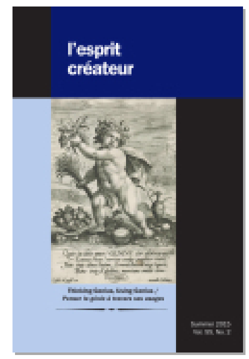
Irigaray: Towards a Sexuate Philosophy (review)

Laura Roberts



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Book Reviews

Les Amis. *Commemorating Epimetheus.* S. Pluháček, trans. West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2009. Pp. 93.

Commemorating Epimetheus, a text by a collective known as Les Amis (which translates as "the friends"), honors Epimetheus, one of Prometheus's lesser known brothers. Similar to the way in which ancient Greek discourse has been critiqued by numerous authors for its oft-embraced polarities, Prometheus and Epimetheus are set up as mythological binary figures—that is, two brothers with names that speak to different callings: respectively, "he who thinks before" and "he who thinks after" (3, 2). This book, then, is a commemoration of the past as much as of Epimetheus, remembered brother who "thinks after" the ways of the Earth, sharing in "the memory of what has been [...] so as to care for the present and the future" (2-3). What is particularly compelling about this telling is the language of the text, rendered in English by S. Pluháček and reminiscent of works by Luce Irigaray such as *Elemental Passions*. The authors have shattered the *logos* of the early Greeks by preconceiving such poets as Heidegger, Irigaray, and Derrida.

Knowing little about the source text has the potential of being a distraction. However, the possibility that the authors "thought before" the likes of the aforementioned philosophers presupposes the problem of chronology. Might we, then, also read this text as a pre-originary story of ancient discourse? That is, in the "thinking before" of he who "thought after"? This, indeed, is the question.

Acknowledging the innocent beginnings of agri-cultural existence (indeed, in Heideggerian terms, the opening of a clearing in which to dwell) and the divinity of everyday love (in Irigarayan terms, the presence of dia-logue, indirection, and silence), the authors evoke Epimetheus, hearkening back to the "earlier ways of our being-in-the-world" (14). Such a "time before" implicates space for non-agri-cultural wanderings. As the authors indicate, our "current lovelessness" suggests there exists at our core a fear of wandering (25). The themes of sharing, caring, meeting, dwelling, and loving are presented to commemorate Epimetheus's wisdom on these matters—and, are carried out beautifully so.

But what might all of this mean for a land that has gone a different way, toward a "Promethean desire to no longer be dependent upon the earth" (17)? Indeed, both the timeliness and timelessness of this text offer hope. For, as these authors (and our other pre-originary poets) ask, "Is not the future the coming of the startlingly unexpected, the unknown—indeed, the unknowable and that which cannot be expected?" (77).

Herein, the fearless wanderings of Epimetheus "think after" and upon the ways of the Earth, prior to such things as profit, property, boundary, and appropriation. Within his kind of thinking-after, however, thankfulness and care embed themselves. Certainly, the *différance* projected herein conveys a sense of care that both "differs" and "defers," suggesting creative play as we come to terms with "(the worlding of) [our] world," our "knot of existence so firmly tied together" (45, 93). Would that we could make such a leap.

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Rachel Jones. *Irigaray: Towards a Sexuate Philosophy.* Cambridge, UK and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2011. Pp. vii + 277.

Rachel Jones' recent work is an important addition to current Irigarayan scholarship and contemporary philosophy. Jones uses Luce Irigaray's groundbreaking text *Speculum* as a guide to trace Irigaray's critical and creative engagement with the "Fathers" of Western philosophical discourse. Seeking to introduce readers to the "specifically philosophical dimensions" of Irigaray's work, Jones carefully foregrounds the particular philosophical position of each "Father" whom Irigaray critically encounters, and only once his philosophical views are made clear does Jones begin to unravel Irigaray's specific relationship with each. It is Jones' attentive and jargon-free descriptions of Irigaray's interlocutors in *Speculum* that help to make this book accessible to students and professional philosophers alike.

It is not, however, only her careful presentation of the views of the philosophical Fathers—and Irigaray's relationship with them—that makes this book invaluable, but also the way Jones highlights the dual dialectic that runs throughout Irigaray's œuvre. Paying close attention to how Irigaray continually works to escape and refigure the hylomorphic model "in which symbolic forms are imposed on inert and essentially form-less matter" (160), Jones details how Irigaray's project is not only critical, not only seeking to destabilize traditional categories, but also has always been devoted to (re)figuring and (re)cognizing life and philosophy as sexuate.

Jones' reading of Irigaray's œuvre as a continuous, critical, and creative project also defends Irigaray from recent criticisms aimed toward her later work, in particular the charge of heterosexism. Ultimately, Jones defends Irigaray's views by pointing toward the ontological status of sexuate difference. In explaining how sexuate difference must be understood as ontological, Jones distinguishes between the Heideggerian notion of ontological difference and what we mean when we say sexuate difference has an ontological status. This discussion also brings to light how Irigaray has always engaged with the very foundations of our reality, the foundations and terms on which our ontological and metaphysical reality is structured. Irigaray is questioning and at the same time rewriting Western metaphysics.

Jones discusses the creative importance for Irigaray of revaluing and refiguring the female body, in particular the figures of the two lips and the pregnant body. Jones tackles the supposed problem of essentialism by reframing it as a problem of representation. Essentialism, for Jones, rests on the representation of the body as "fixed and determined matter" (176). Thus, it is not the problem of essentialism we need to confront; rather, it is rethinking and refiguring the relationship between matter and form, or nature and culture, that is our crucial task.

Irigaray's later work *Between East and West* is discussed in the final chapter. Although it is wonderful to see this book included and taken seriously as a philosophical work, it would have been helpful to hear a little more of Jones' thought on this text. Perhaps this is a project for another time?

Nevertheless, this book is an excellent contribution to Irigarayan scholarship. Whether the reader is encountering Irigaray for the first time or rereading any part of Irigaray's philosophy, this important and timely work from Rachel Jones will open up Irigaray's thought in new and unforeseen ways.

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Luce Irigaray. *In the Beginning, She Was.* New York, London: Continuum, 2012. Pp. viii + 162. $24.95.

This stylistically beautiful and theoretically compelling book presents many themes familiar to readers of Irigaray's work alongside new material and perspectives. The book's title refers to the feminine source—nature, woman, goddess—that inspires philosophy and indeed life itself, but that has been largely obscured by Western institutions and traditions. Irigaray returns to pre-Socratic philosophers, including Empedocles and Parmenides, who allude to this feminine source. Several themes here echo her 1974 text *Speculum,* including the analysis of Sophocles' *Antigone* as well as the suggestion that we need to "go back behind" certain elements of Western thought to uncover obfuscated, pre-patriarchal wellsprings for thought.