

MARY DALY'S *PURE LUST*

EILEEN MANION

Mary Daly, *Pure Lust: Elemental Feminist Philosophy*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1984, 471 pp.

Mary, Mary, quite contrary,
How does your garden grow?
With silver bells, and cockle shells,
And pretty maids all in a row.

The progress of Mary Daly's publishing career represents an important trend in contemporary radical feminist thought. In 1968, along with the first tentative stirrings of "women's liberation," *The Church and the Second Sex* appeared. However, the book itself was more a reaction to Vatican II than a product of second wave feminism. In it Daly identified all the obvious instances of sexist bias in Catholic doctrine and practice, as well as the clear strain of misogyny in Catholic theology. She concluded that "equality" of men and women in the church was desirable and possible and made "some modest proposals" toward that goal.

By the mid-seventies, when her publishers wanted to re-issue the volume (by that time out of print) Daly had rejected all modesty. The book, tame as it may seem in light of her subsequent work, had involved her in a nasty tenure struggle at Boston College, which she describes as "an archetypal battle between principalities and powers."¹ At last she had recognized the forces of evil, and defeated them in the first round, by mobilizing student support so that the administration had to reverse its decision to fire her, and instead grant her promotion and tenure.

By the time that *The Church and the Second Sex* was reprinted, it had become for Daly "the journal of a half-forgotten foremother, whose quaintness should be understood in a historical context." For women to ask for a fair deal within the Church was "comparable to a black person's demanding equality in the Ku Klux Klan."²

Daly had gone "beyond God the Father" (the title of her second book, published in 1973) for she had lost the hope that the Church could be reformed, though not her belief that religious concerns or ultimate questions are central for women. Daly remains a religious thinker. She wants nothing less than to conceive a whole new world view for women's redemption, which she identifies with the salvation of the earth itself.³

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In *Beyond God the Father: Towards a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* Daly was preoccupied with "transforming the collective imagination,"⁴ to get rid of an exclusively male notion of God. She looked forward to an integration of feminine and masculine principles which would result in "psychic wholeness or androgyny."⁵ Toward patriarchy she took the defiant stance for which she has become so famous, "assuming the role of witch and mad woman,"⁶ but she still believed men were salvageable. Power relationships were "demonic" but men might "begin to liberate themselves toward wholeness . . . when women move into the new space."⁷ By renouncing male privilege, men could "succeed in becoming human."⁸

By the time Daly published *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (1978) this fond hope seems to have disappeared and "androgyny" had become a dirty word "conveying something like John Travolta and Farrah Fawcett-Majors scotch-taped together."⁹ Here Daly is more preoccupied with words and word-play, more contemptuous of conventional, academic scholarship, more entranced by some of the nastier contemporary and historical instances of women's victimization or "gynocide": Indian *Suttee*, Chinese footbinding, African genital mutilation, European witch burnings, American gynecology. This catalogue of horrors, which Daly meticulously examines in *Gyn/Ecology*, is proof for her of male "vampirism." In her system men are demons "who feed on women's stolen energy."¹⁰ Her project is no longer any kind of "reconciliation with the Father. Rather it is affirming our original birth, our original source, movement, surge of living. This finding of our original integrity is re-membering our Selves."¹¹ Women must refuse to give up any of their energy to men; instead they must hoard it for themselves and one another, just as nineteenth century males were counselled by some doctors to hoard their semen, make the best use of their personal sexual capital rather than waste it in masturbation, visits to prostitutes or unnecessary conjugal relations.

Gyn/Ecology was a depressing book to read. Even if one disagreed with Daly's simplistic world view, the care with which she examined (male) scholarship's minimizing of women's suffering had an impact. Daly's fluffy metaphysics could be forgotten, or skimmed off, leaving only the undiluted rage, horror, and disgust.

Daly's new book, *Pure Lust: Elemental Feminist Philosophy*, adds very little to *Gyn/Ecology*, except for some new words to play with and a slightly more extreme version of the same ideas. Basically for Daly there are two categories of "Be-ing" in the world: the necrophilic and the biophilic. Men, it seems, by definition, fall into the former category; women have biophilic potential, unless they are seduced by bad male ideas into becoming "fembots."¹² Women who might disagree are just part of the Mean Male Machine.

According to Daly's Gospel, women can retrieve "original wholeness," for "we are rooted, as are animals and trees, winds and seas, in the Earth's substance. Our origins are in the elements."¹³ All this rhapsodic invocation of nature, combined with an exhortation to consider ourselves a "Race of Lusty Women" and an appeal to "the force of reason rooted in instinct, intuition, passion"¹⁴ makes me nervous. Daly may dislike all the correct things in the modern world: "massacres of war, racism, imposed economic poverty and famine, environmentally caused ill-health, the subtly spreading drabness, banality, ugliness of the man-made environment,"¹⁵ but she attributes them to "discharges of male instinctual energy."¹⁶ Thus the

"change of consciousness" she offers as the first step toward solving the world's problems seems curiously resonant with fascist rejection of despised others and internal complexity/ambivalence. She gives us a useful critique of "phallic asceticism" and its often life-threatening desire to transcend the body, but, paradoxically, she herself rejects the human body in its sexual differentiation, since in her post *Beyond God the Father* writings she regards human integrity not as a reconciliation of the sexes, but as a reunion of Mother and Daughter in "pre-oeipal" (to switch terminology) bliss.

The one thing that adds a patina of complexity to Daly's basically simplistic and regressive system is her use of language, her coining of new words (bore-ocracy, methodicide), her refurbishing discredited ones (hag, crone, spinster), or her retrieving archaic ones and using them for her own purposes (brewster, webster, snool).¹⁷ For Daly, language is virtually omnipotent. Words have "radiant powers" in themselves to break through "the bonds/bars of phallocracy."¹⁸ Daly's word-play can be entertaining or inspirational, though it can also run into adolescent self-indulgence: "This is a world made to the image of its makers, a chip off the old block/cocks, who are worshipped by the fraternal faithless as god the flasher, god the stud, and god the wholly hoax."¹⁹

Part of Daly's wide appeal must surely be her irreverence. It is very gratifying to some small part of every reader to see a writer with several doctorates to her credit poke fun at academic pomposity and pretentiousness. One feels sure that she, if anyone, must have the authority to do it. Unfortunately, she often seems stuck in a repetitive conflict with Catholic dogma and symbol, as if she's still trying to scandalize the Jesuits at Boston College or perhaps the nuns from high school — with the Virgin Birth analyzed as male rape fantasy or her references to "androgynous, sweet Jesus, the misbegotten and transsexed parthenogenetic daughter."²⁰

Another source of her appeal is her continual use of the metaphor of the journey, a very American image, since Americans like to think of themselves as constantly on the move, both physically and spiritually. For Daly the New Frontier is Weirdward — away from patriarchal institutions/delusions to the Garden of Original Wholeness where Eve, the tree, and the snake can get along fine without Adam or God.

Daly also titillates her readers with extreme language. For her "gynocide" replaces "sexism" as an accurate description of contemporary reality.²¹ Or "Will there be a second Witch-craze?"²² she asks. What she has in mind here, it seems, is the integration of women into the professions, which she equates with the "killing of consciousness and integrity of women."²³ Thus all the women who did not "dress for success" and get into law school can at least, reading Mary Daly, console themselves: they still have their "Memory of Gynocentric Origins" intact.

Daly defines feminism as "commitment to our past and future memories of Happiness in defiance of civilization."²⁴ Her Vision of "Happiness" is pre-lapsarian; if only we re-member our elemental origins, "We'll Race and leap with deer and hop with rabbits. With ladybugs we'll climb tall stalks of grass. With barnacles we'll hug the rocks of seashores."²⁵ Such a vision of the world is supposed to make us feel "safe" for we are "at home." It's a nice wish that has a respectably ancient pedigree. Today it may sell labrys charms and butterfly earrings, but I don't think

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it will permit any realistic coming to grips with some of the problems Daly herself mentions. Worse, it encourages a smug, superior withdrawal of women who accept the Daly doctrine from a world in which we are all implicated.

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Notes

1. Mary Daly, *The Church and the Second Sex* (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1968, 1975), "Autobiographical Preface," p. 12.
2. Daly, p. 6.
3. Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), p. 6.
4. Daly, *Beyond God the Father*, p. 19.
5. Daly, *Beyond God the Father*, p. 26.
6. Daly, *Beyond God the Father*, p. 66.
7. Daly, *Beyond God the Father*, p. 42-3.
8. Daly, *Beyond God the Father*, p. 172.
9. Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), Preface, p. xi.
10. Daly, *Gyn/Ecology*, p. 2.
11. Daly, *Gyn/Ecology*, p. 39.
12. Has any man ever coined a more contemptuous term of abuse for women?
13. Mary Daly, *Pure Lust: Elemental Feminist Philosophy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), p. 5.
14. Daly, *Pure Lust*, p. 7.
15. Daly, *Pure Lust*, p. 49.
16. Daly, *Pure Lust*, p. 75.
17. "Webster" and "brewster" are archaic words referring to women who weave and brew. "Snool," according to Daly is a Scottish word meaning "a cringing person." As a verb it means "to reduce to submission: cow, bully." (*Pure Lust*, p. 20-21).
18. Daly, *Pure Lust*, p. 4.
19. Daly, *Pure Lust*, p. 24.
20. Daly, *Pure Lust*, p. 93.
21. Daly, *Pure Lust*, p. 320.
22. Daly, *Pure Lust*, p. 109.
23. Daly, *Pure Lust*, p. 111.
24. Daly, *Pure Lust*, p. 360.
25. Daly, *Pure Lust*, p. 460.