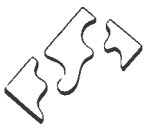

The Phenomenology of Woman to Mother: The Transformative Experience of Childbirth by Vangie Bergum, Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, University of Alberta, 1986.

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We have no philosophy of birth. Mary O'Brien argues that this hole in the fabric of knowledge is not merely an oversight, a dropped stitch in epistemology. In *The Politics of Reproduction* she argues that the very systems of thought that we have at hand to describe, explain, and bestow significance are themselves male compensations for the inferential nature of paternity and the female dominion of reproduction. If the experience of birth is missing from the ontological, epistemological, and ethical literatures that constitute philosophy, it is also barely present in fiction. Denied by men and withheld by women, the intimate relations of women to their children are rarely inscribed in our texts.

Vangie Bergum's dissertation, *The Phenomenology of Woman to Mother: The Transformative Experience of Childbirth*, courageously and sensitively breaks that silence. Her text moves through my mind, making the morning sounds that mark the passage between dreams and the day's enterprise. Introduced at the outset of the work, the six women, whose accounts of pregnancy and childbirth constitute the matter of this text, reappear again and again. It is as if we were having an extended conversation. It is the powerful compelling talk of women. It is good gossip; it is profound, serious, and productive.

> The word gossip was a word that originally designated a child's godmother or godfather, a person who, because of his or her present and future concern for the child, was present at the ceremony of its birth. In Middle English the word appeared as *god-sib*, or *godsybbe*. By the sixteenth century we find the word *gossip*, refering to a woman's female friends invited to be present at the birth. The news, anecdotes, discourse that the women, the gossips, exchanged while they waited, came to be known as gossip, the talk of women....
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> As women's talk, gossip gathered to itself the conditions of women's lives. Barred from public forms and public responsibility, it is an alternative discourse system. Retaining the sanction of intimacy, it is the language of relationships requiring trust, bonded in feeling. This chatter was a liturgy for the ceremony of birth; it was a primordial accompaniment to the labor that brings the child into the world....

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> When women came together to gossip a baby was born. They ushered in new life. Let us be friends. Let us sponsor each other's child in the world. Let our gossip bring forth that world. (Grumet, 1983)

In this text, Bergum gives us the world that gives us children through the talk of the women who conceive, bear, and nurture them. At no point has Bergum turned from their voices in order to amplify the superior, summarizing voice of their scribe.

This abstention coincides with the distinction that Richard Rorty (1979) has drawn between epistemology and hermeneutics, for where the former seeks the rules, forms, or common ground that can become the rational system against which all accounts of experience are measured, the latter listens for those accounts that undermine the common accord, challenging not only its application but very assumptions. Toward the end of her dissertation, Bergum tells us that "the orientation in the approach to the texts has been to search for an understanding of women in a way that acknowledges the public reality of women's private lives" (p. 176). Although it may seem absurd that the reproduction of the species should be seen as women's private experience, Elshtain (1981) has argued that the very category of the public, of the "polis," rests on a repudiation of intimate relations and of familial and domestic experiences, in short of reproductive relations. Bergum's project to study the transformation of woman to mother in ways that bridge the schism between public and private challenges the oppositions that dichotomize our daily experience as well as the methods and practices devised to study them. Again, Rorty's distinction between epistemology and hermeneutics attests to the methodological possibilities and pitfalls of this project:

> For hermeneutics, to be rational is to be willing to refrain from epistemology—from thinking that there is a special set of terms in which all contributions to the conversation should be put—and to be willing to pick up the jargon of the interlocutor rather than translating it into one's own. For epistemology, to be rational is to find the proper set of terms into which all the contributions should be translated if agreement is to become possible. For epistemology, conversation is implicit inquiry. For hermeneutics, inquiry is routine conversation. (1979, p. 318)

It is somewhat unfair to Rorty to isolate this paragraph when he himself follows it with the caveat that his use of "the terms 'epistemology' and 'hermeneutics' to stand for these ideal opposites may seem forced" (p. 318). But here is my concern. If hermeneutic inquiry is routine conversation, and routine conversation replicates the divisions of private knowledge and public discourse, how can hermeneutic method bring us out of the very enclosures that constrain our understanding and action?

I am interested in thinking about the ways that the conversations that constitute this text can and cannot be called "routine." The text appears to me to be constituted by two conversations: one; the discussions that Bergum has held with the women, and the other, the one that she holds with us her readers. It is possible that my view of this text as a double discourse defeats the methodological goal of sustaining the rules and relations of one conversation, the talk of women, in this other one, the scholarly document. My own relation to this text is also doubled. For this text is not my first conversation with Vangie Bergum. We have shared other conversations. She is my friend. We have talked for many hours at the wooden table in the Italian restaurant down the street from the University of Alberta about our work, about our children, conversations that flowered long after the lunches and dinners that occasioned them, watered by the indulgent waitress who kept refilling our coffee cups. This review constitutes yet another conversation and thus replicates the double-talk of the dissertation. Usually "double-talk" is a pejorative phrase, one we use to signify a duplicitous account. Nevertheless, as I use it here, I hope to honor Bergum's attempt to talk *to* Brenda, Christine, Jane, Susan, Anna, and Katherine as she talks *about* them, as well as my own to make this response to Bergum's work continuous with, but not identical to, our own compelling "routine conversations."

When scholarly writing eschews "routine conversation" it loses both context and meaning. Routine conversation bears meaning in nuance, gesture, and rhythm as well as in symbolic content. This study persuades by presenting its information in the rhythms and pauses that tell us how the speakers feel about what they know. Bergum scoops up this talk and gives it to us:

> "Did you have any sensation that you were pregnant before this?" I wondered. "Well, the only thing I had noticed, and this had happened to me one other time, was that my breasts were really very terribly sore. Like I couldn't run around, you know, couldn't go up and down the stairs. But this had happened once before and, oh no, I wasn't pregnant so when it happened this time, I was so fed up with my body not doing things right, that I thought, well, I'm not pregnant. I have a feeling, now, that I might have been pregnant before—but I don't know. I had said to Paul, 'I can't stand my body doing this, it does it all the time for me.'" (p. 64)

Exasperation is encoded in starts and stops. The confusion, inability to make sense of her own body, is extended into the dialogue that the speaker has with her own body, as if it has become other to her. The conversation draws us in, enlarging our understanding of the questions this study is raising, drawing us to the women. They keep coming back in the text and so the sense that the meaning of their experience can not be neatly pulled around their narratives is established, subordinating Bergum's interpretive work to the actual and

possible response of these very real speakers. As these speakers become more real to me, the reader, through their successive appearances, so does Bergum's response to them grow through her successive interpretations and responses.

This important effect of recurrence is dramatically present in Bergum's response to Brenda's narrative. Brenda, who refuses physical contact with her newborn, who seeks the reassurance of the medical model, is the speaker who tests this hermeneutic's resolve to "provide an intensified exploration of women's own realities—the shape of their own lived worlds" (p. 42). At first I am amazed and impressed as Bergum relays Brenda's position without challenging or denigrating it. She manages to make a space around this account that honors its presence and adequacy without isolating it in the silence that we often deploy in "routine conversation" to isolate the speaker whose opinions disturb or offend us. In subsequent accounts Bergum does express her concern, but because she has not framed the initial account in her response, Brenda's experience of childbirth is not collapsed into the assumptions that Bergum brings to the study. When Bergum confesses guilt at the end of the study for never having intervened, we are left to ask ourselves whether this is the guilt of the researcher who abstains so as not to distort the phenomenon or of the polite conversant who observes the fetish of the mother/child bond, forbidden to intrude on its absence as well as its presence.

Conversation commands an attunement to the other. "Method can only be arrived at dialectically through a questioning responsiveness to the matter being encountered" (Smith, cited in Bergum, p. 40). One of the fascinating implications of this study is the sense that each woman's reflexivity is linked to the way in which she experiences the relation to her child. The woman who experiences the presence of a child in her life—from the sexual relation that leads to conception to the experience of pregnancy and the politics of prenatal care and childbirth—as something that happens *to* her, also appears as the speaker whose account is the least self-conscious, the least preinterpreted. Bergum's intent to have the study show how women come to know something about themselves through the transformation of giving birth is realized as the conversations reveal the ways that the women's sense of themselves is influenced by their sense of responsibility for and attachment to a subjectivity other than themselves. While Bergum does not objectify the women's discourse by making judgments about their styles of subjectivity, those assessments are implied in her own responses to them, for as she works to maintain intersubjectivity with the different speakers she adjusts her own interpretations to the degree of reflexivity in their accounts. In the light of this empathy her abstention in the case of Brenda provides and sustains the space that may allow Brenda to reflect on her situation and feelings, a space that may allow her to choose the child.

If routine conversation reveals the speakers' complex understandings of their experiences, in its focused intensity, it also follows their talk through the world which invites it, providing a context that is wide and rich and full and surprising. The themes that organize the study and the presentation of the conversations wind around this complex experience. Bergum follows the lead of the talk from the material and specific topics of "Maternity Clothes" and of "Finding a Position" during the pain of labor to the more ambiguous moments of decision and acceptance. The scope of her inquiry permits her to come to the conclusion that "A woman 'with child' is a community responsibility" (p. 181), for as the moments of this process and the concerns of these women are revealed, this routine conversation takes us from science to religion, from shopping malls to birthing rooms, from offices to kitchens.

And so as the women talk about their desire for a child, or their ambivalence, about their prenatal care, efforts to establish a place in their homes for the baby, adjust their work, maintain their commitments to their own histories and interests, "the public reality of women's private lives" is made evident. The hermeneutics of routine conversation so skillfully and sensitively rendered has made us truly conversant with the phenomenon of this study.

There is yet another dimension to the "public reality of women's private lives" present when ideology, particular interpretations, and values supported by a current consensus, saturate our interpretations of even those experiences that are the most sensual and specific to us. In this way the phrase "the public reality of women's lives" not only indicates the network of interest and responsibility that ties the community to the woman and to the child she bears, but also suggests that there are ideologies of reproduction that insinuate themselves between the mother and her experience of mothering. The intercession of a third, theoretical voice is welcome if it interrupts the dyadic complicity of "routine conversation."

Now the text is not closed to other voices. Mary O'Brien's (1981) dialectical analysis of childbirth, *The Politics of Reproduction,* and Nancy Chodorow's (1978) object relations study, *The Reproduction of Mothering*, are brought into the discourse, as are references to Dinnerstein, Ehrenreich, Chicago's birth project, and others. The major function of these citations is to frame the current study, showing where its questions are connected to themes in contemporary studies of mothering and childbirth. But here is where I think another approach of hermeneutics, one that exceeds the conventions of "routine conversation", might be useful. What these texts provide, particularly the most theoretical ones such as O'Brien and Chodorow, is a position on these issues that will challenge the interpretations, categories, and feelings that Bergum brings to this conversation. You see, I would like to know, for example, what Bergum

makes of Chodorow's suggestions that the most compelling relation for an adult woman is the relation to her infant, as *that* relation, and not the relation to her husband, is the one that permits her to recapitulate the pre-oedipal intimacy and fusion that she experienced with her own mother. Could Bergum's own experiences of being mothered and being mother provide the motives that prevent her from intervening between Brenda and her baby? Now this question of determination clearly interrupts the phenomenological description by implying a bracketing of the writer's response to the situation and its actors. Palmer's (1969) account of Gadamer's dialectial hermeneutics suggests that this bracketing is necessary to hermeneutics:

> Thus there is a need to find a way through to the give-and-take of dialogue: this is the task of hermeneutics. Somehow the fixed formulation must be placed back in the movement of conversation, a movement in which the text questions the interpreter and he questions it. (pp. 199, 200)

Now the taken-for-granted assumptions of the medical model are certainly challenged in this study, but they do not constitute the grounding assumptions of the writer, and whereas the accounts that she provides certainly challenge the hegemony of medical obstetrics, they do not necessarily appear to challenge the assumptions

that she, Vangie Bergum, has brought to the study. In this study that process would require yet another conversation, one that would take as its object the "routine conversations" with the women and their interpretations and presentation in the text of the study, and subject them to yet another study of the writer's biases and commitments. I suggest that the new scholarship on women, particularly the rich resource of feminist theory, provides that third eye that would permit the author to interrogate her own interpretation. The work of Nancy Chodorow or of Mary O'Brien or Mary Daly go beyond the chronicle of women's oppression and the hegemony of men's interests. They explore the conditions of consciousness of both men and women and thus provide some ground to theorize about what motivates women to participate in social structures and meanings of reproduction that appear to contradict their own interests and experience. The richness and complexity of this dissertation, *The Phenomenology of Woman to Mother: The Transformative Experience of Childbirth*, provide a number of moments that invite interpretations that violate the courtesies and intimacy of routine conversation. For example, toward the end of the chapter, "Living as Mother: The Transformative Experience of Living with a Child on One's Mind," Bergum writes about the intense concern that the new mother has for other people's children, as well as increased empathy for other mothers. Nevertheless, one of the great problems that women face is their incapacity to bond with

one another, politically, publicly, to advance our common interests as well as the common interests of our children. If children bring women together, they also keep them apart. Chodorow's object relations theory leads us to consider our responses to other women, the ways they encode our love of our own mothers, our anxieties about differentiation and our homophobia. When Bergum writes about the mysterious union of mother and child, she invites a language that organized religion has often deployed to mystify the very material, very substantial mother/child bond, so that dominion over reproduction can be coopted by males as they compensate for their exclusion from gestation, delivery, and nurturance. The works of O'Brien and Daly point to the fathers' use of mystery to appropriate the child, mystifying and diminishing the nurturant labor that constitutes and sustains that bond.

This vivid, compelling, and provocative text invites many interpretive questions. If its conversations do not contain the critical reflection that is rooted in theoretical studies of female consciousness, they do not preclude it. And I hope it is not a breach of friendship to invite these other women to our table. For I suspect that if we include their discourse in our conversation we will discover the presence of other, uninvited participants in our gossip, and we will learn to shape our future conversations to achieve an even greater intimacy and truer speaking. I shall be talking to Vangie and Vangie's work for a long, long time and I look forward to its publication so that we may bring our students and colleagues into its conversation as well.

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