

Reproducing the World: Essays in Feminist Theory. Mary O'Brien. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1989, Pp. 306 hardcover.

Discussing a book as diverse as Mary O'Brien's *Reproducing the World: Essays in Feminist Theory* is indeed difficult. It is based on a collection of papers and talks written and presented by Mary O'Brien's during the 1980s. The audiences range from gatherings of feminist scholars such as the Simone de Beauvoir Institute of Concordia University — to which "Reproducing the World" was presented — to the Registered Nurses Association of Ontario in 1981 — to which "Learning to Win" was presented. The publications include mass media such as the *Whig-Standard Magazine* (associated with the daily paper in Kingston, Ontario) where "Ethics and Ideology in Health Care: A Feminist Perspective" was published, to *Canadian Forum* where "Collective Pilgrimage: The Political Personal" was published, and *Canadian Woman Studies* where "State Power and Reproductive Freedom" was published.

The book is divided into three quite distinct sections. The first, entitled "Feminist Theory," focuses on the historical centrality of reproduction to patriarchy and capitalism. It also points to the potentially enormous effects of the new reproductive technologies. In the second section, O'Brien addresses her feminist concerns to the works of Heidegger, Samuel Beckett, Machiavelli, Milton and Hegel. The final section critically examines the significant gendered and gendering "institutions" — education and health.

The articles range in seriousness of tone and wit. First, an example of wit (in a discussion of nurses): "There are few tenets more beloved of conservative thought than that which holds that the form which hovers over the sick bed and the death bed should be female, but the notion of hovering has always been a largely fictitious one: it is difficult to hover on a trot" (285). The argument is serious, though. Underlying all of the articles is a consistent viewpoint and mode of analysis. With varieties of combinations and permutations, O'Brien discusses her theory of the origins and results of capitalistic patriarchal social arrangements.

O'Brien's argument is basically that history depends not only on the material production of that necessary for living as Marx postulated, but also on the reproduction of the species. Material production demands the labour of men (and at times the reserve

army of women). Human reproduction involves the labouring of women. Just as men's labour produces surplus value for the capitalist, so too does women's labour produce surplus value for men. For men are alienated ("men do not make history without being born" [47]) from the product of women's birth labour. Motherhood is certain but fatherhood must be proven. It is out of this alienation from the next generation, from their offspring, which men experience that the need for abstract laws and principles (governing men's ownership of women, the babes of the women, and so on) are borne. Compatible with capitalism, the abstracted and alienated father has developed the complexities of patriarchal culture to mediate his place in the world.

There are two significant moments in the history of reproduction. The first was when men discovered paternity and realized how tenuous was their link to their (?) offspring — with the resultant edifice of patriarchy. The second was the separation of reproduction from sexual intercourse. The second change is very recent, but as significant as the first. Through it, a variety of alternative birthing arrangements have become possible: freeze-dried sperm, artificial insemination, surrogate motherhood, ex utero fertilization, as well as more and less effective contraceptives and more or less effective fertility enhancing procedures. Through such techniques, reproduction has come increasingly under the jurisdiction of the patriarchy — of male doctors, research scientists and other male birth-brokers. Now the ultimate outcome of reproductive technology has truly reactionary potential. Through it, men's need to create ownership of the next generation, to their own ends, may be easier and easier as wombs become irrelevant. The possibilities are indeed horrifying.

Such are the arguments and the questions Mary O'Brien raises in *Reproducing the World*.

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This is a wonderful book — breathtaking in its erudition and its celebration of knowledge as the collective creation of the world. The fifteen articles collected here (all but five published for the first time) are equally successful as an introduction to Mary O'Brien's work and an important deepening and extension of the brilliant theory she first presented in *The Politics of Reproduction*. They also allow us

insights into the personal development of her thought and its roots in her life as a working-class Scottish girl, raised by her three aunts, saved from a life of office clerking by the war-time emergency which opened nursing to her.

The organization and editing of the articles, done with Somer Brodribb, reflect a great deal of thought and care. The result is exemplary — notable for both its richness and coherence. Each article acts as a powerful illustration of the value of O'Brien's theoretical frame in analyzing a different aspect of life or thought and, at the same time, further develops our understanding of this framework. Mary O'Brien's literary craft and wit, as well as her penchant for grounding large theoretical questions in the specifics — even minutiae — of everyday life has spared the shared theoretical core in each article from leaving any impression of repetition. In fact, one of the pleasures of the book is the opportunity it provides to luxuriate in various stimulating applications of her perspective even as we come to understand the world differently and better.

In Part One of the book, "Feminist Theory," six chapters present the main tenets of her complex dialectical theory engagingly, clearly and convincingly from a number of angles. She argues that oppressive dualistic patriarchal structures are the result of the separation of biological continuity from historical process over time — a separation grounded in differential male/female reproductive consciousness. For women, childbirth is a mode of alienation mediated by women's labour. It is a "unity of knowing and doing, of consciousness and creative activity, of temporality and continuity" (14). However, the alienation of male sperm is not mediated; "it is fundamentally abstract and involuntary and must be concretized in social process, the most primordial from of which is the male appropriation of the child" (14) — an appropriation accompanied by the definition of "Man's" relationship to the natural world as an antagonistic one, women as part of nature, the separation of public and private life, and the establishment of men's rule over both.

In Part Two, "Critique of Patriarchy," four articles lay bare the workings of this patriarchal political project in the classic literature, political theory, and philosophy of the malestream.

● Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* is read as a dramatization of Martin Heidegger's concerns in *Being*

and *Time*. In both, O'Brien argues, "men stand alone, alienated from the natural world and species continuity ... for there are no women to translate natural continuity into historic time in the act of birthing" (94);

● Machiavelli's play *La Mandragola*, read in the context of his political writing, shows him to be "almost unique in the annals of malestream thought in his understanding ... that gender struggle is an essential substructure of history and that this fact has hard, cold consequences for the theory and practice of patriarchal politics" (122);

● Milton's writing on marriage and divorce reveals him dealing with the challenge of how men might be "re-integrated with nature yet maintain their social superiority over women" (154);

● Hegel is credited with "probably the greatest and most sustained attempt to rationalize and perfect the tradition of malestream thought and to justify the definition of creative humanity as 'Man'" (197).

These critiques provide evidence of the dualistic patriarchal dynamic at the core of western culture and thought and its roots in male reproductive consciousness. However, they do more than this, for they are immanent critiques in which the identification of contradictions is also the development of transcendent theory. Despite his patriarchal blindness, Hegel teaches us:

that the reproductive process is dialectical.... He has shown us why Life yields to Death as the primordial male experience. In doing so he offers us a historical ground and a philosophical foundation for a new transcendent philosophy of Birth and Life. (197)

In Part Three, "Women, Health and Education," five articles treat of nursing, health care, education, hegemony theory, and feminist teaching and scholarship in ways that call on and affirm the radical transformative spirit of that transcendent theory and its ground in collective struggle. Here we have Mary O'Brien:

● outlining to an annual meeting of the Registered Nurses' Association of Ontario a strategic perspective for nursing which seeks the transformation of the health industry rather than only improved status within it;

- noting the failure of hegemony theory to theorize the social construction of gender relations, even as it highlights "civil society";

- rejecting the personal status of "lonely passionate scholar, sweeping Cartesian fluffballs from the musty corners of platonic caves while Minerva's owl moults away her wisdom and gradually loses the power to distinguish dusk from dark" (252), in favour of scholarship as a collective political passion. So we cannot doubt her when she claims that:

Beneath — not far beneath — the turmoil of feminist politics and women's resistance to oppression is a discernible process compounded of critical analysis, demonstration, speculation, artistic creativity, disciplinary rebellion, political will, and intellectual ferment which surpasses the Renaissance fervour which turned John Donne's world upside down. That Renaissance was a rebirth in which parents, child, and attendants were all male. This one is different. (278).

Her own book is eloquent testimony to this claim.

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