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becoming undone: Darwinian reflections on life, politics and art

Elizabeth Grosz, Duke University Press, Durham & London, 2011, 264pp., ISBN: 978-0-8223-5071-2, £14.00 (Pbk)

'At present, to deny all explanations of a biological kind—because biology has paradoxically been used to exploit women—is to deny the key to interpreting this exploitation' (Irigaray, 1993: 46). Reading thinkers such as Irigaray, Deleuze and Bergson through a Darwinian lens, Grosz insists upon the rethinking of biological concepts such as sexual selection and natural selection as essential to advancing feminist theory. Contesting the historical notion of nature as passive matter, Grosz demonstrates with eloquence how rather than opposing nature to culture, and privileging the latter, we should rethink nature as culture's underlying condition. Instead of seeing nature as fixed and static matter, she sees it as harbouring an inherent temporal and evolutionary agency that makes possible the virtual, the virtual being defined as a latent potentiality for becoming. Praising nature's unlimited biological capacity for novel generation, she states, '[t]he common impetus life carries within it is that of *materiality itself*, the capacity to make materiality extend itself into the new and the unforeseeable' (p. 33).

Darwin offers feminist theory a new way of thinking by lauding an inexhaustible replication of differences and constant evolution of the new and never-before-seen. Paramount to understanding the richness of Darwinian difference is Grosz's insistence on the importance of sexual difference. Without sexual difference, 'the indeterminable difference between two beings who do not yet exist, who are in the process of becoming', there would be nothing but an asexual reproduction of the same (p. 146). While Grosz upholds an Irigarayan notion of sexual difference, retaining the view that sexual difference is a universal question of ontological value that perceives the difference between the male and female sex as irreducible and non-reciprocal, she is able to evade the heteronormative critiques to which Irigaray was prone by exploring the two distinct functions of sexual selection and natural selection. While natural selection regulates sexual difference through reproduction, sexual selection is about erotic intensification, inducing 'pleasure rather than progeny' (p. 130). She asserts, '[s]exual selection may be understood as the queering of natural selection, that is, the rendering of any biological norms, ideals of fitness, strange, incalculable, excessive' (p. 132). Grosz beautifully unfolds

the aesthetic dimension of sexual selection and its role in the production of art, which she defines as the ability of materiality to function in ways other than what is given. Key to her understanding of art is the decentring of the human from the animal continuum. She calls for a feminist enquiry into the *inhuman*, reminding us that sexual difference is an inheritance of our 'prehuman past and its animal connections' (p. 86).

Reflecting on life, politics and art, Grosz questions feminist theory's privileging of epistemology (questions of discourse, knowledge, truth and scientificity) over ontology (questions of the real, of matter, of force or energy), calling for a new metaphysics of nature and its cosmological and historical forces. Her ontology of nature is meticulously crafted and averts laying claims to any essentialising project. She offers an analysis of how time interacts with matter, invoking life's very becoming, a becoming that is constantly in flux, resisting stable identities. She engages with feminist politics of identity and rethinks popular notions of freedom and autonomy, critiquing theories that prioritise the role of the subject. She emphasises, '[t]o the extent that feminist theory focuses on questions of the subject or identity, it leaves questions about the rest of existence ... untouched. Feminism abdicates the right to speak about the real, about the world, about matter, about nature, and in exchange cages itself in the reign of the "I"' (p. 84). Shifting away from productive knowledge practices and turning our attention to the real opens us up to the absolute otherness that is the world and its incessant reconstituting of new forms of life.

Rather than shunning the biological sciences that have historically relegated women to the second sex, Grosz calls upon us to revisit the natural world and its proliferation of sexual difference. Sexual difference is not based on any hierarchy of the sexes, but in contending the incommensurability of the male and the female it insists on the plurality of life and its potential possibilities of dispersion. That the biological mixing of two sexes is capable of infinitely multiplying differences is not a biological fact easily denied. And though advances in reproductive technology may permit the procreation of offspring using a third party via processes such as surrogacy, gamete transfer or the controversial mitochondrial replacement, the case remains that the coupling of at least one male gamete and one female gamete is necessary for the coming into being of a new and unique individual. Grosz asserts, '[w]ithout sexual difference, there could be no life as we know it, no living bodies, no terrestrial movement, no differentiation of species, no differentiation of humans from each other into races and classes (...)' (p. 101). Though Grosz maintains that nature itself is always sexed, she is not in any way privileging the heterosexual sexual encounter; however, she asks that we take seriously the real-world fact that heterogeneity exists in our culture because of the underlying condition of sexual difference. Sexual difference is 'the impetus for the eruption of all other human variations' (p. 105). Sexual difference maximises the potential for diversity.

This diversity of life is intensified through art and its erotic entanglements with sexual selection. Viewing art as that space where animal and human lines are blurred, and erotic intensification is sensorially captured as existing in its own right (outside of procreation), demonstrates that we are more than biologically determined reproductive beings, but creative beings that produce the beautiful in all its differing degrees of difference.

Overall, *Becoming Undone: Darwinian Reflections on Life, Politics and Art* is about becomings. It's a book that explores multiple possibilities of existence and praises the temporal, evolutionary and creative power that is nature.

reference

Irigaray, L. (1993) *Je, Tu, Nous: Towards a Culture of Difference*, trans. A. Martin, London: Routledge.

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