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Review of Silvia Bowerbank, *Speaking for Nature: Women and Ecologies of Early Modern England*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004.

With this gracefully written and scholarly book, Silvia Bowerbank, a professor of English at McMaster University, Canada, makes a major contribution to the history of ecofeminist ideas. The text of *Speaking for Nature* unfolds as a series of portraits of early modern English women intellectuals. In many cases, their personal losses, or social compromises as gifted i.e. 'difficult' women, find a salve in the world of green nature. But Bowerbank does not idealize her subjects in a one dimensional way. Alongside their compassion for the wild and their critical political vision, she exposes their occasional vanities, and inconsistencies, too.

Inconsistency and contradiction is an important theme in these existential vignettes, as Bowerbank draws out the political double bind lived by women who would be both feminists and ecologists. Given that women are constructed patriarchally as 'nature and yet human', the ecofeminist challenge has always been

... to ground the movement on women's responsibility to speak and act for the well being of nature as life and, at the same time, to critique the very definitions and practices that perpetuate "nature" as a system of violence and injustice (Bowerbank, p.3).

Another contradiction running through the lives of these educated, and often leisured women, is the tension between their class privilege and their public and private humiliation and subordination as feminine speakers. But the unravelling and sociological de-coding of hybrid personal identities is expertly handled by Bowerbank.

Women's problematic relation to 'nature'- the psychological linch pin of masculine domination - preoccupies many passages of this book, although Bowerbank does not always make explicit when she is discussing 'ecological nature' and when she is discussing women's 'embodied nature'. This may be a stylistic device on her part, used to

echo the confusing everyday experience of women. But it seems to me that it is also a moment which reveals the limits of the literary genre for those of us wanting to make political change. In sociological writing, the distinction between “first nature” and enculturated ‘second nature’ is very clearly made, and it wards off the oppressive ambiguity that bedevils Bowerbank’s reading of women’s predicament.

The reader is introduced first to Mary Wroth, author of *The Countess of Montgomerys Urania* (1621), a study, among other things, of the gendered labor that creates ‘a sense of place’. But Wroth’s novel is a critique of the nostalgic pastoral tradition. Against the sure footed arcadian fantasies of men, a woman knows only too well how the tranquil grove may threaten her safety. Yet, on the other hand, as Bowerbank observes keenly,

The configuration of the forest grove - as relatively free and undetermined - provides a textual shelter where women not only break silence about the toxic nature of love in a patriarchal society, but also begin to devise a collective process of storytelling that might redress those wrongs systemically (Bowerbank, p.49).

Another voice refusing the marginalisation of her sex, is the poet, vitalist philosopher, and forest conservationist, Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle. Bowerbank traces her gentle skirmishes with men of the Royal Society like Robert Boyle, and her bold stance against their move into atomism and mechanistic models of nature. She turns Francis Bacon’s celebration of the scientist as hunter around into an appreciation of nature as an active principle, eluding men’s efforts to determine simplistic cause-effect chains. Beyond this, she conjectures that animals may even have a moral sense. Her *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy* (1666) emphasises the agency of nature as a kind of trickster - a theme revived more recently in Donna Haraway’s feminist appraisals of science.

Speaking for Nature covers some of the same territory as Carolyn Merchant’s foundational ecofeminist classic *The Death of Nature*. But her reading of Bacon’s role in setting up the modern scientific mastery of nature is more nuanced than the earlier account. Bowerbank argues that as Bacon seeks a ‘lasting harmony’ of men and nature - working always to men’s advantage of course, his rhetoric of science as rape of nature, is displaced by an image of humanity and nature in ‘marriage’, the permanent voluntary submission of nature. In contrast to the intellectual dominion demanded by men of science, many early ecofeminists seek a reciprocity with nature through piety. Here Bowerbank documents the lives of Mary Rich, Countess of Warwick, Catherine Talbot, and Jane Lead, founder of the Philadelphian Society. Each in her way is engaged in the perfection of ‘nature’ through various technologies of self-improvement. Theirs is a relational approach to self and other, subject and object.

The discipline of ‘nature study’ is yet a further innovation of 18th century women. In line with the Aristotelian ‘great chain of being’ ideology, men and women have been, and still are, assigned complementary spheres and competences. In the Renaissance era

and even beyond the Enlightenment... this supposedly God given dualism would justify men's exclusion of women from the halls of scientific learning. So women develop a non-interventional alternative in the study of nature', an activity more fitting to their gender role. However, under patriarchal hegemony, nature study comes to be pursued as an elementary form of moral education for children. Enjoyment of the green wild, and careful observation of its ways, not only acquaints young minds with the diversity of flora and fauna, it also serves by recourse to projection and metaphor, to naturalize oppressive class roles and sexual hierarchies.

The model of woman as environmental activist emerges with poet and essayist Anna Seward. She is a friend and biographer of Erasmus Darwin, who actually plagiarizes some of her work, and a friend of Sir Walter Scott, who publishes her writing posthumously. Seward's lifelong preoccupation is the devastation of countryside wrought by the industrial revolution. And her lifelong quest - How to find a 'balance' between useful application and aesthetic value in nature? But arguably, Bowerbank's most engaging profile is the chapter on Mary Wollstonecraft. It begins with her travels through the cold, craggy, 'Bastille-like' landscapes of Scandinavia, and her dismissive comparison of Nordic household economies with English and French urban culture. In some respects, her arrogant 'tourist gaze' prefigures Simone de Beauvoir's liberal feminist view of rural women as mere beasts of burden. Whereas today, ecofeminist theorists evaluate women farmers as competent economic producers.

However Bowerbank surmises that Wollstonecraft was in a kind of personal-political liminality or metamorphosis during these journeys. So that her rather jaded traveller's account in *Letters Written During A Short Residence in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden (1796)* is actually a record of

... her painful - not always successful - struggle to transform her own nature to conform to her new [post revolutionary humanitarian] principles (Bowerbank, p.197).

A firm believer in the historicity of nature, Wollstonecraft, like feminists everywhere, has to purposefully re-invent her womanhood in a modern form. Yet, in the midst of this project, her 'nature' is pulled and stretched confusingly by 'involuntary' fantasies and longings for her infant daughter. Again, her broken relationship with the child's father, needs to be understood as essentially political and historical, rather than some kind of personal failure.

As an ecologist, the author of the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792)* gradually finds her way beyond the severe ethnocentric judgements of modernist universalism to an appreciation of geographic particularity among the various human orientations to nature. Not only does she observe the breakdown of the feudal order with satisfaction, she becomes apprehensive that capitalism will entail an even worse tyranny.

To business, as it is termed, everything must give way: nay, is sacrificed; and all the endearing charities of citizen, husband, father,

brother, become empty names (Wollstonecraft in Bowerbank, p.211).

How prescient her observation seems now, in an era of corporate neo-liberalism, when masculinities across the globe become unhinged and institutional bullying and militaristic sadism colour every aspect of daily life.

And where does Bowerbank herself stand? Ecofeminist activists need women who can give wise leadership. So how would Bowerbank translate her literary appreciation of these remarkable figures into lessons for contemporary political practice? She acknowledges approvingly, I think, Raymond Williams' socialist view of arcadian sentiment as a genre of aristocratic play re-shaping itself as conservationism. At other times her text even leans to an unsentimental postmodern stance and apparent endorsement of the quintessential slogan of capitalist liberalism - 'reinventing nature'. The bio-regional perspective is put aside as unrealistic nostalgia. And fairly loaded phrases like 'the meanness and labor of rural life' (p.40); 'the enchanting spell of living off the land - along with the pleasurable illusion of self reliance' (p.42); 'the misery of a simple life in the woods' (p.46) leave Bowerbank at odds with socialist ecofeminists such as Mies and Bennholdt-Thomsen.

But this rejection of the subsistence perspective, cutting edge of international ecofeminism, sits awkwardly in turn, with the book's concluding call to embrace the ecological wisdom of indigenous peoples - who are after all, the practitioners par excellence of economic subsistence. If Bowerbank is revising the manuscript for a second edition, she could possibly use the opportunity to reconcile what comes across as discordant elements in her meta-authorial voice. My one disappointment in reading *Speaking for Nature* is that this intricately documented, exemplary research results in a rather agnostic palate. Is it a case of academic objectivity versus engagement? Or does it reflect some residual doubt and ambivalence in Bowerbank's feminism vis a vis the tortuous 'idea of nature'? - This said, there is no doubt that her historical essays deepen our understanding of ecofeminist thinking, and show that our 21st century political anguish has been lived already by some very substantial fore-mothers.

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