

Luce Irigaray and the Female Imaginary: Speaking as a Woman

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Although Luce Irigaray's name is beginning to become more familiar in England, her work has not, for the most part, been translated, so that non-French-speaking readers have had to confine themselves to the odd bits and pieces - the translation of an interview in *Ideology and Consciousness* (1977), a few excerpts in *New French Feminisms* (1981) and in *Signs* (1980, 1981). Now two of her books have been published in translation by Cornell University Press, *Speculum* (translated by Gillian C. Gill), and *This Sex Which Is Not One* (translated by Catherine Porter), giving the opportunity to read in more depth (though as far as *Speculum* is concerned, the translator has not always respected the ambiguity and plurality of Irigaray's text, and a spot check reveals that in some places her grasp of French grammar seems slightly shaky). However, these two books appeared in French in 1974 and 1977 respectively, and in the meantime, Irigaray has written a number of other books developing the themes of the early two.

The present article sets out to offer some introductory remarks, putting *Speculum* and *This Sex* in the context of the rest of her work. It is not so much a critical account as a clarification of what I understand to be her aims. I see her as, among other things, a theorist of change, seeking to define the conditions under which change could take place. Even this is to some extent an interpretation, and not merely a gloss, for despite a superficial accessibility, I think that her work will not deliver its meaning more fully until it has been read, discussed, interrogated and evaluated by a great many of us. I hope to show that Irigaray's work requires an interlocutor more than most, since 'speaking as a woman', if we accept the definition of it given by her work, necessitates a dialogue: the meaning of what women are saying only becomes accessible in an active exchange between speaker and hearer. I am also arguing for the psychoanalytic dimension of Irigaray's work to be taken seriously. In reply to a question about her method, Irigaray says she intends to 'have a fling with the philosophers' (*This Sex*: 150). 'The philosophers' include as central figures Freud and Lacan (see in particular *Speculum*: 13-129, addressed to Freud, and *This Sex*: 86-105, addressed to Lacan). Irigaray is herself a practising psychoanalyst. Since my intention here is merely to suggest a possible reading of Irigaray, I do not intend, in the present article, to analyse the question of her differences with the Freudian tradition: however, this tradition seems to me essential further reading if we wish to understand Irigaray more fully.

The imaginary and female identity

Irigaray resists the role of theorist:

I can answer neither about nor for 'woman'.
... it is no more a question of my making
woman the subject or the object of a theory

than it is of subsuming the feminine under some generic term, such as 'woman'. The feminine cannot signify itself in any proper meaning, proper name, or concept, not even that of woman.

(*This Sex*: 155-56)

So it may not be possible to speak of a central concept, since insofar as she intends to 'speak as a woman', 'the concept as such would have no place' (*This Sex*: 123). However, the imaginary (in French imaginaire) is certainly one of the central terms in her work, and, as used by Irigaray, is flexible and curiously imprecise. Our culture is dominated by what she calls the male imaginary, and the aim and theme of her work throughout is to initiate the task of revealing and uncovering the female imaginary and bringing it into language:

We can assume that any theory of the subject has always been appropriated by the 'masculine'. When she submits to (such a) theory, woman fails to realize that she is renouncing the specificity of her own relationship to the imaginary.

(*Speculum*: 133)

The more or less exclusive - and highly anxious attention paid to erection in Western sexuality proves to what extent the imaginary that governs it is foreign to the feminine.

(*This Sex*: 24)

Woman, in this sexual imaginary, is only a more or less obliging prop for the enactment of man's fantasies.

(*This Sex*: 25)

Perhaps it is time to return to that repressed entity, the female imaginary.

(*This Sex*: 28)

I am trying, as I have already indicated, to go back through the masculine imaginary, to interpret the way it has reduced us to silence, to muteness or mimicry, and I am attempting, from that starting-point and at the same time, to (re)discover a possible space for the feminine imaginary.

(*This Sex*: 164)

Her use of the term could imply, I think, that imaginary is an unproblematic notion, immediately accessible to the reader. Now the imaginary is a term which has been given new currency in French by Lacan, and so one might assume that Irigaray has simply taken over the term from Lacan, in whose early work the Imaginary is the domain of pre-linguistic, specular identifications (see 'The Mirror-Stage' in *Ecrits* 1966, 1977). The child is offered an image of itself (e.g. the image in the mirror) and its identification with this image enables the formation of the ego to take place. Since

this ego is an imaginary unity, it is not coextensive with the subject, and to the extent that the subject takes this ego to be itself, it is necessarily alienated (Laplanche and Pontalis 1973: 250-252). The mirror-stage precedes the assumption of the 'I' in language (the 'Symbolic'). In this context it is important to note that, in Lacanian theory, the terms Imaginary and Symbolic have been allocated a specific (if not completely stable) domain of applicability, which gives them greater precision at the expense of connotative range (see *Ecrits*: passim). A comprehensive index locates for the reader the principal references to the Imaginary.) However, the term imaginary in French has debts to a number of pre-Lacanian sources, and it is no part of Irigaray's purpose to strip it of its connotative accretions; she continues to leave it as ill-defined and as richly connotative as possible.

One area of connotation is phenomenology. Sartre, in his book *L'Imaginaire* (1940) (English title: *The Psychology of the Imagination*), made a sharp distinction between the perceiving and imagining functions of the mind, and held that the imagining consciousness was (a) intentional and (b) could not be confused with the perceiving consciousness. According to Sartre's definition, the imaginary is the intentional object of the imagining consciousness, whether it be an object in the mind (fantasies, day-dreams, evocation of absent persons etc.) or external objects which are products of the imagination (such as novels, paintings and so on). Irigaray seems to have the phenomenological definition in mind when she extends the term imaginary to refer, not only to a function of the mind, but also to cultural productions which are marked by the imagining function: what she elsewhere describes as the realm of the in-between, or what mediates and is exchanged either at the individual or cultural level. The products include: love, God (or other transcendent principle), art, thought, poetry, language. To the phenomenological imaginary, she adds the further qualification that the imaginary is sexed; it is either a male imaginary bearing the morphological marks of the male body, whose cultural products are characterised by unity, teleology, linearity, self-identity etc., or it is a female imaginary marked by the morphology of the female body, and characterised by plurality, non-linearity, fluid identity etc. In this sense, her use of imaginary is much more similar to that of other proponents of écriture féminine or woman's writing. The following remark by Hélène Cixous shows the way in which the phenomenological and psychoanalytic versions of imaginary are conflated:

'Things are starting to be written, things that will constitute a feminine Imaginary, the site, that is, of identifications of an ego no longer given over to an image defined by the masculine ..., but rather inventing forms for women on the march, or as I prefer to fantasize, 'in flight', so that instead of lying down, women will go forward by leaps in search of themselves.

(Cixous 1981: 52)

A second area of connotation might be Bachelard. Although Irigaray never, as far as I know, mentions Bachelard, within the French intellectual environment the resonances of the term imaginary are clearly Bachelardian. Reading her work alongside his, it is difficult to believe that there has not been a Bachelardian influence at some stage. However, the imaginary, for Bachelard, is a function of the imagination and owes nothing to the Lacanian theory of the mirror-stage. It is that faculty of the mind which alters the images provided by perception and distorts them. This distortion may be creative in the case of the literary imagination, but it contaminates the effort to acquire scientific knowledge. Knowledge has to purify itself of the images supplied so readily by the imagina-

tion in order to achieve genuine objectivity. The image offers apparent and seductive solutions to problems of knowledge which must be resisted if real knowledge is to be won. In a number of works, Bachelard classes these images in terms of the four elements: earth, air, fire and water, and argues that these are primitive and basic categories of the imagining mind. It is striking therefore to see that Irigaray has adopted this Bachelardian classification in three published works (though using it in a different way): Amante marine (water); L'Oubli de l'air (air); and Passions élémentaires (earth). A fourth projected book on Marx and fire has not appeared. Bachelard suggests that creative writers have a preference for one element over another, and that there is usually one in which they feel most at home. For example, he devotes a whole chapter of L'Air et les songes to Nietzsche's 'dynamics of ascension' (air). Irigaray, unlike Bachelard, emphasises not what is specific to a particular author, but what is absent as being more revealing, and in Amante marine takes Nietzsche's work as a point of departure for a meditation on the flight from water and from the unacknowledged nurturant element, the unsublimated female body. Here the Bachelardian analysis of a dominant element is linked to her aim to 'go back through the masculine imaginary, to interpret the way it has reduced us to silence' (*This Sex*: 164). For, whereas for Bachelard there is a disjunction between knowledge and imagination, with knowledge having to be separated off sharply from the imagination which would otherwise distort it, Irigaray argues that the disjunction cannot be made, that knowledge always bears the mark of its imaginary origins, and that what we take to be universal and objective is in fact male, so that the four elements, in their turn, are subtended by a more basic schema than Bachelard's, namely the male/female distinction. There can be no question of purification by getting rid of the sexual imaginary: knowledge is irrevocably marked by its imaginary morphology.

In the third place, Irigaray's imaginary is obviously indebted to Lacan's Imaginary, and refers to a mental structure or activity, corresponding to a fundamental stage of human development. However, three important divergences between her imaginary and his should be noted. (a) Whereas in Lacan, the Imaginary is a technical term within a psychoanalytic theory (Lemaire 1977, Laplanche and Pontalis 1973, Rose 1981), in Irigaray it is not a technical term; there is no precisely demarcated theory to which it belongs, and she does not seek to define it carefully - on the contrary. (b) Lacan makes an essential distinction between the Imaginary and the Symbolic. Irigaray often seems to conflate the two, as in the following remark: 'She functions as a hole ... in the elaboration of imaginary and symbolic processes' (*Speculum*: 71), and argues that what is needed is for the female imaginary to accede to its own specific symbolisation. And given that she uses the term to refer not only to a mental function, but also to the products of that function, including language, as I pointed out above, it is difficult to make a clear conceptual distinction in her work between imaginary and symbolic. (c) The Imaginary, for Lacan, tends to be presented in rather pessimistic terms as a kind of trap, since Imaginary identifications are essentially illusory and imprisoning, images of the self which are alienating insofar as the subject does not realise that they are no more than images. Irigaray, in contrast, is seeking to make the emergence of a female imaginary possible, and so has a more positive attitude towards the imaginary. Lemaire points out that 'the imaginary is pertinently reflected in socio-cultural symbolism, as much by the number of thoughts it implies as by the number of thoughts it neglects' (Lemaire 1977: 61). Only certain Imaginary objects are taken up and symbolised; other objects, presently neglected, could be

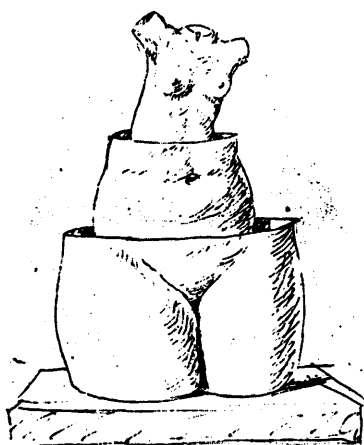
symbolised. And one definition Irigaray offers of the female imaginary is 'those components of the mirror that cannot reflect themselves' (This Sex: 151, her italics), in other words, the material of which the mirror itself is made.

Nonetheless, Irigaray is aware of the 'trap' constituted by identity. In Western thought, the relation between the sexes has traditionally been conceptualised in terms of polarity and opposition, and as a result, argues Irigaray, inevitably in terms of hierarchy, where one sex is either superior or inferior to the other. So, although she speaks of a female imaginary and to that extent of female identity, this identity is not defined in the same terms as male identity. If it were, it would be impossible to avoid unstable oscillation between the two poles, each asserting itself in turn, or else a kind of 'inverted form of sexism' (Moi 1985: 13), in which the female took the superior position instead of the male. Female identity is both a necessary condition and a possible snare. On the one hand, 'it still remains politically essential for feminists to defend women as women in order to counteract the patriarchal oppression that precisely despises women as women' (ibid.). On the other hand, identity as such is a product of the male imaginary. Jane Gallop explains the problem as follows:

Without a female homosexual economy, a female narcissistic ego, a way to represent herself, a woman in a heterosexual encounter will always be engulfed by the male homosexual economy, will not be able to represent her difference. Women must demand 'the same', 'the homo', and then not settle for it, not fall into the trap of thinking a female 'homo' is necessarily any closer to a representation of otherness, an opening for the other.

(Gallop 1982: 74)

The essential phrase here, I think, is 'be able to represent her difference'. What is needed, according to Irigaray, are cultural representations of difference, of a different libidinal economy, so that women are not engulfed in an economy of the same, but have available to them symbolisations of their otherness and difference which can become objects of exchange in the culture at large.



What would the morphology of the female body and its metaphoricity imply in terms of language and culture? In *Amante marine*, *Ethique de la différence sexuelle* and *Parler n'est jamais neutre*, Irigaray gives some indications of the way in which a female imaginary would differ from a male one. A male libidinal economy is characterised as follows: there is no difference except quantitative (more/less); there is no reciprocity

and no exchange except within an economy of the same; there is no permeability and no fluidity. Its syntax is dominated by identity (quantitative or possessive), non-contradiction, binary opposition (subject/object, matter/energy etc.) (*Parler n'est jamais neutre*: 312-313). It is governed by opposition (which is hierarchical) rather than difference (which is not). A female imaginary is characterised by its difference (otherness), its resistance to the male economy, although 'it does not oppose a female truth to male truth' (*Amante marine*: 92). The principles of non-contradiction and identity do not apply (*Parler*: 285), although this does not mean that the female is 'un-identifiable'; rather it implies 'an excess of all identification to/of self' (*Speculum*: 230). A female libidinal economy would oblige us to reevaluate the status of the subject (*Parler*: 289) and the subject would have to be reconceptualised in terms of mobility (*Parler*: 266).

This provisional description raises at least two points. Firstly, what would be the conditions of emergence of the female imaginary, given that 'there is no simple manageable way to leap to the outside of phallogocentrism, nor any possible way to situate oneself there, that would result from the simple fact of being a woman' (This Sex: 162, her italics)? And secondly, how can we talk about it at all and still make sense, if its language is other than the prevailing male language? Irigaray herself insists that the female imaginary should not be conceptualised:

To claim that the feminine can be expressed in the form of a concept is to allow oneself to be caught up again in a system of 'masculine' representations, in which women are trapped in a system of meaning which serves the auto-affectation of the (masculine) subject. If it is really a matter of calling 'femininity' into question, there is still no need to elaborate another 'concept' - unless a woman is renouncing her sex and wants to speak like men. For the elaboration of a theory of woman, men, I think, suffice. In a woman(s) language, the concept as such would have no place.

(This Sex: 122-123)

The beginning of a response to these questions can be discerned, if we look more closely at Irigaray's use of the psychoanalytic model, and the way in which she extends it to the culture as a whole. It needs to be stressed that her whole work has to be seen in the light of a project to change the culture, and not merely to analyse it. Psychoanalysis, for Irigaray (despite her critique of its phallogocentric bias), seems to have provided a blueprint for a type of situation in which change, and openness to the other, can occur under certain conditions.

The 'feminine' as the unconscious of culture: the psychoanalytic model

Irigaray presents herself as a cultural prophet; there is a utopian streak in her work. Her account of Western culture runs something like this. Our society is dominated by a destructive imaginary (whose apotheosis is the ideology of science elevated to the status of a privileged truth) and which is constructed over a buried act of matricide, a murdered mother (a matricide more ancient than the parricide of Freud's *Totem and Taboo*). For there to be any hope of renewal, the male imaginary needs to recognise its own unconscious (at present located in the 'female' element) and cut the umbilical cord which still attaches it to a repressed mother, while the female imaginary needs to find a voice. For this reason, 'sexual difference represents one of the questions or the question of our age' (*Ethique*: 13). We are entering the West's third era; the

first was the Old Testament, the reign of the Father, the second the New Testament, the reign of the Son, the third, on the horizon, will be the Age of the Couple (or Copula): the Spirit and the Bride (Ethique: 140). Subtending the rational subject (with his aspirations to universality, neutrality and objectivity), but unrecognised, there is a subject governed by unconscious desires, powerfully motivated and above all, sexed (so that the criteria of scientific epistemology can in fact be seen as shaped by the male imaginary). Irigaray's work can be seen, then, as a sort of 'psychoanalysis' of Western culture and metaphysics, seeking what underpins its fragile rationality, looking for the repressed or 'unconscious' of culture. In Parler n'est jamais neutre, she attempts to demonstrate her thesis by analysis of the enunciation of speaking subjects in order to uncover the 'true identity of the subject who assumes the énoncé' (Parler: 55) (the terms enunciation/énoncé are explained in Benveniste 1971). She argues in this book that psychoanalysis offers a privileged experimental situation, since it works directly on the enunciation, revealing phenomena which are unavailable to the linguist or psychologist who are merely working on cold data (the énoncés).

At least three specific characteristics of the psychoanalytic situation as the model for a situation in which change can occur, can be elicited from her later work. All three are characteristics in which theory, as it is commonly conceived, has a rather less assured place than theorists are usually willing to accept. Firstly, there is no outside observer; the situation is quite unlike the conditions of experiments in empirical science, since no 'test' or 'repeat' experiment can be set up. And it is not clear what 'verification' or 'falsification' would mean in an analytic context. Secondly, it is a participatory model, not a distanced objective stance, but one in which both participants take risks, unlike the safe detachment of the academic or scientist. For change to occur, you have to put yourself at risk (and that includes the theorist/analyst, not just the woman/analysand): 'Either the unconscious is nothing but what has already been heard by you ... or the unconscious is desire which attempts to speak itself and, as analysts, you have to listen without excluding. However much this listening to everything might bring about callings into question of your desire ... Whatever the risk of your death that might ensue' (Parler: 255, trans. Gallop: 102). Thirdly, its essential instrument is the parole: the word addressed to someone by someone, the spoken word of the analyst and the analysand. This powerful parole, according to Irigaray, can imprison or set free, and certainly, release what has been blocked.

When one reads her work in the light of the psychoanalytic model, there are still further implications which spring to mind, although these are not so explicit. (a) If we go back and look at the description of the female imaginary, we can see that in many respects, its distinguishing features resemble those said to characterise the unconscious: its fluidity and mobility; its indifference to the laws of logic (identity and non-contradiction); its inability to speak about itself, and so on. (b) In Parler n'est jamais neutre, Irigaray uses a linguistic model to analyse taped material from psychoanalytic sessions (see 'Approche d'une grammaire de l'énonciation de l'hystérique et de l'obsessionnel'). According to her analysis, the obsessional lives in the universe of the 'I'; there is no interlocutor. The hysteric, on the other hand, cannot assume his/her own discourse; everything is referred for validation to the 'you'. The aim of the psychoanalyst is to enable an exchange to take place between the 'I' and the 'you', the two poles of any real dialogue. There is a parallel between this linguistic model and the conditions of Western thought analysed in This Sex and more fully in Ethique. The situation which Irigaray describes is one

of a monolingual, 'homosexual' culture in which men speak to men (the universe of the 'I' or the same) and women remain merely the mediators of this exchange, goods or objects, never partners in the dialogue. For sexual difference to be realised, women would have to assume the 'I' in their own right, and men would need to venture out of the closed world of the 'I'. It seems to me that what Irigaray is trying to do in her writing is to effect an intervention, so that her writing would function like the psychoanalyst and set something, some change, in motion. Further, within the framework of the psychoanalytic session, interpretations are dynamic - that is to say, they are not global descriptions of a person's character or psychic make-up, but an interpretation of what is happening, at that moment, between the analyst and the analysand. They refer only to the moment at which they are being made; they may apply to only part of a session; they may be confirmed or disconfirmed by the response of the analysand; they are essentially aimed at bringing about a change in a situation, so that an interpretation is not so much an end-product, the fruits of the analyst's understanding, summarised and encapsulated, but the first step towards changing the situation, designed to effect shifts in the unconscious, open up other possibilities for the analysand who cannot effect the shift unaided. (c) Her use of the 'concept' of a female imaginary has structural (and perhaps strategic) parallels with that of the way in which psychoanalysis uses the notion of resistance to deal with certain critiques. To the critical reader who wishes to raise theoretical objections to Irigaray, it could be replied that the criteria in the name of which one is objecting are male criteria and not universal ones, and that she is attempting to articulate an alternative to which these criteria would not be applicable. Although this argument functions to forestall any immediate 'recapture within the economy of purely masculine desire' (This Sex: 158), it also makes assessment of her work difficult at the same time. I will return to the problem of assessment in the conclusion. (d) The 'power' of a psychoanalytic theory may not be commensurate with its 'correctness'. In therapeutic terms, explanations and therapies based on irreconcilable assumptions seem to produce effects. So perhaps the importance of Irigaray's work may turn out to lie less in its theoretical adequacy than in what it enables. The 'interpretations' which she offers may themselves be enabling, may allow the emergence of a repressed element in culture, though it may not take the shape or form that she envisages. (e) The use of the psychoanalytic model raises a further difficult theoretical problem, which I shall not attempt to discuss here, namely, the validity of using an interpersonal situation involving two individuals as the model for a whole culture or society.

Irigaray's critics

Before concluding, I want to take a brief look at a couple of Irigaray's British critics, in order to focus on one or two further points. The two interpretations of Irigaray which I discuss below both see her work as 'regressive' in one way or another (either identifying her as a biological essentialist, or criticising her for what seems like a nostalgic and hopeless desire for a return to an unmediated relation with the mother). There is some evidence for these interpretations in her work. I'm not sure whether these vestiges of essentialism have a strategic function, or whether they are remnants of a pre-Lacanian interpretation of sexuality (see Mitchell and Rose 1982). Either way, I see them as theoretical dead-ends for Irigaray, since any theory of change must necessarily posit (if not actually demonstrate) that change is within the bounds of the possible.

One view of Irigaray put forward in this country is that she is a biological essentialist. According to Janet Sayers, for Irigaray:

femininity ... is essentially constituted by female biology, by the 'two lips of the female sex'. ... Furthermore she maintains that women have a 'specific female desire' and that Freud's rejection of the notion of feminine libido is simply an effect of his patriarchal attitudes. She does not, however, provide any evidence to show that femininity is, in fact, essentially constituted by biology - let alone that it is constituted by 'two lips' - or that there is a feminine libido. (Sayers 1982: 131)

Now the idea that Irigaray is proclaiming a biologically given essential femininity in which biology in some unclear fashion simply 'constitutes' femininity seems to me quite simply a misreading of Irigaray (based on the only English translations available in 1982). She is speaking not of biology but of the imaginary, in which one may make male or female identifications, regardless of one's biological sex. A distinction needs to be made between (a) women as biological and social entities and (b) the 'female', 'feminine' or 'other', where 'female' stands metaphorically for the genuinely other in a relation of difference (as in the system consciousness/unconscious) rather than opposition. Irigaray is privileging women and the morphology of the female body in her symbolisation of the other. She does in this way run the risk of blurring the distinction between (a) and (b), as it is in fact often already blurred in the Western cultural imaginary, but this is obviously a strategy adopted within a particular historical and cultural situation, although there is always the risk that a provisional identification between female and 'female' may entrap the user. Strategically, too, this insistent material language, full of references to the female body, could well be designed to confront readers with their own sexed self, to elicit the sexuality of the reader, to make readers aware of their own sexed, non-neutral identity, and to make it difficult for readers to take up the distanced stance they would normally adopt when reading a work of theory or philosophy. In this way, not only women, but also men have to become aware of their sex as a reader.

A second criticism is the position argued by Jacqueline Rose, to the effect that Irigaray has missed the force of Lacan's insistence on the construction of sexuality and ipso facto, femininity. For Irigaray, she says,

Feminine sexuality is, therefore, predicated directly onto the concept of an unmediated and unproblematic relation to origin. ... It is therefore a refusal of division which gives the woman access to a different strata of language, where words and things are not differentiated, and the real of the maternal body threatens or holds off woman's access to prohibition and the law. (Mitchell and Rose 1982: 54-55)

Whereas, for Lacan, on the other hand:

there is no feminine outside language. First because the unconscious severs the subject from any unmediated relation to the body as such ... and, secondly, because the 'feminine' is constituted as division in language, a division which produces the feminine as a negative term. If woman is defined as other, it is because the definition produces her as other and not because she has another essence. ... It is crucial ... that refusal of the phallic term brings with it an attempt to reconstitute a form of subjectivity free of division, and hence a refusal of the notion of symbolisation

itself. If the status of the phallus is to be challenged, it cannot, therefore, be directly from the feminine body but must be by means of a different symbolic term (in which case the relationship to the body is immediately thrown into crisis) or else by an entirely different logic altogether (in which case one is no longer in the order of symbolisation at all). ... refusal of the phallus turns out once again to be a refusal of the symbolic. (ibid.: 55-56)

The problem is to reconcile statements like the following: 'As for woman, she touches herself in and of herself without any need for mediation' (This Sex: 124); 'She is neither one nor two. Rigorously speaking, she cannot be identified either as one person, or as two' (This Sex: 26); 'She herself enters into a ceaseless exchange of herself with the other without any possibility of identifying either' (This Sex: 31), with Irigaray's claim in Ethique de la différence sexuelle that we need a female imaginary which would achieve a specifically female symbolisation; that women 'lack mediation for the operations of sublimation' (Ethique: 70); that 'they need language, a language' (Ethique: 104-105); that 'without a language in the female, they are used for the elaboration of a supposedly neutral language in which they are deprived of speech' (Ethique: 105). How to reconcile women's non-identity on the one hand (since identity belongs to the (male) economy of the same) and their specificity on the other?

Reading Rose's account is to miss Irigaray's aims. It is of course difficult to understand what a woman's language could be, except by analogy with what we already know as language and therefore, as Rose points out, it sounds as though the desire for a different language is self-defeating, because it would break the conditions which are the conditions of any signifying or symbolising at all. But if we keep in mind the model of the psychoanalytic session, we might understand the idea of a woman's language as the articulation of the unconscious which cannot speak about itself, but which can nonetheless make itself heard if the listener is attentive enough. Irigaray defines discursive, theoretical or meta-language as 'male', and says there is no 'female' meta-language: 'there is simply no way I can give you an account of "speaking (as) woman"; it is spoken, but not in meta-language' (This Sex: 144) and 'Speaking (as) woman is not speaking of woman. It is not a matter of producing a discourse of which woman would be the object, or the subject' (This Sex: 135), which seems to overlap with the remark of Lacan's quoted at the head of 'Cosi Fan Tutte': 'Women don't know what they are saying' (This Sex: 86).

I interpret the following passage from This Sex as a description of the fate of 'women's' desire in a male-dominated culture, and not as an essentialist or prescriptive account of female identity or parole. In order to hear, one has to 'listen with another ear'; the reference to 'getting rid of words' may refer to the way in which desire is converted into somatic symptoms in hysteria:

'She' is indefinitely other in herself. This is doubtless why she is said to be whimsical, incomprehensible, agitated, capricious ... not to mention her language, in which 'she' sets off in all directions leaving 'him' unable to discern the coherence of any meaning. Hers are contradictory words, somewhat mad from the standpoint of reason, inaudible for whoever listens to them with ready-made grids, with a fully-elaborated code in hand. For in what she says, too, at least when she dares, woman is constantly touching herself. She steps ever so slightly aside from herself with a murmur, an exclamation, a whisper, a sen-

tence left unfinished. ... When she returns, it is to set off again from elsewhere. From another point of pleasure, or of pain. One would have to listen with another ear, as if hearing an 'other' meaning always in the process of weaving itself, of embracing itself with words, but also of getting rid of words in order not to become fixed, congealed in them. For if 'she' says something, it is not, it is already no longer, identical with what she means. What she says is never identical with anything, moreover; rather, it is continuous. It touches (upon). And when it strays too far from that proximity, she breaks off and starts over at 'zero': her body-sex.

(This Sex: 28-29)

But it is clear from *Ethique* that Irigaray is not proposing that we get rid of words; on the contrary she is arguing that women need to speak to each other. Both in *Speculum* and *This Sex*, she proposes various strategies for women, all of them based upon various forms of verbalisation: speaking, writing, (psycho)analysing 'male' language, even psychoanalysis (the 'talking cure') despite its dangers for women.

If Irigaray were arguing what Rose takes her to be arguing, i.e. postulating some kind of essential female sexuality, then Rose's critique seems unanswerable. I think that Irigaray is in fact arguing something rather different (which may in its turn raise problems, but is not the same point), to the effect that, culturally, the relation to the mother's body is unmediated by symbolic representations, and that this is more devastating for women than for men, because unlike men, they have no other home (*sol* or *lieu*) to take the place of the mother. In that (cultural) immediacy their specificity disappears: 'The lack of an imaginary or symbolic territory (*sol*) accorded or recognised in the case of women (*du côté des femmes*) means that everything takes place in an immediacy which risks being a "putting to death"...' (*Parler*: 296). I refer back again to Lemaire's definition of the Lacanian Imaginary: 'the Imaginary is everything in the human mind and its reflexive life which is in a state of flux before the fixation is effected by the symbol. ... The imaginary is reflexively reflected in socio-cultural symbolism, as much by the multiplicity of thoughts it implies as by the number of thoughts it neglects' (Lemaire 1977: 61).

What Irigaray is interested in, then, is the neglected imaginary, what our culture has chosen not to take up and symbolise; this is one of the things she means by the 'female' or 'feminine' imaginary.

Sometimes Irigaray can sound unbearably prescriptive. One can be left with the uncomfortable feeling that as a woman, one has the dilemma of either speaking like a man (which seems to be politically undesirable) or of being unintelligible/hysterical (which seems to be personally undesirable). I should like to conclude with the sketch of a suggestion as to why it is difficult for the reader to react neutrally.

There is a dual purpose in Irigaray's work, in that she wishes to occupy the position of analyst and analysand simultaneously. She wishes, that is, to 'speak as a woman' (analysand) but also as the analyst to 'read' and 'psychoanalyse' the philosophers ('insist also and deliberately upon those blanks in discourse', *Speculum*: 142). This dual purpose in part explains why she refuses the distinction between literature and theory (*Le corps-à-corps avec la mère*: 46) and insists on the poetic element in her work (*Parler*: 13). She is writing both/neither theory and/nor fiction, since she wishes not merely to state or claim, but also to show, manifest in her writing a different kind of parole. I think this dual purpose leaves her, too, in a dilemma. In that she des-

ires to 'speak as a woman', she needs the other, the interlocutor, as the analysand needs the analyst, for it is only in the exchange that the repressed desire emerges into language. But at the same time, she wants to persuade, and this is where the problem lies. For if her readers simply agreed with her work, with no affect, then something vital would be missing, that is to say, the engagement without which no change could possibly take place. We are familiar with the idea that our subjective reaction is relevant to the analysis of a work of literature, but we are less used to analysing our reactions to theory/philosophy in these terms. However, I think that Irigaray does demand a response from her readers. But the reader thus 'put on the spot' may react not with enthusiasm but with hostility or rejection. It seems to me, therefore, that we should treat Irigaray's work as literature, to the extent that its effect on us is directly relevant to its more apparently theoretical content. The 'transference' of the reader is not a more or less accidental, 'emotional' or subjective response which can be set aside to get at the 'theory', but in fact gives a clue to what is at stake. If, as a reader, you 'resist', then this resistance itself is worth analysing and exploring further. It is not in itself a guarantee of the theoretical 'correctness' of Irigaray's work, and, in addition, it makes assessment difficult, because your 'transference' means that you have relinquished neutrality and the assumption of an uninvolved objective stance, whether your reaction is enthusiastic or hostile. But it does indicate that you are not left indifferent, that your 'resistance' is produced by something. If, in the interaction which takes place between you and Irigaray's work, you do not withdraw, to that extent she has succeeded and the scene is set for a possible exchange (Gallop's reading of Irigaray is exemplary in this respect). It is in the nature of the exchange, however, that Irigaray's own 'theoretical' position is thereby put at risk and that, qua analyst/theorist, she herself risks 'death'.

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