

# A Song of Mary O'Brien

BY MADELEINE GRUMET

Any attempt to sing the heart and spirit of Mary O'Brien is daunting. Singing would be better than speaking, for the composition would contain words and melody, a breath drawn up out of my lungs and blown out to the world that would carry, nudge, and swoop around the words, holding them up and tossing them aside at the same time. That would be closer to Mary, the wholeness of her, the power of her vibrant, obstreperous, insistent interest in the world, sustained by outrage and a joke. "Tell all the truth but tell it slant" Emily Dickinson cautioned us, and that was an angle where Mary was most comfortable.

In "Feminism as Passionate Scholarship" she wrote, "we must have a moral lust for a different world." She insisted on this coupling, never relinquishing appetite, nor ethics. Her sense of desire was not a play on words. It was a celebration of the daily pleasure and necessity of being human; her gallery held Breugel's women and as well as Venus on the half-shell, and Eleanor Roosevelt. *The Politics of Reproduction* refused the separation of morality from desire, just as it refused the separation of mind and body, private and public:

The dialectical structure of forms of consciousness is



Cath McNaughton and Mary O'Brien

rooted in the dialectical structure of the primordial biological experience of our lived bodies, in that both digestive process and reproductive process are dialectically structured: they are instances of separation, unification and transformation. (44)

In Mary's work I found language for my own project to link the experiences of reproduction to the shaping of human consciousness. The 1980s was a hard time to be celebrating the universality of reproduction as a theme in human consciousness. Feminism had seemed to promise an escape from the endless responsibility for child care that women carried throughout our lives. Writings about reproduction during the time that young women were celebrating the dignity of lives that did not rock the cradle, that repudiated compulsory heterosexuality, that embraced work in the political and public world, were often read as regressive. Nevertheless, Mary published her list of moments:

- The moment of menstruation
- The moment of ovulation
- The moment of copulation
- The moment of alienation
- The moment of conception
- The moment of gestation
- The moment of labour
- The moment of birth

- The moment of appropriation
- The moment of nurture

And then she explained how these moments and our experience and interpretation of them shaped our consciousness and our world. To this day the originality and courage of Mary's work, published in 1981, continues to amaze me, as it did on the day I first encountered it. And when we met, she welcomed me and my work, even though it was close to hers. Her conviction that intellectual labor is collective labor, was not merely feminist



Cath McNaughton, Angela Miles, Mary O'Brien

rhetoric. She was surely competitive, loved a good fight and a hard contest. She relished attention and purred when appreciated. And she could still celebrate the work of other people, women and men.

When Mary and Cath welcomed me into their home they welcomed me into their world. "The passionate scholar must surely be of the world" Mary wrote, and what a world it was. Sparkling sheets, Cath's rhubarb pie, Mary's roses, the salmon, the haggis, the tea, the singing, the cats. Those of us who knew Mary, know each other, we know each other's work, we know each others kids and partners, and families, for she wound us together, engaging us in each other's projects, support, gossip.

Mary's life was a great adventure, propelled by courage and imagination. Exhilarating and exhausting, she took up the world she met and then took it much further. Then in the evening, she would gather it together, doing crossword puzzles that brought an order, however ephemeral, to all the words. Those who heard her lecture know the exquisite pattern she would weave, often without a note at hand.

It was hard to start and it is hard to end this mediation on Mary. Troubled by the writer's narcissistic worry, I am

reluctant to conclude, fearing that if I let this song of her go, I will lose her. But I forget the moments that follow alienation. My words cannot contain her great spirit, and there is all of her work and our work waiting.

She staked her Feathers—  
Gained an Arc—  
Debated—  
Rose again—  
This time—  
beyond the estimate  
Of Envy, or of Men—

And now, among Circumference—  
Her steady Boat be seen—  
At home—  
among the Billows—As  
the Bough where she was born—  
(Dickinson "She Staked Her Feathers")

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#### References

- Dickinson, Emily. *Emily Dickinson*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993.  
O'Brien, Mary. (1981) *The Politics of Reproduction*. New York: Routledge, 1981.  
O'Brien, Mary. "Feminism as Passionate Scholarship. *Reproducing the World: Essays in Feminist Theory*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1989.

For an excellent selected bibliography of Mary O'Brien's published work, as well as analyses of her work, please see the special September 1989 issue of *Resources for Feminist Research/Documentation sur la recherche féministe* "Feminist Theory: The Influence of Mary O'Brien" (Volume 18, Number 3).