente o sentido das terras e da mulher, ele próprio era o agulhão daquilo que ele via" (109-110).

In contrast to Martim's rage for "reason" there is Vitória's cousin, Ermelinda, a character whose life is constructed upon metaphor – whose language is as symbolic as Martim's dreams. Having a very sensual nature, still young and full of sexual desire, Ermelinda shows interest on Martim from the start. The woman tries to reveal her love to the protagonist but she can only express herself metaphorically. But since her message needs to be decoded, Ermelinda's assertion of love does not work properly – Martim is not able to understand her. Vitória's cousin does not say "I love you" to him but instead she talks about

ferns: “– Olhe esta samambaia! disse ela para o homem porque uma pessoa não pode dizer ‘eu te amo’ ” (144).

Once Martim and Ermelinda begin to have an affair we realize that Ermelinda’s language negates the conventional in order to create a new system as a peculiar way to establish communication. She has always had a great ability to talk about something that has no apparent relation to whatever she wants to say. The traditional language for Ermelinda is something she wants to avoid, perhaps because she thinks it is an inferior way to express herself, extremely primitive and without traces of woman’s style. She creates a language of her own – a symbolic system that shows her resistance to patriarchal structure. In spite of her appearance, Ermelinda has certainly a very smart way to deal with reality: she seems to understand that the roles society imposes on women represent the very negation of their real nature. Because of that she recreates reality. Even Martim some times is surprised with Ermelinda in her way to behavior. Once he becomes amazed with her crude answer when he asks her why she takes so many sedatives:

– Ah, disse ela com simplicidade, é assim: vamos dizer que uma pessoa estivesse gritando e então outra pessoa punha um travesseiro na boca da outra para não se ouvir o grito. Pois quando tomo calmante, eu não ouço meu grito, sei que estou gritando mas não ouço. (179)

Ermelinda’s consciousness does not bring her happiness, as Hélène Cixous reminds us: “She is the hysteric, the classical woman” (*Reading* 78). In fact, as the narrator is wont to compare her, Ermelinda is like a bird, not the bird that flies free, but the one that stays in the cage. She is a person that tries to avoid rejection in a system of domination, and to attain her purpose Ermelinda splits into two: one internal being who is a prisoner of suffering; one external, who covers suffering with the mask of femininity. Vitória’s cousin voluntarily accepts being part of the game society plays. She is clever and sensitive, and in order to belong she assumes a part in the social game that is more convenient for her: she plays the female role.

Vitória, on the other hand, chooses not to fulfill the social female role; she does not want to play this part of the game. By

choice she lives in an isolated farm where her contact with society is only sporadic. She rules the place, and considering her cold and discourteous way of talking, she usually does not find resistance to her orders. Vitória is a strong woman, able to take control over her small domain without demonstrating any weakness. She is a woman in her 50's whose physical appearance would be more appropriately described as that of a man. In her pants, with an old-fashioned hair style, Vitória cannot be taken as a sensual woman; on the contrary, she creates a barrier to prevent her sexuality from being perceived. The farm's owner commands and provides security to the others, maintains the balance and stability of the place. But after Martim's arrival, his threatening presence invades the two women's intimacies, changing their calm routine, gradually disturbing their peace. Vitória's strength, for instance, now exists only during the day when she is working, involved with her duties; at night, however, the woman begins to have insomnia, to feel lonely, abandoned and weak: "na hora de dormir, a miséria a envolveu. . . A pobreza a invadiu como uma meditação" (95).

In contrast to Ermelinda, Vitória seems to hate Martim from the first minute he arrives on the farm. She is disturbed by his presence, and her sagacity makes her constantly alert. The woman experiences mixed feelings of love and hate (more hate than love) for the insecurity he awakens in her, bringing memories from the old past she wants to forget. "Martim and Vitória are two beings who struggle", Cixous reminds us (*Reading* 66). But Vitória is the one who has the deepest conflict. She hides her sexual desire for Martim and, at the same time, displays her anger by exercising control and authority. He infuriates Vitória by awakening in her the sexual desire she thought she could no longer feel. Nevertheless, during the night Vitória frees the female she has inside herself, full of love to share, but confused with the role she has chosen to play. The more Vitória's sexual desire builds up, the more she represses it, and the angrier she becomes at Martim. Ironically, the protagonist's inability to understand Vitória's surfacing sexuality leads him to see her as a mother, a woman free from any sexual desire. In addition, Vitória's loveless past also makes her a perfect piece to fit the asexual virgin-mother model Martim wants to recreate. In her hate, the woman doubles her strength and vigilance against Martim. He interprets that as

sign of her invulnerability as an asexual-powerful-mother figure. Vitória gets increasingly angry with Martim because he never complains about her orders; even when she assigns him an excessive number of tasks, he accepts everything passively and accomplishes her demands rigorously. As the texts tells us:

A princípio a obediência com que ele a ouvia deu a Vitória uma escura raiva no peito. Nas suas fantasias, Vitória tinha a impressão de que, se dissesse ao homem: “de noite eu durmo embaixo da cama”, ele responderia: “pois não, minha senhora” (84-85).

Martim is playing the role of the obedient child, and Vitória is playing that of the austere mother. The protagonist wants to reinforce these roles, this is the target of the hero. By denying herself the right to be a “complete” woman, Vitória loses her identity. In Western thought the prerogative of the maternal over the female becomes a myth of the perfect woman, or as Luce Irigaray explains,

By diminishing herself in volume, she renounces the pleasure derived from the nonsuture of her lips: she is a mother certainly, but she is a virgin mother. Mythology long ago assigned this role to her in which she is allowed a certain social power as long as she is reduced, with her own complicity, to sexual impotence (“The Sex Which Is Not One”, 104).

Martim’s heroic mission of reconstructing the world can be translated as the reinforcement of the old law of the Father that demands woman’s subjugation to man; additionally, it is also the recreation of the myth of the virgin mother versus the “other” women, the daughters of Eve. To fulfill his task, Martim had already accomplished the first step of his heroic journey: to kill a real woman. “[Martim] Pensou que com esse crime executara o seu primeiro ato de homem. Sim. Corajosamente fizera o que todo homem tinha que fazer uma vez na sua vida: destruí-la. Para reconstruí-la em seus próprios termos” (124). Martim’s struggle culminates with the creation of the symbol that he wants to perpetuate: “eu queria o símbolo porque o símbolo é a

verdadeira realidade! eu tinha o direito de ser heróico! pois foi o herói, em mim, que fez de mim um homem!” (293).

In a deeper sense, it is with Ermelinda that Martim is reinitiated in to the gender struggle which culminates with the attempt to kill his wife. The relationship between Martim and Ermelinda occupies a very important part of the text. They form a couple as important as Martim and Vitória do.⁷ When I say that Martim is reinitiated to the “generic” struggle through his relationship with Ermelinda, I mean that it is through this affair that he is forced to face the problems raised by gender division. When Martim confronts Ermelinda, language appears as the first monster. The woman makes their communication impossible, but because she needs love, she changes her strategies. To achieve her purpose, Ermelinda uses even silence to communicate. After Ermelinda obtains Martim’s love, she realizes that love itself creates in her a sense of loss, imprisonment, so she decides not to love anymore. Vitória’s cousin finds strength inside her, overcoming her fear of loneliness, and decides to say “no” to submission: “As costas que Ermelinda lhe virou para ir embora não tinham rosto, eram estreitas e frágeis costas. No entanto com que amargo vigor elas disseram ao homem: não” (191). When Martim understands the woman does not love him, he realizes he has failed to maintain the myth of Eve, the prostitute. Ermelinda no longer wants to give him the symbol of the prostitute that exists in the phallogentric concept related to all women that are able to love sexually.

The book of Genesis tells that Paradise is Adam’s place before the creation of Eve. In *A maçã no escuro*, the gender struggle takes place specifically on the environment of the farm, what I mentioned as a Paradise. But the farm is a place ruled by a woman, it is Vitória’s territory. Martim invades it and starts to believe that it is his possession. Ironically Lispector inverts the idea: it is in Vitória’s paradise that Martim finds hell. At first, this is the world in which women express themselves in a woman’s way. The “lack of logic” that puzzles Martim is one example of the female language he cannot understand. But since Martim is unable to decode woman’s message, to communicate, he recreates reality and distorts it to fit his own perspective. In the scene in which Martim “finds out” the purpose of women’s existence, for instance, he gets all excited with the idea that they only represent

an extension of his own body: “pareceu entender para que nascem mulheres quando uma pessoa é um homem. . . Lembrou-se de que mulher é mais que o amigo de um homem, mulher era o próprio corpo do homem” (102). What happens to Martim is what Simone de Beauvoir calls the vision of the Subject, the Absolute in relation to the Other: “humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being” (44). As Irigaray also points out, “phallogocentric” society portrays women only as objects of consumption for men. The female sex is not a sex, she explains, it is an extension of what sex really is: the male sex. Irigaray says: “The ‘no sex’ that has been assigned to the woman can mean that she does not have ‘a’ sex and that her sex is not visible nor identifiable or representable in a definite form” (“Luce” 111). Female sexuality suggests women’s imprisonment in phallogocentric society precisely because it is an appropriated sexuality, with no identifiable qualities.

The idea of imprisonment implied by the subjugated position of the women in *A maçã no escuro* is symbolically seen through the image of birds that is repeated throughout the novel. Birds are of great importance in this text, for they form a sort of leitmotif, running through and unifying the novel. They symbolize women in their desire for freedom – yet point to the fragility that makes them potential prisoners. The most important bird image in the novel is that of the small bird that Martim kills in his hands. When Martim is running away from the hotel he sees the bird quiet in a lower branch of a tree, looks at it, forces it to confront his rude face, and catches it with his heavy hand. Little by little the bird stops reacting and lets its small body be subjugated, as the narrator tells us: “Aos poucos o pequeno corpo dominado deixou de tremer e os olhos miúdos se fecharam com uma doçura de fêmea” (26). Martim walks for a while without giving any attention to the bird in his hand, which is still very quiet. But later on, the man opens his hand and the bird flies immediately. Angrily, the protagonist runs after the bird and unsuccessfully tries to catch it. Finally, Martim sees the quiet bird in front of him as if waiting for him. He puts it in his hand, and the small creature accommodates itself in his hand with familiarity:

Quando o homem enfim ergueu os olhos, o passarinho perturbado o esperava como se só tivesse lutado

porque pretendia ceder. Martim estendeu a mão ferida e pegou-o com uma firmeza sem esforço. Dessa vez a ave agitou-se menos e, reconhecendo o antigo abrigo, acomodou-se para adormecer. (28)

Martim continues his journey with the bird in his hand until he forgets about it completely. Then at a certain moment the man gets so involved in his thoughts that he presses his hand and kills the bird.

The scene of the bird may be seen as a parody of the scene of the crime. Although Martim does not say much about the crime, we may infer that he uses the same process of power and submission with his wife, a process which is often called "love" in the text. Throughout the novel the protagonist himself makes the connection between the image of birds and his crime. In this passage he confesses that the bird he hears singing during the night reminds him of what happened two weeks before: "Foi só então que o homem percebeu que na verdade ansiava por ouvi-lo [o pássaro]. . . E a Martim que tanto procurava explicações para o seu crime – ocorreu então que se ele não fugira do mundo por um amor que ele não pudera tolerar" (173). Ironically, in the scene of the bird we observe that although Martim wants to possess what he "loves" he ends by killing the bird. As in the other crime, the narrator reminds us that Martim avoids thinking about it because he "matara exatamente o que mais amara" (45).

Another parallel may be drawn between the image of bird presented in the novel and the protagonist's attempt to kill his wife. The legendary name of the bird "Martim-Pescador", whose female is famous for its fidelity seems to be ironically used for the name of the protagonist.⁸ In Lispector's novel Martim is portrayed of killing his wife precisely because of her infidelity. The ironic parallel the author seems to intend us to raise a hypothesis: perhaps Martim's wife is only one more victim of the phallogentric necessity of controlling female sexuality.

The scene of the bird also synthesizes Martim's whole heroic journey. The sequence of order/disorder/order, very frequently observed in Lispector's texts, may be seen in that passage as well as during Martim's stay on the farm. Furthermore, the scene of the bird symbolically explains Martim's mission, including the "death" of Ermelinda and Vitória, whose situation,

after he leaves the farm, is similar to that of the bird when he abandoned it dead in the field. Besides that, there is another passage in which the bird flies away from Martim's hand that is also a parallel to the passage when both women, Ermelinda and Vitória, deny him the possibility of the mythification that the protagonist wants to perpetuate. Ermelinda refuses to love. Vitória gets tired of resisting love; she dresses up and talks like a traditional woman (which scandalizes Martim). The conflict reaches its climax when, under an impulse of despair, Vitória demands the apple tree to be cut down, for it represents the very symbol of woman's sexuality and her sin. But of course, Martim does not want to cut it – what he does instead is to convince the woman it was nonsensical to cut the tree. As in the bird scene both women escape him, but from a distance they look back, right at his eyes, showing no resistance to being caught again. As soon as the rain falls, Ermelinda returns to Martim's room, looking for love, and Vitória reassumes her position as the severe virgin-mother:

como explicar que aquela mulher ferida. . . fosse a mesma que amanhã daria ordens a Francisco; como explicar que aquela mulher ferida, e talvez só porque fora mortalmente ferida, fosse a mesma que amanhã se voltaria para o plantio, de novo inteira como uma mulher que teve um filho e cujo corpo de novo se fechou? (315)

Finally, order is restored in the farm, and Martim goes back to the real world to confront man's law as the hero who accomplished his mission. Contrary to what may be thought, prison does not represent a bad thing for him, for he knows that the law was created by men for men. Martim knows that he is going to paradise instead of hell⁹ – he returns to the place where language is man's language, as opposed to the farm. The protagonist himself is able to see that this is not his fall but his ascension: “O que, ao mesmo tempo que lhe parecia a grande decadência e a queda de um anjo, pareceu-lhe também uma ascensão” (292-293). The four messengers that come to capture Martim seem to admire him in their silent pact of understanding: “Houve um silêncio. . . [Martim] sorriu tolo, parecia um pouco encabulado, ‘tanta

atenção', pensou, 'em torno de mim' " (286). The professor, an arrogant and suspicious man who was rude to Martim when he came to the farm, treats the protagonist kindly, explaining to him the necessity of his act of imprisonment: "o senhor tem que compreender!. . . dirijo-me a um homem superior, o senhor tem que compreender por que fiz isso!" (285).¹⁰

Martim's story becomes the re-creation of a phallogentric myth, and it points to the painful passage from guilt to expiation. Dualities that frequently appear in the text (as Paradise/Hell, for instance) cannot be analyzed as simple dichotomies carrying value judgment. They are not conclusive conditions but rather continuously alter in signification. The protagonist of "Perdoando Deus", for instance, experiences paradise when she gets involved in her subversion. God, however, transforms her subversion-paradise into hell as a punishment for her daring act. Then she has a choice to renounce her transgression of the law of the Father, or to struggle for a further understanding of how His law operates. By choosing transgression she lives the hell of refusing to submit and at the same time the paradise of subversion. In *A maçã no escuro* dichotomies are even a more complex concepts – the reader is unable to determinate where each of them begins and where they finish. In the novel, to be between heaven and hell means to be in the middle of these polarities. The circular line that delimits them does not subdivide; the protagonist's choice is always between both/and rather than either/or. Lispector plays with the idea of gender identities and innumerable other dichotomies precisely to deconstruct the death-dealing binary oppositions of masculinity and femininity.

The sort of subversive self-position of the protagonist of "Perdoando Deus" finds almost no parallel in Clarice Lispector's texts. This protagonist's journey is opposed to that of Martim – she is a woman and he is a man – but neither is it similar to Vitória's and Ermelinda's journeys. Like Martim, the protagonist of "Perdoando Deus" is a heroine, but she does not kill the monster to create a myth – it is a simple inversion: she breaks the myth to liberate reality. The pattern of order/disorder/order that exists in Lispector's text can be seen in "Perdoando Deus" as well as in *A maçã no escuro*. In the short story, the protagonist goes from a moment of subversion to the interruption of the process, and to subversion again. Although the pattern is present, the woman's

dynamic process comprises, paradoxically, the opposite process that most of Lispector's protagonists go through. Instead of initiating her journey from a movement of subjugation to subversion and return to subjugation again, the protagonist experiences subversion in the beginning and in the end of the process. Thus, subversion becomes order. While in *A maçã no escuro* the end of the novel closes in the possibilities of subversion for the women, in "Perdoando Deus" subversion is a pattern of behavior. Whereas Martim imitates old models, the protagonist of "Perdoando Deus" creates a new one. After the gender struggle, in *A maçã no escuro* the women surrender to the phallogentric discourse, whereas in "Perdoando Deus" the protagonist accepts the implications of subversion. Although women react differently in both texts, neither the protagonist of "Perdoando Deus" nor the characters of *A maçã no escuro* can return to their previous position since they have already acquired knowledge and experience.

NOTES

¹ The term has been used by feminist critics like the Australian Beverly Thiele, "Vanishing Acts in Social and Political Thought," 36. I believe that the word "genderic" is only an adjective of the word "gender" and, consequently, the meaning does not change.

² It is not unusual to see woman connected with physical fragility, in opposition to man's physical force. Fear of small animals such as rats and cockroaches is often taken as a symbol of woman's fragility. Lispector uses the image of a dead rat to emphasize the notion of fragility in the protagonist of the story.

³ I borrowed this phrase from Annete Kolodny's article "Dancing Through the Minefield."

⁴ Nancy Jay noted that dualisms in Western culture are considered only as logical contradictions. Dualisms do not recognize continuity between terms; they limit the ideas to simple denial. For further explanation about dualisms see her "Gender and Dichotomy," 44.

⁵ As Thiele 38 points out, dualisms such as mind/body, strength/weakness, subject/object, nature/culture, and others are very common motifs in Western social and political thought. She explains that there is a connotation of value judgment in these dichotomies which show a positive pole in one element of each pair, in opposition to a negative pole of the second element. One is always good or bad, rational or emotional, subject or object, but never both. These dualisms should be used with extreme prudence, Thiele says, because they may lead to the same fundamental dichotomy male/female.

⁶ Although Lispector divides *A maça no escuro* into three parts based on Martim's journey, for purpose of analysis, I decided to divide it in two parts only. The first part includes the scene at the hotel in which Martim seems to be very linked with his past and extremely confused about reality around him. The second part starts when the protagonist escapes from the hotel and goes to Vitória's farm. The reason for this division is based on the fact that only during his stay in the hotel Martim's mind is free from total rationality. His lack of control over reason denotes that he is still a human being, in contrast to the symbolic expression of gender struggle he represents in the second part of the novel.

⁷ This position contradicts Hélène Cixous' views, as presented in her chapter about *A maça no escuro*. She says that Martim and Vitória are the main couple of the novel (Reading, 66). Cixous gives no textual support for this affirmation and does not explain clearly why she chooses them to be in this position. Because of that, I do not see any reason to agree with her idea.

⁸ "Martim-Pescador," "Martim-Peixeiro," or "Martin-Adán" (as this bird is called in Latin American countries) is a voracious and furious bird whose name comes from the ability it has to fish. This variety of bird lives in the margin of rivers and ponds where there are rich vegetation in which foliage hide well. Innumerable old legends mentioned "Martim-Pescador" because it is believed that the female is so loyal to the male that she feeds him in his old age and dies only after him, singing sadly. See *Diccionario enciclopédico gallego-castellano*, ed. Eladio Rodríguez Gonzalez (Vigo, 1960).

⁹ This interpretation differs from Cixous' reading of this part of the novel. Cixous affirms that Martim "accepts abandoning the paradise of which he is the author and coming back to our little burning hell, out of love for humans who hate him as they should." However, as I have argued, based on textual evidence, the prison does not represent Martim's hell but his paradise. Cixous, *Readings* 62-63.

¹⁰ The type of crime on which Lispector's novel focuses is in a certain way engaged with the social reality of Brazil at the time the book was published (1961), when crimes of passion happened almost every day, and male perpetrators were considered by law as defenders of male honour. The media gave no attention to the problem until the 70's, when several women belonging to the upper and upper-middle social classes were killed, making international news. Ironically, in opposition to the prevailing view held by many critics about Lispector, *A maça no escuro* anticipates the interest of the media on this subject, which demonstrates her active engagement with the social reality of the country.

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