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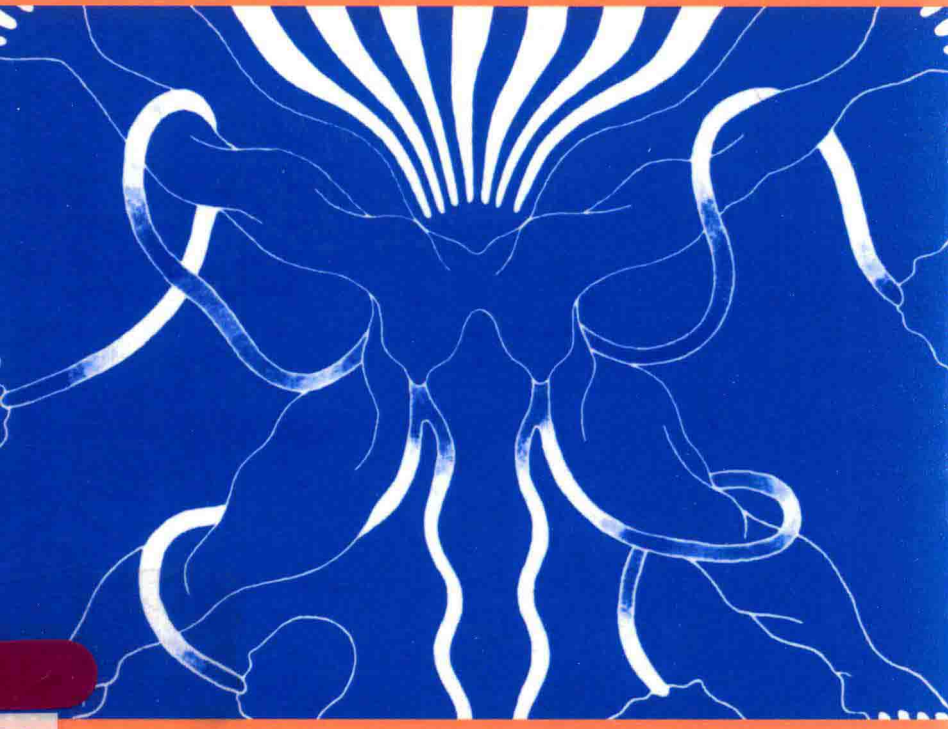
Gynocolonization from Rousseau to Zola



CAROL A. MOSSMAN

POLITICS AND NARRATIVES OF BIRTH

Gynocolonization from Rousseau to Zola

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521415866

First published 1993
This digitally printed first paperback version 2006

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Mossman, Carol A.
Politics and narratives of birth: gynocolonization from Rousseau to
Zola / Carol A. Mossman.
p. cm – (Cambridge studies in French: 41)
Includes index.
ISBN 0 521 41586 1
1. French fiction – 19th century – History and criticism.
2. Childbirth in literature. 3. Feminism and literature – France –
History – 19th century. 4. Politics and literature – France –
History – 19th century. 5. Rousseau, Jean-Jacques, 1712–1778 –
Political and social views. 6. Zola, Émile, 1840–1904 – Political
and social views. 7. Stendhal, 1783–1842 – Political and social
views. 8. Constant, Benjamin, 1787–1842. *Adolphe*. 9. Motherhood
in literature. 10. Narration (Rhetoric) I. Title. II. Series.
PQ653.M67 1993
843′.709352042 – dc20 92-22019 CIP

ISBN-13 978-0-521-41586-6 hardback
ISBN-10 0-521-41586-1 hardback

ISBN-13 978-0-521-03098-4 paperback
ISBN-10 0-521-03098-6 paperback

This book is a feminist analysis which combines a psychoanalytic perspective on catastrophic birth with the politics of reproduction in the emergent democracy of nineteenth-century France. It focuses on three major thinkers whose personal relation to origins is problematic – Rousseau, Constant, and Stendhal – and also includes a broad reading of the nineteenth-century novel within the frame of pathological generation, giving special attention to works by Michelet and Zola. Professor Mossman identifies important areas of interaction between production and reproduction at the level of aesthetic form, and between private, birth-related discourse and the ideology of the birth of democracy. Within the context of the collapse of *ancien régime* France, the nascent ideology of motherhood collides with modes of discourse that invade and colonize the maternal body, generating a considerable burden of anxiety expressed in the nineteenth-century French novel.

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To Jan, to Jack, to Dorothy, and to Karen
for their love and support

Acknowledgements

The first section of cycle 1 appeared in *Studies in Romanticism* 26 (1987). I thank the Trustees of Boston University for granting me permission to reprint it here. The second section of cycle 1 was published in *Nineteenth-Century French Studies* 16 (1988), and the first part of cycle 2 appeared, in slightly different form, in *Annales Benjamin Constant* 12 (1991). I am grateful to both these journals for permission to use this material here. I further wish to thank the General Research Board of the University of Maryland for a summer grant which enabled me to complete the middle section of cycle 1 and a Semester Research Award which afforded me the time to write much of cycle 2.

I also gratefully acknowledge Beatrice Fink and Lynn Hunt for reading cycle 2, and, to Doris Kadish, I extend particular thanks for her time and valuable commentary on cycle 3.

A note on translations

The translations from the French in this book are of my own rendering, except for a few cases. The latter are clearly indicated in the Bibliography. Generally speaking, quotes in the original French have been omitted. However, for certain parts of the study, the French has been retained in order to explore the full resonance of the original.

Printed in Singapore by Markono Print Media Pte Ltd

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Introduction: conception of this book

How to begin a study of birth? Merely to mention birth summons up branches of knowledge as diverse as medical science and bio-ethics, psychology, theology, anthropology, political science, and aesthetics, to name only a few. For birth cannot be contemplated in isolation: to speak of birth is to open up to the problematics of origins. And culture has a stake in addressing origins. This much is evident from the universal existence of myths and cosmogonies which recount genesis. To the extent that such accounts also seek to situate human existence within the larger scheme of things, narratives of collective origins must intertwine with what it means for the individual body to emerge into the world.

If giving birth is never an isolated act, to be born is to emerge into a social environment. We are all born into culture. We are all born ... and yet only half of us are actually capable of giving birth. That one fundamental biological fact carries with it an ideological burden almost beyond conception. We are all born into discourses bearing on reproduction, kinship and family, species propagation for or against the State, creation and procreation. There is thus no neutral passageway leading to birth.

In attempting once again, then, to begin, I cannot help but invoke Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, which stages all the ironies of beginning with birth as the postpartum narrator gazes backward through time's speculum on his own *mise-au-monde*. And a heavily labored beginning it is, in which the arduous emergence of the hero coalesces with the act of literary creation, both subject to the vicissitudes of nativity: miscarriage, stillbirth,

postnatal infant mortality. *Tristram Shandy*'s is one of the most ingenious instances of male headbirth.

In fact, to talk about the literal birth act is not simply to account for the emergence of one being, but rather to consider how one human entity becomes two. This means that the issue of parturition cannot be addressed independently from the Maternal. The mother, states Adrienne Rich in *Of Woman Born*, "*is* the birth trauma" (p. 187). Such language would seem to situate us firmly within the pale of psychoanalysis, pointing – as it does – directly to Otto Rank's work, *The Trauma of Birth*, written in 1923. Herein Rank advances the significance of that primordial severance which is birth in a model which in fact competes (however cautiously) with his mentor's castration construct, thereby out-Freuding Freud.[1] That the experience of parturition as it relates to the constitution of the self is an issue to be addressed by psychoanalysis is undeniable. Freud's reluctance to acknowledge its importance, particularly in elaborating his theory of the origins of civilization in *Totem and Taboo*, suggests that certain narratives of beginnings remain silent on the power to give life for reasons which may best be considered political.

Because, needless to say, birth is also a political affair. In *Two Treatises of Government*, John Locke raises the question in all its gynecological starkness, taking the argument of who shall inherit the throne *ab ovo* ... or very nearly. When a caesarian section must be performed on an expired queen, "which," wonders Locke, "shall be Heir of two Male-Twins, who by the dissection of the Mother, were laid open to the World?" (p. 249). Exposed alongside a queen's dead body is the arbitrary character of primogeniture in which legitimacy depends on which male happens to slide down the birth canal first. In his short story, "La Reine Fantasque," Jean-Jacques Rousseau envisions a different sibling dilemma. To a capricious queen, twins are born, a son and a daughter. But their gender traits have been "misdistributed": the female appears to be endowed with rational, decisive, and firm characteristics, whereas her brother seems flighty, vacillating, and of unpenetrating mind. Sorting out the consequences of nature's

"error" on the exercise of power becomes the preoccupation of this narrative.

These twin examples serve as reminders that reproduction is related to the question of political legitimacy and is as such always the business of the State. Furthermore, a politics of gender is indissociably bound to birth, both on the giving and on the receiving ends. And finally, also at issue here is how the political stands in relation to the maternal body.

Judeo-Christian religious thought is no stranger to the subject of birth either. Indeed, any system of thought which is eschatologically oriented tends to privilege the moment of origin inasmuch as this is hermeneutically bound to ending, often figured as a rebirth. So religion has had much to say on the matter. Everyone knows that if Eve was painlessly extruded from Adam's rib, her destiny as a result of the fall into civilization is to give birth in suffering. Indeed, the *mater dolorosa* is one of patriarchal culture's most cherished icons. Much is also made in Christian lore of the events surrounding Christ's birth. The Annunciation is a topos heavily favored by the pictorial arts wherein the Virgin is often depicted hearkening to the Word of God as transmitted by the angel Gabriel, who offers her a white lily, that strangely vagiform symbol of purity which at the same time resembles the ear. Conception is thus a triply mediated and disembodied act: vagina is transfigured into ear, God operates through angelic intermediary as the maternal body readies itself to distill mind into matter. Christ's gestation also has its remarkable moments such as the Visitation, an intra- and interuterine recognition scene during which the future John the Baptist stirs in his mother's womb in acknowledgement of his *in utero* cousin.

Of course, marvelous gestations and births function mainly to portend extraordinary men and, to that extent, they merely form the hermeneutic props of hagiography. This is no doubt the tradition which Sterne pastiches in *Tristram Shandy*, although it is far from being a culture-specific convention: the Buddha's gestation was a lengthy one during which his mother experienced all manner of premonitory dreams. Neither should one neglect Gargantua's prolonged sojourn *in utero* and his

joyous explosion into the world announced by a splatter of fecal realism. The conditions of this *mise-au-monde* bespeak the Renaissance's celebration of life in all its functions compared to, say, Freud's somber and despondent refrain – a lamentation echoing the Ancients – that man is born "inter faeces et urinas."

And, entering now this book's field of focus, two of nineteenth-century France's greatest mythologizers of the self, Chateaubriand and Michelet, recount their own tales of singular birth. The Chateaubrianesque event was nothing short of cosmic, for it was at the autumnal equinox with seas tempest-toss't that the nascent body of François-René was coaxed out of its maternal abode (*Mémoires d'outre-tombe*, p. 29). At least as self-conscious in his birthscript, the historian Jules Michelet tells the reader of *Le Peuple* how he came into the world in 1798 in a convent church which was "occupied" – but "not profaned" – by the family printing press (pp. 21–22).

The birth of this Romantic self is an emergence into an arena of writing which is itself branded onto a holy uterine space associated with the feminine. In other words, Michelet's nativity scene – his ontogenography – actually recapitulates Western culture's own phylogenetic account of reproduction as male imprint on female matter. What is odd is that subsequently, in *L'Amour*, Michelet will take it upon himself to popularize reproductive science's recent advances suggestive of a preponderant feminine role in procreation.

Thus, when it is depicted, the act of birth serves the narratological function of aggrandizing an extraordinary individual, casting a mystique about his very origins. The origins of the female self, however, can hardly be said to belong to any such convention. This is so for two interdependent reasons. First, the female subject of narrative, if not precisely a rare bird, can at least be classified as something of an endangered species in premodern literature: aggrandizing her origins goes directly against the grain of a socio-literary culture engaged in the praise of great – and later, common – men. Then there is, for the daughter/subject, the booby trap of becoming the maternal which most disciplines – from psychoanalysis to anthropology – have defined either as an absence, or an as unbudgeable object.

In her book on nineteenth-century British women writers, *Bearing the Word*, Margaret Homans undertakes to explore the ambivalent and highly difficult position in which the woman writer is placed as she confronts the maternal. Her analysis of writers Austen, the Brontës, and Mary Shelley (the latter's mother Mary Wollenstonecraft died in the aftermath of childbirth) demonstrates a real anxiety over the issue of birth on the part of these women writers.

In her article "The Birth of the Artist as Heroine," Susan Gubar suggests that safer conditions governing childbirth which evolved during the second half of the nineteenth century led women writers to assume birth as figure for their own (self) writing with far less ambivalence and fear.[2] Certainly women's writing of recent years bears this out: in the French forum, Julia Kristeva and Chantal Chawaf are two writers who come to mind. Also noteworthy is Mexican artist Frida Kahlo's work, in particular her 1937 painting entitled "My Birth."[3] Under the portrait of a woman, another woman lies in childbed, face covered, laboring to give birth. The crowning has just occurred and the viewer is graphically presented with an infant's head emerging between two legs. One reading of this might suggest that under the sign of matriliny (the portrait), woman can birth herself. As the Annunciation example shows, the prevalent topos of male birthing requires mediation and a lot of structural fiddling, whereas woman as sole procreatrix demands less of an imaginative leap. Indeed, the 1915 gynotopian novel *Herland*, by Charlotte Gilman, conceives an entire feminine culture born without male intervention.

Still, the above are all recent depictions which stand, small if growing, against an imposing wall of patriarchal tradition which, aside from extolling the hero as of his birth, has labored hard to suppress birth in its literality. For, in beginning an account of beginnings, one immediately encounters, in both art and literature, the silence which historically has enveloped this most universal of human experiences. And yet it cannot be denied that, whether the event of parturition is viewed in its profane ordinariness, whether it is theologically enshrined in a sacred majesty reflective of some higher order, or whether it is