

LEARNING FROM MARY O'BRIEN:
FEMINIST PHILOSOPHER AND ACTIVIST



Mary Maimie O'Brien, July 8, 1926 – October 17, 1998.

Cats Do Go To Heaven

Remembering

BY ROBBIE PFEUFER KAHN

In 1929 Virginia Woolf set about examining women's absence in the written record. With an acerbic wit that reminds me of Mary O'Brien she quoted an "old gentleman, who is dead now, but was a bishop" who "declared that it was impossible for any woman, past, present, or future to come to have the genius of Shakespeare...." In an unconscious couplet the bishop likewise opined that "cats do not as a matter of fact go to heaven, though they have ... souls of a sort." Woolf praised the deceased bishop sarcastically saying "How much thinking those old gentlemen used to save one! How the borders of ignorance shrank back at their approach! Cats do not go to heaven. Women cannot write the plays of Shakespeare" (48). The bishop might just as well have pronounced that only men could lift off into the bracing sky-blue air of high theory, as uncontaminated as heaven itself by creatural women.

Over 50 years later women had filled in the "empty shelves" Woolf called to our attention, even in the realm of theory. Looking at one of those packed shelves in the early 1980s at the Boston Women's Health Book Collective's Women's Health Information Center I noticed a purple book with plain white letters that read *The Politics of Reproduction*. I opened it because the title sounded

scholarly, an anomaly in the midst of women's health advocacy books. A new graduate student and single mother, I had been making my way through readings in social theory hoping to find mention of women's childbearing as constitutive of the human world. I had just finished a short polemical piece for my graduate seminar on the labour movement in the United States taught by the Marxist political sociologist Ralph Miliband. In the paper I heatedly pointed out that we were at the semester's end and yet our discussions had not once mentioned women's reproductive labour. Standing in the Women's Health Information Center my eyes flashed on the names in Mary O'Brien's book—Marx, Freud, Sartre—central contributors to western thought, all of whom had taken natural functions and found ontologic depth in them. Then came Mary's poignant sentence: "There are no comparable theories of birth" (1983, 20). I clasped the book to my chest, walked back to my desk and waited impatiently for the workday to end.

For a week thereafter I read Mary O'Brien's words feverishly, at times in a semi-hypoxic state, for I felt she had written what I meant to write. When such seeming eclipses occur I find I have to lie down for about a week, as if the life-force swoops out of me. Yet I have learned that I always rise up enriched as a scholar. In finding Mary's book, fittingly at the Women's Health Information Center rather than at the Brandeis University library (which in any case didn't own it), I had found my scholarly foremother.¹

Women had proved that cats can go to heaven, had filled the empty shelves with prodigious scholarship, even in the rarefied domain of theory. Yet no woman had lifted birth into the realm of abstract language, no one had theorized it until Mary O'Brien. No woman had written a philosophy of birth because they feared the patriarchal judgment which decreed, as Mary wittily described, that "Adam fell upward while Eve fell downward" (1989, 8). These new women scholars did not want to be identified with the muck of the material world—where the maternal body wallowed—abhorred by western tradition or what Mary called, embodying this legacy with a fatally humorous metaphor, "male-stream thought" (1983, 5). Until Mary the only words that gathered birth into utterance were those of the empirical sciences as she recalled, speaking of her days as a student midwife, "... a theory of birth



Mary O'Brien

as such and the language of traditional philosophy [did] not intrude upon these practical treatises" (1983, 45–46). A midwife and a political theorist. Here was the felicitous combination that allowed Mary O'Brien to put a new mark on the page conferring upon birth for the first time ontological status.

Even today when I reread *The Politics of Reproduction* I continue to appreciate the freshness of her vision. She dares to ask questions feminists, terrified of being thought essentialist (the belief that nature has a status independent of culture or history) avoid such as "What is *wrong* with genetic continuity as a necessary material base of history?" (1983, 33). When I first read this sentence I caught my breath it seemed so audacious. In the social sciences social constructionism (the conviction that culture or history entirely shapes nature) is *de rigueur*. Confessing to being a social constructionist is common at the outset of an article or paper, said, I've detected, with an almost anxious haste as if to assure the reader or listener of one's party affiliation. Mary O'Brien, though a socialist, is not a social constructionist, at least not pure and simple. Her argument has been unfairly reduced to essentialism because she speaks unabashedly about the power of the body to shape consciousness. When someone attaches the dread label essentialism to Mary's work, they usually add "well what about women who've never had children?" for they assume that Mary is a mother. It delights me to rejoinder "Mary O'Brien never had children of her own." I go on to assert that the example of Mary nonetheless shows that the body is implicated in consciousness. Had Mary not been a midwife, taking the blood and body of birth in her hands, there might still be no philosophy of birth.

A defense of Mary O'Brien's double lens of social construction and essentialism comes from the unlikely source of the postmodern feminist theorist of science Donna Haraway. She criticizes the idea that there is a "safer place for narrative, called 'inside' history, 'outside' nature" (1990 158). She goes on to say that oversimplification is not in the spirit of good feminist inquiry where:

... boundary crossing and redrawing is a major feminist pleasure that might make some modest different [sic] in a struggle for differentiated meanings, material abundance, and comprehensive equality. (1990 158)



Most of those feminist scholars who argue that history defines nature work in disciplines which can disregard embodiment. To these uncontaminated theorists, Donna Haraway offers a thought expressed in a stunning phrase. She says, "the craft of constrained storytelling intrinsic to biological sciences" doesn't allow forgetting about nature (1990 158). By biological sciences, Haraway means the field of primate studies. But the study of childbearing which Mary O'Brien undertakes imposes, happily, the same craft of constrained storytelling, because with childbearing it is impossible to disregard the body.

Besides asking questions no one else has dared to ask or even thought of Mary's book vivifies the intellectual tradition of the West through the excellence of her writing. She can beat the fathers at their abstract language game while repudiating abstraction. Many of my students have objected to her traditional speech, finding it too difficult. If they looked more closely, though, they would detect irreverent sharp-toothed words everywhere which rip the fabric of patriarchal sententiousness, creating instead a luminous sentientness. For example:

In the most primordial and abstract sense, "reproduction" in Marx's sense—the daily reproduction of oneself—is not necessarily social. It becomes social historically. Reproduction in the



biological sense, however, is necessarily social from any perspective, practical or abstract. The arch wisdom of the baby congratulation card is correct: One plus one equals three. (1983, 40)

What a slight to grand theory—toppled like a house of cards by a baby congratulation card. And what patriarchal high theorist would be imaginative enough to find ontological wisdom in such a humble cultural artifact?

Mary's wit roused by the follies of patriarchy is untiring. Speaking of another cultural artifact she tells us about the deep meaning Marx finds in a tool of production. For Marx "the instruments of production, of tools, shows the labour of past ages" (1983, 42). "Perhaps so ..." Mary muses, going on to say with justifiable irreverence, "Women do not apprehend the reality of past ages in a meditation on the probable history of a hammer, but in the mediation of real labour" (1983, 42). Like her use of the phrase "male-stream thought" Mary again debunks patriarchy by suggesting that a certain onanistic dramaturgy is endemic to it.

Besides crafting phrases which embarrass patriarchy Mary is mindful of the constraints, given the patriarchal context, feminists must use in their self-descriptions. At one point toward the end of *The Politics of Reproduction* she advises us when we write about political organizing not to use the phrase "a broad-based movement." So many *bon mot* Mary invented have become a permanent part of my own language in the same way that a bird takes sticks from a tree for her nest. But I want to turn next to several major elements of Mary's philosophy of birth which have had the greatest theoretical significance for me.

First, in implicit criticism of pure social constructionism Mary O'Brien notes that in order for there to be history at all, humans have to be born and it is women to whom this generative act has fallen. Ever fair she credits Marx with once observing that twin forces generate history. Marx said: "The production of life, both of one's own labour

and of fresh life in procreation, now appears as a double relationship: on the one hand as a natural, on the other as a social relationship" (1983, 50). But as Mary points out poignantly his ultimate analytical stance on reproductive labour was "to negate [it] by neglect" (1983, 174). Marx's customary use of the term "reproductive labour" denoted what could be called the maintenance of life—the consumption of food, clothing, shelter, education, entertainment, et cetera.

Daring to generalize about women's bodies Mary brings this commonplace yet radically overlooked truth about historical proc-

ess to our attention. In doing so she is a good 15 years ahead of her time. Some feminists today struggle with fashioning a double lens of social constructionism and essentialism. In her recent book *Hatreds: Racialized and Sexualized Conflicts in the 21st Century*, Zillah Eisenstein paraphrases Rosalind Petchesky, international coordinator of the International Reproductive Rights Research Action Group who noted a commonality amongst women over embodiment: "the desire for women to know their bodies and be in control of them is overwhelming, and not solely western in origin" (144). Eisenstein goes on to call for a politics that recognizes women as a category of analysis:

Although post-modernism's anti-essentialism is crucial to making a space for radically multicultural/racial feminisms, it also can destroy the willingness to build a politics that can recognize women.... Let us ... build connections between ... communities of women. (138)

Another example of Mary's twin lens is her brilliant narrative about the origins of patriarchy, a theory as bold as Freud's *Totem and Taboo* (1950) insofar as it seeks to give an account of the origins of the structure of human thought. She begins with a theory about how consciousness in the generic rather than genderic sense arises from body experiences. Mary believes that our knowledge of dialectical processes—the experience of "separation, unification, and transformation" which is fundamental to the unfolding of life process—begins with the childhood experience of excretion:

From our own digestive processes, we are conscious of a basic structure of process, our own participation in the opposition of externality and internality, and of the unification and transformation of objects.... Negation is rather a fancy word for the disappearance of an apple into the alimentary tract, but none the less that is what happens to the apple. It is negated and transformed. (1983, 39)

She then goes on to show how the divide over gender occurs, for besides excretion the body experience of reproduction is dialectically structured. It, too, is an instance of "separation, unification, and transformation." For men separation is the strongest experience, for women, unification and transformation (1983, 44). In a breathtakingly simple and elegant formulation Mary states: "Patriarchy is the power to transcend natural realities with historical man-made realities. This is the potency principle in its primordial form" (1983, 54–55).

Mary explains that the move from matrifocal to patriarchal culture decisively altered the status of the maternal body in experience and in representation. She suggests that matrilineality—where ancestral descent is traced

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through the maternal line—existed in the West until men realized that their seed had something to do with the creation of human life. With the “idea of paternity” came a realization of men’s “separation from nature and their need to mediate this separation.” From the idea of paternity grew the idea of patriarchy, or “the potency principle” (1983, 54–55). Patriarchy is shaped in her view by men’s desire to gain control over the continuity of generations, which women are more simply and obviously part of, since they give birth. Man compensates for his “alienated” relation to natural process by becoming the prime mover of historical process. By “alienated” Mary means (building on Marx’s definition of the term) man’s objective separation from natural process, and his consciousness of this separation.² Although men and women make history, men have created what Gerda Lerner calls the master symbols of Western culture; and men have dominated positions of social, cultural, political, and economic power (Lerner 274–307).³

Mary equates patriarchy as an institution with men as a biological group. But I believe the word “primordial” is important in her definition and shows her social constructionist sensibility because she is suggesting that, though a durable phenomenon historically, the potency principle is not ineluctable, therefore it is not biologically determined. Male reproductive consciousness arising from experiences of the body may have given birth to patriarchy. However, as Mary implies, over millennia patriarchy has become an institution which shapes or misshapes men’s lives as well as women’s, and either gender can wield its power.

At the conclusion of *The Politics of Reproduction* Mary urges women to go beyond seeking integration in the productive sphere which she sees as a “necessary but not sufficient condition of liberation. Liberation also depends on the reintegration of men on equal terms into reproductive process” (1983, 210). Mary illustrates this double integration which, according to her, depends upon the exercise of *reason* not biology, by reworking Marx’s famous vision of the division of labour. Including reproductive labour, which Marx negated by neglect, Mary imagines: “a rational human society, [where] people will be producers in the morning, child carers in the afternoon, and critical critics in the evening. Only then can men and women abandon a long preoccupation with sleeping together in favour of being awake together” (1983, 210). No one reading this image, redemptive through acts of human will and consciousness, could rest comfortable with calling Mary O’Brien an essentialist.

Having accounted for the reproductive consciousness that gave rise to patriarchy Mary O’Brien explains how this dialectical process works with women:

At the biological level, reproductive labour is a synthesizing and mediating act. It confirms women’s unity with nature experientially, and guarantees that the child is hers. It is inseparable

from reproductive process in its biological involuntariness, but it is also integrative. It is a mediation between mother and nature and mother and child; but it is also a *temporal* mediation between the cyclical time of nature and unilinear genetic time. Woman’s reproductive consciousness is a consciousness that she herself was born of a woman’s labour, that labour confirms genetic coherence and species continuity.⁴ (1983, 59)

Earlier in her discussion Mary breaks down reproductive process into “moments” available for analysis. I love this portion of her text. Her incantation of these moments acknowledges each as she lifts them one by one from the empirical world into the realm of ontology. This strategy serves her point that reproductive process is far more than physiological; it is suffused with consciousness. The moments she identifies are “menstruation, ovulation, copulation, alienation, conception, gestation, labour, birth, appropriation, nurture” (1983, 47). Mary then divides these moments into ones which are voluntary and involuntary, female and male, as well as those that are generically shared moments. Elsewhere she brilliantly adapts Marx’s famous parable about the architect and the bee to show how childbearing is ineluctably both a voluntary (social constructionist) and involuntary (essentialist) experience. As Mary describes, Marx wrote: “what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in his imagination” (1983, 37). That is, the architect creates an object not involuntarily, but with intellect and intentionality, however much these attributes may be shaped historically. Mary takes Marx’s parable away from the realm of historical-made realities and applies it to natural realities in the following way:

... female reproductive consciousness knows that a child will be born, knows what a child is, and speculates in general terms about this child’s potential. Yet mother and architect are quite different... Unlike the architect, her will does not influence the shape of her product. Unlike the bee, she knows that her product, like herself, will have a history. Like the architect, she knows what she is doing; like the bee, she cannot help what she is doing. (1983, 38)

As so many times before I find myself bewitched by Mary’s reworking of Marx’s famous couplet, as if I were reading a poet’s not a political theorist’s lines.

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I began this appreciation of Mary O'Brien with Virginia Woolf and I will conclude with her. In *A Room of One's Own* Virginia wrote that you can either write with a pen or a pickaxe (84). By this she meant that anger can get in the way: "Severances and oppositions" can impede the development of an incandescent mind (101). Yet in her own writing Virginia Woolf uses anger to great advantage, as evidenced by the quote at the beginning of this article about the deceased bishop. And so does Mary O'Brien whose mind, in my opinion, qualifies for the adjective incandescent. The white heat of her insights into patriarchy transforms her pickaxe into a pen. With this fire-forged implement she crafts a theory that bequeaths to us all a profound understanding of embodiment and of the dominant social institution under which we live.

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¹Now I must digress for a moment to tell an anecdote which would amuse Mary. Once in spell-checking a chapter for my book *Bearing Meaning: The Language of Birth*, offspring of Mary's book, I was told by the spell check (of Microsoft Word 4.0 for the Macintosh) that the word "foremothers" was "unknown." Naively, I asked—"suggest." The reply—"forefathers"!

²For O'Brien as for Marx, alienation is not a psychological hang-up but a *structural condition with psychological effects*: "Alienation is not a neurosis, but a technical term describing separation and the consciousness of negativity" (1983, 52). O'Brien identifies alienation in the sphere of reproduction, Marx in production.

³Gerth and Mills also use the term master symbols in a useful sociological discussion of the manipulation of master symbols in legitimating institutions of society.

⁴As Mary O'Brien explains, "Reproductive process is not a process which male-stream thought finds either ontologically or epistemologically interesting on the biological level. The human family is philosophically interesting, but its biological base is simply given" (1983, 21).

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