

To Think the Sexual Difference: Irigaray and the Psychoanalysis of Rationality

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Listen to Linda Pastan:

My husband gives me an A
for last night's supper,
an incomplete for my ironing,
a B plus in bed.
My son says I am average,
an average mother, but if
I put my mind to it
I could improve.
My daughter believes
in Pass/Fail and tells me
I pass. Wait 'til they learn
I'm dropping out.

Linda Pastan, "Marks"

She tells of the fact that women the world over are principally and, oftentimes, exclusively, defined by motherhood. Asked her thoughts about womanhood during the question-and-answer period of an international beauty pageant held in Manila a few years ago, one of the contestants enthused: "The essence of women is motherhood!" Whether or not she is actually a mother, a woman is judged in terms of the extent to which, in her dealings with others, she is able to bring to display compassion, concern, an indefatigability of care – qualities of her presumptive maternal nature. Any amount of failure to do so is swiftly met

with social disapproval, and labeling, running the gamut from “un-ladylike” to “dyke.” Women remain tied, as a result, to an identity derived from their biology: “This is your body; therefore, you have to be such-and-such.” Luce Irigaray holds such essentialist/maternalistic thinking responsible for much of the ecological destruction, inter-religious violence, global poverty, runaway consumerism, scientific imperialism of our own time.¹ To overcome it, as well as the conundrums stemming from it which underwrite so much of today’s violence, we need, in Irigaray’s view, to give *sexual difference* – which, notwithstanding its being “one of the important questions of our age, if not in fact the burning issue”² persists as our civilization’s great un-thought – the hard and honest attention it deserves.

The fundamental problem of *sexual difference*, on Irigaray’s account, is *patriarchy*, or that “exclusive respect for the genealogy of sons and fathers, and the competition between brothers.”³ In consequence of *patriarchy*, the textures and patterns of “thinking” in Western culture, its very rationality, is “male.” Both the word for the supreme and transcendent deity, “Father,” and the most normal and everyday word for humanity, “man,” point to a bias for men. Women, for their part, vanish into the maelstrom of this male-brokered-and-dominated order of things.⁴ Irigaray engages the major thinkers of the Western tradition,

¹ Luce Irigaray, “Sexual Difference,” in *The Irigaray Reader*, Margaret Whitford, ed. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1991), p. 165.

² *Ibid.*

³ Margaret Whitford, quoting Irigaray in the “Introduction” to Section 1 of *The Irigaray Reader*, p. 23. The writer is confident that most of Irigaray’s ideas have application in the Philippines. Many Filipino families to this day, for example, rear boys to be the ones to take up an education, and later on, to assume the role of provider, at the same time that they rear girls to housework. Girls are expected to take care of the needs of their fathers and brothers, to wash the men’s clothes, cook their meals, mend their clothes. A bachelor’s pad, for example, is naturally disorderly, since “there is no woman to take care of things.”

⁴ Irigaray writes: “[T]he feminine must be deciphered as inter-dict: within the signs or between them, between the realized meanings, between the lines ... and as a function of the [re]productive necessities of an intentionally phallic currency, which, for the lack of the collaboration of a [potentially] female other, can immediately be assumed to need *its* other, a sort of inverted or negative alter-ego – “black” too, like a photographic negative” *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 22.

ranging from Plato to Derrida, to bring to surface this un-analyzed bias, this construction of feminine identity as a derivative and, as such, inferior identity.⁵ In this connection, she wryly comments on Freud's concept of *penis-envy*:

So we must admit that the LITTLE GIRL IS THEREFORE A LITTLE MAN. A little man who will suffer a more painful and complicated evolution than the little boy in order to become a normal woman! A little man with a smaller penis. A disadvantaged little man ... Whose needs are less catered to by nature and who will yet have a lesser share of culture ... A little man who would have no other desire than to be, or remain, a man.⁶

What Irigaray has in mind is not the political struggle to ameliorate women's secondary status in a male-dominated society. She does not, in this respect, follow the lead of Simone de Beauvoir in working to place the political rights of "woman as the other" on a parity with those of man, for that, in her view, would merely be to make "the other" the "other of the same,"⁷ and

⁵ See, in particular, the following of Irigaray's works: *Speculum*, for her critical engagement of Freud and Plato; *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (New York: Colombia University Press, 1991), for her "conversations" with Nietzsche; "Questions to Emmanuel Levinas," in *The Irigaray Reader*. See also Tina Chanter, *Ethics of Eros: Irigaray's Rewriting of the Philosophers* (New York: Routledge, 1995), for a study of Irigaray's critique that sexual difference has largely been passed-over in the writings of the major thinkers in Western history, including the Greeks, Hegel, Heidegger, Levinas, Derrida, and even De Beauvoir.

⁶ *Speculum*., p. 26. Freud's notion of penis-envy is Irigaray's main contention with this influential thinker. By what reason Freud presupposed that the female ego suffers from a privation of the male organ, Irigaray claims she does not comprehend at all. As she remarks:

Why does the term "envy" occur to Freud? Why does Freud choose it? Envy, jealousy, greed are all correlated to lack, default, absence. All these terms describe female sexuality as merely the *other side* or even the *wrong side* of a male sexualism. (*Ibid.*, p.

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⁷ Irigaray maintains that the metaphysics of Western rationality is a metaphysics of 'the same.' This means that everything that falls under the purview of this masculinist metaphysics is reduced into the terms of the dominant power, which is male. It is thus the distinctive quality of Western thought that it thinks everything in terms of the principle of identity, the principle of non-contradiction, and binarism. These underwrite the Western obsession with *identifying* things, with investing them with stable, unchanging, individuating identities. *That* thing is either A or non-A. But given this 'logic of the same,' everything is either male or not-male. Everything, as a result, including femininity, is viewed in the light of maleness.

thereby to accommodate still to the male norm. Men dominate society, and they alone have a voice, because society itself is constructed according to the terms supplied by male rationality. Women need to develop their own voice, an achievement destined forever to elude them in the context of the present rationality. If women are to develop a voice, "the restructuring of the construction of the rational subject," would have to be brought about.⁸ The whole of Western rationality would have to be re-worked/re-programmed all the way from the foundations (i.e. what grounds it) upwards. This way the "otherness" of women would achieve a truly different "otherness," one certainly not in the image of the dominant male power.⁹ It is not, therefore, the prospect of a reversal of positions between men and women that Irigaray entertains. A tyranny that merely changes hands remains, in her view, a tyranny. Women need to overcome the position of complementarity assigned them in patriarchal society. They need to show that they are not simply there to fill up the second part of the binaries man/woman or masculine/feminine, which are still in accordance with how masculine reason sees things.¹⁰ The call, then, is not for equality but for the recognition of sexual difference. If the counter-argument is that "We are all human anyway!," Irigaray would answer that we have defined "human" all throughout history as "man," that is, "male." What needs to be recognized is that male and female are two distinct genres, which need to be operated in terms of social rights and duties.¹¹ But this will happen only if women are allowed to have an identity all their own. Women *as* women, not simply as secretaries, prostitutes, or even, mothers.¹² Woman must be allowed to be woman-for-herself, and not just "man's 'other,'" or the 'other of the same.'¹³ Irigaray writes:

⁸ Margaret Whitford, *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine*, (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 53.

⁹ See Luce Irigaray, "Equal or Different?" in *The Irigaray Reader*, pp. 30-33.

¹⁰ See Moira Gatens, *Feminism and Philosophy: Perspectives on Difference and Equality* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), p. 113.

¹¹ "Equal or Different?," p. 33.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 31.

¹³ See Whitford's Introduction to Section III of *The Irigaray Reader*, p. 159.

No doubt female physiology is present but not identity, which remains to be constructed. Of course, there is no question of its being constructed in repudiation of this physiology. It is a matter of demanding a culture, of wanting and elaborating a spirituality, a subjectivity and an alterity appropriate to this gender: the female. It's not as Simone de Beauvoir said: one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman (through culture), but rather: I am born a woman, but I must still become this woman that I am by nature.¹⁴

A woman's identity, in her view, is not akin to silly putty that she, then, is responsible for shaping over her life. To assume it is (as De Beauvoir did) is to assume that only one identity – the human – subsists in all of us, and “male” or “female” becomes simply an accident of one's own life choices. Irigaray would argue instead that becoming a woman entails the fashioning of an identity that is radically different from that entailed in becoming a man, and that this identity is not simply a result of a process of differentiation.

Central to Irigaray's critique of Western rationality is her critical interrogation of the notion of the “Imaginary.”¹⁵ Her mentor, Jacques Lacan, had, of course, pioneered the use of the term, using it to designate the moment an infant's bodily integrity is displayed to it through the instrumentality of the *mirror* (literal, but also figurative, in the case

¹⁴ Irigaray, Luce, *I Love to You: Sketch for a Felicity Within History*, trans. Alison Martin (New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 5.

¹⁵ By deploying the very tools she had received from Freud and Lacan to critically interrogate psychoanalysis, by psychoanalyzing, so to speak, the psychoanalysts, Irigaray established the point that psychoanalysis is beset with all kinds of hidden presuppositions that affect its theorizing. Oblivious to its own historico-philosophical determinants, ruled by unconscious fantasies which it has left unexamined, Freud's work, the work of the master himself, is decidedly patriarchal. It subjects what debt it has to the maternal to the processes of erasure; it takes as the norm of *all* human development that of the boy. As for Lacan, Irigaray criticizes him for his “imperialism.” His dislike of deviations from whatever theory he had set made him a prime candidate for Irigaray's criticism of the metaphysics of sameness, in which connection she questioned his insistence on the primacy of the phallus and on the male body as the ‘imaginary body’ of the “mirror stage” of human development. Very likely as a consequence of her work of critical interrogation of psychoanalysis itself, Irigaray lost her position in the Department of Psychoanalysis at Vincennes. See Introduction to *The Irigaray Reader*, p. 5-6.

of parents or parental figures around it). For the infant who is born without an already-coherent sense of its bodily self, this is "a [crucially important] developmental moment in the formation of [its] Ego or 'I,'" ¹⁶ for it is by means of the reflection which it receives through the mirror that the infant becomes aware of, and begins to develop a confidence in, its own bodily unity and identity. Two things about this process must be kept in mind: the entire process is played out upon the register of the unconscious; the infant does not choose the mirror (the parent-figures) from which it receives the image of itself. By his own account, Lacan had developed his conception of the Imaginary following upon Freud's notion of the Ego. A human life, according to Freud, is not invested with the Ego from its start. Quite the contrary, the Ego develops over time, under the impact most especially of those (mostly unconscious) identificatory relationships that in the child's earliest years spring up between itself and the parents/parental figures around it. It is a bodily Ego, taking the form of those mental representations of bodily experiences that underwrite a person's sense of wholeness and identity. It is Freud's notion of the bodily Ego that Lacan crafts into his conception of the Imaginary.

As Irigaray sees it, the trouble with Freud's and Lacan's related theories of the Ego and the Imaginary is that they are tied to a "phallo-centrism," understood not so much as "the primacy of the phallus," as "a more general process of cultural and representational *assimilation*."

Phallocentrism is the use of *one* model of subjectivity, the male, by which all others are positively or negatively defined. Others are constructed as variations of this singular type of subject. They are thus reduced to or defined only by terms chosen by and appropriate for masculinity. ¹⁷

Freud's model of human subjectivity, for one thing, is decisively biased in favor of male identity, insofar as it takes for its unexamined standard of human development that of the little boy. The little girl who sooner or later must face the "fact" that she "lacks" the physical appendage that gives identity and power to men, ¹⁸ must learn to settle for the secondary identity of

¹⁶ Margaret Whitford, "Luce Irigaray's Critique of Rationality," in *Feminist Perspectives in Philosophy*, ed. by Morwenna Griffiths and Margaret Whitford (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), p. 114.

¹⁷ Elizabeth Grosz, *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1989), p. 105.

¹⁸ *Speculum*, p. 71.

the "castrated boy." This marks her entry into the developmental stage called Oedipalization, the threshold to the process of normalization, from which point on she will be expected to "resolve" her identity in *complementarity* (not in competition) with, that of the empowered male. By acquiescing to the fact that he has something that she lacks, she will be able to lead a normal, feminine life.¹⁹ Lacan's mirror is similarly phallogentric, insofar as it reflects back to its viewer the image of the male (never of the female) body. What female bodily identity is reflected back to her would be that of a lack, of a *hole*. The self parlayed to a woman by such a mirror would be that of the self which is "defective," deprived.²⁰

But if Freud's and Lacan's theories are phallogentric, it is because they operate in a tradition of rationality that, as a consequence of women's absence from it, has been cobbled together under the influence of the phallogentric imaginary, with its insistence on static form, on the unchanging identity of subject and object, on the principle of non-contradiction, on the binarism that cuts through all of its discursive practices.²¹ The problems of war, ecological disaster, economic imperialism can all be traced back to their roots in the "hardness" (erection?) of male rationality. Given that the whole of Western metaphysics, philosophy, culture and rationality is phallogentric, how can the whole bundle be brought to think *beyond* itself, *outside* itself? How can society be brought to think otherwise than it is? At this juncture, Irigaray deploys the insights of *psychoanalysis*. She points out that in psychoanalytic practice, psychic health is chiefly fostered by providing the unconscious with the means to break to the surface, the repressed with

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 112-129. In the segment entitled "Woman is a Woman as a Result of a Certain Lack of Characteristics," Irigaray takes Freud to task for his "observations" which purport to establish that the supposed feminine traits of narcissism, physical vanity, and shame are all linked to woman's basic penis-envy. She excoriates Freud for remarking that the only thing women have invented in the whole of history is *weaving*.

²⁰ If body images are to be reflected back to women in greater fidelity to her own true contours, it will have to be by means of a *speculum*, a concave mirror as opposed to a flat one. *Ibid.*, pp. 144-146.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 133. Here Irigaray comments: "We can assume that any theory of the subject has always been appropriated by the 'masculine'... Subjectivity [has been] denied to woman."

the means to speak. In Western rationality, the unconscious, the repressed, is the feminine. As a consequence of this repression, we are in the throes of nihilism, of a culture-wide death drive. The way out? Invest the feminine with a voice that will empower it, finally, to speak, not as the other-of-the-same, but *as itself*²² – in the matter, firstly, of the authentic (in the sense that it has been sealed against the interloping figure of the father) relationship between mother and child, and in the matter, secondly, of that sexuality, corporeality, morphology that women truly could call their own.²³

Irigaray is emphatic about investing women with a voice that will not render them servile to the father-of-the-house at the same time that it helps them to develop their identity-as-mother. This, she understands, is not going to be an easy task. Already in Pastan's poem we learned just how a daughter can be sympathetic to her mother, and yet be unable to count on her to be that mirror image, that lead to follow, in crafting her own feminine identity. Her mother (this woman who barely "passes"), is absent from her reckoning, having been erased, murdered, banished into that species of death which results from her routing envelopment in total silence. All the more reason, insists Irigaray, to ground our symbolic representations of the mother-daughter relationship, not in woman as *envelope* (as one finds with mother-son symbols), but in woman as purely and simply woman. Here there will be no need to reinvent the wheel. For notwithstanding the disappearance from the popular imagination of the mother-daughter relationship, a cultural *residue* exists in which mothers bond with their daughters and daughters with their mothers in a manner that will always be mysterious to the phallographic discourse of men).²⁴ One need only recall to mind the

²² One very important point: before one thinks that the nihilism of Western rationality is the fault of *men*, one must remember that this culture-wide repression is an unconscious, *not* an intended, effect. It is not as if, spurred by the exigencies of their own biology, men have to play out some essential, psychological need to dominate. Irigaray does not speak of *essential* male or female characteristics. Indeed, she resists categorization as an *essentialist*. She does not claim that men are such-and-such or that women are such-and-such. She, however, does say that in a world constructed differently, things could be expected to work in different ways. See *Sexual Subversions*, p. 112.

²³ *Sexual Subversions*, p. 109.

²⁴ See Irigaray, "And the One Doesn't Stir without the Other," trans. by Helene Vivienne Wenzel, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 7 (1981): pp. 60-67.

great mother-daughter tandems of ancient mythology: Demeter-Kore, Clytemnestra-Iphigenia, Jocasta-Antigone.²⁵ Not to recall these examples to mind in order to mine them for their riches is to collude in the repression of the mother-daughter relationship. Elizabeth Grosz writes:

There must be space for women *as* women. And, in turn, for Irigaray, this implies a renegotiation of the mother-daughter relationship, for until the mother can be seen as a woman, the daughter does not have a basis for feminine identity.²⁶

In conjunction with her efforts to provide, at a remove from the phallogentric symbolic sphere, a more authentic representation of the mother-daughter relationship, Irigaray conducts as well exploratory approaches towards a representation of woman's identity itself. Chiefly characteristic of these approaches is her identification of those "blind spots"²⁷ in Western discourse where, in her view, a possibility exists of turning around the systematic repression of the feminine, and turning into a tool for the subversion of phallogentric rationality. The texts of Freud and Lacan provide a case in point. Irigaray subjects to careful (though, in part, playful) analysis Lacan's representation of woman's sex, insofar as it stares back at her from the mirror, as "hole," or "lack." She replaces the masculine mirror with a *speculum* so as to allow the distinctive sexual identity of woman to break to its surface representation. Irigaray is not, of course, making the claim that an essential woman issues from this. Her point simply is that only through the instrumentality of a non-phallogentric (symbolic) instrument, will woman finally acquire a means of self-representation undetermined by the masculine imaginary.²⁸ For by means of the deployment of the *speculum*, what

This article is an imagined direct-discourse monologue delivered by a daughter to her mother in the hope of finally arriving at a real woman-to-woman relationship.

²⁵ Irigaray, Luce, *Thinking the Difference: For a Peaceful Revolution*, trans. Karin Montin (London: The Athlone Press, 1994), p. 9.

²⁶ *Sexual Subversions*, p. 119.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

²⁸ "Not until this repressed imaginary has been more adequately symbolised will we be able to articulate the relation between male and female elements in a different way." (Whitford, "Luce Irigaray's Critique of Rationality," p. 122.)

is able to appear is woman's *fluidity*, plurivocity, ambiguity, formlessness, in contradistinction to male rationality's insistent fetishization of the static subject. By deploying a different imaginary for women, women finally can achieve a different understanding of themselves, outside the male-dominated discourse of rationality. Women can then possess a *voice*, a *language* of their own:

Speak, just the same. Because your language doesn't follow just one thread, one course, or one pattern, we are in luck. You speak from everywhere at the same time. You touch me whole at the same time. In all senses. Why only one song, one discourse, one text at a time? To seduce, satisfy, fill one of my "holes"? I don't have any, with you. We are not voids, lacks which wait for sustenance, fulfillment, or plenitude from an other. That our lips make us women does not mean that consuming, consummating or being filled is what matters to us.²⁹

Irigaray speaks of women's sex as *lips*. Not of a phallus, or of the lack of it; not of the hole for a phallus to fill up and use as an envelope or sheath. They are never one, or two, they are always *both* (there is no "one lip"). Irigaray here is speaking of the female sexual body not in the simple anatomical or biological sense, but in the sense of *morphology*. French theorists employ the term to refer to the body as it is socially constructed. *Morphology* then is somewhere between anatomy and socialization.³⁰ Instead of being a phallus or a non-phallus in the either-or of male logic, female sex is *neither*; it is neither the one nor the other, but is, rather, a plurality, an ambiguity. Instead of being merely a lack that serves as a receptacle for the phallus, the woman's sex escapes from such determinations:

The/A woman cannot be gathered into *one* volume, except on pain of being removed from her *jouissance*, which demands that she remains open to nothing that can be said, but which contrives the non-closure of her edges, the non-suturing of her lips.³¹

²⁹ Luce Irigaray, "When Our Lips Speak Together," trans. by Carolyn Burke, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 6 (1980), p. 73.

³⁰ *Feminism and Philosophy*, p. 115.

³¹ "Volume without contours," in *The Irigaray Reader*, p. 66.

Once more, it is important to stress that Irigaray is not out to unveil an "essential" feminine nor even to prescribe an *ought* for women. She is out, rather, to show that if current notions of female "identity" bespeak a static, unalterable destiny, it is because they are products of the male imaginary. We need, she argues, to bring to surface that which lies hidden in the prevalent discourse, namely, sexual difference; we need to give a voice to that which has thus far remained repressed. We need, in other words to operate psychoanalysis upon culture itself. By assigning priority to what so far has been given a subordinate status,³² we shall be able to undermine the limiting power, namely, the phallogentric Western rationality.

What strategies does she propose to achieve this? One is to foster *jouissance*,³³ which is the love a woman lavishes upon herself as a woman. Woman is in the jaws of a situation in which she cannot even love herself owing to the denial of her, by phallogentrism, of all experience of affection. The only love allowed a woman in this order of things is that forthcoming from a male eroticism: the phallus is sovereign, and the final goal and actualization of all pleasure is the sheathing of the penis in the woman's hole. A woman, even in love, remains in subjugation. By means of *jouissance*, however, she will finally be able to experience her body as her own, not as phallogentric discourse defines it. To find pleasure at a remove from the category of phallus-nestling-in-vagina, or, for that matter, from a sexuality centered on the groin area, enables woman to escape man's definition of erotics. This is one avenue of uncovering sexual difference.

Mimesis is the strategy perhaps most frequently deployed by Irigaray in her writings.³⁴ It has to do with assuming the feminine role deliberately. Patriarchy will not listen to a language unless it is its own. Thus, it has, for the longest time, assumed the role of speaking for women. "Only through its own techniques can patriarchy be challenged and displaced."³⁵ Irigaray *mimics* the few available positions allotted to

³² "Luce Irigaray's Critique of Rationality," p. 114.

³³ *Philosophy in the Feminine*, p. 165.

³⁴ See Irigaray, Luce, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, trans. Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1993). The book is Irigaray's attempt to critique the "masters" (according to Judith Butler's blurb), from Plato to Levinas, by *miming* them.

³⁵ *Sexual Subversions*, p. 133.

women in masculine discourse. The role of the *hysteric* is one essayed by Irigaray frequently.³⁶ Her symbolic hysteric is thrown into "illness" in the throes of her attempts to cope with the expectations of a patriarchal culture. Her illness will constitute her rebellion against male society. Freudian psychoanalysis recognizes hysteria as the repression of heterosexuality; Irigaray subverts that idea and presents hysteria as the rejection of male-defined heterosexuality. Symbolic hysteria is the refusal to accept a pre-designed role, the refusal to remain "the philosopher's wife." Diane Chisholm remarks:

Irigaray's mimesis of phallogocentric discourse deploys hysterical resistance as a counterdiscursive strategy. In acting the hysteric, speaking as a hysteric in the circles of philosophy and psychoanalysis, Irigaray is not herself hysterical nor does she advocate hysteria as an idealized, alternative "discourse." Instead she reproduces the vicious and maddening logic of master discourses to prompt necessary and sufficient disenchantment with the masquerades to open a reserve of productive mimesis.³⁷

One finds a specific demonstration of Irigaray's deployment of the strategy of mimetic hysteria in "The Blind Spot of an Old Dream of Symmetry,"³⁸ where she reconstructs the scene of psychoanalysis, acting as both psychoanalytic critic and feminist therapist. Here she stages Freud as the "analyst" bent on understanding the "problem" of sexual difference (of course, through the optic of his own phallogocentric interpretation), as opposed to the "analysand" (representing the female readers) who has a parallel desire to give voice to her own *feminine* desire.³⁹ A double-mimicry is at play here: whereas a "real" hysteric mimics what phallogocentric society expects her to be, Irigaray's hysterical mimesis is a parody of that mimicry, performed in order to subvert the prevailing order.

³⁶ See Irigaray, *Speculum*, pp. 59-61, 71 (here Irigaray claims that phallogocentric rationality leaves a woman no room at all, and so, "Hysteria is all she has left."); p. 72 ("And hysterical miming will be the little girl's or the woman's effort to save her sexuality from fatal repression and destruction").

³⁷ Diane Chisholm, "Irigaray's Hysteria," in *Engaging with Irigaray: Feminist Philosophy and Modern European Thought*, ed. Carolyn Burke, Naomi Schor, and Margaret Whitford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 278.

³⁸ *Speculum*, pp. 11-124.

³⁹ "Irigaray's Hysteria," p. 275.

According to Irigaray, what lies in store for the woman who engages in these practices is love. In order for people to genuinely think the sexual difference, there first needs to be *wonder*, that which according to Descartes is the first passion.⁴⁰ The thing about wonder is that it exists always as if for the first time. It flows out of the recognition of the gap that has developed between man and woman, filled up in the meantime with greed or possession, and a lot of other destructive things. In wonder, men and women always meet as if for the first time, fresh, unpossessible. In the throe of wonder, there is no issue of control or domination, only of openness:

Man and woman, faithful to their identity, do not have the same intentionality, as they are not of the same gender, and do not occupy the same genealogical position. But they can make commitments to act together according to terms of agreement that render their intentions compatible: to build a culture of sexuality together, for example, or to construct a politics of difference.⁴¹

Wonder enables the interval between men and women to always remain a gap. "One sex is never entirely consummated or consumed by another. There is always a *residue*."⁴² There is always something more than can be grasped by the relation.

But in order for such a relationship to blossom between men and women, a re-conceptualization of space and time, a new "topology," needs to be internalized:

In order for [sexual] difference to be thought and lived, we have to reconsider the whole problematic of *space* and *time* ... A change of epoch requires a mutation in the perception and conception of *space-time*, the *inhabitation of place* and of the *envelopes of identity*.⁴³

A new language needs to be developed that will serve as a "dwelling" for these reconceived notions in relation to the genuine morphology of women.⁴⁴ A language, that is, as Whitford puts it, "a way of talk-

⁴⁰ "Sexual Difference," p. 171.

⁴¹ *I Love to You*, p. 112.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Whitford, quoting Irigaray, in *Philosophy in the Feminine*, p. 155.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 159.

ing about women which should keep open rather than close shut, and above all, allow women to be *mobile*, alive and turning on their own axis.”⁴⁵ Instead of the binary oppositions posited by the phallogentric order, this new language sees sexual difference in terms of less-theorizable, more ambiguous symbolisms of the *angel* and the *mucous*.⁴⁶

One must take the unbridgeable difference between men and women as something *angelic*. An angel is always in-between. It mediates between God and man and woman. It is always on the move and never static. Angels open up what is closed in the world; they enable possibilities. In such a new linguistic fashioning of thought, the old carceral systems of phallogentric language are overcome. Identity escapes staticity. The angel represents the sexual being that is yet to be incarnated, the always-not-yet, the never-anywhere, the transgression of all limits. Angels are never simply this or that.

Angels must also be thought in the sense of *mucosity*. Are they not the farthest things apart? Holiness and baseness? Mucosity is what Irigaray equates with the fluidity of woman's sex. But it is not an impossibility for the other, male, sex. Mucosity is what prevents a body from ever turning dry: a body deprived of all mucous is a corpse.⁴⁷ The living, breathing, sexuate body remains dynamic due to mucosity, to saliva, sweat, sexual fluids. We need to go beyond the old notions of sexual identity that have kept not just women, but also men in a state of oppression (through ignorance). We need to be able to operate in a language that speaks of the difference as mucosity, and not in terms of positive/negative dichotomies. The mucous is what keeps the body in motion and always in the possibility of creation.

A sexual or carnal ethics would demand that both angel and body be found together. This is a world that must be constructed or reconstructed. A genesis of love between the sexes has yet to come about, in either the smallest or largest sense, or in the most intimate or political guise. It is a world to be created or recreated so that man and woman may once more or finally live together, meet and sometimes inhabit the same place.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ “Sexual Difference,” pp. 173-175.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 174.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

This hopefulness for a *parousia* is the fuel that keeps Irigaray on her task of thinking the sexual difference.⁴⁹ Insisting on this fundamental difference is not meant to create inseparable divisions or alienation between the sexes. She realizes that only in the examination of what has long been covered up, the female sex, can this new age of the world even have a dawning. This threshold into a new world is accessible only to a thinking that recognizes sexual difference *as* difference:

Waiting for the parousia would require keeping all our senses about. Not destroyed, not covered, not "dirtied," our senses would be open. If God and the other are to be unveiled, then I too must unveil myself ... Let this be something I am able to do, without ever having done with it.⁵⁰

Only in this can we hope to stop the nihilism running rampant in our world right now.

Irigaray maintains that the time has come for what has been silenced to speak. The female sex as itself, in genuine recognition of the sexual difference must be given a language of its own. It must now finally escape the silence it has borne for the whole of Western history. A poem by Marge Piercy gives voice to this possibility:

Blizzards of paper
in slow motion
sift through her.

⁴⁹ Irigaray remains a joy to read because she has not succumbed to a negativity concerning the role of the male sex in the needed "peaceful revolution." Instead of assuming a combative poise, she has maintained a hopefulness for the possibility of harmony between men and women. One of her most hopeful passages is the following:

Happiness must be built by us here and now on earth, where we live, a happiness comprising a carnal, sensible and spiritual dimension in the love between women and men, woman and man, which cannot be subordinated to reproduction, to the acquisition or accumulation of property, to a hypothetical human or divine authority. The realization of happiness between us is our primary cultural obligation. It is not an easy task to realize. It is constantly avoided, replaced by secondary and basically futile activities. Becoming happy implies liberating human subjectivity from ignorance, oppression and the lack of culture that weighs so heavily upon this essential dimension of existence: sexual difference (*I Love to You*, p. 15.)

⁵⁰ *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, p. 148.

In nightmares she suddenly recalls
a class she signed up for
but forgot to attend.
Now it is too late.
Now it is time for finals:
losers will be shot.
Phrases of men who lectured her
drift and rustle in piles:
Why don't you speak up?
Why are you shouting?
You have the wrong answer,
wrong line, wrong face.
They tell her she is womb-man,
Baby machine, mirror image, toy,
earth mother and penis-poor,
a dish of synthetic strawberry ice cream
rapidly melting.
She grunts to a halt.
She must learn again to speak
starting with *I*
starting with *We*
starting as the infant does
with her own true hunger
and pleasure
and rage.

“Unlearning to not Speak”