The Controversial Female Body: New Feminist Perspectives on Ageing

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> *Age puzzles me. I thought it was a quiet time.*
> *My seventies were interesting and fairly serene,*
> *but my eighties are passionate.*
> *I grow more intense as I age.*
>
> Florida Scott Maxwell, *The Measure of My Days*

From the beginning of the 1970's, there is an unexpected phenomenon of considerable increase in life expectancy which has led scientists and scholars from many fields to focus their research on ageing.[1] Also feminist critics of the first generation began to discuss the problems and issues connected with ageing. They were aware that ageing involves various epistemological, biological and social problems, including the relationship between generations and therefore the need to study this phenomenon from an interdisciplinary perspective. These studies are based on the idea that ageing is no longer an illness but that there is, in this stage of life, a "remodelling" in which some functions are less powerful than they were before, while others are stronger. Ageing, from a biological point of view, becomes a more and more complex phenomenon which reflects the continuous readjustment of the organism to reach ever-newer balances. This new conception of ageing is consolidated by the Jungian reassessment of old age: Jung considers the third age as a new period of development in which the psyche is subject to continuous remodelling (Jung, 1982a; 1982b). With these premises, we must, therefore, reconsider old age as a stage in the evolution of the psyche, that particular stage which, if well understood, allows us to understand and to complete what we have been and, in the final analysis, what we are.

In an important study by Betty Friedan, *The Fountain of Age*, there is a chapter in which she criticises the American mystic of never-ending youth in order to deconstruct the stereotypes which capitalist society has created in relation to the concept of old age. Friedan's criticism of American society is ferocious: USA is a society which is founded on the visual images, on *show*, depriving imagination of its power (Friedan, 1994). The obsession which American society has with the body, the preservation of its exterior appearance through artificial methods, such as plastic surgery and the cosmetics of beauty, are dismantled one by one by Friedan who wants to emphasise the vacuum of values in a society founded on consumerism and materialism. While in the past the books full of dietary and hygiene advice were based on the idea that a sober and moderated life-style was the best recipe to ensure a healthy old age,[2] nowadays diets are completely unrelated to the idea of *ascesis* for purification and have become a form of regulation of the body to preserve *sex appeal*, to have greater sexual and erotic attraction.

Since the 1970's in feminist studies, there is a new awareness of this phenomenon especially on the part of the historic feminists who, in Europe and America, discuss the problem of old age: how do these women, who were young in the 1960's, react to what Marylin Pearsall defines as "The most stigmatised stage in women's life cycle: old age" (Pearsall, 1997:1)?

Women intend to deal with this problem from several perspectives and with an interdisciplinary approach and, above all, they want to deconstruct the prejudices of male gerontology in relation to women: "feminist theorists deploying such discourses wish to dismantle the structure of their masculinist bias. Women in later life have been massively and familiarly objectified in gerontological literature" (Pearsall, 1997:2). As Simone de Beauvoir says in *The Second Sex*, the life of women is marked by a series of initiation rites because "woman is not born but becomes". Even when they enter the third stage of life,

women are subject to an arduous and difficult process, because the dominant patriarchal society provides a series of mysogenic stereotypes mainly based on the body of the elderly woman. In Beauvoir's book, *La Vieillesse*, old age is perceived as a foreign body. Influenced by Sartre's existentialism, she emphasises the idea that the Subject sees old age through the perception of others: "La vieillesse est particulièrement difficile à assumer parce que nous l'avions toujours considérée comme une espèce étrangère: suis-je donc devenue une autre alors que je demeure moi même" (Beauvoir, 1970:14). Women, therefore, must deconstruct a twin process of objectification: the look of others who see you as an object and also the image which you have of yourself: inside me, there is the body which has become old and different from me, that is, the person which others see from outside.

Beauvoir's book, which has been a seminal study for women, also has become a useful ground for comparison and discussion. There is, in fact, a profound difference between the position of Beauvoir in the 1970's and the writing of women like Friedan, Greer or Woodward [3] who deal with this theme ten years later, in the 1980's. The fundamental difference is the fact that Beauvoir does not see all the implicit links between being a woman and being old and, above all, she does not relate the problem of old age with the three categories of gender, race and class. However, the biggest criticism moved by women to Beauvoir's study is that she had a totally negative view of old age and, above all, saw menopause in a reductive and negative way as a profound trauma in women's lives which led to nothing constructive. To fully understand the pessimistic attitude of Beauvoir, the following excerpt from her book *The Mandarins* is significant: "Glass mirrors are too indulgent. The faces of these women my own age, that flabby skin, those blurred features, those drooping bodies, so obviously drooping under their corsets, these were the true mirrors" (Beauvoir, 1979:366-7). As rightly emphasised by Woodward in an interesting article (1988:90),

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the theme of old age in Beauvoir is strictly linked to certain obsessions which tormented her all her life: the theme of death and, above all, the theme of fear and phobia of any existential change, especially in the life of the body. She does not believe in the possibility of woman creating a new autonomous life for herself, dependent on either husband or children: it is too late for her to project herself into the future. Woman, in old age, then, has an existence which is not authentic, because she feels extraneous to herself, tormented, unsettled and therefore is no longer the master/mistress of her own life.

From the 1980's on, women scholars of all disciplines, although inspired by Beauvoir's book, emphasised the biggest limit of her thought which basically consists in remaining within an "existential conceptual framework". One important aspect of Beauvoir's book is the idea that the elderly are socially marginalised and that, historically, society has always had an ambivalent and contradictory attitude towards old age.[4] Bearing this premise in mind, women tried to reveal the twin marginality of the elderly woman and, above all, did their best to create new models and to overcome the stereotypes of the *body in decline* and the *other within us*. At this regard, a very interesting essay is one by Susan Sontag titled "The double standard of ageing", in which she very strongly emphasises this twin marginality for women, related not only to the fact that woman, in this stage of life, is no longer procreative but also to the fact that her beauty and physical appearance have withered and deteriorated. The phrase "for the woman the calendar is the final arbitrer" is emblematic because it emphasises that woman in old age becomes invisible in a society founded on beauty and sex appeal. On this matter, it is also interesting to re-read Sontag's statement in relation to gender difference and the process of old age: "women feel the face-body dichotomy more profoundly than men" (in Pearsall, 1997:20ff.). For Sontag, the face becomes the emblem, an icon, a sort of flag which one cannot change and that cannot be altered with age. For

centuries, women have been forced by patriarchal society to base their success on their physical appearance; when woman's beauty and *sex appeal* are no longer, she becomes invisible. The idea of femininity was related to the attributes of fragility and thinness and was, above all, centred on the face. While man is perceived by society as an *overall entity*, woman has always been subject to a dichotomous process, separating the face from the body. In order to appear unaltered, her face on the stage of life must be subject to a never-ending *make up*.

Menopause and women creativity are two related issues that are of central importance in the female process of ageing. Betty Friedan recalls that menopause has been for too long considered by women as a shameful sexual illness, because the cessation of the procreation function has been experienced as a definitive trauma. For Friedan and Greer, female identity must go beyond sexual and biological role. It is important that women accept the stage of menopause in order to find other possibilities and new dimensions to their personalities. A brief analysis of the comparative study of the anthropologist Margaret Lock on menopause in Japan and North America can prove useful to expand on Friedan's and Greer's premises (Lock, 1993:XXI). In her introductory chapter, Lock reveals how menopause is an event which is difficult to define and must be punctually contextualised and historicised. For Lock, menopause is not a universal concept but one that is profoundly linked to the history and culture of a people and the existential and living experience of the individual woman. At the base of Lock's hypothesis is the idea that the body is the result and the product of history and culture and that, therefore, its conception changes over time and space. The strong body-mind dichotomy, which has plagued Western culture, has led to consider either culture as the dominant element and biology as something irrelevant, or biology as something unchangeable over time and space and culture as a sort of "distortion", the diversifying, changeable element. For this reason, according to

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Lock, it is essential to employ a new conception of biology which focuses on its flexibility and close interdependence with culture. Lock, in her book, emphasises the concept of "local biology", a biology which must account for the culture of all areas and which must position not only the biological subject but also the object which it studies. The idea of the body as "simultaneously physical and symbolical artefact... both naturally and culturally produced, and securely anchored in a particular historical moment" (Braidoti, 1999), is one which we also find expressed in the recent important contributions by women on the subject of the body.[5]

Lock's study brings up a series of interesting questions which are difficult to resolve; however it also provides the idea that an interdisciplinary approach may lead, if not to the resolution of these complex questions, perhaps to its clarification. How do we reconcile the objectivity of scientific research with the different locations of the scientist and science in the various historical and cultural contexts? In Lock's book, it seems to be clear that we have now gone beyond the idea of a neutral and objective science because, after the teaching of Foucault (1984), we have become aware that the analysis and medicalising of the body[6] in industrial society are subject to a policy of social control.

This important clarification of the relativity of the concept of menopause is strictly connected with the attempt to revise the literary canon in representing female old age. The 1970's saw the rise of a new form of narrative which has focused on the creativity of the elderly, as represented by novelists who are themselves already quite old. They choose to focus their novels on elderly who are represented no longer as marginal figures but as characters with complex psyches. The desire to revise the canon of the stereotypical representation of old age aims to crush a series of prejudices in order to explore and discover this mysterious and unfathomed "planet". Therefore, if the *Bildungsroman* was the novel of growth, which followed the hero from infancy to maturity, a new term is now coined,

Vollendungsroman, which is used by Constance Rooke to define a new narrative paradigm: the "novel of completion" which is concentrated on the last stage of life (in Cole *et al.*, 1992). Growing old implies a passage, a real initiation which coincides with the abandoning and rejection of the previous social roles and is always marked by a traumatic event, by a process of the deconstruction of the "I" which may lead to negative or positive effects. The *Vollendungsroman*, then, is based not only on the principle that old age is heterogeneous, that it varies, that is, from individual to individual, but also on the principle that the psyche of the elderly is in continuous movement. Interesting examples of this new genre are found in the narrative of women involved in an overturning of the female figure in the phase of menopause and in the affirmation of a new concept of the elderly body, previously erased and despised. An example of this kind of women's writing related to the controversial body of the old is provided by May Sarton's diaries which record, day by day, the incessant inner search for an ontological profundity founded no longer on "acting (as)" but on "being".[7]

Within literature, it is mainly Ursula Le Guin, a writer with a great knowledge of anthropology and other cultures, who has emphasised how women should experience menopause, not passively, but as a challenge, an important rite of passage, an event which touches their lives only, and remains outside of men's and doctor's control. Women should be aware that menopause means change, a process of rebirth which is described by Le Guin in the following icastic phrase: "the woman must become pregnant with herself" (in Pearsall, 1997). Emblematically, she ends her essay imagining a science fiction story, in which the inhabitants of another planet, *The Altairs*, have come to visit earth and are about to return to their planet. Faced with the decision about who to take back, the author, who imagines herself as a member of the spaceship crew, writes: "what I would do is go down to the local Woolworth or the local village, Market Place, and pick an old woman over sixty, from behind the

costume jewellery counter or the betel-nut booth. ... It will be very hard to explain to her that we want her to go because only a person who has experienced, accepted, and acted the entire human condition – the essential quality of which is Change – can fairly represent humanity" (in Pearsall, 1997:251-2).

The figure of the grandmother, who is capable of transmitting a historic memory, is of central importance in the works of many women writers as she is the one who is able to bridge the gap among different generations [Plate 1]. She can set up a relationship of tender complicity and deep intimacy, something that for maternal figures is a much more complex task.[8] For many feminists, the grandmother becomes a sort of "symbolic mother" who incarnates both the figure of the mythical great mother and the process of genealogical transmission of knowledge.[9] For instance, Marina Warner in the process of re-reading and re-writing some popular fables, re-assesses the essential role of the grandmother as the 'story teller', who masters the knowledge of ancient oral cultures based on folklore throughout the history of the origin of nations. Doris Lessing tries to connect ageing with personal and individual forms of memory related to family traditions in her novel *The Diary of a Good Neighbour*, which investigates the interpersonal relationship between the young Joanna and old Maudie; a relationship which is rich and intense because based on a similar and reciprocal search for identity.

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Opposed to the sweetened image of old age fostered by much sentimental literature and visual art [Plate 2], women writers try to overturn this stereotype. They offer the image of an eccentric old woman who wants to regain her freedom which has long been denied to her by social constraints. This is a positive rewriting of the theme of the witch, which is exemplified by *Warning*, a daring poem by Jenny Joseph which was emblematically selected by the journal *Science* as a sign of new times for elderly women:

PLATE 1

Steven Hall, *Jeannette, her mother Agnes and the 102 year-old grandmother Susie Billie*, in *Wisdom's Daughters. Conversations with Women Elders of Native America*, by Steve Wall, Harper Perennial, 1994.

PLATE 2
Vuillard, *Portrait of madame Bérnard*, Paris, Musée Nationale d'Art Moderne, 1930.

When I am an old woman I shall wear purple
With a red hat which doesn't go, and doesn't suit me.
And I shall spend my pension on brandy and summer gloves
And satin sandals, and say we've no money for butter.
I shall sit down on the pavement when I'm tired
And gobble up samples in shops and press alarm bells
And run my stick along the public railings
And make up for the sobriety of my youth.
I shall go out in my slippers in the rain
And pick up flowers in other people's gardens
And learn to spit.

You can wear terrible shirts and grow more fat
And eat three pounds of sausages at a go
Or only eat bread and pickle for a week
And hoard pens and pencils and beermats and things in boxes.

But now we must have clothes that keep us dry
And pay our rent and not swear in the street
And set a good example for the children.
We must have friends to dinner and read the papers.

But maybe I ought to practise a little now?
So people who know me are not too shocked and surprised
When suddenly I am old, and start to wear purple.[10]

A new image also emerges in the literature of the multicultural writers who move between more than one literary traditions, and emphasise the importance of multiethnic comparison for a new study of female old age (Bagnell and Soper, 1998). In *Running in the Family*, the English-Canadian writer Michael Ondaatje proposes in the character of Lalla, his Sri-Lankan grandmother, a non-sweetened grandmother figure, an old woman who opposes herself to the canon which sees her as ever obedient and passive, because she still desires, and stubbornly wants to preserve her freedom of movement (Ondaatje, 1986). In *Praisesong for the Widow*, the Afro-American writer Paul Marshall emphasises the importance of memory in the reconstruction of one's own identity. As she reaches old age, the

protagonist, Avey, decides to radically change her life-style, returning to the values of her African tradition where the elderly were the depositories of the culture of the forefathers (Marshall, 1984). In Afro-American literature, for example in Toni Morrison's fictions, there are portraits of old black women who have political, spiritual significance as foremothers. These older women are "magical" because they become subjects who perpetuate the ancient mythology and wisdom of the African nation, becoming the carrier of the survival of the clan: "Considering the prevalence of ageism in white America, one can even see the African tradition as diametrically opposed to US traditions" (Holloway and Demetrakopoulos, 1986:15).

The controversial representation of old age in literature confirms, contrary to common sense, the problems its conceptualisation poses. Old age is not an immutable phenomenon but a process which changes over time and space, because it is the result of a continuous interaction between nature and culture, between body and mind. The greatest challenge comes perhaps from the attempt to deconstruct male stereotypes through the disruptive use women artists now make of the old body in photography and painting. The exposure of the old woman's naked body challenges a culture which, as we have seen, has reduced woman past the age of reproduction to invisibility, or has entrapped her in the canonised role of the grandmother. Women artists, from Cindy Sherman to Claire Prussian, show the elderly body in its excesses and horror, or represent the old woman as a being with polymorphous sexuality." In this sense, they see the old woman as a creature who incarnates the disquieting aspects of mythical figures such as the Sibyl, the Pythia, the Medusa: these images emanate a charm and an enchantment which can break down the boundaries and limits which patriarchal society has imposed upon them.

The comparison of two antithetical visual representations of female ageing condenses and epitomises the extent to which the

female ageing body is a social and cultural artifact and the positive change that has occurred in the perception of female bodies in Western civilisation. The first is the *Portrait of an Old Woman* by Giorgione [Plate 3] and the second one is the photograph of a seventy-nine old swimmer, in a bathing costume, [Plate 4]. The painting by Giorgione is emblematic to highlight the western stereotypes of the representation of the female body. Western literature and iconography is full of anthropomorphic representations of old age as a woman with grey hair, withered, faded, pale and wan face, foul and obscene, with a gelid and wintry landscape in the background. It is no coincidence that old age has been represented as an old woman because, traditionally, there have been strong attacks by male writers and painters against the body of the ageing woman, which was the focus of considerable misogyny. The old woman becomes a symbol of evil and an allegory of time which completely corrupts everything. In *Portrait of an Old Woman* by Giorgione the devastation impressed on the curved figure, balding with few teeth and deep lines on her face, her eyes pervaded by sadness, acts as a reminder of the transience of beauty. It provides a terrible warning of what is to come, hence the scroll laid on one of her hands reads: «with time».

In the second image, the eye of the photographer is careful to capture the vitality in the body of this woman, whose signs of time are clear in the face, and its inner balance. Sport and physical activity are not ends in themselves but are tangible signs of being able to accept old age, a proof of a serene and balanced relationship between the body and the surrounding environment. <<

PLATE 3
Giorgione, *Portrait of An Old Woman*, Venezia Galleria dell'Accademia, 1508-1510.

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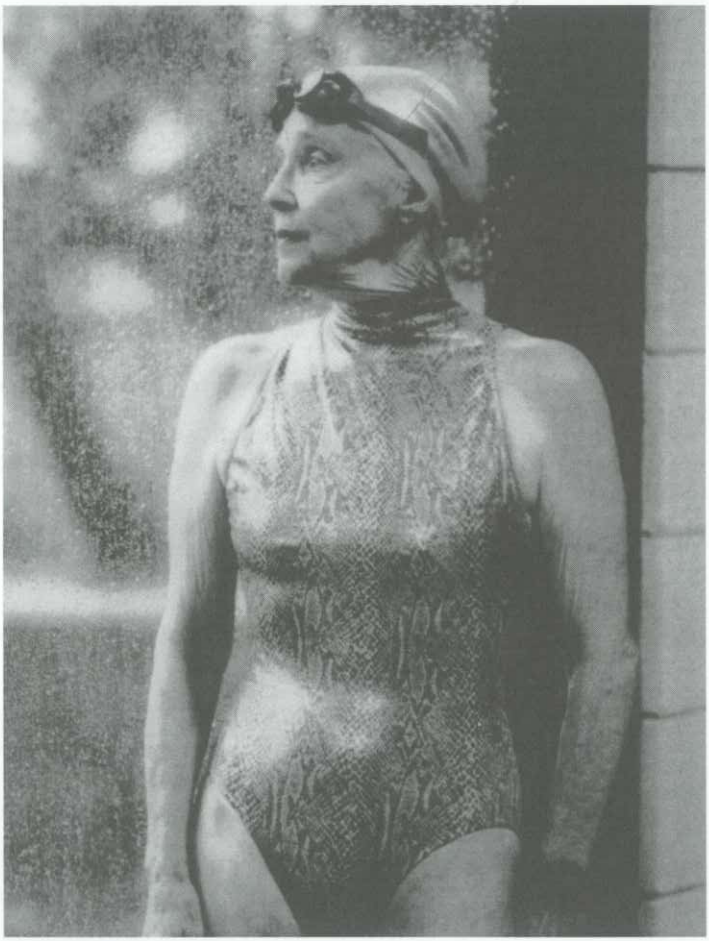
PLATE 4
Etta Clark, *Growing Old is not for Sissies II: Portraits of Senior Athletes*, Pomegranate, 1995.



NOTES

[1] See Claudio Franceschi (1994:52-61).

[2] See A. Cornaro (1946).

[3] See K. Woodward and M. Schwartz (eds.) (1986); K. Woodward, (1991); G. Greer, in M. Pearsall (1997: 253 and following); see also G. Greer (1992).

[4] See Vita Fortunati (1997:77-82).

[5] See D. Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective", in *Feminist Studies* 14, 555-99. See also R. Monticelli in R. Baccolini *et al.* (1997).

[6] Another point which appears to me to be controversial, and which has seen woman contraposed to scientists and doctors, is the use of oestrogen to combat not only the symptoms of menopause but also the dangers of old age.

[7] M. Sarton, *At eighty-two: a journal*, New York: W.W. Norton, 1996; *At seventy: a journal*, New York: W.W. Norton, 1996; *Encore. A journal of the eightieth year*, New York: W.W. Norton, 1993; *Endgame: a journal of the seventy-ninth year*, New York, W.W. Norton, 1992.

[8] See K. Woodward, "Tribute to the older Woman: Psychoanalysis, Feminism and Ageism": "Indeed Freudian psychoanalysis can admit no other economy than a sexual economy. Just as importantly for my purposes can only imagine two generations in this scene: the mother and the child...."

[9] See A. Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

[10] J. Joseph, "Warning", in *When I am an old Woman I Shall Wear Purple*, S. H. Martz (ed), Watsonville CA, Papier-Mâché Press, p. 1.

[11] See J. French, "Visible Differences: Women Artists and Aging"(in M. Pearsall, 1997: 197-220).

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