

Periods

BY MARY O'BRIEN

I remember that when I was at school in the 1930s I was much perplexed by the notion of periods. Our school day was divided into periods: math period, sewing period (I hated that) and history period. In history period we learned about historical periods, generally associated with kings or poets: The Augustan, Caroline, Romantic, Jacobean periods. While the words "age" and "era" have become more popular, periods persist in the time sense and with continuing ambiguity. To learn about them as temporal phenomena, stretching from forty minutes to a thousand years was bad enough, but there were other resonances at work. There was grammar, where period meant full stop and had apparently nothing to do with time. There were "period pieces," the childish sobriquet for any female teacher over 30. We were being introduced to something called a periodic table, which certainly granted no elemental legitimacy to time. This opacity in the notion of periods, however, paled in the significance of our pre-pubescent anticipation of our "first periods," which, unlike the elements, had heavy temporal connotations: "that time of the month," "a woman's time." But historical pe-



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riods were tidily continuous and linear, while the monthly sort, we were told, might have a tendency to irregularity. As we had never been offered information about alternative modes of time consciousness, the contradictions of linear and cyclical modes were puzzling and irregularity seemed faintly pathological. In those days, too, we had to cope with families impoverished by "short time" or "idle time" in an industrial depression: (nice capitalist ambiguity in this proletarian usage which identified unemployed workers as "idle": wasting time?) We also had a school-mate, a sort of awesome kid, who walked proudly because her brother was "doing time" for a bit of "petty" larceny. He *was* idle, of course. A grander larceny might have brought hard labour.

Fortunately, I hadn't yet met time out of mind, in the poetic sense, or time as mind in the philosophic sense: these would come—at a later period.

There is still some slight tendency to refer to early modes of social organization in terms of periods: Lower and Middle Pleistocene periods for example. The words "age" and "era" are kept for *homo sapiens* in a more recognizable form—obsessed with technology and prepossessed with male power. Stone Age "man" despite some limitations, had managed to define the species as male in terms of its capacity to record its history, however obliquely. It may well be that the ridiculous word "prehistoric" actually means prepatriarchal, consigning societies which might have been either matriarchal or simply egalitarian to the murky caverns of ahistoricity.¹ In modern terms, "ages"—political, literary, economic—have widely supplanted "periods" in historical description. An interesting exception is the "Romantic Period," which resists definition as an age or an era. This may well be due to the preoccupation of the romantic imagination with the ambiguities of nature and images of eternal return, with a good dose of elegant misogyny thrown in. There is perhaps something profoundly unmanly in the effort to reconcile cyclical time, which destroys the very possibility of the triumph of Reason, with historical time which leaves us all groping in a night in which all cows are black and there are no male progeny of Minerva's owl left to see in the dark the glint of wisdom. Yet Hegel himself was determined to produce a system of philosophy which would abolish the triviality and divisiveness of periods for the splendors of transfigurative processes. It is clear from the closing pages of

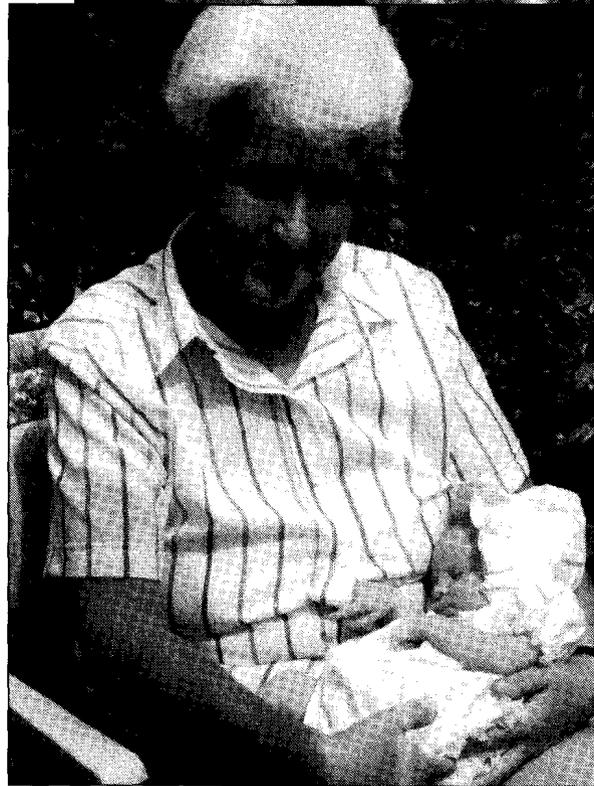
The Phenomenology of Spirit that women disrupt man's reconciliation with time and with god: "Just as the individual divine man (Hegel means Jesus C.) has an implied (essential, *an sich*) father and only an actual mother, in like manner the universal divine man (i.e., patriarchy), the spiritual (ideological) communion has as its father its own proper action and knowledge, while its mother is eternal love (no periods, we note) which it merely *feels*, but does not behold in its consciousness as an actual immediate object" (184).² For these reasons, the world awaits transfiguration, but Hegel had not identified *patriarchy* as a period awaiting transcendence. Had he done so, he could then have envisaged a human future rather than snatched in melancholy desperation at the abstract trouser legs of absolute spirit.

Hegel's system is important because it is the most ambitious European attempt to "master" time: time-consciousness is an eternal battle which Hegel tries to endow with "periods" which are neither circular nor cyclical nor linear. He conceives(!) a history mothered by negativity and fathered by transcendence—body by mind, nature by history, intuition by reason. The Romantic failing was to think that body, nature, and intuition ought to be taken seriously, a dangerously unmanning procedure. "Periodicity" was historicized in the positing of a creative antithesis—dialectical process—in which man's self-consciousness was eventually to be subsumed in his spirituality, and reborn as universal Reason. Unfortunately, Hegel's notion of negation as the

plant food of historical process has moved steadily from men's theorizing to men's practice: we know now that negation as the motor of time does not clear the path for rational spirit but clears the earth of the life that gives mind any reason at all for contemplating human history. In any case, all this clever reconstruction of time within mind silenced the romantics and drove them mad, leaving the way clear for the men of the scientific age who never did read Hegel's luminous critique of their intellectual deficiencies. They had no time for philosophy, finding the future of "empty" space more interesting than faulty memories of past history.

It did not silence women, for they had not spoken to Hegel, although he had this quite romantic notion about our capacity for feeling, playing dizzily, dangerously and ignorantly with the dialectic of power/reason. Hegel's women whispered furtively and chaotically with ancient household gods, who lived in domestic inglenooks more murky than the pastures of invisible cows. These were the days when women were spoken "for," a social process of the negation of rights in

the dialectic of patriarchy and the conjugal family. Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* is, for women, the transfer of their rights from father to brother to husband, a "Right" grounded in female incapacity for transcendence of domestic labour and the cycle of regeneration of the species, "periods" of mindless dumb necessity, a massive philosophical yawn supervised by big brothers. Hegel thought the loving and sacrificial relation of brother and sister to be the earthly



manifestation of the highest peak that the phenomenology of female minds might aspire to: hence his admiration for Antigone for love of her brother, dead before she bred.

We are no longer silent, some of us: of what, when we speak, do we speak? Doubtless, the patriarchy would like to think of a feminist "period," another historical outburst of collective nagging, due to stop—full stop—part of a repetitious cycle of uppityness, a climacteric of some kind, women's trouble, troublesome women whose activities are historically cyclical. A little period of insubordination, after all, acts as a safety valve for the sustenance of the sex/gender system. A few concessions: let them emerge from the private realm and test themselves against all reason: they will go back to their natural sphere, worn out by the effort to simulate reason in their naturalistic way.

But let me cycle back to those youthful covens in which the essence of periods was distilled in womanhood/sisterhood, in continuity: when the ageless wisdoms of menstruation struggled with the historical trivialization of femininity. Much giggling, one remembers: nervous, anticipatory, puzzled, awed. Menstruation was constructed by adolescent patriarchs in the debased language of the dirty joke, the rag, the curse, the cunt. For us, periods were shared secret things, runes of linguistic cyphers and magical powers, badges of inferiority-through-vulnerability, strength-through-sisterhood. Given this confusion, it was not odd that the prime mode of communication of these mysteries was the giggle. The language of women's experience was gone, as our Parisian sisters keep telling us so eloquently. Did we know where the vulnerability really lay? Did we guess at the envy? Perhaps not. But we certainly did not suffer from the sense of a separation of fecundity and sexuality which afflicted our brothers. We assured each other that we would never have sex with a man we did not love, we exchanged misinformation about

"safe periods," we decided how many children we would have (two) and the qualities of acceptable fathers for them. We hinted at arcane knowledge about masturbation, single and mutual, about abortion and contraception: falling off the table after drinking a bottle of gin was considered the sophisticated methodology of the former and virginity ambivalently perceived as the only

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effective strategy for the latter. But of our sexual experience: of importunate fathers and experimenting brothers; of gropes and fumbles; of rape; of these we never spoke. It was a new romantic period, spawned by industrial stagnation and Hollywood fantasy, the motionless "cycle" of the economy dulled by celluloid trivia. Yet we knew sisterhood in the perplexities of burgeoning womanhood. We did not giggle because we were silly but because, in some feminized version of Sisyphus we knew that we were happy—for a period. The curse would come upon us somehow as a time of change, as maturity, as fulfillment. We were strong in our covens, even though we had been taught the evil of witchcraft.

"There is a kind of magic in recollection" de Beauvoir says, "a magic one feels at every age" (402). She goes on to argue that the past was lived in the "for-itself mode" yet becomes an "in-itself" with aging. One's youth-

ful past, she claims is the remembrance of "guilt, shame and anxiety" (413). No doubt she would, in 1970, have regarded what I have written above as evasive sentimentalism, an inauthentic defence of Sartre's "practico-inert," the processes by which we objectify ourselves in the world. For existentialism, we are captives of our past, of periods congealed in an experience we cannot recover as we face the inevitability of our deaths. Yet de Beauvoir's strictures on the winding-down weariness of old age are perhaps less convincing when one thinks of the vitality of her own late involvement in feminist politics. We shall miss her, for the book of her youth and the politics of her agedness. In between? A different period. A period of that fixation with finitude which is, I believe, specifically masculine: the preoccupation with death, the despair; the new romanticism which sees eternal return as the no-longer-courageous, now merely pointless cycle of the natural world; a mindless on-spinning continuum of triviality that takes its meaning from an intellectualized subjectivity that cannot stay here, that dies too soon, too inevitably, that waits out life in the doomed anterooms of mortality, the condemnation of self by self's immersion in finitude, in abrupted linearity, in the momentous moment of one's death.

One cannot think intelligently about time within patriarchal history, with man-centred epistemologies. If indeed mankind is engaged in a continuous linear or even dialectical process of making history—a process understood only by philosophers and therefore qualifying as more real than reality—somewhere a line must be drawn. Where this line is to be drawn, by whom, its erasures, amendments, breaks, recapitulations; its lies and secrets, its crippled language, its ethical unconcern, its empty elegance; where it is to be drawn is precisely the lie of male supremacy and the truth of masculine inadequacy. History tumbles outside of drawn lines and selec-

tive dialectic. For example, the dialectic of nature and history, of season and clock, of individual and generation, of fecundity and decay. Knowledge of these is knowledge of abstract time, time out of mind, not experienced time, not species time, not common time. Men have used mind for the sorts of understanding of reality embedded in the history of the conquest of time, men's history. Women "mind?" the children. The obvious thing that is wrong with this is the failure to realize that the first is destructive of history, a quest for Nirvana, the periodization of abstract heroes arrogantly symbolized in the cyclically insignificant death of the deified individual: the second—coping all the time—is the absolute condition of a human existence in time. Human history has meaning only in species time, a reality dimly recalled by "remembering" our individual birthdays while forgetting the cyclical integrity of species life.

Yet we cannot simply assert the "brute" presence of the natural world as "necessary," though it is clearly so in economic terms. Our relations of production, however, have become relations of destruction, and the task of feminism is much larger than transforming existing structures of political domination. Human freedom cannot be understood as license to destroy the natural world. A dim awareness of this is evident in patriarchy's space and nuclear "energy" programs, in which the need to find other planets to exploit creates a destructive obsession which explodes the wealth of nations in "incidents," "accidents," blow-outs, blow-ups, and mounting martial hysteria about "races against time." This phrase crystallizes the limitations of linearity: one does not race against a cycle; horrors of treadmills, circular thinking, and square rings notwithstanding. A cycle is not a circle, not an eternal return, not just a pseudonym for the inadequacies of capitalist production, not a temporary malfunction in linear history. Patriarchy, particularly capitalist patriarchy, is

very sulky about recycling; conservation is bad for business. Patriarchy examines space, sees it is an environment in which circular objects abound, but chooses to "penetrate" it with phallic rockets. Patriarchy sees regeneration itself as a "line," and works out the racial, ethnic, and class "lines" which cannot be "crossed."

We were of course wrong, we little

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girls in speaking of our "periods." The cycle of regeneration is not subject to full stops. The older word, "courses," makes more sense. Collectively, there is no moment in history when menses are not flowing, the promise of fertility and regeneration, a nuisance on occasion but hardly a curse, unless fertility itself is a curse of life itself unworthy of renewal. In human terms, in female experience, our "periods" cannot grammatize our fecundity: they are reminders that we have chosen not to reproduce at *this* time, not by "controlling nature" but by self-discipline, by intention, by preference: by that practical rationality which does not abstract from reality but learns to live with it. There are periods in which the interplay of rational/ethical decision-making, personal responsibilities, and species continuity are apprehended in temporal consciousness. To do or not to do, *that* is the question which must

be posed when we act in life rather than indulge in macabre fantasies of power over death.

That is also the question which faces contemporary feminism as modern Hamlets play out their depressed ontologies of the end of the line: jumbling dialectic with juxtaposition, subject/object obscuring the truth of subject/species while they reach out to touch the face of imagined god-the-fathers. (Hands on holsters in case it turns out to be the other fellow's god.) The birth of a child is the cord which links and breaks and reconstitutes the integrity of history and nature, of linear time and cyclical time. These are not two different time modes but the dialectic vitality of human existence, the linear/cyclical entwinement whose promises of universality threaten those who are indifferent of difference, cowed by the notion of death, careless of their reproductive power and exploitative of that power in "Others," the not-us.

The problem now is, of course, species death, the "end" of historical time, the expiration of mind which originally named time so that it might be straightened out. The "scientific" appropriation of women's reproductive powers is an essential part, perhaps the ultimate move in creating time as an unfrayed rope with which to hang our species. Reproductive technology gives to man in general the power to control both individual birth and with onrushing genetic "engineering," species continuity. (Hand me that spanner buddy, I'm spanning time.) Reproductive technology also offers the dizzy vision of a world without women, the end of gender, but also the chaos of the disintegration of universal man at the end of his time. What happens when all that phallic imagery confronts the reality of masturbation into a dish in some institutional lavatory?

This scientific period, promising a final solution to the "reproductive problem," would be a depressing prospect if it were simply the latest phase in patriarchal history, another step

in the control of women's fecundity. However, its totalitarian, universal dimensions historically create resistance. To be sure, reproductive control may seem like a dot on the line of history—until we remember that history is not a line and a dot is not a period. Feminism is a clear example of the power of cyclicity, not a romantic eternal return but a never-going-away. What we now have is



the possibility of technological control of reproduction, of the total displacement of birth from culture to science. Feminism in this sense has no longer to look to abstract concepts of man's justice and ethics to know that women are near the beginning of their time because men have betrayed their historicity, have lost the dialectic of nature and history in the "transcendence" of birth. Reproductive technology exposes the fallacy of scientific enterprise, which attempts to negate women without noticing that in so doing it negates the historical, social, sexual, born subject.

This desperate fling at reproductive imperialism won't work, partly because it destroys the very fortresses which patriarchy has built to contain "its" women, the most notable of these being the varied set of social relations known as "the family," of private life as opposed to public life. The feminist revolution astonishes

all those men who write snide, bewildered letters asking editors what women want so that it can be arranged that we don't get it: whatever it is. In practice, feminism has redefined revolution in a way that creates problems for martial modes of consciousness. Revolutionary "periods" abound in men's history, periods of spilled blood, of sudden death, black magic breaking the linearity of time, of magic male moments strung together with the sticky glue of seminal white magic. Revolution has been understood as progressive violence in the public realm, that changing from one period of history to a better one. Feminism has created a new kind of revolution, a non-violent revolution in the private realm. This is not monolithic of course. The only constant factor in modern family forms are patriarchy and hierarchy, and the variations in different societies and time-frames affect the pace of development and frequently create tensions in the movement itself as international conferences and interpersonal struggles often

show. These divisions among women cannot be simply dismissed as the "legacy" (linear) of patriarchy. Though they are that, enormous efforts have to be made to mediate injustices while conserving the vitality of female difference with the yeast of feminist respect. Despite this, the patriarchal family is in a state of dissolution by the contradictory forces of feminist politics on one hand and the male project to control women's fecundity on the other. Clearly, the former is the way to go and the latter must be resisted. Nonetheless, it would be naive not to notice that this revolution has already had far-ranging effects, not necessarily experienced by individual women as triumphs of any kind, but transforming gender and sexual relations in quite clear ways related to work, education, child-raising, income distribution and, where they exist, to civil rights. Further, the developing consortium of peace and

environmental groups are welcome retinues in women's struggle for human dignity. The revolution of the private realm is difficult and painful, but it is an event in time in which transformed feminist consciousness is the essential creativity. The impact is, of course, obscured by masculinist perceptions of righteousness in *their* "liberation" of women, an ideological liberation from the struggles of dual work loads, single parenting, cheap labour moderated by trendy sexuality and the benign hand of the state. But other gains are real: for lesbian women, in education, independence but above all in the rising revolutionary potential of the movement itself.

But is there time? Not only time to dismantle patriarchy, but to heal the divisions which separate women from each other? If we are to continue to think of temporality as linear, to set an hour, a date, for the Feminist Period, all we do is saddle ourselves with the apparatus of what are appropriately called "deadlines." If we are to conceptualize history as a lifeline, we not only have to challenge male power, but to destroy the myth of men's time and produce a regenerative time consciousness. This cannot be done by changing the meanings of words in an arbitrary way, but then, it need not be a process of abstraction—of meaning, of significance, of power, of time. There is an ancient base for a new knowledge of the world in the concrete, non-objectified female experience of the unity of continuity in the practical act of birth, the experience of species persistence as accomplishment rather than fate, of life rather than death, of practicality rather than ideology, of wisdom rather than power. These are the premises of feminism, which cannot be decontextualized because their context is us and our experience.

There are three very young women walking in the shopping centre. They are beautiful, these bosom friends. Their heads are close. They are giggling. All is well; on and on....

¹Marilyn French's recent historical encyclopedia has a strong sense of this kind of process, as well as an impressive summary of what men have chosen to know and chosen to forget (French 43–112).

²The emphases are textual, the bracketed interpolations mine.

I do not like "foot-noting" women: reminds me of "foot-binding." But I must acknowledge the debts which come as much from informal talking as formal writing. So to Somer Brodribb, Frieda Forman, Medeline Grumet, Sandra Harding, Nancy Hartsock, Angela Miles, Dale Spending and many others: salutations.

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MARY O'BRIEN

XXV

I am weary of the platitudes of change—
accelerated inconvenience
calls for response
old as feeling rain fall
faster, suddenly,
or watching others or myself
mutate
as we have done, and will again
predictable, unknowable as bugs
bugged by some novel chemical

But then
I never was enamoured
of consistancy
never felt
warmth of certainty
radiate from the cracked crucible of existing
or knew
the chrismal emollient
of being sure of anything at all.

So no
hearing the tired tautologies of change
articulated
with verve or terror
tight lipped trauma
ass-holed asininity
naive delight
as if of something never known before.

Then all I do
is mix the plaster of iconoclasm
a little thicker
to build my barricades a little higher
and wonder why the hell I seem to care
for what goes on
out there.

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