Book review for Rosemary Balsam, Women's Bodies in Psychoanalysis

Return to Journal Articles

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"…if one agrees that the pregnant and birthing body is currently virtually erased in our literature, one needs, I guess, to consider deeply the sheer and breathtaking force of the desire that would deny its ongoing role in the psyche." (Balsam, p. 189)

After four decades of cultural constructivism being in the ascendant in feminist scholarship and throughout the humanities more generally, the body is making a comeback. There have of course been early adopters, such as the feminist rescue missions for the body in work from the 1990s by Elizabeth Grosz, Elizabeth Wilson and Vicki Kirby. But since the French Feminists, Luce Irigaray and Helene Cixous in particular, were condemned as essentialists for embracing even the metaphorical power of the female genitals to critique phallocentrism and enable *l'ecriture feminine,* defensiveness and caveats have routinely been required before feminist theorists could embark wholeheartedly on listening to, and speaking from, the female body. This too was reinforced by the second-wave feminist rejection of the procreative female body as the cause (and victim) of centuries of oppression. Hence the emancipatory potential of culture over nature became paramount to women's empowerment project.

Rosemary Balsmam's study of the place, and erasure, of the female body in psychoanalysis is therefore a timely addition to feminist scholarship that focuses on meanings of the body, as well as to the interdisciplinary explosion of interest in the role of the body more generally. This literature not only explores cultural meanings represented through the body, its shape, needs and desires, but also seeks to understand the human animal through the intelligence and perspicuity of the body itself, if we pause to watch, listen, taste, touch, smell and quietly inhabit its proprioceptive world. Similarly neuroscientists such as Antonio Damasio have broadened their focus to explore the mechanisms and pathways of the body as a network of consciousness, memory and cognition, as well as its better-understood functions of sensory perception (reference).

Thus the body discourse may function within a representational and Cartesian paradigm, to allow the body a place in the symbolism, for example, of Freudian analysis. Or it may be a more radical epistemological project to better understand how our bodies enable us to know anything – ourselves, others, the world – in the first place. Balsam's project is of the first kind and, as a Freudian, she makes a valiant effort to defend Freudian analysis as being so uniquely grounded in the body that its revision, rather than its abandonment, is the wisest course for analysts to follow. Despite Freud's serious limitations in allowing for only a single-sex, male model of human development, Balsam insists that Freud's is still the only analytical framework that adequately recognizes the role of the body at all, and argues that with the addition of a female model of development that acknowledges its procreative and sexual specificity, all will be well. . She writes: "My attempt is cogently to build on and expand highly viable aspects of Freudian ego psychology by theorizing about the content of what the patient says, finding accurate and helpful Freud's emphasis on the sexed and gender physical aspects of psychic functioning, while rejecting his obsolete formulations." (p. 26)

But nor is Balsam simply a dualist, despite her allegiance to the talking cure; and she indicates awareness that this method necessarily relegates the significance of the body to the realm of the symbolic, since it is inevitably mediated through speech. Whether that speech refers to actions, behaviours, beliefs, incidents from the past, or dreams and fantasies — and even while attending to speech's slippages — the body is merely a representational field for meaning-making rather than a place within which meaning itself resides. Balsam shows an awareness of this tension, writing that:

A contemporary therapist can thus easily miss an opportunity to hear connections between a woman's sexual body, its implications to her, and the productions of her sexuality, i.e. her children, by focusing *separately* on her talk of mothering, as a more 'out-there' phenomenon to do with 'out-there' children. A therapist can forget that her own and her mother-patient's bodies and interior corporeal memories are constantly taking part in this experience in the office. (p. 32, italics in original)

It would be interesting to see how the two approaches (of representational and epistemological bodies) could be usefully combined in a clinical setting, perhaps through a feminist somatic therapy that also values analytic dialogue.

Balsam rightly focuses on establishing first that the female body possesses greater symbolic import within the psychoanalytic narratives of development, than has previously been allowed. And her evidence is both persuasive and astounding, from the 16th century anatomical diagrams of women's genitals as inverted male genitals to the "gracious silence" (p. 9) that characterizes ideal femininity across all the religions, and from the well-known phallocentric models of development proposed by Freud to the persistent erasure of the pregnant body within analysis. As Balsam writes, "[The pregnant body] is so problematic that it has actually been *omitted* in important aspects of theory building to date." (p. 32) In her introduction to the chapter on "The pregnant mother and her daughter's body image" she adds, "I feel almost apologetic about how obvious the

associative material is, but this just serves to deepen the mystery about how these materials are not referred to by theory builders and to what lengths they go to twist out the logic of this fundamental developmental connection." (p. 55)

Although female analysts such as Melanie Klein and Helene Deutsch addressed the role of the female body in development, and despite refutations of the one-sex theory of development found in the work of Janet Adelman (1999), Tyson and Tyson (1990) and Notman (1996), Balsam contends that there is still much work needed to compensate. This is partly because refutation creates a need to bring forth alternative narratives. As Balsam writes, "psychoanalysis still has much more to explore and contribute to this particular knowledge from the inner vantage point." (p. 46)

And so Balsam provides a wealth of information, including interwoven case histories, to describe the ways in which the embodied female can be incorporated into traditional analysis, from the more obvious carnal differences such as pregnancy and mothering to the less tangible, such as relationships between brothers and sisters. Balsam's readings of cases involving siblings are some of the most interesting in the book as she records the persistently "un-phallocentric" even "gynocentric" orientations of the families. (p. 127). It "is in this section too, that she is more attuned to the indeterminacy and changeability of the subject and less concerned with symbolic correspondences more usually associated with Freudian method. Reporting on the creativity of the female body and its extension to material wealth through the "omnipresence of female procreation" in one case, she writes, what is "fascinating, is how individuals" bodies and body parts and their anatomical and physiological functions become interpreted and mentalized by the growing child, and are given fluid meanings that reflect their family relationships, as they understand the animal biological life cycle of sex and procreation." (pp. 142-3) Looking finally at infant daughters with fathers who are primary care givers, this gender fluidity also arises, in a way that again undermines Freudian essentialism. Wary of "gender generalizations", Balsam concludes that "archaic body fusion fantasy may play a recognized, perhaps ubiquitous, and certainly adaptive role in both men's and women's caretaking of their children." (p. 174)

As an academic rather than a clinician, I found the final chapter of this book, "Some implications for theory", to be particularly valuable as an overview of Balsam's argument and a summary of the traditions she is working against. She offers here "six trends, and their historical development, [which] have each been, in their own way, crucial to the story of women in psychoanalysis" and yet into which "the female biological body has not readily fitted." (p. 175) The trends Balsam enumerates are as follows: a focus on external genitalia; woman as separate from man; children and mothers — in which "the corporeal maternal body remains slighted" (p. 182); the Kleinian and object relations traditions; postmodern influences; and the post-modern body. These latter sections bring us to the postmodern troubling of concepts such as gender and the physical body but leave Balsam in no doubt that even if these concepts are regarded as "necessary fictions", nevertheless "life is not possible apart from the body". (p. 190)

Throughout Balsam's study, the second, epistemological aspect of embodiment maintains a ghostly presence. She grapples with this spectral challenge, and is aware of it, but is ultimately unable to incorporate it, given her loyalty to Freudian analysis: "Despite our clinical sophistication," she writes (and I would suggest perhaps *because* of it), "it is difficult to sustain a mental integration of body and mind. How humanly eager we all are — analysand and analyst alike — to seek the transient but seductive comfort of dwelling with less anxiety in the mental spaces of splits, schisms and rifts, where physical explanations and mental ones are kept in separate compartments." (p. 8)

As Elizabeth Stephens argues in her essay "Bad feelings", even the influential and feminist-inflected work on affect theory has tended to relegate the body's role in expressing emotion to a reductive conception of the physical. She quotes from Ruth Leys' critique of affect theory in *The Turn to Affect* (2011), that the non-mediated bodily expressiveness of affect is nevertheless "irreducibly bodily and automatic" and still regarded as "non-cognitive corporeal" which is merely expressive rather than constitutive of subjectivity (p. 281). Similarly, Balsam dismisses the "new concepts of bodymind or embodiment" as a "hodgepodge of thoughts that exceed the helpful tolerance of ambiguities at the same time as [the end result] supposedly mirrors the contents of our minds." (p. 186) However, this critique is offered within the context of disembodying poststructuralist thought that sees the body as an idea as much as an entity, rather than through the more current theoretical lens of neuro-cognitive philosophy.

This is why to me Balsam's efforts are not only of importance to feminist scholars and therapists. While understanding the role of the body may be particularly urgent within feminist scholarship, it has broader implications for all of us. As Guy Claxton writes, the body has been a "Cinderella concept, denigrated and disdained by the fictional Ugly Sisters of Mind and Soul":

Overall, the body has had a hard time of it for the last 2,500 years of human — especially Western — history. Because the world has lacked, until very recently, the scientific tools to persuade the body to reveal its intricacy and sophistication, it is no wonder that societies should have invented all kinds of explanatory fictions to account for human intelligence, leaving only menial tasks for the body to pick up (2015, p. 27).

Whether those "menial tasks" are to engage in physical labour or represent meaning, they are regarded as merely the instruments of cognition, rather than integral to its very possibility. It will take a radical reimagining of the topography of the mind, and of the concepts of self-awareness and subjectivity — not to mention definitions of the ego and its counterparts — to reunite somatic sensibility with intellect.

References

Stephens, E. (2015). Bad feelings. *Australian Feminist Studies*, *30*(85): 273-282.

Claxton G. (2015). *Intelligence in the flesh: Why your mind needs your body much more than it thinks.* New Haven: Yale University Press.

Return to Journal Articles