**Ageism, existential and ontological: reviewing approaches towards the abject with the help of Millett, Hodgman, Lessing and Roth**

**Introduction: the fourth age as both structural and existential**

Ageism is a problem of great concern for the gerontological community for whom a core goal is to demonstrate the structures, institutions and practices that create and maintain it, with the aim of helping to eradicate it. However, in a 2019 paper Paul Higgs and Chris Gilleard raised the important issue that, whilst acknowledging the structural and thus modifiable forms of ageism, we should be clear about the more obdurate manifestation associated with the fourth age. This is not the product of ideology or discourse or power relations, they note, so much as one reflecting ‘existential and ontological concerns’ rooted in a fourth age social imaginary associated with senescent and frail embodiment. Combating ageism as a mode of discrimination will not, and cannot, they claim, dissipate this imaginary because the facts of decrepitude and finite corporeality must be acknowledged as intrinsic to the human condition, to be experienced, in one way or another, by all those fortunate enough to live to advanced old age.

Crucial to this argument is the distinction between the third and fourth ages, first introduced into the English-speaking gerontological community by Peter Laslett (1987). Approaching the life course in general, and old age in particular, through a focus on demographics and social structure, Laslett’s chief concern was in fact with the third age, his aim being to reconceptualise ‘old age’ through decoupling it from out-dated connotations of sickness, poverty and dependency, which became the property of the fourth age. This residual category has been developed substantially in the thirty years since Laslett published his work, including through research which takes in the clinical, life span developmental, frailty, class and gendered dimensions. Higgs and Gilleard’s unique contribution to fourth age studies is to suggest its strong connection with collective representations, or a social imaginary, which depicts it as the antithesis of all that is valued for the self, including not only independence and self-care but also will and volition (Gilleard and Higgs 2010; 2011) As reflected in this imaginary, a concept they draw from the work of Cornelius Castoriadis, in particular, the fourth age entails social death, extreme Otherness, and most of all, it is abject old age separated not just from the pleasant third age that is more or less continuous with youth in its norms, values and expectations (including of the old body itself) but also from the rest of the life course. The fourth age’s disconnection from the life course is symbolized by the metaphor of the ‘black hole’, from which no light and no signal can be returned (Gilleard and Higgs ,2010). It thus exceeds the limits of our imagination or, rather, we have a number of horrific images which are stereotypes of the fourth age – misshapen bodies in wheelchairs, zombie-like Alzheimer’s Disease (AD) patients – but what we cannot do is empathetically imagine ourselves in this period of life: the gap is unpassable. The emotional economy associated with its abjection, not surprisingly, is a darkly emotional one, swirling with the disgust, pity and horror generated by incontinence, filth and other failures of the civilized body. Cultural stereotypes paint the fourth age as disgusting as in this description by Higgs and Gilleard: ‘Food spilled down the front of one’s clothes or in one’s lap, toenails thickened, stained and curled deep into the flesh, hair matted and greasy, skin covered in sores, hairs sprouting from the nose, the ears or the chin, growths in the face, swollen and sagging flesh round the ankles’ – what Higgs and Gilleard call the ‘abject objects of old age’ (2015: 81). Relatedly, they acknowledge that the fourth age is heavily associated with the old female body above all, both in terms of frailty and dementia, in terms of the likelihood for poverty and deprivation, which of course remind us of the structural factors shaping this age in terms of multiple disadvantage, but also in terms of aesthetics, suggesting that the ‘dirty old woman’ is both more abject, and hence more central to the social imaginary of the fourth age than is the ‘dirty old man’ (2015: 84).

It seems to me crucial, and indeed urgent, that we look again at this social imaginary of the fourth age, particularly given its undoubted connection with the deaths of older people in care homes across the UK and Europe in the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic and the surrounding rhetoric that implied these lives were without real value (e.g. Lawson 2020). Heeding the warning of Higgs and Gilleard suggests that one of the problems we are up against in any project of this kind is the existence of such negative codes (which feed and in turn are fed by structural factors) but which make for a deeper and more tenacious kind of ageism and one depicted as ‘natural’ and ‘inevitable’. In order to shift this requires of society that it finds a way of accepting vulnerabilities and challenges of deep old age, including, for some, frailty and dementia, without viewing this as either somehow totally discontinuous from the life course that has preceded it, as unlike other existential issues we have to face as human beings, and/or as meaningless and without value. Central to this project is a reappraisal of the abject.

**Abjection and the fourth age**

There are two key approaches to abjection as a concept in the literature, the first associated with Julia Kristeva, the second with Georges Bataille. Kristeva’s more psychoanalytic account is concerned with the formation of identity. According to Kristeva, writing in Powers of Horror (1982) The need to construct a border between the emerging self of infancy and the vast inchoate omnipotent mother—an individuation process that in fact is never ‘complete’—. Thisleads to a rejection of the latter, a practice which is imbued with symbolic violence and generates misogyny on both a cultural and personal level. Abjection is configured by an emotional economy of disgust above all, triggered by features associated with the mother’s body,and other ‘matters out of place’, such as blood, excreta, and even soft and jellied foodstuffs that resemble this ‘betwixt and between’ of merging and indistinct boundaries. Disgust as an aversive reaction produces the effect of distancing oneself from, or expelling, the object that elicits such disgust. Along with misogyny, the fear and rejection of ageing and the associated ‘denial of death’ is also central (see Arya, 2014 for further explication).

But where Kristeva’s writings about the abject are mainly psychoanalytic and descriptive, Bataille’s work has a different emphasis and contains both a socio-cultural reach and a moral purpose. Bataille highlights the social constitution of abjection, both in terms of rendering certain classes of people ‘abject’ and in terms of the rationalizing and disciplining theme of modernity, a process also concerned with ejecting both the abject and sacred from society. . Indeed, while Bataille did not directly employ the term ‘abject’ but rather focused on the sacred, the latter contains both the pure and the polluted, as analytically indistinct, meaning that the sacred includes the abject (Richman, 2002), The instrumental, acquisitive model of capitalism and the disciplining of the body, set apart from the mind, have resulted in a society based entirely on the profane realm, concerned with the quantifiable, measurable, rational and productive (which Bataille calls the ‘homogeneous economy’. Furthermore, and in concurrence with Durkheim’s ideas, the autonomy and independence valorized by such a rationalizing society induces alienation and obstructs true communication and indeed community, including in an intergenerational sense. Bataille puts it thus: ‘Communication cannot proceed from one full and intact individual to another. It requires individuals whose separate existence in themselves is *risked*, placed at the limit of death and nothingness’ (Bataille, 1992: 19; quoted in Arya, 2014:69).

Aesthetics contributes to the homogeneous, profane economy. Along with the classical ideal of art, this was formed as a philosophical discipline in the early years of modernity and encodes the body in relation to ideals of beauty on the one hand, related to the smooth, closed body of youth, and to disgust on the other (Menninghaus, 2003). In this system ‘the founding fathers of the new “discipline” of aesthetics incorporated aged femininity into their system as its maximum disgusting evil’ (2003: 86), a judgement with both moral and aesthetic components and in which ‘the old age preceding death is at least as repulsive as death itself’ (Menninghaus: 88) Medicine has equally played a rationalizing role, incorporating both a mind/body split at its core (Leder, 1990) and playing a role in the disciplining and ordering of society through biopower. In terms of the medicine of old age, this regulatory purpose is evident in the separation of productive old(er) age from abject old age, with boundaries erected via a process of quantification and measurement. Differences are exaggerated; what is a continuum become either/or, be that frailty, continence or memory loss, and all is measured with respect to youthful ideals of strength, power and speed (which are in turn related to morals and aesthetics as evidenced in the fact that Homeric heroes were youthful, beautiful, strong, fast and good as Menninghaus points out).

Bataille’s work suggests several modes through which the sacred/abject can be embraced (the ‘heterogeneous economy’) , including humour and eros (sometimes translated as erotism). Experiences of both eroticism and humour break down the individual’s tightly sealed boundaries, (what Elias calls the ‘capsule’ that closes and individualizes the body/self through the civilizing process) in the former case via experience of a loss of self and transgressing the boundaries of another and in both cases by revealing the abject to be a central – and even joyous – part of life. According to Bataille, eroticism, which comprises three types – physical, emotional and religious – is ‘assenting to life even in death’ (1987:11). He is speaking here of what Kristeva (1982: 12) refers to as ‘before the beginning’ (the beginning being separation), except that Bataille’s concern is with describing the opposite movement, that is from separation back to what he calls ‘a primal continuity linking us with everything that is’ (1987 : 15). In all forms of eroticism, the concern is to substitute for the individual ‘isolated discontinuity a feeling of profound continuity’ (1987:15). Meanwhile, laughter effects a rupture in the homogeneous economy of discontinuous existence and allows continuity (Arya, 2014). Describes as one of the ‘revelatory keys’ of Bataille’s philosophy, laughter is embodied and ‘reveals what is at the depths of worlds’ (Surya, 2002:34) demolishing hierarchies, bringing the high low and rebuking the self-important (Noyes, 2000; Surya, 2002). An example of the use of humour is found in Bataille’s discourse on the ‘Big Toe’ (1986), in which he makes the point that the big toe is the ‘most *human* part of the human body’ differentiating us from our nearest relatives, the great apes, and enabling us to walk upright; yet, at the same time, it is a part of our anatomy that we consider absurd and treat with mirth and ridicule. This, however, is not the kind of humour Bataille has in mind; rather, he wishes to reclaim this laughter, to make it an expression of affirmation of human existence, of life, rather than its denial through embarrassment or shame. Instead of distancing oneself from the big toe – or our viscera or other body parts – the aim includes acceptance of the truth of human being: ‘A return to reality does not imply any new acceptances, but means that one is seduced in a base manner, without transpositions, and to the point of screaming, opening his eyes wide: opening them wide, then, before a big toe’ (1986: 23). As Winfried Menninghaus notes: ‘Disgust[…] and laughter are complementary ways of admitting an alterity that otherwise would fall prey to repression [….] and in such a way that our consciousness is not at the same time overwhelmed’ (2003: 11). Moreover, Bataille’s thinking counters the classical ideals of art and is indeed ‘anti-aesthetic’ as found in his concept of the ‘informe’, part of a project intended to reconfirm all that modern aesthetics, the civilizing project, and the wider rationalizing projects of modernity have suppressed. Indeed, his sympathies are more in line with the pre-modern grotesque body as described by Bakhtin. Here, the grotesque body is everything the modern ideal rejects: open, joined to other bodies and life stages in a unity of birth, life and death (as opposed to separate, closed and individualized), linking generativity to rot (rather than strictly separating life stages), it is the body of the carnival, convulsed in life-affirming yet order-defying laughter.

Bataille’s work provides us with a moral, political, and aesthetic counterweight to the emotional economy of the fourth age. Yet it is important to remember that Bataille is delineating not an ideal but an actual, if subterranean, counter to hegemonic discourses in the face of an excessive/transgressive body that has a history as long, or longer, than the disciplined body (Falk, 1994). This transgressive body is one that is alive and well in many people’s lived experiences and everyday lives, including with regard to the body of deep old age, albeit in contradiction to the dominant imaginary which sees the old body according to the codes of modernity.

**Re-imagining the fourth age**

In what follows, I explore four literary texts all of which, with one exception, take the form of memoir. Each recuperates the fourth age by means of a shift in the emotional economy of the abject, indicating aspects of what could be an alternative social imaginary of deep old age (a term I prefer as it avoids the rationalizing approach to old age implied in the third/fourth age distinction). Limitations to this paper include the fact that this material is presented from the point of view of younger people, who happen to be in their mid-to late- fifties, and are caring for someone in advanced age, rather than from the perspective of the abjected individuals themselves. Mitigating this somewhat is the fact that third agers themselves readily take part in this practice of abjection to reassure themselves that the horrors of ageing do not relate to them. There is a wonderful description by Peter Bradshaw (2018) (in a review of the horror film, *Hereditary)*, in *The Guardian*, that captures this distancing that occurs among the middle-aged, in particular, and which he describes as this ‘secret fear and loathing of old people that flowers in middle-age: fear of becoming old, fear of the genetic message of weakness they have left us, about which we can do nothing, strive for success as we may’. If a change in the social imaginary of the fourth age is to come about, it will occur first and foremost by and through this age group. The texts I will explore are *Mother Millett* (2002) by Kate Millett; *Bettyville* (first published in 2015) by George Hodgman; *The Diary of a Good Neighbour* (1984), by Doris Lessing, and *Patrimony* (1994) by Philip Roth.

I turn first to *Mother Millett* (2001), Kate Millett’s tender, lyrical account of caring for her mother, Helen Feely Millett, as she fell slowly ill with what eventually was diagnosed as a brain tumour in her late 80s. This literary memoir is an account of her return from Poughkeepsie, New York state to St Paul’s Minnesota, where she grew up, to care for her mother. Helen had been, in her prime, a resourceful, successful business woman, an independent competent divorcee, who became a self-made wealthy woman in fact following the end of her marriage. Until her late 80s, she had retained this fierce independence, living alone in a luxury sheltered apartment complex, the Wellington, that felt like a sorority (and indeed contained women who had lived on her floor in college) when her health began at last to falter. The narrative takes in Kate’s visits to her mother in the final year before her death. At first Helen is unaccountably frail and out of sorts, but still living at home in the Wellington; then she is diagnosed and treated for a brain tumour and goes to live, possibly permanently, in a rather grim nursing home, St Anne’s. At this point – the central arc of the narrative - Kate grows determined to rescue her mother both from the nursing home and from the status of hopeless senescence into which she has been apparently consigned.

For Kate, an emotional eroticism, in Bataille’s terms, helps her to make the imaginative leap across that gap between herself and her mother, a woman in deep old age: it is what draws her towards her mother, and simultaneously towards her own future as an old woman, serving to counterpose the forces of repulsion normally associated with abjection. As she comes to visit Helen in the Wellington, acutely aware of Helen’s increased frailty, she reflects on the new closeness to her mother from whom – as a rebel – she had felt somewhat disconnected since adolescence: ‘I arrive flamboyant in a leather jacket with two bunches of strange off-white tulips beautifully stippled at the base of the flower with a soft mauve flame which at first you are not sure you have seen… That’s it, I said, the perfect thing to bring, the feeling like a suitor. I have a fancy car since the plain ones were rented, a luxury of gray Oldsmobile. And in the back, the wheelchair’ (p. 65). On the night before she returns to New York, Kate takes Helen out for a ‘lilting, almost romantic dinner… She is pleased with me tonight and goes along with the big date atmosphere, an elegiac note to our last evening. The local pike is divine, something to dream of in any corner of the world’ (p. 119).

Kate’s journey to this place of closeness and understanding is one arrived at only after some discomfort and much ambivalence, which, as Kristeva points out, is the hallmark of the abject. At the start of the journey she is not reconciled to ageing and old age at all. She writes: ‘The prospect of age. It had never really occurred to me that I could be old, infirm, all that she is now. Instead I had leafed through portraits of artists photographed in their studios, the serene faces of ageing genius in beautiful settings….So in my dealing with my mother’s infirmity and longevity I see my own and am scared’ (p. 18). Thus, Kate begins her journey with the feeling that she can somehow be aged and simultaneously transcend those corporeal embodied aspects that become, like death, something we learn to hide from and deny. But then comes the moment she visits her mother after her diagnosis and finds her ravaged with age and illness in the nursing home bed after brain surgery. There is a moment of horror, but, after the initial shock, Kate sees not the ‘ugliness’ of fragile sick old womanhood, her skull newly shorn of hair, but something both beautiful and gender-defying. Indeed, she reflects how, for much of Helen’s life, she had been a slender unimposing figure, a ‘little woman’ which belied, in Kate’s view, her competence and ambition, as well as undermining her authority through its semblance of fragility. Now, transformed, Kate feels: ‘Actually, I like it – gone is that stupid permanent, that silly arrangement of curls[...]; the old hairdo always made her seem lightweight, foolishly middle-aged[…]intellectually discountable. Not now. Now she looks like Georgia O’Keefe or a professor emeritus,’ (pp. 145-6). Her ‘new-old’ appearance somehow conveys the essence of who she is, released at last from a lifelong conventional femininity. The image is both stark and radiant, pared down, no longer acting as a brake but serving as a liberation, her true strength and character at last evident.

Again, eros helps her make that leap in expectations, judgements, understanding and there is a scene, above that bed in the nursing home, in which Helen kisses Kate’s hand, a gesture of immense significance to Kate, as if both are at last joined in a *communitas*, in the words of Victor Turner. Kate reflects: ‘I have often kissed her hand that first moment of meeting: she has never kissed mine. It was always my role as supplicant…’ Now her mother kisses her hand and Kate reciprocates: ‘quickly I reply by kissing her hand too, the white flesh, its liver spots, its frailty, its waster fingers… All fervour is in these two kisses, these hands joined before me, every commitment in the world is in this flesh’ (p. 147). It is during this visit that Kate decides not to ‘visit’ her mother – and afterwards to pick up her ‘legacy’ of cutlery from Helen’s draw in the Wellington, as instructed by her family - but instead to rescue her and return her to her own home, where she can live, and possibly die, with dignity, in her full individuality and not reduced to a ‘category’. She describes how they sneak out of the nursing home (against instructions) again with an overt air of romanticism, as in a *folie à deux*, ‘like two bandits[…]Like a getaway[...] We are Thelma and Louise, this frail old women beside me, and I some undefined criminal type ‘(p, 158). On the way they stop at a fancy upscale deli, Helen’s favourite place, and significantly Kate encourages Helen to eat as if physical appetite would at the same time ignite her appetite for life, restore to her full human being.

After her mother agrees to undergo rehabilitation in order to live in the Wellington (where capacity for self-care is required), with Kate overseeing her gruelling and painful regimen, Kate experiences bouts of ambivalence and indeed describes how, with the horror of the end of life staring her in the face, her mother’s death is threatening to swallow them both up. She reflects: ‘You finally believe in death, have seen it prefigured in her. And you want to run. Grab onto what is left of your life[…] and run’ (p. 216). There is, in this proximity to death, the (particularly female) fear that she has been consumed by the identity of her mother, and by her mother’s own death, the ultimate loss of self. She continues: ‘Now that you finally believe in death it’s sickened you too, like an ulcer in your mind… And if you fight and wrestle with it, it will get her in any case, but its hand will burn you, wither you… I’ll never make it out of here alive. Unless I get out of here now’ (p. 217).

It is the moral-political aspect of abjection, recognition of it as source of inequality and injustice, that holds Kate fast to her aim. Her own lifelong experience of outsiderhood, her writings that had won her fame and recognition in the wider world but at the same time outraged the staid St Paul’s family from whence she came, as well as her commitment to fighting prejudice in all its forms, makes her stay and fight for her mother. She describes a scene in which Helen suffers a vomiting attack, during a luncheon held in Helen’s honour and organised by her good friend Vanny, Vice-President of a powerful downtown bank. Kate is talking with a friend when Helen’s bout of vomiting begins: ‘Vomit is seeping down the front of Mother’s beautiful sweater as I run to help.’ Still, almost miraculously, Kate reflects, Helen preserves both dignity and poise, despite her ‘body’s betrayal’. Kate is almost fooled into believing all is well. But then on the way out, Vanny ‘presses my hand and assures me that my mother was one of the smartest women she has ever known’ and her use of the past tense makes Kate wince: ‘Vanny understood events only so far, failed to see that Mother was even smarter now[...] No one understands the real extent of Mother’s courage and sagacity’ (p, 255): courage which was needed to come here in the first place, in her state of ill health and frailty, as well as ‘the hell of getting wheelchair through their tunnels and elevators’ (p. 256) – all designed for the young and healthy. Furthermore, embarrassed smiles turn into disdain later, when Kate dares to ask another guest – her nephew, Steven, Helen’s grandson, and a young corporate lawyer – about Helen’s care plan which he had helped draw up, and about which Kate has reservations specifically regarding its ability to hold Helen against her will in St Anne’s. She reflects on how he had ‘admired me today for the speed and ease when I cleaned up Mother’s vomit. However when I played advocate I was suddenly someone he intensely disliked’. She, in turn, is shocked at the ‘masculine domination that emanated from him,’ placing both Helen and herself in a deficient category. For him, and others of his age and ambition, confining Helen to a nursing home, even against her will, is worth it as ‘we’ll finally be grownups and on our own, come into our heyday of glory, unencumbered’ (p. 274).

Finally, there are scenes that show that this emotional shift towards, rather than away from, abjection and the old, dying body permit enjoyment of states of shimmering enchantment, a breaking through to the heterogeneous or sacred realm, as in this description of Kate and Helen enjoying driving aimlessly together: ‘Then we drove the town, seeing the leaves, Summit and the River Road a maze of gold, an ecstasy of light, we held our breath and didn’t speak as we drove along, sharing a cloud of golden mist as the leaves swirled around the car. “Don’t you love Summit,” Mother said, saying everything in this one statement, surely not a question but a confirmation[…] as we glided down the avenue of old elms and younger maples, surrounded by grace. We were holding hands’ (p. 240). In the words of Simmel, which sum up the religious aspect of Bataille’s eroticism very well, ‘life wishes to express itself directly as religion, not through a language with a given lexicon and prescribed syntax’ (1968: 24). Or in Bataille’s own words: ‘Beyond the intoxication of youth, we achieve the power to look death in the face and to perceive in death the pathway into unknowable and incomprehensive continuity…and eroticism alone can reveal it’ (1987: 24).

There are certain similarities, both in detail and emotional tone in *Bettyville*, in which George Hodgman describes leaving New York, where he had formerly been a senior editor for *Vanity Fair*, to return to his small town boyhood home of Paris, Missouri, in order to care for his mother, Betty, as she develops various frailties and enters the early stages of dementia. Betty’s inability to conform to certain societal expectations and norms chimes with George’s growing feeling of repugnance with respect to these same norms and values. This also produces a new sense of closeness towards Betty (his mother had never accepted that he is gay), as he draws parallels with her increased marginalization, in the social world that values youthful competence and appearance, to his feeling of lifelong outsiderhood as a result of his having struck a wrong note as an artistic gay adolescent in the conservative small town of Paris, Missouri and later in New York, the sense of being a small town boy in the big city, and his eventual sacking from the cut throat world of high-end publishing. Betty’s continued efforts to ‘not fall’, as well as to continue to play the piano at Sunday church, which she has done for 25 years, demonstrate that her will is still very much burning brightly, and he takes courage from this in his own life. Indeed, he continually weaves their parallel experiences into a continuous whole, emphasising the human predicament that characterises both. Thus, he describes how her frailty reminds him of his adolescence when ‘I didn’t feel comfortable in my body. I didn’t feel comfortable anywhere. I hated to walk across a room if people were watching’ (p. 105). As it tells Betty now, the world told young George that ‘people like me weren’t right. Gay kids hear everything […]Pick up a newspaper. We hear so many terrible things about ourselves. People think it is their right. They just don’t get what being different feels like, on the inside’ (p. 105). Abjection, says Judith Butler, is the ‘mode by which others become shit’ (1990:182), a process that informs homophobia as well as ageism and all the other painful exclusions and rejections that characterize the systematizing and ordering of late modernity.

One of the ways in which George overturns the emotional tone associated with abjection is through humour. Whether gentle or bittersweet, self-deprecating or slapstick, George makes the ‘abject’ ordinary, everyday, human, even touching thereby reinserting the sacred into the profane realm. When Betty stumbles and nearly falls at the hairdressers, he sets about trying to find shoes to substitute for her dangerously worn sandals, but she will not part with them. He resorts to subterfuge and cunning. This is how he describes it and how he approaches her feet, displaying what we might call a deep sympathy for the abject: ‘This will be a battle for control over one small territory that remains my mother’s own: her feet, a dry landscape below the region of swollen ankles, a terrain coursed by rivers of fragrant lotion, of calloused patches, broken veins, errant toes. On this field of battle I have vowed to lay my body down. Withdrawing to my bed, I planned future manoeuvres. My hostages, I decided, would be stored in the crowded confines of my bedroom closet’ (2016:37). Even as he hides the sandals away in the cupboard, he thinks of them fondly: ‘If I were starting a Betty museum, I would make an exhibit out of the sandals with their worn, thin straps and soles indented with my mother’s dark footprints[…] I treat them kindly; they have served us well, through weather in all forms and days of challenges’ (p. 37). Nevertheless, when Betty a few days later cries that she cannot wear any other shoes, he yields and returns them to her.

George paints a similarly benign portrait of Betty’s habit of staining her clothes with food and other matter, describing how, despite using the washing machine regularly at odd hours of the night, as if in secret, her clothes are nevertheless always soiled. One day, when she puts on her smart black trousers to go to bridge, George reflects: ‘Mean tattletales, they keep record of every day’s spills, every crumb or bit of lint, everything she has brushed against, every speck… How unforgiving the eyes of the world can be, even over small things’ (p. 40). He brushes her legs with his hands, saluting his ‘victorious adversaries’ in the form of the old sandals, as he does so, then sponges off a streak of something dusty: these ‘small things’ are nothing more than that, in his eyes and are not polluting or damning of Betty.

He also reveals, in a number of ways, such as by making clear the similarities between mother and son, by questioning the accepted views on what matters in life and by celebrating difference, what can be described as the absurdity of everyday life. If Betty is slow and doddery, George is so clumsy he knocks down whole rows of cans in the grocery store, and he is equally eccentric in many other ways: ‘This morning, Betty got up at 4am after looking at the clock wrong[…]“Why is it still dark?” she asked. To calm her a little, I asked if she would let me comb the hair on the back of her head, which gets tangled when she lies with her head on the pillow. Who says there are no advantages to giving birth to a homosexual?’ (p. 95). All along, the object of criticism is the contemporary world with its ignorance of the sacred, its dismissal of the realities of vulnerability and suffering, the discontinuity between each and all, and very soon he ceases to miss New York ‘the city, where it is normal to work 24/7, tapping on your BlackBerry for someone who will fire you in an instant, but crazy to pause to help someone you love when they are falling’ (p. 60).Both Millett and Hodgman’s accounts make clear the fluxing movement between the pure/impure, sacred/abject and, more generally, profane/sacred realms, capable of bestowing even the greatest indignities of ageing with meaning, beauty and value. Their accounts also underline the link between patriarchy, the heterosexual matrix and ageism, each reinforcing the rest in deep unconscious or semi-conscious traces which can, however, be resisted via an embrace of the abject.

But the next question is surely this: Is there anything beyond the capacity for recuperability in terms of the abject? What about shit? No, not even shit is beyond recuperability and the holy say the texts by Doris Lessing and Philip Roth.

Turning first to Lessing, *The Diary of a Good Neighbour* features 50-something Jane (known at work as Jana) Somers, whose attitude to the filth and abjection of an old neighbour’s body provides the gateway to a new understanding of her own life. Jane first visits Maudie Fowler (a pun on ‘fouler’?) after encountering her in a shop, to keep her company and run errands and fetch shopping for her. Maude is approaching 90, without close family, and living in poverty, and Jane soon feels not just concern but some level of responsibility for her. This culminates in the event when, after an illness, and weaker than normal, Jane first takes it upon herself to wash Maudie. She washes her top half, the skeletal shoulder bones, the long thin breasts; then her bottom half, which she had dirtied, and she washes all the shit away. Lessing keeps her description of it purely matter-of-fact; the way Jane removes her clothes ‘brown and yellow with shit’, the way she stood silently allowing herself to be washed thrusting her buttocks out ‘as a child might, and I washed all of it, creases too.’ She washes her ‘private parts’ and her legs where the filthy water has swirled down her legs. After this she dressed her in the cleanest (but still faintly soiled) clothes she could find, aware all the time of her shame and mortification, therefore trying her best to be sensitive and careful (pp. 60-62). This exercise is repeated whenever it is needed and, as it turns out Maudie has stomach cancer, this is needed again.

What is important here is that, instead of seeing Maudie’s body through the youthful gaze, mediated by disgust, as the Other, Jane uses her experience to reflect on her own body, comparing her own embodied daily competence with what seems to be the fate of anyone, should they suffer an illness or accident: ‘I have only to break a bone the size of a chicken’s rib, I have only to slip once on my bathroom floor, whose tiles are dense with oils and essences – at any moment, fate may strike me with one of a hundred illnesses, or accidents… and there you are, I shall be grounded…solitude, that great gift, is dependent on health… and now I greet each day with -*what a privilege, what a marvellous, precious thing, that I don’t need anyone to assist me through this day, I can do it all myself’* (pp. 174-5). In such a way she works to close the distance between her body and that of Maudie seeing them not as two different kinds of body but separated only by *temporality*: Maudie’s body is Jane’s future self.

Confrontation with the abject body, moreover, gives a *meaning* to Jane’s life that it had formerly lacked, a meaning that now infuses her everyday life as well as her relationship with nieces, colleagues, budding lovers, work and play. It also permits her a temporal expansiveness, in the sense of an opening out to the future unto death. Finally, she gains access to pleasures normally elusive in a busy professional life. She reflects: ‘I could learn real slow full enjoyment from the very old, who sit on a bench and watch people passing, watch a leaf balancing on the kerb’s edge. A small wind lifts it: will it fall over, be blown under wheels, be crushed? No, it rests, a thick juicy green leaf, shining and full of sap… The wheels of a shopping basket spin past, just missing the leaf. The shopping basket belongs to a girl who has a child in it. She is in love with the child, smiling and bending to it, as it looks confidingly up at her, the two isolated by love together on the pavement, watched by old people who smile with them.’ (p. 174). Time, and life, have slowed down, allowing other things to rise to the surface, things of value that have been suppressed by the busy forward thrust of Jane’s life as a successful national magazine editor. Lessing makes quite clear that this state of enchantment has been attained only through the gateway of closeness to the abject body; without filth there is no holiness, calling to mind what Simone de Beauvoir, speaking of her own mother’s dying body, called a state ‘both repugnant and holy’ (1985: 20). Such a space is akin to the arcadia of childhood, which during the Golden Days of Victorian fiction often did put the very old and the very young together (Carpenter, 1984). The frail body specifically makes this experience possible. As a ‘myth’, perhaps, but a positive one, it seems to me an equally powerful counterpoint to the dread-filled social imaginary of the fourth age.

I turn lastly to Philip Roth’s autobiographical account of caring for his father in his last months, which he titled *Patrimony* (1991). In two incidents in the middle of the book Roth describes the dirty work of caring for his father as something both disturbing and pleasurable in a profound way. The first, shorter, incident relates to his father’s false teeth. Roth Senior, whose name is Herman, had had a new set of false teeth fitted but was finding them uncomfortable and during a walk with Philip he removed them in frustration, but then didn’t know what to do with them. Philip offered to hold them instead and this is what happens next: ‘To my astonishment, having them in my own hand was utterly satisfying[…] By taking the dentures, slimy saliva and all, and dumping them in my pocket, I had, quite inadvertently, stepped across the divide of physical estrangement that, not so unnaturally, had opened up between us once I’d stopped being a boy’ (p. 152).

The second incident is central to the text and involves him cleaning up his father’s faeces. This episode occurs when, after being discharged from hospital following an exploratory procedure for a brain tumour, Herman comes to stay with Philip and Philip’s partner Claire (Bloom, the actress). After several days of constipation following the surgery, Herman cannot control his bowels, and makes a mess in the bathroom, as well as dirtying himself. The episode is described in exquisite detail but, as in the Lessing, with minimal value judgements and a carefully restrained emotional tone. Here’s what he initially sees: ‘The shit was everywhere, smeared underfoot on the bathmat, running over the toilet bowl edge and at the foot of the bowl, in a pile on the floor. It was splattered cross the glass of the shower stall from which he’d just emerged, and the clothes discarded in the hallway were clotted with it… I saw that it was even on the tips of the bristles of my toothbrush hanging in the holder over the sink’ (p. 172).

Then, this is how he describes cleaning it up: ‘where his shit lay in front of the toilet bowl in what was more or less a contiguous mess, it was easiest to get rid of it. Just scoop it up and flush it away… But where it had lodged in the narrow, uneven crevices of the floor, between the wide old chestnut planks… I took down my toothbrush and, dipping it in and out of the bucket of hot sudsy water, proceeded inch by inch, from wall to wall, one crevice at a time, until the floor was as clean as I could get it[…]’ (p. 174). And the consequences of this is also a profound and pleasurable sense of connection, intimacy, of honouring Herman. Philip reflects: ‘I thought I couldn’t have asked anything more for myself before he died – this, too, was right and as it should be. You clean up your father’s shit because it has to be cleaned up, but in the aftermath of cleaning it up, everything that’s there to feel is felt as it never was before… once you sidestep disgust and ignore nausea and plunge past those phobias that are fortified like taboos, there’s an awful lot of life to cherish.’ (p. 175). After spending some part of the narrative ahead of this regretting the fact that he has declined any share in Herman’s estate in favour of his brother, feeling ‘left out’ in some symbolic way beyond the financial, he dismisses all this as the concerns of the homogeneous economy, and as fundamentally unimportant, since the latter does not attain a state of being valid in itself (Arya, 2014). He concludes: ‘So *that* was my patrimony. And not because cleansing it was symbolic of something else but because it wasn’t, because it was nothing less or more than the lived reality that it was’ (p. 176).

Roth’s attitude towards his father’s fluids: the slime of his dentures, as well as his shit, gives him access to the holy, in that it permits a communion with his father last encountered during boyhood. Abjection’s meaning is reversed so that, rather than removal *from*, a closeness *to,* is achieved, acceptance of a truly embodied parent admitting acceptance of one’s own vulnerable corporeality likewise, and at the same time a glimpse of the world beyond the profane is revealed. Indeed, these excerpts, all in their own way, suggest that a true embrace of abjection may not only serve as a counterweight but open up an alternative register of feelings about deep old age, and about life itself.

**Discussion and concluding thoughts**

An important point to emphasise in terms of resisting the kind of ageism that is instated by and through the social imaginary of the fourth age is that, as Castoriadis himself makes clear, the social imaginary can change. Here it is worth noting that in his thought the social imaginary can be contrasted with the radical imagination, which is the realm of fantasy, of the psyche, unfettered imagining, divorced from social ‘reality’. The social imaginary is, by contrast, rooted in society and social imaginings which usually crystallizes such that these imaginings are considered ‘real’ and ‘natural’. According to Ross, powerful imagery lies between the two – a kind of imaginary that is free and unspoiled yet rooted in reality, ‘“new” without being mad’ (2018: 73). Indeed, Castoriadis suggests that the last thing we need to do is to treat the social imaginary as ossified, pre-determined and inevitable. This paper has suggested that one of the ways of challenging the existing social imaginary lies with and through the abject. I have drawn on Bataille’s ideas to suggest a way of reclaiming the wild possibilities of the abject, itself part of the sacred realm, for the basis of a new relationship among different generations, constructed outside the framework of ageism. William Miller, in his genealogy of disgust, points out that social hierarchies (of all kinds) are at least partly constituted by and within the sensual and affective dimension, with ‘disgust’ an emotion that separates those of no value from the rest; hence, on this very important level: ‘the battle is for changes in the emotional economy’ (Miller, 2009: 235). The current task, which involves resisting the emotional economy associated with the fourth age, and, by extention, the social imaginary itself, brings this project into alignment with other projects of social justice. Combating ageism in this deeper existential and ontological sense is, moreover, connected with a wider project of freedom . Commenting on aesthetics, Menninghaus notes that the rules of ‘disgust-avoidance’ that constitute the ideal youthful body, serve, along with the civilizing impulse and the increased rationalization of society ‘as one of the many ideological reflexes pointing to a comprehensive suppression of the body in its basic being and functionality’ (2003: 92). Suppression of the body is, of course, suppression of freedom at a fundamental level. Moreover, changing the collective representation of the fourth age has the potential, in eroding this obdurate source of ageism, to further endow the whole life course with a freedom and meaning lost from it when value became the property of the earlier stages of the life course alone.

**Works Cited**

Arya, Rina *Abjection and Representation: an exploration of abjection in the visual arts, film and literature.* London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

Bataille, Georges *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings 1927-1939.* Edited and with an Introduction by Allan Stoekl. Trans. Allan Stoekl, with Carl R. Lovitt and Donald M. Leslie, Jr.

Bataille, Georges. *Erotism, Death and Sensuality*, Trans. Mary Dalwood. San Francisco: City Lights Books 1986 [1957].

Bataille, G. (1992 [1945]) *On Nietzsche*, Trans. Bruce Boone. London: The Athlone Press.

Beauvoir, Simone de. *A Very Easy Death.* Trans. Patrick O’Brian. New York: Pantheon Books, 1985 [1964]

Bradshaw, Peter. Hereditary Review – Toni Collette is Outstanding in Brilliant Fear Machine. *The Guardian* June 1, 2018

Butler, Judith *Gender Trouble*, London and New York: Routledge, 1990.

Carpenter, Humphrey. *Secret Gardens: A Study of the Golden Age of Children’s Literature.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1985.

Castoriadis, Cornelius *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, Trans. Kathleen Blamey. Cambridge: Polity, 1987

Falk, Pasi. *The Consuming Body.* London: Sage, 1994.

Gilleard, Chris and Higgs, Paul Ageing without agency: theorizing the fourth age. *Ageing and Mental Health*, 14 (2010): 121-128

Gilleard, Chris and Higgs, Paul Ageing abjection and embodiment in the fourth age. *Journal of Aging Studies*, 25 (2011): 135-142

Higgs, Paul and Gilleard, Chris *Rethinking Old Age: theorising the fourth age,* London: Palgrave, 2015

Higgs, Paul, and Chris Gilleard The ideology of ageism *versus* the social imaginary of the fourth age: two differing approaches to the negative contexts of old age, *Ageing and Society*, 1-14 2019 [doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X19000096](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X19000096)

Hodgman, George. *Bettyville*, London: Two Roads, 2016

Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: an essay on abjection.* Trans by Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982

Laslett, Peter The emergence of the third age, *Ageing and Society*, 7 (1987), 133-160

Lawson, Dominic. My Generation Will Pay Most to Keep Us Afloat. *Sunday Times*. April 19, 2019.

Leder, Drew. *The Absent Body.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990.

Lessing, Doris. *The Diaries of Jane Somers*. London: Penguin, 1984.

Miller, William Ian. *The Anatomy of Disgust*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2009.

Menninghaus, Winfried. *Disgust: Theory and History of a Strong State*. Trans. Howard Eiland and Joel Golb. New York: State University of New York Press, 2003

Noyes, Benjamin *Georges Bataille: A Critical Introduction.* London: Pluto Press, 2000

Richman, Michèle H. *Sacred Revolutions: Durkheim and the Collège de Sociologie*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002.

Ross, Lachlan. The Mad Animal: on Castoriadis’ radical imagination and the social imaginary. *Thesis Eleven*. 146 (1): 71-86, 2018

Simmel, Georg. *The Conflict in Modern Culture.* Trans. and ed. K. Peter Etzkorn. New York: Teachers College Press. 1968 [1918]

Surya, Michel. *Georges Bataille: An Intellectual Biography,* Trans. Krzysztof Fijalkowski and Michael Richardson. London: Verso, 2002.