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THE LIFE AND DEATH OF SEXUAL DIFFERENCE

Louis van den Hengel

Becoming Undone: Darwinian Reflections on Life, Politics, and Art by Elizabeth Grosz. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011. Pp. 264. \$84.95 cloth; \$23.95 paper.

In *Becoming Undone*, Elizabeth Grosz connects Charles Darwin's account of biological evolution as an unpredictable and open-ended process of variation to the philosophies of Henri Bergson, Gilles Deleuze, and Luce Irigaray in order to elaborate a more or less neomaterialist ontology of sexual difference as the engine of natural existence, the vital mechanism productive of the complexity and excesses of life as we may or may not know it. The book is set over and against what Grosz perceives as a postmodern feminism in which notions of nature and matter have been sidelined, and where, more precisely, ontological inquiries into the constitution of life have been subsumed under epistemological considerations of how bodies come to matter exclusively in terms of language, discourse, and culture. Grosz, in contrast, develops a Darwinian feminism and a post-modern Darwinism that attempts to rethink the materiality of sexual difference through the inhuman time of evolutionary becoming.

Whereas feminist theorists have generally been reluctant to engage with Darwinian thought beyond the scope of epistemological critique, Grosz's work takes a different and more affirmative approach. The aim of *Becoming Undone* is not to address the androcentrism apparent in Darwin's theory of evolution, nor to assess the essentialist approaches to sexual and racial

differences within neo-Darwinian sociobiology or evolutionary psychology, but rather to take hold of what in Darwin's work is useful for the elaboration of feminist thought beyond postmodern theories of power and difference, and past the limits of egalitarian politics of recognition. Against this background, Grosz advances a philosophy of life and matter as deeply attuned not only to each other but to the generative force of duration—the becoming and unbecoming—through which biological evolution proceeds as an open-ended process of differentiation, especially sexual differentiation.

Starting from the basic Darwinian insight that the differences between humans and other animal species, as well as among human beings, are differences in degree and not in kind, Grosz uses the philosophies of Bergson and Deleuze to theorize evolutionary emergence not merely as a relation between different forms of life but as a dynamic entanglement between life and the inorganic forces of matter. Life and matter are conceptualized not as binary opposites but as divergent tendencies or trajectories, two different degrees of the same, ever-differing, force of duration: the temporal or evolutionary impulse that enables life to actualize the “vital indeterminacy” (34) of the material world from which it emerges, to unfold the dynamic unpredictability that is

folded into matter as the potential to become different. This nonteleological reading of Darwin is directly opposed to the traditions of social Darwinism that tend to reduce all evolutionary mechanisms to the teleological principle of survival—a reduction that has on more than one occasion facilitated a classification of humanity as the pinnacle of creation that runs counter to Darwin's own work. Indeed, Grosz posits a fundamental continuity between individuals and species of all kinds, not because they share a common genealogy, but because all of life is enjoined in the transformation of matter. Grosz's Darwinism, then, is a highly Deleuzian one in which evolution is construed as a transversal force of creative transformation, an impersonal cut across the boundaries between organic and inorganic vitality, an unpredictable and increasingly complex elaboration of life as the power to differ.

If, as Deleuze has suggested, “Darwin's great novelty was that of inaugurating the thought of individual difference,”¹ Grosz seizes upon Darwin's idea that it is *sexual* difference, in the form of sexual selection, through which life first elaborates itself as a continuous process of variation and creative excess. It is through her philosophical exploration of the relation between sexual and natural selection in Darwin's writings, and her subsequent elaboration of a dynamic ontology of sexual

divergence, that Grosz's Darwin emerges not only as a decisive theorist of becoming, but—unwittingly—as “the first feminist of difference” (142). As unexpected a designation this may be for someone whose vision of evolution regularly attests to the biological and social inferiority of women, and whose personal views about sexual difference may be summed up by a calculated list of marriage's pros and cons describing female companionship as slightly preferable to owning a dog,² Grosz convincingly shows how Darwin's open-ended understanding of nature and matter as *constitutive* of vital transformations may become central to the elaboration of a nonanthropocentric feminism of difference, a “new kind of feminism” (57) that reworks the problem of sexual difference in the bio-ontological context of “animal becomings and the becomings microscopic and imperceptible that regulate matter itself” (86).

Like in her previous work, Grosz frames the invocation of the concepts of nature, matter, and life as a turn—or return—to a “more archaic” but also “more modernist” tradition that has been largely neglected in feminist theory (59). The call to reclaim matter—not the materiality of the body, but the biological dynamism from which all bodies emerge—from its perceived absence in feminist theory after the cultural turn is of course not new, but has pervaded, in an

increasingly mundane fashion, feminist scholarship from the 1990s onwards. Grosz, however, hardly engages with any of the new material feminisms that have emerged as a response to this call, which is one of the reasons why, although I am fully committed to what she has called the “forgotten question of ontology,”³ I remain unconvinced by the rhetorical gestures that underpin the urgency with which that question is posed. There are few specific references to feminist scholarship in *Becoming Undone*, and Grosz's repeated criticisms of “feminist egalitarianism” and “postmodern feminism” are not substantiated by in-depth readings of whatever theorists are supposed to be filed under these extremely elastic concepts. The book as a whole lacks much of the meticulous engagement with feminist theory that characterized Grosz's earliest work. The assertion that “concepts of autonomy, agency, and freedom . . . are continuously evoked in feminist theory” but “have been rarely defined, explained, or analyzed” (59), for example, is overly generalized at best, while observations about feminism's “submersion in the politics of representation” (85) and “the overwhelming dominance of identity politics” (89) sound curiously quaint in light of Grosz's own insistence, in the same chapter, that what is principally at stake in feminist theory is the invention of the new.

If *Becoming Undone* provides a foundation for future feminist thought, it is not through its account of recent feminist history, but by means of Grosz's interpretation of evolutionary theory as a way to rethink the materiality of sexual difference as an entanglement of—rather than interaction between—the biological, the cultural, and the social.⁴ To this end, Grosz revisits Irigaray's conception of sexual difference—as an irreducible ontological difference—through Darwin's account of sexual selection. Darwin introduced the concept of sexual selection in part to explain the origins of phenomena that cannot be attributed to natural selection, such as the differences in appearance between male and female animals, the operations of erotic appeal and attraction, and the presence of beauty in the natural world. Sexual selection hence accounts for the evolution of features without any particular survival value, such as large antlers or ornate peacock feathers, which are primarily directed to the attainment of sexual partners. Since sexual selection is independent from the logic of reproduction—even if it may lead to reproductive success—Grosz views it as a strategy to maximize difference or variation itself, to proliferate differences for the sake of beauty and pleasure alone, for the intensification of nothing but pure difference.

Grosz thus acknowledges a rich feminist potential in Darwin's

work by reading it as a Deleuzian feminist analysis of difference avant la lettre. More importantly, the notion of sexual selection in her view explains the persistence of sexual difference as an ontological force in the evolution of life. It is at this point, argues Grosz, that “feminists who are committed to the concept of the irreducible difference between the sexes,” such as Irigaray, “may find in Darwin's writings surprising confirmation of their claims” (156). This is a compelling statement, and yet the interweaving of Irigaray's ontology of sexual difference with a Deleuzian–Darwinian understanding of evolution is not without problems. The most important difficulties, in my view, arise from Grosz's tendency to contain the vital indeterminacy of matter—its infinite potential for change and transformation—within a binary of sexual difference that is understood as ontologically impossible to overcome. Since, as Grosz has claimed elsewhere, “sexual selection differentiates all species touched by its trace with an irreducible binarism that itself generates endless variety on either side of its bifurcation,”⁵ life on earth in her view consists in the elaboration of multiple lines of development that cannot proceed without the irreducible existence of at least two types of being. Yet if physical forms of evolution occur through the nonteleological force of duration, and if sexual selection

is governed not by sexual reproduction but by the unpredictable forces of aesthetic choice and appeal, why does Grosz need to posit an irreducible ontological binarism as the *sine qua non* of biological and cultural differentiation?

In fact, Grosz's own neomaterialist Darwinism—if taken to its logical conclusion—would seem to imply a rather opposite understanding of sexual difference as a process of ontological differentiation irreducible to any sexual binarism. Grosz *a priori* rejects this view,⁶ which leads to a curiously unresolved tension between her open-ended reading of evolutionary unfolding on the one hand and her affirmation of the ontomateriality of binary sexual difference on the other. The crucial point here, as Luciana Parisi has astutely noted, is that if the evolution of sex is truly considered as a *form of process*—that is, if it is conceptualized from a radical empiricist perspective—then “the biological formation of two sexes may coincide not with the ontological duration of sexual difference but . . . with an *accident*, an event in evolution.”⁷ By grounding the becoming and unbecoming of life in a model of two irreducible sexes, Grosz fails to attend not to the potentially infinite expressions of sexual difference *per se*, but to the myriad forms of sex that run beneath the figure of the two, the “infinitesimal number of differential sexes that are completely

determined and yet do not exactly constitute the biology of sexual difference.”⁸ In this way, Grosz's neomaterialist philosophy of life in its virtual multiplicity, its openness to “the irresistible future of sexual difference” (101), paradoxically ends up denying the unpredictable nature of sexual evolution.

That Grosz, in light of the endless variation generated through sexual difference as an evolutionary force, continues to cast this difference in terms of ontological duality rather than irreducible multiplicity cannot be divorced from her concentration on the later work of Irigaray. As many critics have noted, Irigaray's oeuvre is split into an earlier phase and a later phase: whereas the former develops a fluid philosophy of difference as not-One, the latter asserts the duality of sexual difference at the increasing expense of sexual and natural multiplicity.⁹ More importantly, this later work affirms what Rosi Braidotti has called “the metaphysics of two” from a distinctly heterosexual, or at least heterosexual, perspective.¹⁰ In *I Love to You* (1996), for example, Irigaray unambiguously positions the male–female relationship as the paradigmatic model for the “mysterious” force of sexual difference, and even turns the heterosexual couple into the privileged site for the development of ethical social relations, feminist politics, and the creativity of life itself.¹¹ Although Grosz,

with Irigaray, acknowledges that sexual difference cannot be contained within the sexual identities of male and female as they are presently lived or actualized, she seems to take no issue with the latter's conviction that the affirmation of sexual difference, if it is to be truly ethical, "will come from the evolution, the revolution in the relations between man and woman, first and foremost in the couple."¹² *Becoming Undone* instead takes the bifurcation between male and female, effected through sexual selection, as the primary mechanism through which the evolution of life proceeds in "two different incalculable directions" (141).

I do not want to imply at this point that Grosz's conception of the natural as "never one but always at least two" (149) reproduces normative heterosexuality at the ontomaterial level of life itself. The problem rather lies in the residual organicism of Grosz's conception of evolution. It is precisely to the extent that Grosz locates the force of sexual difference in the complexification of organic life that her attachment to a late-Irigarayan ontology of sexual difference—perceived as a duality that "inscribes finitude in the natural itself"¹³—closes down what her Deleuzian reading of Darwin had so creatively opened up: the infinite potentiality of matter to unfold a qualitative multiplicity of sexes, a proliferation of sex events that

cannot be adequately addressed through the notion of sexual difference as "(at least) two" (104). And while it may be the case that Grosz uses this remarkably parenthetical phrase, which recurs throughout her work, to release some of the tensions inherent in the encounter between Darwin and Irigaray, *Becoming Undone* makes painfully clear that "(at least) two" does not a multiplicity make.

The limits of Grosz's account of sexual difference become readily apparent in her discussion of the objections against Irigaray by Drucilla Cornell and Judith Butler. The latter in particular points to the "presumptive heterosexuality" in Irigaray's conception of ethical exchange, which not only privileges the sexual over all other forms of difference but also, as already noted, frames the generative interval of sexual difference through a most narrow version of heterosexual relationality.¹⁴ Grosz does not provide a direct answer to Butler's concern that Irigaray denies the existence of ethically enabling differences within same-sex relationships, but points out that all sexual relations—no matter how queer—are affected by sexual difference. While this in principle acknowledges same-sex relations as a locus for the affirmation of sexual alterity—a much-needed supplement to Irigaray—it also leads to a curious confession on Grosz's part: "I cannot see," she writes, "how an

understanding of sexuality, sexual pleasure, desire, and identity can be developed which doesn't discern, as part of its very operations, the relative values of and attraction to the particularities of male and female bodies, organs, and activities" (108). Unfortunately, this failure to envision sexual difference beyond a binary frame subsequently translates into a number of contentious claims about how sexual difference, as a constitutive difference, supposedly operates in relation to sex, gender, and sexuality.

The full weight of the parenthetical "(at least) two" comes to bear on Grosz's interpretation of intersexuality and transsexuality. While the former is simply dismissed as confirming rather than challenging the binary nature of sexual difference, Grosz considers the latter as—quoting Irigaray—the "new opium for the people" (110). Indeed, she insists that "however queer, transgendered [*sic*], and ethnically identified one might be, one comes from a man and a woman, and one remains a man or a woman, even in the case of gender-reassignment or the chemical and surgical transformations of one sex into the appearance of another" (109–10). This remarkably strong statement not only suggests that sexual difference is controlled by bodily difference—a view inconsistent with the work of either Irigaray or Grosz herself—but also comes

dangerously close to the transphobic assumption that trans individuals may *look* like "real" men or women, but can never actually *be* the sex with which they identify. Equally problematic are Grosz's claims about nontraditional family arrangements, which under the pervasive impact of sexual difference in her view inevitably take a heterosexual form: "The roles of mommy and daddy are perpetrated even within gay families," according to Grosz, "although it is no longer clear that the mommy is a woman and the daddy is a man" (108). While this argument willfully ignores the possibility that queer forms of kinship may transform rather than reproduce the nuclear family model, it also remains curiously anthropocentric in light of Grosz's own Darwinian interpretation of sexual difference. Even when we leave aside that two-parent families are largely absent in nonhuman nature, where single parenting or the absence of any parental investment is the norm,¹⁵ it remains entirely unclear how the reproduction of gender roles rooted in human sociality would testify to the ontological persistence of sexual difference as a nonhuman force.

That Grosz refers to Darwinian sexual selection as "the queering of natural selection" (132) diffuses rather than solves the problem. While Grosz interestingly places a queer intensification of bodies

at the heart of her neomaterialist reading of sexual evolution, the strong association of this queerness with the “skills of spectacular performance” (125)—the “noisy colorfulness” and “artistic excessiveness” (126) of the most attractive members of a particular species—is not theoretically innocent. In effect, the naming of sexual selection as *queer* potentially reinforces the stereotypical association of queerness—and queer theory—with the conceptually frivolous and politically unproductive spaces of gender performativity, erotic pleasure, and aesthetic display. The establishment of such links between queer theory and frivolity is actually central to what Clare Hemmings has perceptively called the “political grammar” of much contemporary feminist theory, especially those narratives that, like Grosz’s, reclaim a “forgotten” materiality or ontology in order to move beyond the textual abstractions of the cultural turn.¹⁶ Since such narratives are generally marked by an overassociation of cultural theory with sexual critique, as Hemmings demonstrates in admirable detail, they problematically position queer theory—often in the person of Butler—as “the quintessential opposite” of feminist new materialism, an “anachronistic interruption” that needs to be overcome in order to regain feminist commitment and political credibility.¹⁷ One of the most pernicious effects of

such reductive textual oppositions, for Hemmings, is their amenability to the highly problematic framing of the sexual in broader postfeminist and antifeminist discourses far beyond their own theoretical location.

To be clear, I do not want to suggest that Grosz’s evolutionary narrative serves to set queer theory against neomaterialist feminism—after all, whether her work has this or precisely the opposite effect surely depends on the reader. Nevertheless, the aforementioned examples are revealing of the tensions not only between the Deleuzian–Darwinian and Irigarayan strands in Grosz’s work, but more generally between feminist new materialism and queer criticism within contemporary philosophies of life. By reading Grosz’s compelling turn towards the evolution of life and matter in light of the genealogy of feminist theory and its discontents, I have attempted to show how the commitment to an irreducible binarism of sexual difference, in tandem with an affirmation of difference as the generative force of the living and nonliving universe, both invokes and disavows the existence of a natural multiplicity—a biological queerness, perhaps—that is just as sexually specific and just as *real*, both phenomenologically and ontologically, as the nature of sexual duality.

Grosz's work generously provides the reader with potential ways out of the dilemmas posed by its own contradictions, and perhaps this testifies to its conceptual vitality and strength. Although *Becoming Undone* ultimately does not quite develop a philosophy of sexual difference as a force of irreducible multiplicity—the crossing over of sex into what Deleuze and Guattari describe as “molecular assemblages of a different nature”¹⁸—it is certainly possible to make the frictions in Grosz's work productive to that end. If Grosz's theorization of the life of sexual difference as an ongoing process of human and nonhuman becomings will eventually lead to the death of sexual difference as a philosophical concept, then this is a death only in the most generative sense: not in terms of a metaphysics of finitude, but as another phase in an enduring process of material and conceptual transformation. The death of sexual difference in this view consists only and precisely in its emergence, or reemergence, as a vital force of qualitative multiplicity, an immanent flow of sexual *differing* in its infinite complexity.

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NOTES

1. Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton, Athlone Contemporary European Thinkers (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 248.
2. For the latter, see Nora Barlow, ed., *The Autobiography of Charles Darwin 1809–1882: With the Original Omissions Restored* (London: Collins, 1958), 231–34.
3. Elizabeth Grosz, *Time Travels: Feminism, Nature, Power, Next Wave: New Directions in Women's Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 172.
4. It is important not to reduce Grosz's argument to the straw (wo)man fallacies that are used to sustain it. At this point, I disagree with Sara Ahmed's claim that Grosz's return to the “forgotten” issue of nature depends on the “forgetting” of previous feminist scholarship on the biological (Sara Ahmed, “Imaginary Prohibitions: Some Preliminary Remarks on the Founding Gestures of the ‘New Materialism,’” *European Journal of Women's Studies* 15, no. 1 [2008]: 23–39, quotations on 27). In Grosz's view, it is not biology, as such, but the *ontological inseparability* of the biological and all other spheres of life that has been left out in postmodern feminist theory, which conceptualizes nature and culture, mind and matter, as two *distinct* interacting categories.
5. Elizabeth Grosz, *The Nick of Time: Politics, Evolution, and the Untimely* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 67.
6. Grosz in fact turns Irigaray's notion of sexual difference as a “lived universal” into the precondition for her neomaterialist reading of evolutionary theory: “It is only to the extent that feminism is committed to the primacy of sexual difference that the value and significance of Darwin's conception of sexual selection can be appreciated

- and the reductive impulses of social Darwinism resisted" (117).
7. Luciana Parisi, "Event and Evolution," *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 48, Spindel Supplement (2010): 147–64, quotation on 153.
 8. *Ibid.*, 154–55.
 9. Irigaray considers the notion of multiplicity not as opposed to but complicit with the violent logic of sameness, and even claims that, beyond its basis in the irreducibility between the two sexes, "multiplicity is likely to lead to death" (Luce Irigaray, *I Love to You: Sketch for a Felicity within History*, trans. Alison Martin [New York: Routledge, 1996], 143). See also Pheng Cheah and Elizabeth Grosz, "Of Being-Two: Introduction," *Diacritics* 28, no. 1 (1998): 3–18.
 10. Rosi Braidotti, *Transpositions: On Nomadic Ethics* (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 2006), 117.
 11. For Irigaray, lesbian and homosexual love clearly fall short in their potential to realize the "fecundity" of sexual difference. In an interview quoted by Grosz (101), Irigaray asserts that "man and woman is the most mysterious and creative couple. That isn't to say that other couples may not also have a lot in them, but man and woman is the most mysterious and creative" (Kiki Amsberg and Aafke Steenhuis, "An Interview with Luce Irigaray," *Hecate* 9, nos. 1–2 [1983]: 192–202, quotation on 199). Irigaray's view on the ethical limitations of same-sex relations is equally unambiguous: "Engaging with a person of my own gender is threatened with superficiality, dissolution, with an unethical sensibility as long as there are no just institutions appropriate to it. That is not the case with a gender different from mine, not because of natural attraction and reproduction . . . but more because of the creativity difference produces" (Irigaray, *I Love to You*, 146).
 12. Irigaray, *I Love to You*, 26.
 13. *Ibid.*, 35.
 14. Judith Butler, in Pheng Cheah and Elizabeth Grosz, "The Future of Sexual Difference: An Interview with Judith Butler and Drucilla Cornell," *Diacritics* 28, no. 1 (1998): 19–42, quotation on 26.
 15. Myra J. Hird, "Animal Trans," in *Queering the Non/Human*, ed. Noreen Giffney and Myra J. Hird, *Queer Interventions* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2008), 227–47.
 16. Clare Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory*, *Next Wave: New Directions in Women's Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).
 17. *Ibid.*, 118, 120.
 18. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaux: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 213.