

University of Warwick institutional repository: <http://go.warwick.ac.uk/wrap>

**A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD at the University of Warwick**

<http://go.warwick.ac.uk/wrap/3066>

This thesis is made available online and is protected by original copyright.

Please scroll down to view the document itself.

Please refer to the repository record for this item for information to help you to cite it. Our policy information is available from the repository home page.

**Alternative Temporalities of Revolution in the work of  
Walter Benjamin and Luce Irigaray**

**by**

**James Ewan Porter**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the  
degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Philosophy

University of Warwick, Department of Philosophy

August 2001

# Table of Contents

	Page Number
Acknowledgements	i
Abstract	ii
Introduction	1
<b>Part 1: Benjamin</b>	32
Chapter 1: Benjamin's Revolutionary Philosophy of History	33
Chapter 2: Historicism, Progress and Dialectics	75
Chapter 3: Staged Tragedy: The Representation of Tragedy in Nietzsche and Benjamin	122
<b>Part 2: Irigaray</b>	170
Chapter 4: Irigaray and the Brushing of History against the Grain	171
Chapter 5: Irigaray's Revolutionary Antigones: The Ironic and the Irenic	231
Chapter 6: Not Dancing But Swimming? Space, Time and Movement in Nietzsche and Irigaray.	273
Chapter 7: Conclusion	312
Bibliography	343

## **Acknowledgements**

I owe huge thanks to my supervisor, Christine Battersby, who encouraged me to undertake this project and saw it through to the end. Her advice, thoroughness, support, and careful criticism has been invaluable throughout. My parents, Warren and Joan Porter have also helped me through the highs and lows of the PhD process in innumerable ways. I would like to thank them for this and their patience, love and loyalty. My love and gratitude to Teresa Ludden, who believed in me and taught me to believe in myself, goes beyond expression. This thesis never would have been submitted without her love, intellectual enthusiasm, and respect.

I would like to dedicate this work to the memory of  
Sandra Ryan 1961-2001.

## **Declaration**

I declare that this thesis is my own work and that it has not been submitted for a degree at any other university.



## Abstract

Every conception of history is invariably accompanied by a certain experience of time which is implicit in it, conditions it, and thereby has to be elucidated. Similarly, every culture is first and foremost a particular experience of time, and no new culture is possible without an alteration in this experience. The original task of a genuine revolution, therefore, is never merely to ‘change the world’, but also – and above all – to ‘change time’. (Giorgio Agamben)<sup>1</sup>

In this thesis I will be looking at the work of Walter Benjamin and Luce Irigaray as two examples of different attempts to ‘change time’ in the sense given by Giorgio Agamben above. I will be arguing that both of these thinkers theorise this ‘genuine revolution’. I will also be arguing that there are useful parallels in their work which will help to bring about a more productive thinking of the temporalities of history and revolution.

The first part of the thesis consists of a reading of Benjamin’s revolutionary philosophy of history and a study of the temporalities that emerge from his critique of historicism. This also involves an investigation into both Hegel’s and Nietzsche’s influence on Benjamin’s thinking of time and history. His relationship to Hegel is explored through the nature of the dialectic at work in Benjamin’s texts as well as through the interpretations of these texts by Adorno and Agamben. Nietzsche’s influence is traced through the theme of tragedy. I compare and contrast Nietzsche’s thinking of tragedy with Benjamin’s thinking of *Trauerspiel*, and show the various conceptions of historical time at work in these forms.

The second part of the thesis is then a reading of what I take to be Irigaray’s revolutionary philosophy of history. I begin this section by setting out my reasons for considering Irigaray to be a revolutionary thinker as well as suggesting why she might also be considered to be undertaking a similar project to Benjamin. The revolutionary temporalities that I extrapolate from Irigaray’s work are then also looked at in relation to Hegel and Nietzsche. The study of her relationship to Hegel takes place through the figure of Antigone, which also brings us back to the theme of tragedy. The different times that emerge in Irigaray’s thinking are then compared to different notions of movement that take place in Nietzsche’s thought.

The thesis concludes with an investigation and comparison of the different temporalities that have been discovered in Benjamin and Irigaray. The recurring themes of destruction, disjunction, continuity, and rhythm are explored in order to suggest how each of these thinkers can provide a useful critique of, or supplement for, the other.

---

<sup>1</sup> Giorgio Agamben, ‘Time and History: Critique of the Instant and the Continuum’, in *Infancy and History: Essays on the Destruction of Experience*, London, Verso, 1993, p. 91.

# **Introduction**

Every conception of history is invariably accompanied by a certain experience of time which is implicit in it, conditions it, and thereby has to be elucidated. Similarly, every culture is first and foremost a particular experience of time, and no new culture is possible without an alteration in this experience. The original task of a genuine revolution, therefore, is never merely to ‘change the world’, but also – and above all – to ‘change time’. (Giorgio Agamben)<sup>1</sup>

In this thesis I will be looking at the work of Walter Benjamin and Luce Irigaray as two examples of different attempts to ‘change time’ in the sense given by Giorgio Agamben above. I will be arguing that both of these thinkers theorise this ‘genuine revolution’. I will also be arguing that there is a secret agreement between them; one that will produce a more productive thinking of the temporalities of history and revolution.

Benjamin’s theory of the experience of time of modernity is what produces the demand for a change in time as well as setting out some alternative models of temporality. Irigaray’s theory of sexual difference is what produces the demand for a change in culture. I will be arguing that this change in culture can also produce a revolutionary change in time, as demanded by Benjamin’s theory.

The first part of the thesis is a reading of Benjamin’s philosophy of history and his temporalities of history and revolution. In the second part I extrapolate a

---

<sup>1</sup> Giorgio Agamben, ‘Time and History: Critique of the Instant and the Continuum’, in *Infancy and History: Essays on the Destruction of Experience*, London, Verso, 1993, p. 91.



theory of different temporalities of history and revolution from Irigaray's writing. As these temporalities are not always explicit in Irigaray's texts I will be uncovering, what I consider to be, the thinking of time and history that is implied in her writing. Part of this project is also to bring Benjamin and Irigaray's theories together in a productive conjunction. I will be showing that, if Irigaray is read in a Benjaminian light, she can be seen to be undertaking a similar project of 'brushing history against the grain'. I will also be showing how Irigaray's work can supplement, enrich and fulfil some of the promise of Benjamin's theories. However, I will not be attempting to identify these two thinkers, or to homogenise their very different theories; rather, I will be showing how the similarities and differences between them can lead to a better understanding of the temporalities of history and revolution.

## **Benjamin and Irigaray in Modernity**

Benjamin's work is, at least in the later writings, explicitly an attempt to construct a theory of modernity. In other words, it is seeking an understanding of the 'new' in modern society, or the experience of the new in modern society. It is in his studies of Baudelaire and the Paris Arcades that what he calls his 'pre-history of modernity' is most extensively elaborated. It will be useful then to take Baudelaire's own account of modernity as a working definition. In *The Painter of Modern Life* he wrote 'By 'modernity' I mean the ephemeral, the fugitive, the

contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable.’<sup>2</sup> It is this experience of the ephemeral, the fugitive, and the contingent that is also at work in Benjamin’s theory. What is most significant for this thesis, and Benjamin’s theory of modernity, is the understanding of time and history within modernity. David Frisby suggests that many theorists of modernity are ‘concerned with the new modes of perception and experience of social and historical existence set in train by the upheaval of capitalism. Their central concern was the discontinuous experience of time, space and causality as transitory, fleeting and fortuitous or arbitrary...’.<sup>3</sup> It is Benjamin’s understanding of this discontinuous experience of time that will be the primary focus here, as well as Irigaray’s attempts to change the experience altogether.

Modernity has often been conceived as the result of a break. This is usually positioned as break with tradition and accompanied by the announcement or promise of a new age.<sup>4</sup> The themes of break, disjunction or discontinuity will play a major role in this thesis, as will differing conceptions and uses of continuity. Benjamin will be shown to be a thinker of radical disjunction and discontinuity, while one of Irigaray’s roles will be to rework a notion of continuity.

---

<sup>2</sup> Charles Baudelaire, ‘The Painter of Modern Life’, in *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, trans. and ed. Jonathan Mayne, Phaidon Press, Oxford 1964, p. 13.

<sup>3</sup> David Frisby, *Fragments of Modernity*, Cambridge Mass., MIT Press, 1988, p. 4. The theorists that Frisby is explicitly referring to are Georg Simmel, Siegfried Kracauer, and Walter Benjamin.

<sup>4</sup> This theme is explored in detail in, Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*. Oxford, Polity, 1987. While Habermas acknowledges the emergence of modernity and its understanding of itself as a new age ‘around the year 1500’ with the Renaissance and the Reformation, his own analysis really takes off from Hegel’s conception of modernity as a new age.

Modernity can be seen to be strangely dependent upon both discontinuity and continuity. Andrew Benjamin describes modernity as ‘delimited by a founding dislocation’, which he points out is also ‘one of the defining motifs of Walter Benjamin’s conception of modernity’.<sup>5</sup> However, at the same time that modernity is to be understood as and through dislocation, Andrew Benjamin also draws our attention to the conceptions of continuity and totality at work within modernity.<sup>6</sup> He suggests that another aspect of modernity is ‘the continual attempt to efface the presence of this founding moment’.<sup>7</sup> In other words there is also a sort of ‘bad faith’ at work in modernity which constantly tries to refuse the presence of dislocation and disruption within itself. We could say that modernity tries to paper over its own constitutive cracks.

Andrew Benjamin discusses the effacement of dislocation in terms of particularity and universality. He identifies the inability to think particularity without incorporation back into universality as one aspect of the effacement of the dislocation of modernity.<sup>8</sup> This is also the basis of the dominance of

---

<sup>5</sup> Andrew Benjamin, *Present Hope : Philosophy, Architecture, Judaism*, London, Routledge, 1997, p. 162.

<sup>6</sup> In order to avoid confusion over the two authors present in this work with the surname Benjamin, wherever the surname Benjamin is used without a forename it will be taken to refer to Walter Benjamin.

<sup>7</sup> Andrew Benjamin, *Present Hope*, p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> Andrew Benjamin’s discussion is also focused around the question of a thinking of the Shoah as constitutive of the present as it is linked to modernity. While I will not be undertaking a sustained discussion of the status of the Shoah in the interconnection between modernity and the present, it must always be borne in mind in any discussion of particularity, universality, totality and specificity. While my focus will be on the various temporalities of revolution emerging from the



continuity within modernity, because a proper thinking of dislocation would be able to think a particularity that is not immediately taken as a moment in a universal continuum. Part of the philosophical task then, as identified by Andrew Benjamin, is to attempt to think ‘a conception of particularity that cannot be readily reinserted into the universal/particular relation’; what is also of significance here is that he also identifies this task as ‘a fundamental part of Walter Benjamin’s philosophical undertaking.’<sup>9</sup> This task will also be important, even if it is not always explicit, throughout this thesis, not only in relation to the thinking of Walter Benjamin, but also in relation to Irigaray’s attempts to rethink both particularity and universality.

What is interesting about these two thinkers is that they both avoid the pitfalls of post-Holocaust thought, as identified by Andrew Benjamin. The first of these is complicity, which would involve ‘the unchecked repetition of tradition’<sup>10</sup>; the kind of thinking that would deny the Holocaust as a constitutive disjunction in thinking. Neither Walter Benjamin nor Irigaray can be accused of complicity in an uncritical repetition of tradition although they are both concerned in their different ways with tradition. Benjamin is concerned with a destruction and rescue of tradition, and Irigaray with a subversive repetition of tradition.

---

thinking of Benjamin and Irigaray, this cannot be - nor would I want it to be - divorced from a thinking that would take the Shoah as having ‘a determining effect on thinking’. (*Present Hope*, p. 6).

<sup>9</sup> Andrew Benjamin, *Present Hope*, p.8.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p.4.

The second of these pitfalls is nihilism, which involves ‘a metaphysics of destruction’<sup>11</sup>. While it will be shown below that Benjamin’s method can sometimes be described as nihilism, and that he even uses this label himself, this will be shown to be a nihilism that destroys the very tradition of metaphysics of destruction. I will be attempting to show that although Benjamin is greatly concerned with destruction, this is an affirmative destruction – one that can even be described as a thinking of happiness. Irigaray will also be shown to be highly critical of a tradition of nihilism and of the destructive thinking that forms its basis.

The dialectic of continuity and discontinuity will be most important to the formulation of any alternative temporalities of history or revolution. Benjamin’s theories will be useful in criticising constructions of modernity that rely on conceptions of continuity and its implied totality. Andrew Benjamin draws the important distinction between chronology and time which allows us to see that it is ‘the interarticulation of chronology and continuity [that] comes to be naturalised and, as such, is taken to be the expression of time itself.’<sup>12</sup> In other words it is only because of this naturalisation of continuity that we experience temporality as a continuous process. Walter Benjamin’s position is, on the other hand, that the real nature of modernity can only be grasped in its dislocation, which necessarily includes its temporal dislocation. What I will be arguing is that Walter Benjamin’s thinking of revolution also takes the form of a temporal dislocation.

---

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 4.



I will also show that Irigaray is useful in theorising a notion of revolution that incorporates a refigured concept of continuity that is able to avoid Benjamin's well-founded and convincing criticisms of historical theories and temporalities of continuity. There is a thinking of continuity in Irigaray's work that can be extrapolated in terms that avoid positioning it as another attempt to efface the dislocation of modernity. It will be shown to be a continuity that can incorporate discontinuity. The particularity of dislocation is cherished within Irigaray's texts because her reworking of universality allows difference to be maintained and valued. Irigaray's continuity does not necessitate a closed totality. Indeed I will be showing that the 'incomplete present' and 'impossibility of closure'<sup>13</sup> that Andrew Benjamin derives from Walter Benjamin's work can, in a compatible and yet different way, also be derived from Irigaray's writing. This dialectic of openness and closure is what she identifies as contributing to the nihilism that needs to be avoided. As we will see, her temporalities of revolution are based on the temporalities of the body – the female body in particular – which is neither open nor closed, or which is both open and closed. This is linked to Irigaray's metaphor of 'the two lips': the openness of the female body is not based on a lack while its closure is not totalising and exclusive.

The relationship between continuity and tradition will also return, in various forms, throughout the thesis. As well as Benjamin's attempts to destroy the temporality of tradition we will see Irigaray's engagement with cultural and

---

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

philosophical traditions. Irigaray will be interpreted as a revolutionary thinker, who breaks with traditions in her own way; at the same time, she will also be interpreted as working within certain philosophical traditions and even, to a certain extent, carrying on those traditions. This is not an attempt to position Irigaray as a conservative thinker, rather it is an attempt to position her within a recognised philosophical tradition in such a way that it revolutionises and rescues that tradition.

Irigaray's project is not as firmly based on a theory of modernity as Benjamin's, so some justification is required for this if this pairing is to be convincing. I will be using an argument that suggests that the kind of radical thinking of sexual difference conducted by Irigaray takes place in relation to modernity's understanding of itself as founded on a break<sup>14</sup>. I will be extending this argument to show how Irigaray's thinking of sexual difference is not only revolutionary but also suggests the kind of revolutionary change in time called for by Agamben.

Adriana Cavarero paraphrases a dominant theme of Irigaray's thinking when she states that the 'modern system of power ignores female sexual difference by absorbing it into an abstract paradigm of the individual, which is understood as male and universal.'<sup>15</sup> In order to arrive at this conclusion she starts from the

---

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>14</sup> This argument must be attributed to Adriana Cavarero, and is laid out in her 'Equality and Sexual Difference: Amnesia in Political Thought', in *Beyond Equality and Difference: Citizenship, Feminist Politics and Female Subjectivity*, G. Bock & S. James (eds.), London, Routledge, 1991, pp. 32-47.

<sup>15</sup> Cavarero, 'Equality and Sexual Difference', p. 32.

position of treating modernity as conceiving itself as the result of a break, and asks ‘what was “before” modernity?’<sup>16</sup> This question is the start of an investigation of the invisibility of sexual difference in political theory. If the female is ignored by the modern system of power, perhaps things were different before modernity. Cavarero suggests that things were in some respects different in political theory, but much the same in others.

She takes Aristotle’s political writings to be the theoretical touchstone for the majority of ancient and pre-modern political theorists. While there were obviously a multitude of different interpretations and formulations at work, she highlights two characteristics that bear on the question of sexual difference. These are that Aristotle’s political theory alleged that there are hierarchical differences between individuals, and that there is a distinction to be made between the public politics of eudaimonic flourishing (*politika*) and the bodily survival needs of the private household (*oikonomika*). Cavarero argues that Aristotle’s conception of the political sphere was based on the ‘maximum realisation of the male essence’, and that the female was confined to the domestic sphere and designated as ‘dependant on the adult male’<sup>17</sup>.

If this is what was ‘before’ modernity, then the theoretical and logical structure of modernity, or the modern state, can be said to be founded on a rejection of this model. Indeed this is true in terms of the political sphere. The assumed hierarchical differences between individuals are rejected in favour of a theory in

---

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, p. 32.



which a state of nature is assumed. This model also confers an absolute equality between individuals. However it is not true in terms of the domestic sphere. Cavarero claims that the distinction between *politika* and *oikonomika* remains relatively unchallenged, even into the modern era. While there have been radical changes in theories relating to the political sphere, and there has been a great deal of discussion of repression within the domestic sphere, Cavarero argues that there is still a repression of the domestic sphere itself. The radical rethinking that takes place in thinkers such as Cavarero and Irigaray will also upset this distinction: to refigure the political space and time in such a way as to include the aspects of the 'domestic' that have traditionally been considered as 'female' or 'feminine'.

In an examination of the status of women in the literature of modernity Janet Wolff has argued that the distinction between the public and the private has become more marked in modernity<sup>18</sup>. Along with an increasing separation, she also discovers increased confinement of women to the private. Wolff discovers that in both the poetic and sociological literature of modernity women tend to be invisible, or given marginal roles. Taking the model of the experience of modernity as Baudelaire's ephemeral, transient, and fugitive, (as given above), Wolff suggests that this is the experience of the, exclusively male, *flâneur*. She describes the *flâneur* as the hero of modernity who, as male, is free to move in the crowd. She contrasts this celebration of the public freedom of the male *flâneur* in the literature of modernity with the ever more marginalised

---

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 34.

<sup>18</sup> Janet Wolff, 'The Invisible *Flâneuse*: Women and the Literature of Modernity', in Andrew Benjamin (ed.), *The Problems of Modernity: Adorno and Benjamin*, London, Routledge, 1991.

representations of women. Wolff suggests that women either remain invisible because they are confined to the private sphere, or else they appear as marginal figures such as 'the prostitute, the widow, the old lady, the lesbian, the murder victim, and the passing unknown woman.'<sup>19</sup> This trend can also be seen in Benjamin's own theory of modernity, where the most frequently used female figures are, the predictably marginalised, prostitutes.

These marginal figures, however, are never given equal status or the same value as the (male) writer. They are always the 'subjects of his gaze'.<sup>20</sup> Wolff argues that this is as much the case in the sociology as well as the poetry of modernity, because the growth of the discipline of sociology itself can be related to the increasing separation of public and private in modernity. Due to the industrial nature of western societies the separation of work from home increased, but Wolff suggests that the gendered consequences of this social change is, to some extent, exaggerated by (male) sociologists. She argues that there are many models of women who are visible and active in the public arena of modernity. What is lacking is a proper analysis of their experience of modernity. Wolff argues that the women who were active and publicly visible had different roles. Middle class women were primarily given the role of consumers and became 'public signs of their husbands' wealth'.<sup>21</sup> Their experience of modernity therefore differed from that of the *flâneur*. While his was one of fleeting encounters and detached,

---

<sup>19</sup> Janet Wolff, 'The Invisible *Flâneuse*', p. 148.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 149.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 153.

purposeless strolling, hers was one of consumption and the public display of wealth.

It is in the political theory of modernity that Cavarero also finds the exaggeration of the public/private distinction. However, there would appear to be some hope for the political status of women in the modern rejection of hierarchical differences between individuals. Cavarero suggests that, even though there is an introduction of a conception of absolute equality through a 'state of nature' theory, the equality does not, in practice, extend to sexual difference. She states that 'the minds of modern political thinkers are marked by a powerful repression of female sexual difference' and that this is part of what she defines as 'a syndrome of "universalization of masculinity" which manifests itself on at least two levels'.<sup>22</sup>

The first of these is described by Cavarero as 'the way that modern political theoreticians simply *fail to see* women'.<sup>23</sup> This gender blindness is a theme that we will see repeated in Irigaray's work also. The second manifestation of the 'universalisation of masculinity' Cavarero describes as the generalisation of the male into a neutral or universal being'.<sup>24</sup> In other words, although modern political theory has attempted to theorise notions of universal equality based on the model of a universal subject, the model – and as a result, this universal subject – is, in fact, one that privileges the male subject. The neutral and

---

<sup>22</sup> Cavarero, 'Equality and Sexual Difference', p. 36.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 36.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 36.



universal being turns out to be a male neuter and universal 'man', not human. This kind of universalisation will also be a theme that we will see repeated in Irigaray's work. While the universalisation of masculinity can be attributed the best of intentions, in that, it is at least in part an attempt to create equality between all humans, it actually ends in what Cavarero calls a 'homologising, assimilating inclusion',<sup>25</sup> which denies women the possibility to become full subjects in their own right.

Cavarero suggests that this homologisation is a repression that is not an exclusion – that there is no conscious attempt to exclude women from the universality of subjecthood. However, this homologisation, is not described in terms of a misguided generosity either, Cavarero is careful to point out that the repression that occurs is still an 'extremely potent form of power', because it acts to strip women of any position from which to project their own subjectivity as women.

While I agree with Cavarero's analysis of the homologising, assimilation within modernity, I will be arguing, in relation to Irigaray's engagement with the forms of power at work in the repression of women, that there is also an exclusionary logic at work both within the homologisation and theoretical and cultural invisibility of women. While it may seem paradoxical to suggest an exclusionary homologisation, what I mean by this is that what is excluded is any form of value for women, the female, or the feminine. Homologisation is repressive because in ignoring sexual difference in favour of a male neuter, it excludes any value for the female/feminine. This exclusion from being valued also reflects back on the

---

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 37.

exclusion of any appropriate evaluation of the female/feminine, which would go some way to explaining the theoretical invisibility of women within modernity. As Cavarero herself, puts it, this homologisation creates and ‘inferiorising condition of human existence’ for women.<sup>26</sup> I will be arguing that part of Irigaray’s revolutionary strategy is to instigate an inclusionary logic that recognises sexual difference. This inclusionary strategy will attempt to avoid the problems of homologisation through a spirit of generosity that would make room for a proper value and evaluation to be given to all.

I will be examining Irigaray’s strategy of non-homologising inclusion in terms of revolution because I understand it as more than an attempt to liberate women from the repression of either exclusion or homologisation. Irigaray, by calling for a cultural shift radical enough to bring about a publicly visible, theoretical and symbolic capacity for the female subject to speak a language proper to herself, as well as theorise appropriate rights, protections and values, is undoubtedly embarking on a revolutionary programme. It will also be part of the task of this thesis however, to explore the repercussions for the concepts ‘revolution’ and ‘programme’ because they will also be affected by the radical change demanded. I will be following thinkers such as Cavarero in this interpretation by maintaining that a proper thinking of sexual difference is necessary in order to bring about a truly inclusive society and culture, and that this thinking of sexual difference cannot be introduced by simply making alterations or revisions to the existing model of society or politics. What is needed is radical rethinking of the basic logic of the model. I would go further than Cavarero, however, in arguing that

---

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 37.



this radical rethinking – this revolution – will also take into account the temporality enshrined in the politics of modernity.

## **The Philosophy of History in Hegel and Nietzsche**

In order to show how Benjamin's and Irigaray's theories relate to modernity, and its variant philosophies of history, I will be reading them in relation to two versions of the philosophy of history – those of Hegel and Nietzsche. This will be a twofold gesture, that as well as investigating their readings of the philosophy of history, will also take account of their position within a modern tradition of philosophy. This is not to suggest that Hegel and Nietzsche represent the whole range of philosophies of history available in modernity, rather they will be taken as two, differing, and opposing, positions in the philosophy of history as well as two representative examples of outstanding thinkers of modernity. I will not be presuming to provide an exhaustive reading of either of these thinkers on history, both of their theories are open to multiple interpretations which would provide subject matter for at least two other theses. Instead I will be taking what I consider to be fairly representative, and uncontroversial reading of both Hegel's and Nietzsche's philosophies of history, in order to show how both Benjamin and Irigaray relate to these positions.

The reason for relating Benjamin and Irigaray to these thinkers is also to try and show how they relate to, at least part of, the history of philosophy or the

philosophical tradition. This question of tradition is another important element for both thinkers. Benjamin is concerned with trying to understand modernity's relationship to tradition, whether it is a rejection of tradition, or a carrying on and over of tradition in a different, or perhaps similar form. For Irigaray, the question is how tradition, and the philosophical tradition in particular, has treated the question of sexual difference.

Benjamin and Irigaray will also be shown to be deeply engaged with both Hegel and Nietzsche in their respective attempts to 'change time'. In both cases there are areas where they can be seen to diverge strongly from both Hegel and Nietzsche as well as others where they can be seen to be indebted to the theoretical groundwork laid down by them. It will be useful therefore to outline Hegel's and Nietzsche's philosophies of history.

I will be taking Hegel's philosophy of history as paradigmatic of philosophical models of history and time in modernity. In the later considerations of Benjamin's and Irigaray's relations to Hegel I will not be engaging primarily with his lectures on the *Philosophy of History*. The detail of the argument in the later chapters will be more concerned with the nature of the dialectic and the thinking of time that can be extrapolated from this. In the later chapters I will be more concerned with the dialectic as elaborated in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. However, in order to be able to contextualise the more general statements I will be making about Hegel's philosophy of history in the later chapters, I will briefly outline what I take to be a summary of the main points of Hegel's philosophy of history.

Hegel's philosophy of history can be taken as paradigmatically modern in that it is an attempt to look for a pattern, order, or meaning in history. Moreover it is an attempt to attribute such a pattern or meaning to the workings of reason. The philosophy of history is, for Hegel, nothing more than the application of reason to world history. As he states in his introduction to *The Philosophy of History*:

The only thought which philosophy brings with it, in regard to history, is the simple thought of Reason—the thought that Reason rules the world, and that world history has therefore been rational in its course.<sup>27</sup>

For Hegel, history is a narrative of development. In a similar way that the *Phenomenology of Spirit* can be read as the story of the development of the consciousness of an individual to complete self-consciousness or absolute knowledge, the *Philosophy of History* can be read as the story of the development of the consciousness of freedom in history. What will be important throughout this thesis is the teleological structure of this development in Hegel's theory. For, Hegel, history has a very specific final goal; 'Spirit's consciousness of its freedom, and hence the actualisation of that very freedom.'<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Introduction to The Philosophy of History*, trans. Leo Rauch, Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Company, 1988, p. 12. Many Hegel scholars find the reliability of this text questionable as is it based on the lecture notes of some of Hegel's students rather than confirmed writings of Hegel himself. However I will be treating it as reliable enough to provide the required outline for his philosophy of history.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.



Even the study of history itself conforms to this model, for Hegel. He distinguishes between three methods of dealing with history: Original history, Reflective history, and Philosophic history.<sup>29</sup> These methods also follow chronologically. The first, Original history, is described as a sort of eyewitness account of history in which ‘historians primarily describe the actions, events, and situations they themselves have witnessed, and whose spirit they shared in.’<sup>30</sup> This is the most primitive form of historical writing for Hegel because it assumes no differentiation between the historian and the past. This is the idea of history as pure description. With the next method, Reflective history, the relation between the present and the past; between the knowing subject and the object known is interrogated. This is the view of history which acknowledges the theoretical implications of the world becoming ‘present to the mind through the mind’s own activity.’<sup>31</sup> In other words at this stage it has become apparent that there can be no historical knowledge that is not a form of interpretation. This moment of history recognises the limitations of the historian’s context and the practical problems of having to evaluate and order historical material.

Philosophic history is what brings the thought of the rationality of history with it. Hegel’s dialectic brings the past and the present together as different parts of the same, unfolding totality. The opposition of the positivity of original history and the interpretation of reflective history is also resolved in this thinking of history which brings explanation and understanding, immanence and transcendence, and

---

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

fact and value under one roof. Philosophic history does not only deal with the facts of history it is also ‘the application of philosophic thought to history’<sup>32</sup>. This is proper philosophy of history, not mere methodology of historiography. Philosophic history is where the real becomes the rational in history because of the speculative nature of philosophy. The historically concrete coincides with the speculation of the dialectical philosopher when ‘he is dealing with history as a raw material, not to be left as it is, but to be construed according to thoughts *a priori*.’<sup>33</sup>

The progression in the teleological development of the methods of history is also reflected in Hegel’s substantive philosophy of history itself. It is the absolute commitment to progress in his model of history that will be of primary relevance to the discussions of Hegel throughout this thesis. The development of the consciousness of freedom is necessarily progressive for Hegel. ‘World history is the progress in the consciousness of freedom—a progress that we must come to know in its necessity.’<sup>34</sup> Hegel attempts to show how this progress has actually taken place through four different world views that he identifies in world history. The first of these he identifies as the ‘Oriental World’ in which the only freedom is that of the ruler who is ‘also a high priest or God himself’<sup>35</sup>. Spirit’s consciousness of freedom is very obviously limited in this case. In the next moment, which he identifies as the ‘Greek world’, this consciousness of freedom

---

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>35</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, trans. T.M. Knox, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1967, p.220.

is extended as ‘the principle of personal individuality arises’. The ‘Roman world’ again increases the consciousness of freedom as personal individuality is taken to the extreme. It is in the ‘Roman world’ that Hegel diagnoses the greatest split between the public and the private. Hegel describes abstract universality and private self-consciousness coming together again in Spirit’s final manifestation of its consciousness of freedom, in which that freedom is truly realised: the ‘Germanic World’. Here is Hegel’s controversial ‘end of history’ in which heaven and earth come together in the ‘true reconciliation which discloses the state as the image and actuality of reason’.<sup>36</sup>

In any discussion of the philosophy of history there is an ambiguity that must be attended to so that we do not become confused by the use of the word ‘history’ itself. ‘History’ can be taken to mean either the phenomenon of the past course of human events – *res gestae* – or the representation of those events by the writers of ‘history’ – *historiam rerum gestarum*. While it is impossible to divorce one aspect of this ambiguity from the other in any analysis of history, we will be more concerned with *res gestae* in this thesis – ‘History’ with a capital ‘H’. However Hegel confuses this distinction when he points out that the German term for

---

<sup>36</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, p. 222. At this stage I am merely setting out what I take to be the most straightforward reading of Hegel’s *Philosophy of History* and *Philosophy of Right*. There are of course many different readings about the force and status of Hegel’s ‘end of history’ thesis. These range from Francis Fukuyama’s triumphalist reduction in his *The End of History and the Last Man*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1992, to Lutz Niethammer’s, sober survey of the question in *Posthistoire: Has History Come to an End?*, trans. Patrick Camiller, Verso, London, 1992. See also Peter Osborne, *The Politics of Time: Modernity and Avant-Garde*, London, Verso, 1995, pp. 36-44 for an analysis of both of these responses.



‘history’ (*Geschichte*) ‘is derived from the verb ‘to happen’ (*geschehen*)’<sup>37</sup>. He argues that it then combines both the objective and subjective; the *res gestae* and their narration; *historiam rerum gestarum*, and that ‘We must therefore say that the narration of history is born at the same time as the first actions and events that are properly historical’.<sup>38</sup> This refusal to fully divorce the events of history and its ontology from the narratives in which these events are represented is a useful thought to bear in mind when we venture down the more abstract paths of investigations into the nature of time at work in history. For Hegel history could be viewed as a ‘gallery of images’<sup>39</sup>, and what gives these images their shape is the ‘muse of memory (*Mnemosyne*)’<sup>40</sup>. The shapes of history, as moments in the teleological progress of Spirit’s consciousness of freedom, depend on memory to give them form.

On the other hand, I will be taking Nietzsche’s critique of this type of Hegelian philosophising, and its variant philosophies of history, as influential in Benjamin’s and Irigaray’s different attempts to allow for difference to emerge from and in history. Nietzsche will be taken as the first to theorise the attempt to efface the dislocation of modernity that is so central to Benjamin’s theory. He will also be taken to be influential in Irigaray’s criticism’s of modernity’s constructions of the subject, and subject-centred reason.

---

<sup>37</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Introduction to The Philosophy of History*, p. 64.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 64.

<sup>39</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1977. .  
p. 492.

<sup>40</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Introduction to The Philosophy of History*, p. 64.

Nietzsche's early essay 'On the Utility and Liability of History for Life' (1874) is far removed from the Hegelian project of finding a pattern, order or meaning in history. It does not set out any guide to a comprehensive understanding of history in order to clear up any ambiguities by proposing both a proper means of representation as well as a triumphant ontology. It is instead a disturbing challenge to the many variations of history. It is an attempt to transgress history and philosophies of history such as Hegel's.

In this essay Nietzsche's polemic is aimed primarily at the condition of German culture at the time. His more specific targets are Eduard von Hartmann who can be taken as a representative of, what Nietzsche would consider to be, the sterile and cynical results of Hegelianism and its absolute historicism. In this text which announces the uselessness of a substantive philosophy of history, Nietzsche even reflects Hegel's own text on the *Philosophy of History*. Where Hegel has presented us with three methods of dealing with history; 'Original history', 'Reflective history', and 'Philosophic History'<sup>41</sup>, Nietzsche distinguishes between 'a *monumental*, an *antiquarian*, and a *critical* kind of history'.<sup>42</sup>

What is important for Nietzsche is that these three types of history all correspond to the life of human individuals. Monumental history 'pertains to the living

---

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>42</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, 'On the Utility and Liability of History for Life', in *Unfashionable Observations*, trans. Richard T. Gray, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1995, p. 96.



person'... 'as one who acts and strives'<sup>43</sup> because this kind of history celebrates the acts of great individuals. Antiquarian history pertains to life 'as one who preserves and venerates'<sup>44</sup> because this kind of history 'looks back with loyalty and love on the origins through which he became what he is'.<sup>45</sup> Critical history – which will be our main concern here – relates to life and to the human being 'as one who suffers and is in need of liberation'<sup>46</sup>. It is in this last type of history that we can discern the seeds of Benjamin's reading of history as well as Irigaray's historical stance. Nietzsche claims that critical history enhances life, because 'in order to live, [the human being] must possess, and from time to time employ, the strength to shatter and dissolve a past...'.<sup>47</sup>

Nietzsche's emphasis on life is at the same time a denial of Hegel's assumption that 'reason rules the world'. Even though Hegel took 'life' to denote the dynamic, concrete, organic, and dialectical, it remained for him, a teleological and imperfect mode of spirit.<sup>48</sup> For Nietzsche, on the other hand, the only guiding principle of human existence should be life itself. (Although it is, more accurately, an anti-authoritarian *an-archia*.) In this early essay on history (1874) we find in embryonic form the first presentation of many of the major themes of his later work. His insistence that 'life and life alone, that dark, driving, insatiable

---

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 96.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 96.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 102.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 96.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 106.

<sup>48</sup> See, Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, especially the beginning of the chapter on Self-Consciousness, pp. 104-111.

power that lusts after itself<sup>49</sup> is all that can sit in judgement on history. will later be extrapolated into his theory of the ‘will to power’. The invigorating power of the great individual in monumental history can be seen as the germinating seed of his theory of the *Übermensch*. The treatment of the Pythagorean belief ‘that when an identical constellation of the heavenly bodies occurs, identical events – down to individual minute details – must repeat themselves on the earth as well’<sup>50</sup> signals the emergence of his thinking of eternal recurrence.

Life defies reason for Nietzsche; the real does not identify with, or even reciprocate, the rational. However this is not an outright rejection of knowledge and the rational, it is a warning to consider the life enhancing and life diminishing aspects of knowledge and reason. Nietzsche insists that life requires the service of history, and can be harmed by an excess of it. Because the judgement of life is ‘merciless, always unjust, because it has never flowed from the pure fountain of knowledge’<sup>51</sup> it refuses the teleological structure of absolute historicism. Life is not a final goal it is the ever present judge of the usefulness of knowledge in the here and now. Nietzsche’s materialism is counterposed to Hegel’s idealism when he states that ‘knowledge that destroyed life would simultaneously destroy itself. Knowledge presupposes life; hence it has the same interest in the preservation of life that every creature has in its own continued

---

<sup>49</sup> Nietzsche, ‘On the Utility and Liability of History for Life’, p. 106.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 99.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 106.

existence'.<sup>52</sup> This materialist critique will also be seen to be influential in Irigaray's engagement with philosophy and philosophers.

If Nietzsche's radical *Lebensphilosophie* is considered in conjunction with his unchecked criticism of German culture, we can only conclude that he is also rejecting the necessary progress assumed in Hegelian historicism. Rather than the optimistic faith Hegel theorised as the necessary progression of Spirit's consciousness of freedom, Nietzsche paints a picture of a moribund and decadent culture. He suggests that this state of affairs has come about through the very excess of history of the Hegelian theory which has 'allowed the Germans to grow accustomed to speaking of the "world process" and justify their own age as the necessary result of this world process.'<sup>53</sup> Nietzsche laments the fact that this has become a faith; a 'religion of historical power'.<sup>54</sup> This dogma refuses critical thought in favour of 'that admiration for the "power of history" that in almost every moment reverts to naked admiration of success and leads to the idolatry of the factual'.<sup>55</sup>

What is of primary significance in Nietzsche's criticism of this kind of triumphant historicism is his diagnosis of the dangers lurking in its refusal to think difference. His affirmation of life is also a championing of heterogeneity

---

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 164.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 143.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 144.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 143.



and difference against the totalisation of dialectical closure.<sup>56</sup> I will be arguing that both Benjamin and Irigaray are exemplary thinkers of difference, in their own right, and as readers of Nietzsche. Benjamin's notion of 'brushing history against the grain' can be taken as part of a critique of the 'naked admiration of success'. Irigaray's concentration on sexual difference in the cultural omissions of history and philosophy's gender amnesia, will be read as her own version of brushing history against the grain.

The cure for what Nietzsche calls, this '*historical sickness*'<sup>57</sup> is to come through the rejuvenating forces of the '*ahistorical*', and the '*suprahistorical*'. The '*ahistorical*' designates 'the power to be able to *forget* and to enclose oneself within a limited *horizon*', and this contrasts with Hegel's description of history as a gallery of images inspired by Mnemosyne. We can also see the embryonic form of Nietzsche's perspectivism at work here. It is this active forgetting that allows us to draw these limited horizons, therefore enabling us to create distinctive identities. Such limited horizons would free us from the weight of history and from the status of mere epigones. This perspectivism is again to be contrasted with the universalism and totality of Hegelian historicism. Nietzsche likens the *ahistorical* to an enviable, bovine existence, 'tethered... to the stake of the

---

<sup>56</sup> It is important to note here that it is not totalisation itself that is the problem, but the way in which it operates. As Peter Osborne states in *The Politics of Time*, London, Verso, 1995, 'The problem with Hegelianism derives not from totalization as such, but from its specific mode: the combination of the positing of an *immanent narrative* end to history with the claim to *absolute knowledge*.' (p. x) In his book Osborne provides a convincing argument for a different mode of historical totalisation through a reading of Heidegger and Ricoeur. However throughout this thesis 'totalisation' will refer to the Hegelian model, and therefore as something to be challenged.

<sup>57</sup> Nietzsche, 'On the Utility and Liability of History for Life', p. 163.

moment'<sup>58</sup> in which only the present is known. Ahistorical forgetting is a means of concentrating on 'genuine needs' which, for Nietzsche, are the needs of an authentic culture, as opposed to 'cultivated' needs.<sup>59</sup>

The 'Suprahistorical' provides a much different remedy, being 'those powers that divert one's gaze from what is in the process of becoming to what lends existence the character of something eternal and stable in meaning'.<sup>60</sup> For the suprahistorical teleology is redundant, because 'the world is complete and has arrived at its culmination in every individual moment.' The suprahistorical individual has no need for a Hegelian religion of history which seeks 'salvation in a process'<sup>61</sup> Again the emphasis is on the moment rather than the totality of the process of history. The living, present moment must take priority over knowledge of the dead past.

However, Nietzsche should not be interpreted as rejecting history altogether, merely its excessive abuses. He was clear that 'life requires the service of history'<sup>62</sup>, so long as we remember that history should provide a service to the enhancement of life, rather than vice versa. Indeed there is a certain amount of historicism at work in Nietzsche's writing, if we take historicism to mean a recognition of the role played by the historical situation in which an individual or culture is situated. Nietzsche's later attention to historicity is played out in terms

---

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 87.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., pp. 163-167.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, p. 163.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, p. 94.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 96.

of genealogy. Indeed Nietzsche also advocated ‘historical philosophising’ as a remedy to the ‘lack of historical sense’ of the philosophers who he accuses of mummifying knowledge ‘when they dehistoricize it, *sub specie aeterni*’<sup>63</sup>. Historical philosophising is more concerned with becoming than being and this would also suggest some agreement with Hegel. Hegel’s inversion of Plato not only brought history, but metaphysics also, to an end by substituting becoming for being. Nietzsche obviously rejects Hegel’s notion of world history as a process culminating in the Prussian state, but he does carry on the radical historicizing initiated by it.<sup>64</sup>

## **Models of Revolution**

The necessity of historical philosophising is of central concern to Benjamin and Irigaray. I will be exploring their different methods and outcomes in relation to the different historicisms and ahistoricisms of Hegel and Nietzsche. The contrasts and comparisons will be made in order to try and set out the different temporalities at work in the various theories. While I have not gone into the temporalities of history at work in Hegel and Nietzsche above, I will be elaborating on these and exploring the consequences for Hegel’s narrative of continuity and Nietzsche’s insistence on the moment.

---

<sup>63</sup> Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, trans, R.J. Hollingdale, London, Penguin, 1968, p. 35.

<sup>64</sup> Although he tends to attribute the thinking of becoming more to Heraclitus. See, for example *Twilight of the Idols*, p.36.



The explorations of temporalities of history will be conducted as part of an investigation into the idea of revolution. I will be considering revolution as a radical change in culture rather than a merely rebellious, political challenge to the *status quo*. While revolution is often thought of as the violent overthrow of a government, I will be paying attention to its status as bringing about change, including the possibilities of the non-violent inclusion of difference. Because of the radical nature of this change, revolution presents us with what Hannah Arendt has termed ‘the problem of beginning’<sup>65</sup>. However, rather than concerning myself with the overtly political problem of beginning, I will be looking at the philosophical problems surrounding the relationship between revolution and history.<sup>66</sup> I take the link between revolution and history as necessitated by the special place given to revolution within history. By this I mean that revolution can be considered as an historical event that contributes more to the shape and understanding of history than most. Revolution can variously be thought of as a turning point in history, a particular stage in the continuous development of history, or an interruption of history. It is the latter, interruptive interpretation of revolution that I will be most concerned with here, as this is the interpretation most closely associated with Benjamin.

What will bring Benjamin’s thinking of interruption as revolution together with Irigaray’s call for radical cultural change, is the timing of revolution at work in these thinkers. Having stated that revolution is accorded a special place in

---

<sup>65</sup> Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, London, Penguin, 1990, p. 21.

history, it is necessary to add, following Agamben, that it must also be given a special time. If Benjamin's and Irigaray's conceptions of revolution are to be regarded as genuine, according to Agamben's criteria, they must also be able to theorise the change in time implicit in revolution. I will be arguing that Benjamin and Irigaray both successfully theorise the change in time requisite for revolution. They will be shown to offer multiple models of the temporality of history and revolution.

In many cases these models will take the form of various art forms. Even in this introduction we have come across Hegel's view of history as a gallery of images. In the chapters that follow we will become acquainted with Benjamin's thinking of historical time as narrative, tragedy, and image, as well as the recurrent themes in both Benjamin and Irigaray of the rhythmic and musical nature of historical time.

---

<sup>66</sup> For a comprehensive account of revolution as a political concept involving the overthrow of governments by physical force see, Peter Calvert's, *Revolution*, London, Macmillan, 1970. Also see Arendt, *On Revolution*.



# **Part 1**

## **Benjamin**

## **Chapter 1**

### **Benjamin's Revolutionary Philosophy of History.**

What is at issue is the violent rhythm of impatience in which the law exists and has its temporal order as, opposed to the good (?) rhythm of expectation in which messianic events unfold.<sup>1</sup>

In this chapter I will be undertaking a reading of some of Benjamin's texts in order to support my claim that he can be read as a revolutionary thinker. I will begin with an analysis of the 1921 text 'Critique of Violence' as an example of Benjamin's revolutionary, political agenda. This reading will also introduce elements of messianism in Benjamin's thinking. The second half of the chapter will begin to elaborate the alternative temporalities of revolution and history that can be found in some of Benjamin's later writings. Rather than emphasising the differences in these two phases, I will be stressing the development and continuity of Benjamin's thinking by suggesting that the later messianic temporalities of revolution are closely related to the theory of 'divine violence' attributed to the 'Critique of Violence'.

'Critique of Violence' is, perhaps, Benjamin's most overtly revolutionary text; it can be read, primarily as a response to George Sorel's *Reflections on Violence* which was published in 1908. Benjamin uses Sorel's text in order to attempt to provide a metaphysical basis for revolutionary violence. The essay moves from an analysis of how law arises as an original agreement between two parties in

---

<sup>1</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'The Right to Use Force', in *Selected Writings, Volume 1: 1913-1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock & Michael W. Jennings, London, Belknap Press, 1996, p 231. The question mark is Benjamin's.

violent conflict, through a further analysis of how the law is maintained, and concludes with a study of a violence that would be outside the law altogether – a revolutionary violence. At this stage in his work, Benjamin's conception of revolution is at its most radical. A genuine revolution would be one in which a radical break would eliminate the possibility of any complicity with the present regime.

This problematic of complicity with state, or law-preserving, violence is a central focus of the 'Critique of Violence' essay. In this essay the general proletarian strike is given as a paradigmatic example of revolutionary action. This is seen as non-complicitous because, in Benjamin's terms, it is pure and unmediated, which means it is not instrumental; it is not oriented to any posited goal. In this essay we are presented with a kind of thinking which would consider any positive programme or positing as always already complicitous. Pure, unmediated violence, which is revolutionary violence, is described in terms of suspension and destruction. Revolution is not the result of a planned take-over of one section of society by another, instead it is the way this cycle of taking over and transferring power from one group to another through foundational violence is broken. Benjamin states that revolution, which he terms here as 'a new historical epoch', will only come about through 'the suspension of law with all the forces on which it depends as they depend on it, finally therefore on the abolition of state power'.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Benjamin, 'Critique of Violence'. in *One Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter, London, Verso, 1979, p. 153.



This lack of complicity is formulated by Benjamin using overtly theological language. It is described as divine violence and structured like a messianic intervention. Only the Messiah can remain transcendent or exterior enough to avoid complicity with worldly, or state violence. However, as we shall see, in the later thinking of the theses ‘On the Concept of History’, the ‘historical materialist’ is given access to this exteriority through a ‘*weak* Messianic power’<sup>3</sup> which will mean she/he can also at least weakly avoid complicity. This claim to avoid complicity is also described as a turning away from the world in thesis X. But what is being turned away from is the world that believes in the inexorable advance of history as teleological progress. The transcendent step outside is the movement outside ‘accustomed thinking’. The exteriority of a non-complicitous Messiah can also provide the critical impetus and apparatus to conceive of history and temporality ultra-radically and ultra-alternatively. This will be what makes room for the interruption of radical alterity as revolution.

Benjamin’s revolution is to be pure, uncomplicitous and unmediated, and it seems that only this theological framework would give it access to adequate exteriority, in order to avoid the pitfalls of teleology and instrumental reason. The problem of complicity leads Benjamin to set out a theory of pure violence. While the demand for purity is always a dangerous condition to impose, this is, for Benjamin, a purity of political means. Pure means are not means to ends which would be situated outside the immediate context in which they are being

---

<sup>3</sup> Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, London, Fontana, 1992, p 246. The title of the theses is translated as ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’ in this edition, however I shall use

deployed. Benjamin describes the problem in terms of law-making and law-preserving violence. 'All violence as a means is either law-making or law-preserving.'<sup>4</sup> Law-making violence is like a liberating violence and is pure because it is not directed towards a goal whereas law-preserving violence is repressive because it has a purpose; it has as its *telos* the maintenance of what already exists and can only maintain this by the violent denial of any other law-making violence.

What is revolutionary about Benjamin's text is that it is not merely an attempt to theorise the replacement of one type of violence with another, it is an attempt to inaugurate another history through a thinking of pure violence that does not need to fall back onto the model of an impure, law-preserving violence. Rather than taking the route of an evolution or development of history, Benjamin is attempting to interrupt history, which he considers to be the history of the abjection of others. Werner Hamacher describes Benjamin's project in the 'Critique of Violence' in terms of positing and deposing. For Hamacher

The logic of inaugurating this *other* history is not the logic of positing and intrinsic alteration, and accordingly not a logic of substituting one violence with another, or one privileged class with a hitherto oppressed one. Rather,

---

the title 'On the Concept of History' as a closer translation of Benjamin's '*Über den Begriff der Geschichte*'.

<sup>4</sup> Benjamin, 'Critique of Violence', in *One Way Street*, p.142.

it is the logic – assuming one can still speak here of logic – of ‘deposing’ (*Entsetzung*).<sup>5</sup>

This *Entsetzung* which means deposing, suspension, or relief, is the pure violence which Benjamin is looking for. It is a violence which is not violent because in deposing or suspending it does not posit anything. It has no *telos* and is therefore a pure means without an end. The imposition or positing of law is a paradigmatic performative act. By saying what it does it does what it is saying. Hamacher, on the other hand, concludes that Benjamin’s deposition or suspension will be imperformative or affirmative. ‘Pure violence does not posit, it ‘deposes’; it is not performative, but affirmative.’<sup>6</sup> In other words pure violence says nothing, and by doing so it does nothing. It suspends the activity and violence of preservation without violently instigating a positive alternative.

This affirmativity is a useful way of thinking about the purity of revolutionary violence that Benjamin is trying to theorise. For Hamacher ‘affirmatives are not a subcategory of performatives. Rather, affirmative, or pure, violence is a “condition” for any instrumental, performative violence and, at the same time, a condition which suspends its fulfilment in principle.’<sup>7</sup> He even goes so far as to suggest that there is a thinking of the sublime at work in Benjamin’s pure violence. To borrow a term of Benjamin’s from his essay on Goethe’s *Elective*

---

<sup>5</sup> Werner Hamacher, ‘Affirmative, Strike: Benjamin’s “Critique of Violence”’ in Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne (eds) *Walter Benjamin’s Philosophy: Destruction and Experience*, London, Routledge, 1994, p. 115.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p 115.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 128.



*Affinities*, which was being written at the same time, we could say that this pure violence, as an affirmative, is doing the same work in politics and history as the ‘expressionless’ (*das Ausdruckslose*) does in literature.<sup>8</sup> In that essay Benjamin used the notion of radical interruption as a key to a theory of criticism. The expressionless is what interrupts the movement and harmony of an art work. It is what shows the impossibility of the art work becoming a totality. There is a clear family resemblance between the thinking of the expressionless in the *Elective Affinities* essay and the notion of pure, or divine violence at work in the ‘Critique of violence’. Instead of an account of history which is to be interrupted by this pure violence, the expressionless is situated in an account of the literary or artistic absolute that is to be interrupted by this pure violence:

The expressionless is the critical violence which, while unable to separate semblance from essence in art, prevents them from mingling. It possesses this violence as a moral dictum. In the expressionless, the sublime violence of the true appears as that which determines the language of the real world according to the laws of the moral world. For it shatters whatever still survives as the legacy of chaos in all beautiful semblance: the false, errant totality—the absolute totality.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> ‘Goethe’s *Elective Affinities*’ was written between 1919 and 1922, ‘Critique of Violence’ was written in 1921.

<sup>9</sup> Benjamin, ‘Goethe’s *Elective Affinities*’, in *Selected Writings, Vol. 1.*, p 340. While I will primarily be engaging with the ontological aspects of the political and ethical thinking involved in Benjamin’s texts, it will also be necessary to engage with his aesthetics at certain points. For more complete and sustained readings of Benjamin’s aesthetics see Michael Jennings, *Dialectical Images: Walter Benjamin’s Theory of Literary Criticism*, London, Cornell University Press, 1987; Rainer Rochlitz, *The Disenchantment of Art*, New York, Guildford, 1996; Richard Wolin, *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1982.



This thinking of the expressionless as a kind of critical cognate for political, pure violence will be helpful in the discussions of rhythm in chapters 6 and 7, because Benjamin also links the expressionless to Hölderlin's theorisation of the caesura in tragedy as a 'counter rhythmic rupture'.<sup>10</sup> Indeed there is already a thinking of pure revolutionary violence as counter rhythmic rupture in one of the sketches Benjamin wrote before the published version of 'Critique of Violence'. He already makes the link between the rhythms of the law and the possibility of the different rhythms of a messianic interruption when he states that,

What is at issue is the violent rhythm of impatience in which the law exists and has its temporal order, as opposed to the good (?) rhythm of expectation in which messianic events unfold.<sup>11</sup>

Affirmativity, according to Hamacher, must also demand singularity. Only affirmativity can prove appropriate to the singularity of individual situations because absolute singularity suggests such a radical or complete difference from all other situations that it could only be articulated as difference. Performativity, on the other hand, must ignore the singularity of a situation in order to validate it through the reiteration or repetition of conventions or norms, even if these are subversive reiterations.<sup>12</sup> This singularity is not exclusive in the sense that it produces the exclusion or abjection attributed to performativity; the deposing

---

<sup>10</sup> 'Goethe's Elective Affinities', p.340-1.

<sup>11</sup> Benjamin, 'The Right to Use Force', in *Selected Writings, Vol. 1*. p. 231.

<sup>12</sup> The question of subversive reiterations will become appropriate in chapter 4 below, when we begin to engage with Irigaray's mimetic strategy.

aspect of affirmativity means that it is not an attempt to put anything in place and therefore will need no constitutive outside.

Benjamin's uses the example of the proletarian general strike as a practical demonstration of pure revolutionary violence because this kind of strike is not an attempt to put anything in place, it is an attempt to put an end to state violence. '[T]he proletarian general strike sets itself the sole task of destroying state power. It "nullifies all the ideological consequences of every possible social policy; its partisans see even the most popular reforms as bourgeois."'<sup>13</sup> What is affirmative about the proletarian general strike is that it is one 'in which nothing happens, no work is done, nothing is produced, and nothing is planned or projected.'<sup>14</sup> As such, it cannot be subsumed under any instrumentality. If revolution is to be an affirmative event it would need to be a revolution which has no programme or goal other than destroying the present regime.

However, if this pure violence or affirmative suspension allows revolution to circumvent the problem of complicity, it raises another, and equally serious, problem, that of resignation. If to be truly revolutionary is to disengage from the present forms of violence and do nothing, then this could always be read by those who are not revolutionaries as resignation, quietism or defeatism. Proletarian general strikes are only successful if enough members of the proletariat do nothing; so revolution will only be successful if there is an overwhelming lack of action. If revolutionaries affirm then this will leave free reign for those who

---

<sup>13</sup> Benjamin, 'Critique of Violence', p. 145.

would consider revolution as damaging to their interests to perform defensive and repressive actions. The metaphysics of revolution might prove the justice of affirmativity but it could still be pragmatically considered as ineffective and dangerously quiet.

However, those pragmatic interests will always still be complicit with the old regime, if they are posited instrumentally. The logic of affirmativity means that a new history must be created non-instrumentally. To be completely uncomplicitous with the old regime is also to break with its instrumental logic. For the affirmative revolution, the goal is to have no goal, and in so doing, to annihilate all impositions of law. Performativity carries on the evolution, replacement and substitution of one or several laws (symbolic as well as jurisprudential), whereas affirmativity brings an end to this evolutionary history and thereby inaugurates another, revolutionary history.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> Hamacher, 'Affirmative, Strike', p. 120-1.

<sup>15</sup> The question of performativity as a radical or revolutionary gesture can be linked to the work of Judith Butler who theorises performativity in terms of sex and gender in her books *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, London, Routledge, 1990; and *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*, London, Routledge, 1993. Butler explores performativity as part of a wider exploration of sexual politics. It is partly her hope that her thinking of performativity might enable woman, women, gays and lesbians to construct legitimate, sexed and gendered identities. This can be aligned with a feminist argument which would suggest that to give up the logic of performativity, in favour of affirmativity, one must first of all be in a position of legitimate and effective performance. Those who have traditionally been excluded from the practice and metaphysics of law-imposition, or violent performativity would seem to be at an advantage in that this would put them closer to a position of affirmativity. As we shall see below this could be linked with Irigaray's thinking by noting that it could be argued that she constructs woman as the hidden principle, or condition for metaphysics, and that this might be analagous to thinking of affirmativity as the condition for performativity. But the historical silencing of women cannot be interpreted as placing women in an advantageous revolutionary



Benjamin's pure, affirmative violence, is indeed a version of nihilism in its nullification of the consequences of all social policy. If it is a pure violence which is not violent because it suspends and deposes all existing violence, then it could be described as a pure praxis. But it is the praxis of nothing. It does not seem as if we are yet in any position to decide on the truth or danger of affirmativity. Hamacher suggests that the 'decision reached by pure, critical violence cannot be made by cognitive means. The decision eludes judgement.'<sup>16</sup>

The contrast between performativity and affirmativity in relation to revolution situates performativity as an evolutionary strategy rather than as a revolutionary one, whereas affirmativity produces a formal concept of revolution as absolute interruption and new beginning. However, it is this almost pure formality of affirmativity – a formality which is probably impossible to form – that leaves it somehow stranded. Its purity which allows it to be righteously free from the contamination of complicity also leaves it unable to come together with anything concrete.

The nihilism of this pure violence, which is also in the suspending and doing nothing of the general proletarian strike, is also reflected in another text of this period. The 'Theologico-Political Fragment' of 1920-21. In this fragment

---

position of affirmativity. For a silence to be effective it must be the silence of something we have come to expect a noise from. If women are to affirm a revolution they must first be put into a position from which they can be heard and listened to. If women's performativity is to be suspended it must first be in an effective position to be suspended from. The effectivity of deposition will be greater from a stable and dominant position than from a minority and marginal one.

Benjamin draws the distinction between the what he terms ‘the order of the profane’, and the ‘Messianic’<sup>17</sup>. The messianic, as outside mundane history, means that ‘the order of the profane cannot be built up on the idea of the Divine Kingdom’. However even though the messianic is extra-historical, it is also the completion and redemption of history. In other words there can be no redemption in history, only a redemption of history. This completion is not to be thought of as ‘the *telos* of the historical dynamic’ though, because while it is the end of history, it is not its goal. There is, however, something in history that can act as a model to direct history towards redemption. This is the idea of happiness. For Benjamin, ‘The order of the profane should be erected on the idea of happiness’, but the idea of happiness also turns out to be a nihilistic idea of happiness because ‘For in happiness all that is earthly seeks its downfall’.<sup>18</sup>

Benjamin discovers parallels between this nihilistic, profane happiness and messianic redemption. Although he considers them to be acting in opposite directions he suggests that the profane idea of happiness can help to bring about the redemption of history. There is a correspondence between the two, and it is this notion of correspondence that will become important in trying to decipher the various images and tensions that Benjamin presents us with in his thinking of history, time and revolution:

just as a force can, through acting, increase another that is acting in the opposite direction, so the order of the profane assists, through being

---

<sup>16</sup> Hamacher, ‘Affirmative, Strike’, p. 126.

<sup>17</sup> Benjamin, ‘Theologico-Political Fragment’, in *One Way Street and Other Writings*, p. 155.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 155.

profane, the coming of the Messianic Kingdom<sup>19</sup>

Sigrid Weigel identifies a theme of ‘counter striving disposition’ (*gegenstrebige Fügung*) at work here that runs through Benjamin’s work, wherever he tries to construct thought-images about the nature of history<sup>20</sup>. These forces acting in opposition are both directed by the fading rhythm of impermanence. Even the messianic, it seems, is not the bringer of eternal truths or values, for Benjamin. As we shall see, Benjamin will always look for the space and time in which becoming and difference are allowed to open up the scene and play their part, rather than those times and places in which closure, fixity and eternal being dominate. He recognises that this may be diagnosed as political nihilism, but he suggests that,

To the spiritual *restitutio in integrum*, which introduces immortality, corresponds a worldly restitution that leads to the eternity of downfall, and the rhythm of this eternally transient worldly existence, transient in its totality, in its spatial but also in its temporal totality, the rhythm of Messianic nature, is happiness. For nature is Messianic by reason of its eternal and total passing away.

To strive after such passing, even for those stages of man that are nature, is the task of world politics, whose method must be called nihilism.<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 155.

<sup>20</sup> Sigrid Weigel, *Body- and Image-Space: Re-reading Walter Benjamin*, London, Routledge, 1996, p. 54.

<sup>21</sup> ‘Theologico-Political Fragment’, p. 156.



It is this image of the tension between the profane idea of happiness and messianic redemption, that continues through Benjamin's work. The tensions are constantly refigured in different images of historical time and messianic time. Osborne suggests a link between the different images of time at work in the 'Theologico-Political Fragment' (1921) and the theses 'On the Concept of History' (1940). He argues that Benjamin's analysis of Surrealism is able to reintroduce 'historical time into the conceptualisation of Surrealist experience'.<sup>22</sup> According to Osborne, this takes place through Benjamin's constant attention to the 'everyday' and results, in what Benjamin describes as the 'trick' of 'the substitution of a political for a historical view of the past'.<sup>23</sup> It is this same substitution that Osborne sees taking place in both the 'Theologico-Political Fragment' and the theses 'On the Concept of History' and is necessary to the 'refiguration of the everyday through interruption'<sup>24</sup> – or revolution.

In elaborating the historical and messianic temporalities germane to this revolution I will also provide further links between the early writing of both the 'Theologico-Political Fragment' and the 'Critique of Violence, and the theses 'On the Concept of History'. The account of 'image-time' set out below will also be able to be read back – as messianic time – into the affirmative, divine violence and messianic rhythms of Benjamin's earlier essays.

---

<sup>22</sup> Osborne, *The Politics of Time*. p. 184.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 184, Benjamin *One Way Street*, p. 230.

<sup>24</sup> Osborne, *The Politics of Time*. p. 185.

## Experience and Story-time

In his notes for the 'Arcades Project', Walter Benjamin makes an intriguing claim. In a section on what he calls, the theory of historical materialism, he writes: 'History breaks down into images, not into stories.'<sup>25</sup> As a way into Benjamin's philosophy of history I will be motivated by the questions of 'What could it mean for history to break down into images instead of into stories?' and 'would this give us any theoretical advantage in understanding historical, messianic, or revolutionary time?'

Benjamin also links experience to his statement that 'history breaks down into images, not into stories.' in the fifth of his propositions on the theory of historical materialism, which reads ;

The procedures of historical materialism are founded on experience, on common sense, on presence of mind, and on dialectics.<sup>26</sup>

And as it is his version of historical materialism that breaks history down into images, this breakdown must also be founded on experience, as well as common sense, presence of mind, and dialectics. It is important to note here, that the presence of mind present here, as Weigel reminds us, is always a 'bodily

---

<sup>25</sup>Walter Benjamin, 'N [Re the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress], in *Benjamin: Philosophy, Aesthetics, History*, ed. Gary Smith, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1989. References to this will be given with the 'N' number, for example this reference is N 11, 4.

presence of mind' (*leibhaftiger Geistesgegenwart*), for Benjamin<sup>27</sup>. But what kind of experience is it that Benjamin's version of historical materialism is founded on?

Benjamin uses two different words for experience. *Erfahrung* is the word for experience that is linked to tradition; experience which is acquired and learnt from. On the other hand, Benjamin uses *Erlebnis* to refer to a more impoverished form of experience; experience that is merely lived through. For our own purposes we can start from the assumption that experience in the first instance derives from perception, and that the events that we experience contribute to knowledge. Experience can contribute to knowledge through perceptions, which in turn, depend on events – whether mental or material. Experience then, is a necessarily temporal concept; one that belongs to time and history. If there is any truth to historicism, it is that we are all creatures of our own time and history. However great or small an extent we allot to the contribution of history to the social/historical construction of our knowledge, there can be no such thing as completely ahistorical experience.

In an early work entitled 'On the Program of the Coming Philosophy' (1918) Benjamin explicitly stated the task in hand is 'to undertake the epistemological foundation of a higher concept of experience (*Erfahrung*)', also referred to as 'a new and higher kind of experience yet to come'.<sup>28</sup> In this piece he is in dialogue

---

<sup>26</sup> N 11, 4.

<sup>27</sup> Weigel, *Body- and Image-Space* p. 4, Benjamin, *One Way Street*, p. 99.

<sup>28</sup> Benjamin, 'On the Program of the Coming Philosophy', in *Selected Writings, Vol. 1*, p. 102.



with Kant on the concept of experience. However, the criticism of Kant's conception of experience is not straightforwardly a formal, epistemological criticism of the logic at work in the Kantian construction, instead it is based in the historicity of the concept itself. Written in 1918 while the collective experience of the 1914–1918 war was still being assimilated, Benjamin realised that Kant's concept of experience is no longer adequate to the radical change in historical conditions that have emerged in or as modernity.

One of the main threads of Benjamin's criticism was that Kant's concept of experience was too tightly tied to the scientific framework of his time. The newer, 'higher' concept of experience that Benjamin wants to elucidate would extend Kant's concept to make it more inclusive of aspects that would escape the limits of Newtonian physics. These criticisms, however, are not necessarily attempts to undermine Kant's critical project, rather, they can be read as supplements to a neo-Kantian theory of experience which places more emphasis on the historicity of experience. Benjamin connects Kant's own conception of experience to a particular 'world view (*Weltanschauung*)', and more specifically, the world view of the Enlightenment.<sup>29</sup> The problem with this Enlightenment experience, for Benjamin, is that it is insufficiently inclusive of all that he would like to encompass by the concept experience. It is, in his words, 'experience (*Erfahrung*) virtually reduced to a nadir, to a minimum of significance'<sup>30</sup>.

---

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 101.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 101.

What he considers to be happening in the Kantian construction of experience is that it becomes reduced to a subjective process. Kant's reliance on the subject/object dichotomy demanded that experience could only be described as a kind of gathering together of perceptions in consciousness; a mechanical relation between objects and a perceiving subject. But, according to Benjamin, even the subject/object divide on which the Kantian system and its concept of experience rests is a result of its own historicity. This 'shallow experience' is just as much an epistemological fiction and has no more claim to universal or timeless truth as the belief of ancient or, so called, 'primitive' peoples who 'identify themselves in part with objects of their perception'. Indeed the shallowness of Kant's concept of experience is that it is set up in terms of the individual human, as a purely psychological problem of consciousness, rather than taken as a larger picture of what Benjamin calls 'a systematic specification of knowledge'<sup>31</sup>. This would include experience that lies outside rationality, for example intoxication and dream experience. By taking Enlightenment experience as the norm Kant is unable to account for historical change in the nature of experience, he fails to register its own historicity.

The new concept of experience that will constitute the programme of the coming philosophy is one that will somehow go beyond the subject/object divide. But as it is just the programme that Benjamin is giving us in this text, he is unable to show what this new 'higher' concept of experience will look like. The problem with the development of this new concept of experience is that although he is successful in showing its inherent historicity, he is unable to show how it can be

---

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 103.

a more inclusive concept.

That it has been a more inclusive concept, historically, we are in no doubt. This is resonant in an experience of the events of knowledge that have taken place in not only an individual but also a community. This is experience as wisdom; the traditional wisdom of the elders of a society as well as the collective wisdom of the society itself, embedded within the traditions of that society. More accurately this is experience as tradition: the experience that is handed down from generation to generation.

In 1934 Benjamin wrote more directly about the qualitative change in experience that he saw as characteristic of late modernity. The experience of modern technological warfare was what finally completed the failure of tradition to convey experience. There was no way that the traditional forms of communicating experience could convey this experience. The radical and sudden nature and speed of change in the early 20th century is his prime example of the historicity of experience itself. That the nature of experience could remain unchanged in such historical circumstances is out of the question for Benjamin. The changes are so rapid tradition is no longer able to assimilate them:

Was it not noticeable at the end of the war that men returned from the battlefield grown silent – not richer, but poorer in communicable experience?... For never has experience been contradicted more thoroughly than strategic experience by tactical warfare, economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare, moral experience by those in power. A generation that had gone to school on a



horse-drawn streetcar now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged but the clouds, and beneath these clouds, in a field of force of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile human body.<sup>32</sup>

Although he stated in his early work that the new concept of experience still wants to incorporate religious experience, this does not necessarily have to be read as a reactionary stance.<sup>33</sup> In recognising the qualitative change in experience (even though he labelled it as having fallen in value) that accompanies social and technological change, the appropriate response is not an atavistic wish for a return to a mythical golden age of experience<sup>34</sup>. The challenge is to create a new concept of experience that can help us to understand our own reactions and interaction to the social and technological environment in which we find ourselves. Benjamin's later theory of experience, although labelled as 'historical materialist', was still carrying on the project of trying to produce 'true'

---

<sup>32</sup> *Illuminations*, p. 84.

<sup>33</sup> Experience always retained a spiritual element throughout his work, and it is always 'shot through with theology' however uncomfortable this may be for some commentators. For Benjamin modernity doesn't so much mark the death of God, rather the impoverishment of the experience of God. Osborne also argues that this religious aspect of Benjamin's thinking later became a thinking of the 'everyday'. (*Politics of Time*, p. 181.)

<sup>34</sup> Richard Wolin, detects conflicting attitudes to the impoverishment of experience in Benjamin's essays of 1936. He identifies a nostalgic yearning for the wisdom of tradition in 'The Storyteller' which sits uneasily with the bold iconoclasm of 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility.' However there does appear to be a synthesis of these apparently conflicting positions in the 1939 essay 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire'. See chapter 7 of Wolin, *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1982. Although Wolin's position could be challenged by noting that, in 'The Storyteller', Benjamin makes use of long passages from an earlier essay, 'Experience and Poverty' (1933), in which he argued that the modern impoverishment of experience provides the opportunity for a fresh start.

experience. This 'true' experience, which is also political experience can only be produced through a disruption of the continuity of history, which at the same time enacts 'a specific and unique engagement with'<sup>35</sup> the past.

Benjamin's text is concerned with the transition of storytelling into the form of the novel, in modernity. The novel can be seen as the paradigmatic narrative medium of modernity because it is created by an isolated individual to be consumed by isolated individuals. No longer is the 'counsel of wisdom woven into the fabric of life', instead we are presented with mere information. Because the novelist is not in a position to communicate her experience, she can only attempt to create a false experience by creating a false totality.<sup>36</sup> In 'The Storyteller' Benjamin describes the differences between traditional experience and modern experience. The experience of the traditional is steeped in the lore: the teaching and counsel, of a community. This kind of knowledge assumes a continuity of the community in which it is being transmitted. This is what Benjamin terms the 'communicability of experience'; and this 'counsel woven into the fabric of real life is wisdom (*Weisheit*)'. The 'epic side of truth' or wisdom is what Benjamin diagnoses as dying out in modernity.<sup>37</sup> This wisdom, in belonging to a community, could pretend to a kind of universalism. On the other hand modern experience has become the disrupted and private experience of an individual within society. Although Benjamin's text does appear nostalgic

---

<sup>35</sup> Benjamin, 'Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian', in *One Way Street and Other Writings*, p. 352.

<sup>36</sup> Benjamin's thinking of totality here, is deeply indebted to Georg Lukács', *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. Anna Bostock, London. Merlin Press, 1971.

<sup>37</sup> *Illuminations*. p. 86.

in places, his materialist analysis is careful to avoid describing the change in experience as either a ‘ “symptom of decay, (*Verfallserscheinung*)” let alone a “modern” symptom. It is, rather, only a concomitant symptom of the secular productive forces of history.’<sup>38</sup>

Benjamin maintains that there is still some possibility for *Erfahrung*, – the traditional experience that is acquired and learnt from – but suggests that, in modernity, the more common form of experience is *Erlebnis* – the impoverished experience that is merely lived through. For him, the paradigmatic experience of modernity, is the experience of shock<sup>39</sup>. This is the daily experience of the city dweller who has no chance of assimilating all the fleeting encounters and experiences involved in the modern urban encounter with the crowd. Benjamin derived this concept of the ‘shock experience’ from his reading of Baudelaire as the poet of modernity. It is this shock factor that is also characteristic of experience as a moment that is lived (*Erlebnis*). The temporality of these accounts of experience also reflect on the temporalities of history implied in Benjamin’s historical materialism. The continuity of the community assumed in traditional experience suggests a continuous temporality. While the individualised, shock experience of the lived, urban moment suggests a more disjunctive temporality.

Benjamin opposes his version of ‘historical materialism’ to a position that he identifies as ‘historicism’. For him, historicism presupposed the possibility of

---

<sup>38</sup> *Illuminations*, p. 86.

<sup>39</sup> See Susan Buck-Morss, ‘Aesthetics & Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin’s Artwork Essay Reconsidered’, in *New Formations*, 20, Summer 1993. for a detailed examination of the shock experience in Benjamin’s work.



objective knowledge about the past by pretending to present it ‘the way it really was’<sup>40</sup>. In order to do this it has to depend on the ‘Once upon a time’ (*Es war einmal*)<sup>41</sup> form of historical construction which tends to fix the past as eternal and immutable. This is the narrative form of history which treats history as if ‘telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary.’<sup>42</sup> This narrative structure of history provides the conditions for historical experience through assuming a seamless continuity in history. This continuity is often described as being at work in tradition, where tradition is taken to be the handing over from one generation to the next. But for Benjamin, historicism is not a traditional form of historical consciousness. As we have seen in the case of experience, the breakdown of traditional forms due to the historical circumstances of modernity would make historicism only one of a number of competing historical consciousnesses within modernity.

It is precisely storytelling as traditional experience ‘which is passed on from mouth to mouth’<sup>43</sup> which was identified by Benjamin as the communicable experience (*Erfahrung*) that has been lost by the returning soldiers of the war. However, Benjamin’s target is not storytelling, as such, but the idea of history and time that comes with the attempt to break it down into stories. For Benjamin, it is not only that historicism still adheres to a linear, narrative structure of history, or even that it closes the borders of history through claiming objectivity and immutability, its greatest sin is that it still maintains an idea of history as

---

<sup>40</sup> Thesis VI, *Illuminations*, p. 247.

<sup>41</sup> Thesis XVI, *Illuminations*, p. 254.

<sup>42</sup> Thesis XVIII A, *Illuminations*, p. 255.

<sup>43</sup> *Illuminations*, p. 84.

progress.

The narrative form which is used to retain the seamless continuity of historical time is described by Benjamin as the ‘vulgar naturalism of historicism’<sup>44</sup> which, in refusing even to acknowledge the possibility of other modes of time-consciousness (let alone compete with them), standardises and homogenises its own time-consciousness. However what is missing in the idea of history as a seamless narrative is any account of a present. Continuity is bought at the expense of a present which is able to disrupt this continuity. It is our experience of the present, or our present experience, and its historicity, that plays a major, constitutive role in our own consciousness and idea of time. We determine the shape and direction of history in and through the present.

This inflated continuity of historicism is also accused of presenting a skewed and partial view of history: one which empathises with the victors, also as a result of its narrative form. For Benjamin, historical continuity becomes the ‘triumphal procession in which the present rulers step over those who are lying prostrate’<sup>45</sup>

Cultural products such as technological, theoretical or artistic developments, which are exhibited as proof of historical progress, also incorporate all that remains forgotten by this idea of history. For Benjamin these ‘cultural treasures’

owe their existence not only to the efforts of the great minds and talents who have created them, but also to the anonymous toil of their contemporaries. There is no document of civilisation which is not at the

---

<sup>44</sup> N 2, 6.

same time a document of barbarism.<sup>46</sup>

By forgetting the price paid for these cultural treasures, historicism takes progress as the norm. This is not to suggest that historicism automatically accepts a more recent development as necessarily better than its predecessor. Writing at a time when Fascism commanded huge popular support in Europe he could not help but notice that those who he would position as historicists around him were amazed that such a movement could emerge in the twentieth century. But he diagnosed their amazement as arising out of their inadequate conception of history and historical time. Their seamless, progressive narrative of history could not help but be amazed that Fascism could arise in the twentieth century – the century that promised to be the most progressive and enlightened in history. Their amazement, for Benjamin, was ‘*not* philosophical, This amazement is not the beginning of knowledge – unless it is knowledge that the view of history which gives rise to it is untenable.’<sup>47</sup>

The story of story-time was one of progress that was based on the closure of the ‘once upon a time’, and its time is described as ‘empty’ and ‘homogenous’<sup>48</sup>. The story of progress takes up residence in this empty time and closes its doors to any future challenge. It must be homogenous time to exclude any difference within history; to exclude the competing claims of all those who have given of their anonymous toil or who are still lying prostrate. Indeed it is the fourth premise in the list concerning the theory of historical materialism that also states; ‘The

---

<sup>45</sup> Thesis, VII, *Illuminations*, p. 248.

<sup>46</sup> Thesis, VII, *Illuminations*, p. 248.

<sup>47</sup> Thesis, VIII, *Illuminations*, p. 249.



materialist presentation of history goes hand in hand with an imminent critique of the concept of progress.<sup>49</sup>

## Image-time

Benjamin wants to break open the ‘continuum of history’<sup>50</sup> to explode this story-time and its tale of homogenous victory in order to make room for all those who have been excluded from it. It is through a certain understanding of a relationship between history and images that we might be able to construct a more useful account of history and historical time that may be able to accomplish this.

Sigrid Weigel has referred to Benjamin as a thinker-in-images<sup>51</sup>, but the use of the term ‘image’ that she is attributing to Benjamin is, again, rather unorthodox. His ‘Image’ (*Bild*) is traced back to an older use of the word which she calls the ‘original and literal sense of the word: image as likeness, similitude or resemblance (*Ähnlichkeit*)’<sup>52</sup>. This is to be distinguished from thinking of an image as a representation, standing in for something else. An image for Benjamin refuses the dichotomy of form and content, it is what he calls, ‘that third thing’ in his essay *The Image of Proust*.<sup>53</sup> Although he does not explicitly mention Kant in this text, he is again in dialogue with him, attempting what we might describe as

---

<sup>48</sup> Thesis, XIV, *Illuminations*, p. 252.

<sup>49</sup> N 11, 4. This critique of the concept of progress will be examined in greater detail in the next chapter.

<sup>50</sup> Thesis, XIV, *Illuminations*, p. 253.

<sup>51</sup> See Sigrid Weigel, *Body-and Image-Space*, this is one of the major themes of her book.

<sup>52</sup> Weigel, *Body-and Image-Space*, p. 23.

a proto-deconstruction of the dichotomies that his system functions on. Just as we have seen his earlier engagement with Kant as an attempt to elaborate a more inclusive concept of experience, here he is making silent reference to Kant's discussion of the 'Transcendental Schemata'.

In the chapter on the schematism on the pure understanding of concepts in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant is concerned with finding a way to understand how an 'object can be contained under a concept (*Begriff*)'. The problem is that if 'pure concepts of the understanding' are indeed pure then they have nothing to link them to 'empirical intuitions (*Anschauung*)'. The situation has been set up in such a way that there seems to be only pure concepts of the understanding and intuitions, without any way of bringing the two together. Kant, however, announces that 'there must be some third thing' that has something in common between the category and the appearance which allows us to apply categories to appearances. This is the 'transcendental schema' which is described as a 'mediating representation' which is both purely 'intellectual' and 'sensible'.<sup>54</sup> According to Kant, it is these schemata which make images possible for us and they connect the image to its appropriate concept.

These Kantian schemata depend on the subject/object dichotomy and result in a mediation between the two. As a representation (*Vorstellung*), the schema also depends on the form/content dichotomy which can be extrapolated from the original subject/object one. However, Benjamin also wants to supersede this

---

<sup>53</sup> *Illuminations*, p. 200.

dichotomy with his use of image. Because his images are not representational in the Kantian sense<sup>55</sup>, they no longer rely on this distinction. He gives us a clue as to how they might work when he describes a childhood scene in which he is intrigued by the way a rolled up woollen stocking appears to be a bag which contains a present. But then he relates,

I applied myself to unwrapping ‘what had been brought me’ out of its woollen bag. I drew it ever closer to myself until the perplexing thing happened: I had taken ‘what had been brought me’ out, but ‘the Bag’ in which it had lain was no longer there. I could not put this process to the test often enough. It taught me that form and content, the wrapping and what is wrapped in it are the same thing.<sup>56</sup>

In this case the first thing is the bag, the second, the gift within the bag, and the third is the stocking, which was both the bag and the present. In *The Image of Proust* essay this stocking/third thing re-appears as the image.<sup>57</sup> It is the form and the content and yet not the same as, but greater than the sum of its parts.

Benjamin’s image is concerned with similarity (*Ähnlichkeit*) rather than representation (*Vorstellung*), but this is the kind of similarity that he describes as ‘the deeper resemblance of the dream world’<sup>58</sup>. It has the associational quality of a dream image. It is through tangential, marginal, non-linear and extreme

---

<sup>54</sup> Kant *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith, London, Macmillan, 1929, B177.

<sup>55</sup> In Kant a representation does not match the object in a mimetic way, rather it is produced by our concepts and intuitions.

<sup>56</sup> Benjamin, *Berliner Kindheit um Neunzehnhundert*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1981, p. 58.

<sup>57</sup> *Illuminations*, p. 200.



associations that we come to be able to understand the image. These associations crystallised into different types of images at various stages of Benjamin's work. There are dream-images, the image as third thing in the *Proust* essay, which is derived from a meditation on Proust's involuntary memories (the famous madeleine). There are also the 'profane illuminations' that he attributes to Surrealism and drug induced ecstasies. What is so powerful about all these images is the instant moment of cognition or recognition. It is the moment of waking out of the dream.

The images that we are concerned with, and from which we will construct a notion of image-time are not pictorial images, they are, what Benjamin calls, dialectical-images. For the moment we will take dialectics to be a description of the movement of thought.<sup>59</sup> So these images, as dialectical-images, are images of thought. However this is not to confuse them with mental images which would usually be thought of as pictorial representations in the mind.

It is by using images as dialectical images that we can come to an understanding of image time and its possible advantages over story-time as a model of historical time. Images are always already historical images, for Benjamin. As we have seen through the analysis of experience there could be no such thing as an ahistorical experience of these images. The sudden recognition that occurs with images is not only a recognition in history, it is a recognition of the historicity of the images themselves. This is a historicity that would not only go some way to

---

<sup>58</sup> *Illuminations*, p. 200.

explaining our experience of them, due to our own historicity, but a recognition of different histories within the image. For Benjamin these images have an ‘historical index’ which has a double aspect when it comes to their role in the temporality of history. Firstly their ‘historical index’ means that they belong firmly to a particular time, and secondly, that ‘they only enter into legibility at a specific time’.<sup>60</sup>

We have seen the unsatisfactory aspects of story-time, due to its closure of the past and its commitment to the idea of progress. If story-time is this continuum of empty, homogenous time, what Benjamin requires is something that will break up this continuum and create full, heterogenous time. It is dialectical images that he sees as having the explosive potential to ‘blast open the continuum of history’, because they contain within their disparate elements both the ‘Then’ (*Gewesene*) and the ‘Now’ (*Jetzt*). This sudden recognition in which the various elements fall into place impacts on the dialectical movement of thought and history with such a power of shock that it freezes it into an image. Benjamin describes it thus:

It isn’t that the past casts its light on what is present or that what is present casts its light on what is past; rather, an image is that in which the Then and the Now come together into a constellation like a flash of lightning. In other words: an image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is a purely temporal, continuous one, the relation of the then to the now is dialectical: not of a temporal, but of

---

<sup>59</sup> The next chapter will explore the more specific meanings of dialectics in Benjamin’s work.

<sup>60</sup> N 3, 1.

an imagistic nature.<sup>61</sup>

The 'Then' (*Gewesene*) and the 'Now' (*Jetzt*) are elements that belong to image-time, whereas the past (*Vergangenheit*) and the present (*Gegenwart*) belong to the continuum of story-time. The past is what is dead and gone, its place and significance in the story is fixed eternally. The present is merely the contemporary episode in this seamless narrative of sameness, a point on the continuum. The 'Then' and the 'Now' can come together in an image because, due to its image logic, both elements can be at work within the same constellation. The similitude or resemblances of an image allow it to hold elements of the 'Then', which is not fixed or closed, in a tense relationship with the 'Now', in its constellation. What I am calling image-time, Benjamin termed *Jetztzeit* – the time of the now, which is able to keep these different modes of time and history at play within the present moment. This is the time of awakening – the time of both dreaming and consciousness. It is during this time that we become aware of the dream and its interpretation.

Image-time opens history up: it evades the eternalising closure of story-time because the 'Then' is always in a dialectical relationship with the 'Now', and vice-versa. Dialectical images are the most historical of images in that their timing and their historicity coincide to form this explosive constellation. They are not historical in the sense that they are simply images of past events, they are historical in that they are the images which are full to bursting with the historicity of the 'Then' and the 'Now'. Their historicity not only determines our present experience but, according to Benjamin, even gives us an experience of the past.

---

<sup>61</sup> N 3, 1.



because to be caught up in this explosively illuminating constellation we also form a relationship with the other elements. They are the most historical of images because, through their marginal and forgotten moments we can discover and experience aspects of history, new to us.

By opening up history new constellations can be formed: Ones in which the excluded, the anonymised and the forgotten can shine again. This more inclusive opening up of history is captured by the phrase ‘brushing history against the grain’ This occurs in the seventh thesis of ‘On the Concept of History’:

There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is not free of barbarism, barbarism taints also the manner in which it was transmitted from one owner to another. A historical materialist therefore dissociates himself from it as far as possible. He regards it as his task to brush history against the grain.(*die Geschichte gegen den Strich zu bürsten.*)<sup>62</sup>

It is a phrase that may be interpreted as a wish to undo the injustices and lacunae of a great deal of historiography, or it can be given a stronger interpretation, which fills it with revolutionary hope and potential. It is the latter, stronger, interpretation that I would like to emphasise throughout this thesis. I shall be arguing that Benjamin’s notion of brushing history against the grain was one which he thought could provide genuine transformation, in the sense of a revolutionary interruption of history. However, my main purpose is not to rehearse the debate over Benjamin’s political radicality, his closeness to

---

<sup>62</sup> *Illuminations*, p. 248.

Communism; Trotskyism, Anarchism or Mystical theology etcetera;<sup>63</sup> but to explicate a radical version of brushing history against the grain.

According to Benjamin, what is forgotten about cultural treasures and the ‘great’ events of history is that,

They owe their existence not only to the efforts of the great minds and talents who have created them, but also to the anonymous toil of their contemporaries.<sup>64</sup>

He is reminding us of such simple facts as the necessity of the blood, sweat and death of colonised peoples to build empires, of the necessity of slavery to the creation of the wealth of Western Europe and North America and the sub-humanisation of women to enhance the perceived greatness of men. To remember this is to remember the horror. For Benjamin and his ‘historical materialist’ any thinking about this culture cannot be separated from the horror of thinking about the price paid for it in terms of lives and agonies.

For Benjamin, brushing history against the grain amounts to much more than simply reinterpreting historical facts. This conception also rests on the experience (*Erfahrung*) of the past. This experience is produced through remembrance (*Eingedenken*) and also requires an alternative temporality. Brushing history against the grain is not only the production of alternative histories but also the

---

<sup>63</sup> These issues are raised and discussed to varying conclusions in Michael Löwy, *Redemption and Utopia*, London, Athlone Press, 1992. And Rolf Tiedemann, ‘Historical Materialism or Political Messianism? An Interpretation of the Theses “On the Concept of History”’, in *Benjamin, Philosophy, Aesthetics, History*.

<sup>64</sup> Thesis VII, *Illuminations*, p. 248.

interruption or introduction of an alternative temporality of history. There is an urgency about this interruption which can be seen in thesis VIII where we are told that the revolutionary task is ‘to bring about a real state of emergency’<sup>65</sup>.

Agamben discerns a link between Benjamin’s use of this ‘state of emergency’ or exception (*Ausnahmezustand*)<sup>66</sup> and messianic time. This messianic time is the temporality of revolution that can be read back into the affirmativity of the general strike and divine violence described above. He points out that this emergency, crisis, or exception is a kind of exclusion. What is interesting to note here is that he theorises this exclusion in terms of its relation to law, suggesting that ‘what is excluded in it is not...simply the relation to the rule. On the contrary, the rule maintains itself in relation to the exception in the form of suspension’.<sup>67</sup> In other words, it is indeed the exception that makes the rule. This would indicate that the ‘state of emergency’ theorised in the 1940 Theses still retains a very close connection with the affirmative, divine violence of the 1921 ‘Critique of Violence’. Exclusion, as a suspension, is given as a condition of possibility for the law.<sup>68</sup>

---

<sup>65</sup> *Illuminations*, p. 248.

<sup>66</sup> This ‘state of emergency’ (*Ausnahmezustand*) is derived from Benjamin’s reading of Carl Schmitt’s *Politische Theologie, Vier Kapiteln zur Lehre von der Souveränität*, Munich-Leipzig: Duncker and Humbolt, 1922. It is in this volume that Schmitt sets out his theory of sovereignty.

<sup>67</sup> Agamben, ‘The Messiah and the Sovereign: The Problem of Law in Walter Benjamin’, in *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1999, p. 162.

<sup>68</sup> The notion that it might be an exclusion that maintains the law, or even makes it possible, will return during the discussion of Irigaray’s work below. Although, for Irigaray, the exclusion at work is often a founding gesture, such as the murder of the mother. The maintaining exclusion would then be the cultural forgetting of woman.



Agamben also discerns a nihilism at work in Benjamin's thinking of messianic time. He traces this nihilism to a Judaic tradition of reading the 'original Torah' as 'a medley of letters without any order – that is, *without meaning*'.<sup>69</sup> What this lack of meaning means, for Agamben, is that this original form of the law does not signify any actual propositions. It is neither prescriptive nor performative. It is, in fact, affirmative because it is 'a commandment that commands nothing'.<sup>70</sup> The problem then arises, that if the Messiah comes to redeem, restore and fulfil the original law, it will be the restoration of a law without commandments or propositions. It will be a different kind of law altogether – a lawless law.<sup>71</sup> However, Agamben correctly points out that Benjamin's thinking of messianic time does not construe it as chronologically distinct from historical time. Messianic time and historical time coexist as parallel, possible temporalities.<sup>72</sup> They relate to each other in a way that produces paradoxes because if messianic time were to become actualised as the fulfilment of history it would both have to cancel historical time as well as manifesting itself in it. As Agamben states 'the two times must instead accompany each other according to modalities that cannot

---

<sup>69</sup> Agamben, 'The Messiah and The Sovereign', p. 165.

<sup>70</sup> Agamben, 'The Messiah and The Sovereign', p. 166.

<sup>71</sup> This will also relate to the discussion of Irigaray below, in particular to her exhortation to refuse moralising and law-making. See chapter five below.

<sup>72</sup> Susan Buck-Morss, in *Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, Cambridge MA, MIT Press, 1989, pp. 240-52, and Peter Osborne, in *The Politics of Time: Modernity and Avant-Garde*, London, Verso, 1995, pp. 151-53, also produce versions of this parallelism. Osborne, however produces a more nuanced reading than Buck-Morss due to his insistence on there being 'three temporal registers at play' instead of two. The third register – between the messianic and the 'empirical historical' – is given as '*the phenomenological structure of the living present*'. (*Politics of Time*, p. 152.)

be reduced to a dual logic (this world / the other world)<sup>73</sup>. This doubleness can be seen more clearly in the figure of the Messiah who is both legislator and redeemer. As legislator he belongs to historical time and its law, but because his legislation will be the restoration of the original law which commands nothing, it will also put an end to the law. Benjamin's 'real state of emergency' can then be read as the state of exception in which this law can be seen to be in force without significance. To bring about a real state of emergency would be to realise the meaninglessness of the law.

In terms of brushing history against the grain, this might be achieved through a realisation of the fact that for the oppressed majority life is a constant crisis of hand to mouth existence or the incessant degradation of sexist and racist culture. I am claiming that brushing history against the grain is a revolutionary strategy rather than an evolutionary strategy such as liberal political correctness. The latter seeks to counteract injustice through controlling language, but fails to grasp the force of claims, like Benjamin's, that something more than a mere rewriting of history needs to take place through a new use of language. Benjamin suggests that history and its temporality need to be changed beyond this. Rather than considering history as a linear progression which passes through its stages of imperialism, fascism, etcetera, Benjamin finds revolutionary potential in the notion of the messianic, parallel, but unactualised, temporality.

This is also the conception of history of Benjamin's 'historical materialist' not history according to 'historicism'. The crucial difference between these two is

---

<sup>73</sup> Agamben, 'The Messiah and The Sovereign', p. 168.

that ‘historical materialism’ maintains history as incomplete and open, thus providing hope for a fulfilment and redemption of history, whereas for ‘historicism’ history is a closed book, with no hope of rescue. This experience provides a link between the past and the present and gives the historical materialist the power or influence over the past which is described as a ‘*weak Messianic power*’<sup>74</sup>. It is the messianic aspect of Benjamin’s conception of history that lends it a helpful discontinuity – helpful because its discontinuity enables it to act as a critique of teleological conceptions of history which ignore any possibility of redemption or revolution.

For Benjamin messianic history becomes a form of remembrance (*Eingedenken*), as well as a science. This is the Judaic remembrance of the *Torah* which is able to experience the past. ‘We know that the Jews were prohibited from investigating the future. The *Torah* and the prayers instruct them in remembrance, however.’<sup>75</sup> It is through this active form of remembrance and its accompanying experience that the past is able to be modified through brushing it against the grain:

What science has “established” remembrance can modify. Remembrance can make the incomplete (happiness) into something complete, and the complete (suffering) into something incomplete.<sup>76</sup>

This incompleteness of history is also what creates access to an alternative temporality of history: one in which the past will not be fixed or completed until

---

<sup>74</sup> Thesis II, *Illuminations*, p. 246.

<sup>75</sup> *Illuminations*, p.255.

<sup>76</sup> N, 8, 1.



the arrival of the Messiah, or the revolutionary interruption. Revolution here is structured like a messianic intervention; it will be the final reckoning of history; a last judgement which is, at the same time, a new beginning. Such a revolution will be ultra-novel, but not in the sense of a new beginning which has wiped the slate clean and must start from scratch again. It is instead a whole new configuration of history, a retroactive as well as a pro-active retrieval and creation of a just history. History, therefore, is always provisional until its fulfillment, and the dominating versions of the perceived victors can be continually challenged and undermined by the ongoing historical guerrilla tactic of brushing history against the grain.

Benjamin's device of the 'dialectical image' can provide us with an instance of ways in which the past and the present can come together in such a transformative moment. The dialectical image is described as the picture which 'flits by' ( Thesis V) and as the 'memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger' in (Thesis VI)<sup>77</sup>. Its equation would have the same explanatory power as  $E=MC^2$ . Indeed Benjamin describes his method in the notes to the *Arcades Project* as being able to

be compared to the splitting of the atom – [it] releases the enormous energy of history that lies bonded in the 'once upon a time' of classical historical narrative.<sup>78</sup>

---

<sup>77</sup> *Illuminations*, p. 247.

<sup>78</sup> N, 3, 4.

The device itself could also prove to be as dangerous as the moment that it flashes up. While Benjamin's political affiliations were to 'historical materialism' and Communism, the collective aspects of those theories seem to be absent from this moment that could be redescribed in terms of a direct and personal revelation of truth. While the dangers of such a device are not to be ignored it is also easy to imagine how effective it might be if detonated at the right time and in the right place. The only problem is of how to recognise the correct conditions for such an explosive transformation of history. However, the recognition itself is a part of the dialectical image in that the blast is caused by the sudden recognition of correspondences between past and present; correspondences that have always been there, that we have, up to now, simply failed to recognise. This is the specific time that the image enters into legibility, or recognisability (*Erkennbarkeit*).<sup>79</sup> It is also the 'profane illumination' that Benjamin refers to in his essay on surrealism and could be likened to James Joyce's epiphanies. Dialectical images are quasi-totalising snapshots: sudden revelations of world-historical profundity in the quotidian.

Benjamin's most famous image of history is presented in the reading he produces of Paul Klee's painting *Angelus Novus*, in Thesis IX. Benjamin suggests that this painting could be taken as a representation of the angel of history. History, as viewed by this angel, would be the history of image-time, rather than that of story-time:

Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his

---

<sup>79</sup> N. 3, 1.

feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.<sup>80</sup>

Rather than a narrative of progress, the angel of history is able to show us a single montage of catastrophe.

Weigel reads Thesis IX as a prime example of one of Benjamin's 'thought-images' (*Denkbilder*), which she also describes as 'dialectical images in written form'.<sup>81</sup> She suggests that the tensions in this image – tensions between historical materialism and messianism; between 'us' and the angel; between continuity and discontinuity, are all brought together in a '*single constellation*'<sup>82</sup>. This image is 'an allegory of Benjamin's specific theoretical work' in which she finds his theories of language, writing, dialectics, and history all at play.<sup>83</sup> More importantly, for us, it is also an embodiment of his dialectics at a standstill; one which will aid the disruption of the continuum of history.

It is the sudden, disruptive nature of these dialectical images that demands that Benjamin's philosophy of history be read as one of revolution rather than evolution. The evolutionary politics of the Social Democrats embodied what he

---

<sup>80</sup> Thesis IX, *Illuminations*, p. 249.

<sup>81</sup> Weigel, *Body- and Image-Space*, p. 51.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.



considered to be the politically paralysing effects of an adherence to the ideology of progress. This was another aspect of what Benjamin considered to be an insufficient conception of time and temporality:

The concept of the historical progress of mankind cannot be sundered from the concept of its progression through a homogenous, empty time. A critique of the concept of such a progression must be the basis of any criticism of the concept of progress itself.<sup>84</sup>

If the concept of historical progress rests on its conception of time as empty and homogenous, the revolutionary alternative must advance a temporality of saturation and heterogeneity. The saturation will be provided by the Messianic structure of history which will be made whole, completed and saturated by the arrival/interruption of the Messiah/Revolution. The heterogeneity of time results from the dialectical interplay of the past and the present (or, more accurately, for Benjamin, the 'Then' and the 'Now'). Heterogenous time allows for an engagement with history whereas homogenous time is, by definition, a one-sided affair. Heterogeneity allows for a revolutionary hope, a hope for the past as well as the future, because of the ability to experience the past through remembrance (*Eingedenken*). It leaves history open, unfixed and therefore changeable. The engagement of the various elements of this heterogenous time – past, present, future, Then, Now, empirical, mundane events and messianic interruption – means that the import and direction of change and development are themselves constantly changing direction and significance. The struggle in and over history is

---

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., p. 55.

ceaseless, a Sisyphean labour that will only be relieved through an interruptive cessation. This will be an affirmative cessation which will inaugurate a new era of history by refusing to posit or programme.

Benjamin describes *Jetztzeit* as ‘a model of Messianic time’ which ‘comprises the entire history of mankind in an enormous abridgement’<sup>85</sup>. Using *Jetztzeit* as a model of messianic time we can more easily construct dialectical images from elements that, according to empirical, mundane time, would belong to different eras. *Jetztzeit* can also be thought of as a montage of world historical events rather than as a linear and progressive development. Thinking in terms of montage rather than linearity allows for the plenitude or saturation of time that, coupled with heterogeneity, constitutes the alternative temporality that will allow us to brush history against the grain. History, according to this temporality might be described as a palimpsest, but in this case each layer of text is still in the process of being written and can interact with other layers to create different combinations and meanings. Because the logic of the dialectical image is imagistic rather than narrative or instrumental it can gain access to space and time outside the linearity of teleological meaning and time. In a certain sense, Benjamin could be described as attempting to think difference. However the difference of his alternative temporality will have great difficulty being articulated within a temporality and symbolic order that depends upon unidirectional linearity to structure its logic.

---

<sup>84</sup> Thesis XIII, *Illuminations*, p. 252.

<sup>85</sup> Thesis XVIII, *Illuminations*, p. 255.

## **Chapter 2.**

### **Historicism, Progress, and Dialectics**



On the dialectical image. In it lies time. Already with Hegel, time enters into dialectic. But the Hegelian dialectic knows time solely as the properly historical, if not psychological, time of thinking. The time differential (*Zeitdifferential*) in which alone the dialectical image is real is still unknown to him... Real time enters the dialectical image not in natural magnitude—let alone psychologically—but in its smallest gestalt. All in all, the temporal momentum (*das Zeitmoment*) in the dialectical image can be determined only through confrontation with another concept. This concept is the “now of recognizability” (*Jetzt der Erkennbarkeit*).<sup>1</sup>

In this chapter I would like to continue the discussion of time undertaken in Chapter 1. This will involve a development of the concepts of historicism and progress at work in Benjamin’s thought, and his criticism of certain uses of them. I will also be examining the question of the dialectical nature of Benjamin’s revolutionary thought; asking if it is dialectical or not, or if it, in fact, presents us with a revolution in the dialectical method inherited from Hegel. These questions will all be mediated to a large extent through the work of Theodor Adorno, in order to bring to light certain criticisms of Benjamin’s position. At the same time this mediation will also be used to show the full effect of Benjamin’s influence on Adorno and his appropriation of Hegel.

---

<sup>1</sup> Benjamin, ‘First Sketches’ in *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland & Kevin McLaughlin, London, Belknap Press, 1999, Q°, 21, p. 867.

As we have seen in Chapter 1 it is the narrative version of history and its concomitant conception of the continuity of time – what I have termed ‘story-time’ – that Benjamin finds most problematic in many modern philosophies of history. It is in trying to identify a representative example of a philosophical elaboration of ‘story-time’ that we must turn to Hegel. Although Benjamin rarely engages with Hegel explicitly, we can derive a reading of Hegel’s philosophy of history as the paradigmatic model of narrative historical totalisation that Benjamin will come to criticise in his theses ‘On the Concept of History’.<sup>2</sup> The description of Hegel’s philosophy of history as a model of narrative historical totalisation is fairly common amongst commentators. For example Joshua Foa Dienstag comments that ‘it is widely accepted that Hegel attempted to marshal most of the human past into a single story line’<sup>3</sup>. From the emergence of the seamless dialectical progress of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* to the painstaking developmental description of historical change in the *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, we can trace an unbroken linear narrative. It is the continuity of such an account that will prove problematic for Benjamin, but what also provokes criticism is the historicism and progressivism that emerge from reading Hegel as a theorist of narrative history, or ‘story-time’.

---

<sup>2</sup> Although the particular targets of the *Theses* are the Social Democrats and Ranke.

<sup>3</sup> Joshua Foa Dienstag *Dancing in Chains: Narrative and Memory in Political Theory*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1997, p.141. Other commentators supporting this view are Singer *Hegel*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1983, Ch.2; Taylor, *Hegel*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1975, Ch.15; Findlay, *Philosophy of Hegel*, New York, Collier Books, 1958, p.334; Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, trans. Raymond Queneau, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1980, p.130-49.

Hegel can be read as a historicist, firstly, in the wider sense of historicism as claiming that states of affairs can only be properly understood by considering their historical context. Secondly, Karl Popper also famously reads him as a historicist, where historicism is more narrowly understood as ‘an historical fate or inescapable essential destiny’<sup>4</sup>. However, it is Benjamin’s conception of historicism as the guarantee of both continuity and progress in history that will concern us here. His prime targets are those theorists who would aspire to being able to represent history through an objective historical method. Ranke is Benjamin’s most frequently referred to adherent of this version of historicism. This is best summed up in Ranke’s claim to represent the past ‘the way it really was’ (*wie es denn eigentlich gewesen ist*)<sup>5</sup>. These theorists can be seen to be reacting against the earlier Hegelian orthodoxy that they considered to be a version of historical relativism. However we can still try to apply Benjamin’s criticisms to Hegel’s historicism because of its own adherence to historical continuity and the notion of progress that is smuggled in along with this. Benjamin’s criticisms of historicism are described by some commentators as a theory of modernity. According to this reading we can think of Benjamin’s construction of historicism as modernity’s version of historical time. However it is a historical time which fails to become fully modern because it is merely a replacement for the continuity of historical time that was formerly guaranteed by tradition.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Karl Popper, *The Open Society Vol. 2. Hegel and Marx*, London, Routledge, 1945, p 7.

<sup>5</sup> Leopold von Ranke, *Fürsten und Völker*, ed. W. Andreas, Wiesbaden, 1957, p. 4.

<sup>6</sup> See, Osborne, *The Politics of Time*, Routledge, London, 1995, p.138-144.



It is in his awareness of the different time consciousnesses at work within tradition and modernity that we come across the first aspect of the dialectical nature of Benjamin's thought. Although he is concerned with a certain destruction of tradition, he is also aware of its continuation in modernity. It is in the tension between modernity and tradition that we can discover the dialectical relationship that refuses to consider them as simple opposites. Indeed, for Benjamin, one of the problems of historicism is that it ignores this dialectical tension in favour of simply secularising traditional religious (especially Christian) notions of time and history. The continuity that was formerly thought of as a continuous, linear movement of time towards the kingdom of heaven is still structurally the same in historicism. It has merely become a secularised version of this eschatology. For Benjamin, modernity is much more radically different than a secularisation of culture. We shall see that it involves a different consciousness of time and the present, and the critical ability to engage with the past in a dialectic of destruction and redemption.

For Benjamin, historicism also fails to carry out this critical task through its adherence to a certain ideology of progress. As he puts it, 'the concept of progress is associated with an uncritical hypostatisation rather than with a critical placing into question.'<sup>7</sup> However, historicism's faith in progress is not a separate aspect from its adherence to the structure of continuity, it is also the result of that continuity. The historicist's belief in progress results from its status as the secularisation of traditional eschatology. Adorno, in a highly Benjaminian essay,

---

<sup>7</sup> N 13, 1

usefully draws our attention to the fact that, even for Benjamin, progress will be linked to the notion of redemption.<sup>8</sup> At the same time progress is also ‘averting utmost, total disaster’<sup>9</sup> for Adorno (and for Benjamin) rather than the guaranteed movement towards redemption.

In this essay on progress, Adorno can also be read as adhering to Benjamin’s diagnosis of modernity as containing consciousnesses of time and history that are different to those of tradition. He is also endeavouring to undertake an investigation of the notion of progress that pays full attention to the dialectical relationship of modernity to tradition. Rather than succumbing to a nihilism that would give up on the idea of progress altogether, Adorno undertakes the more difficult task of trying to produce a thinking of progress that could escape the catastrophes of instrumental rationality and the ‘triumph of radical evil’.<sup>10</sup> Adorno reads progress as not only linked to the notion of redemption but also to a universalisation of the human subject. He also draws attention to Benjamin’s criticism of progress that it is always only progress of humankind. The most significant moment in the dialectic of progress – the moment that marks the transition from tradition to modernity – is identified by Adorno as taking place with Kant’s Copernican revolution. This is the moment of secularisation in which the subject becomes central. It is also at this moment that the problems of modernity occur. According to Adorno existence becomes almost like a ‘bad

---

<sup>8</sup> Adorno, ‘Progress’ in *Benjamin; Philosophy, Aesthetics, History*, ed. Gary Smith, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1989, p.85.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* p.85.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* p.101.

faith', because at this moment 'What is received the aura of redemption when redemption did not come and evil continued undiminished.'<sup>11</sup>

Adorno argues that if history is to be truly secularised, then progress will need to give up the notion of redemption as a transcendent intervention. He also follows Benjamin in arguing that the conception of historical time must change if the notion of progress is not to 'evaporate into ahistorical theology'<sup>12</sup>. So another dialectical relationship is at work here – that of redemption and history. Hegel was able to work with this tension, in as much as he translated the traditional *telos* of history (redemption) into a modern *telos* of progress as reconciliation. This meant that, for Hegel, progress required the supersession (*Aufhebung*) of history. According to Adorno's reading there is still room for the movement of progress within a Hegelian totality. But the problem then is that this totality, within which the movement of progress unfolds, itself remains stationary. There is no progress for the totality. This is still unsatisfactory for Adorno, because as far as he is concerned it is the totality that needs to be transfigured in order to escape from the undiminished continuation of evil.

Adorno also reads progress as having been concerned with mastery – mastery of nature and human nature. So it also follows that if progress is about the increasing ability to control nature, then nature must also be brought to a halt so that spirit or human reason can subdue it. Adorno suggests that those who adopt

---

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p.87.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. p.87.



such a conception of progress forget that humankind is in fact a part of nature itself. In this case real progress would only be able to start once progress has been made aware of its own limitations and contradictions:

Progress means: a coming out of the spell, even out of the spell of progress which is itself nature, when humankind becomes aware of its own indigenoussness to nature and halts the mastery which it exerts over nature through which mastery by nature continues. In this respect it could be said that progress only properly occurs where it ends.<sup>13</sup>

The above quotation is a good example of what we will be seeing as Adorno's eminent Hegelianism which is at the same time his eminent Benjaminianism. It is Hegelian because of the structure and promise of dialectical supersession; because of the surpassing, overcoming, destruction and preservation of progress. It is Benjaminian because it is attempting to explode the continuity of progress through a dialectical juxtaposition of movement and stasis that will release the energies of real progress. It is in relation to this dialectical tension that Adorno sums up his own appreciation of Benjamin's dialectical images:

Dialectical images: these are the historical-objective archetypes of that antagonistic unity of standstill and movement which defines the most general bourgeois concept of progress.<sup>14</sup>

'Real progress' would not want to master or triumph over anything. Instead it would be the critical disruption of history as triumph and mastery. Adorno

---

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. p.90-91.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. p.100.

describes such a version of progress as ‘resistance against the perpetual danger of relapse’<sup>15</sup> which resembles and accompanies Benjamin’s critical placing into question. The moment of disruption that Adorno envisages can also be derived from Benjamin’s thinking on progress. For Benjamin, because progress is complicit with tradition through the secularisation of traditional continuity, then the present, for the historicist, becomes the continuation of the values of the past. According to Benjamin, the historicist’s representation of historical phenomena ‘presents them in terms of their “value as heritage”.’ Benjamin would, instead, like to save these phenomena from their fate of becoming cultural treasures. He proposes to rescue them by ‘exhibiting the discontinuity that exists within them.’<sup>16</sup>

This discontinuity, erupts in and as the present for Benjamin, and this should not surprise us since we have seen that it is also an attempt to engage philosophically with modernity. Indeed, as argued in the introduction above, any theory setting out to understand modernity will need to engage with the question of the present. As such it is also historicism’s treatment of the present that indicates another aspect of its failure to engage with modernity properly, for Benjamin. It is by re-establishing continuity with the past that historicism forgets the present. For Benjamin, it is exactly this forgetting that produces the stultifying ‘value as heritage’ at the same time as it relies on the ‘homogenous empty time’ that needs to be exploded.

---

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 101.

<sup>16</sup> N 9,4.

It is also around the question of the present that we can best distinguish the differences between Hegel's and Ranke's historicism, and Hegel's and Benjamin's dialectics. Benjamin's critique of historicism is explicitly aimed at Ranke and others who reacted against Hegel. We have also seen that Hegel's dialectic is prone to Benjamin's critique of historicism due to its investment in teleology and continuity. Hegel differs from Ranke primarily because he doesn't forget the present in his dialectics. This brings him closer to Benjamin which means that our task now must be to see how Hegel's present compares to Benjamin's before we go on to discover how Hegelian Benjamin's dialectics might be.

## **Hegel's Present**

Hegel's conception of the present and historical time indulge in both the continuity and progress of historicism. For Hegel, time is becoming; but it is becoming which is directly intuited as an aspect of nature. Our intuition of the world leads unavoidably to a presupposition of the dynamic nature of the world. To put it very simply, we cannot help but notice that things change, and change ceaselessly. It is this ceaseless change that Hegel identifies as another aspect of the universal principle of contradiction. For him, non-contradiction would mean stasis and therefore would be either at the end of, or absolutely unrelated to, becoming.



Hegel argues that past, present and future are all contradictory. The past is a present that is not present (now), as is the future. But they are also brought together through the present. The operation of negation comes into play here because this unification only takes place negatively. The present only comes about because the past is negated (it has ceased to be); and the present also only exists to be negated by the future (the present that will cease to be). This is one version of time that will enable us to label it as a ‘negation of negation’<sup>17</sup>.

In *The Phenomenology of Spirit* Hegel identifies this negation of past and future as the ‘Now’ (*Jetzt*)<sup>18</sup> which is the point in time which ‘is nothing other than the passage of its being into nothingness, and from nothingness into its being.’<sup>19</sup> The act of attempting to point to a particular Now is given as an example of the inexorable workings of the dialectic. Through making this attempt we arrive at the truth that ‘Now is a universal’.

Hegel’s argument runs as follows:

(1) I point out the ‘Now; and it is asserted to be the truth. I point it out, however, as something that *has been*, or as something that has been superseded; I set aside the first truth. (2) I now assert the second truth that it *has been*, that it is superseded. (3) But what has been, *is not*; I set

---

<sup>17</sup> See Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature*, trans. M.J. Perry, London, Allen and Unwin, 1970, §257, p. 229.

<sup>18</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology*, p.63

aside the second truth, its *having been*, its supersession, and thereby negate the negation of the 'Now', and thus return to the first assertion, that the '*Now*' is. The 'Now', and pointing out the 'Now', are thus so constituted that neither the one nor the other is something immediate and simple, but a movement which contains various moments'<sup>20</sup>

According to this analysis, then, the negation which is the 'Now' is also inevitably negated, and it is this negation of negation which produces a general form of the 'Now'. It is this general or universal form of the 'Now' that is also described as a 'movement' and is indistinguishable from the movement of the dialectic as a whole – or the movement of becoming.

The dynamic nature of the Hegelian dialectic and its corresponding conceptualisation of time guarantees the continuity required by the Hegelian system. By constructing his account of time as a dialectic of the 'Now', time becomes a continuous succession of precise instants. However it is both the dependence of this notion of time on the instant and the continuity that this demands that will enable us to treat it as an example of historicism. Although the account given above would allow us to position Hegel as privileging becoming over being, there is always the danger that this becoming is directed towards a specific, and pre-ordained goal. Whether this is cashed out in terms of 'Absolute Knowing', the unity of subject and object, or the 'end of history' it would appear

---

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. p.67

<sup>20</sup> Ibid p.63-4.

to be moving towards a final, static, atemporal Being.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, if we read Hegel's dialectic as an 'absolute method' committed to these goals rather than as an open-ended process, the consequences for the present become more serious. As Osborne remarks; 'Hegel's method – dialectic as absolute method – *eternalizes the present*' because the production of absolute knowledge and the 'end of history' abolish the past (as past) and the future, respectively.<sup>22</sup>

I have noted above that Hegel's concept of time and movement starts out from a spatial analogy of the 'Now', and that the construction of this notion of time as a movement of the 'Now' guarantees the seamless continuity of the movement of time and becoming. However as this is the continuity of a negation of negation it still lacks any graspable, concrete reality. Although Hegelian time incorporates and instantiates becoming, this is still a very abstract notion of becoming. Its continuity and movement depends on immaterial instants.

What is most obviously at stake in the different conceptions of the dialectic in Benjamin and Hegel can be approached through an exploration of how they differ in their construction of the present or the 'Now'. As we have seen, for Hegel the 'Now' is the motor and guarantee of the continuity of the dialectic. For Benjamin however, the present has a completely different nature and function.

---

<sup>21</sup> It must be noted that the assumption that Hegel was committed to a teleological view of history has been challenged by many commentators. See Rolf Ahers' 'The Dialectic in Hegel's Philosophy of History' in *History and System: Hegel's Philosophy of History*, ed. R.L. Perkins, New York, SUNY, 1984 for a criticism of readings of Hegel which assume a 'mythology of automatic progress in history'.



Benjamin's version of the present can be discovered in his concept of *Jetztzeit* or 'Nowtime' which rather than guaranteeing a seamless continuity of the dynamic dialectic, brings it to a disruptive halt. As we have seen in Chapter 1, *Jetztzeit* brings dialectics to a standstill.

## **Benjamin's Present**

Benjamin is careful to distinguish the present (*Gegenwart*) from his Nowtime (*Jetztzeit*). It is his reconceptualisation of time that begins to move us towards a different experience of time as well as a different metaphysics of time. Although I have been emphasising the stasis of Benjamin's *Jetztzeit*, it needs to be made clear that this is modelled on the stasis of a messianic interruption which would differ significantly from a stasis that would be thought of as dead or inert. This kind of stasis can be thought of as bringing movement to a stop; but it is not analogous to the gradual, or even sudden, application of brakes to a speeding vehicle. A more useful analogy might be to think of it as a freeze-frame interrupting a moving image. It is an instantaneous halt not a slowing down, however rapid. The notion of the instant would seem to comply with both the thinking of the present as the Hegelian 'Now', which can be characterised as a transition from one point in time to the next, and the Benjaminian *Jetztzeit* which he describes as 'a present which is not a transition, but in which time stands still and has come to a stop.'<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> Osborne, *Politics of Time*, p. 42.

<sup>23</sup> *Illuminations*, p.254.

It will prove useful then to try to develop a notion of full, heterogeneous time. Just to think about time as having a fullness already gives us a clue as to how this might work. The phrase 'in the fullness of time' suggests a completion that is perhaps influenced by fate or at least some sort of guiding force or spirit. Indeed this fullness of time for Benjamin will also have something of the messianic about it. It will not be the completeness of a teleological end point, although it will be the completeness of an eschatological fulfilment. So full time is also fulfilled time. The moment of *Jetztzeit* will also be a fulfilled now due to its own messianic structure. This is the moment that 'every second of time was the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter.'<sup>24</sup> The completion or the fullness of time, can then come in any instant, it can exist in this instant now, at this time now. The completion could take place in every now which differentiates it further from a completion that would be the result or end point of a process, such as the Hegelian dialectical process. This aspect of fullness as completion and fulfilment will be developed into the account of the revolutionary aspect of Benjamin's conception of time, because with its fulfilment and completion will come a different, more fulfilled, experience of time and culture.

What is it that is fulfilling about this time? What is this time so filled full of that it will burst open and explode the historical continuum of Hegelian dialectical time? Giorgio Agamben suggests that there is already an experience available to us that would enable us to understand this concept of time and experience. This

is the experience of pleasure<sup>25</sup> which would also support the reading of fullness as fulfilment, and even the satiated fulfilment of gastronomic or sexual pleasure. He also points out that this account even accords with Aristotle's deliberations on pleasure which assume it to be heterogeneous and 'within each now something whole and complete'<sup>26</sup>. This completeness in every moment of pleasure can also be seen in the thought of the monadic structure of the full time of *Jetztzeit*. According to this thought we could see the completion of history in every moment of time.

It is in the possibility of pleasure, completion or happiness in time and history that Benjamin again diverges radically from Hegel. If dialectical thinking is driven by an attempt to solve contradictions, we would assume that pleasure, happiness and completion could only result from the final resolution of contradictions. For Hegel this could only take place at the end of the dynamic process of history. He states boldly in his introduction to his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* that 'history is not the place for happiness'<sup>27</sup>. Max Pensky suggests that although Benjamin's and Hegel's dialectics may differ in their respective static and dynamic natures they are both melancholy thinkers who reject any promise of happiness within history.<sup>28</sup> But although this is an accurate interpretation of Benjamin's position on historical time as portrayed by

---

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 255.

<sup>25</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History: Essays on the Destruction of Experience*, p.104.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. p.104

<sup>27</sup> Hegel, *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, p. 29.

<sup>28</sup> Max Pensky, *Melancholy Dialectics: Walter Benjamin's Play of Mourning*, Amherst, Mass, 1993, p.17.



historicism, I would argue that it fails to consider the promise of happiness in history evoked by the messianic structure of *Jetztzeit*.<sup>29</sup>

The possibility that the Messiah might arrive at any second not only holds out a hope for happiness in the future. For Benjamin it promises a hope for the past and a rescue of the past. Rather than supposing that we can only have contradictions resolved at the end of history, or even through the mediation of ‘the total social process’, Benjamin’s fulfilled time gives us the possibility to grasp the moment in all its fullness and to liberate ourselves in history, not from it. The happiness promised in Benjamin’s concept of time and history is not an escape from the painful contradictions of our position in history but a fulfilled possession of the pleasure of our own lived experience.

### **Benjamin’s Non-Hegelian Dialectics**

Benjamin’s *Jetztzeit* is most famously at work in his own most dialectical formulation – the dialectical image. It is through his own description of this difficult construction that we will best gain an insight into what dialectics might mean for Benjamin:

---

<sup>29</sup> Osborne is another commentator who refuses an account of fulfilment in Benjamin. He suggests that ‘Benjamin’s ‘now’ is one of futurity rather than fulfilment’ due to the ‘exteriority of Benjamin’s materialist messianism’ (*The Politics of Time*, p. 177). However, I would argue, following Agamben’s reading of the doubleness of the Messiah in chapter 1 – the Messiah as both legislator and redeemer, internal and external – that we can read both futurity and fulfilment into Benjamin’s ‘now’.

Thinking involves both thoughts in motion and thoughts at rest. When thinking reaches a standstill in a constellation saturated with tensions, the dialectical image appears. This image is the caesura in the movement of thought. Its locus is of course not arbitrary. In short, it is to be found wherever the tension between dialectical oppositions is greatest. The dialectical image is, accordingly, the very object constructed in the materialist presentation of history. It is identical with the historical object; it justifies its being blasted out of the continuum of the historical process.<sup>30</sup>

We shall see that this conception of dialectics diverges radically from any orthodox Hegelian theory. Although during a discussion of dialectics at a standstill in the first version of his essays on Brecht, 'What is Epic Theatre?' (1931), he suggests that this could be a respectable Hegelian construction:

The conditions which epic theatre reveals is the dialectic at a standstill. For just as, in Hegel, the sequence of time is not the mother of the dialectic but only the medium in which the dialectic manifests itself, so in epic theatre the dialectic is not born of the contradiction between successive statements or ways of behaving, but of the gesture itself.<sup>31</sup>

The view that the dialectic is not born out of the sequence of time but manifests itself in it, fits comfortably with Hegel's notion of the dialectic, but it is the nature of the sequence of time that would differ radically between Hegel's and Benjamin's dialectics. If the dialectic is born of the gesture in epic theatre we are

---

<sup>30</sup> N10a, 3

left unclear as to what would correspond to this in Hegel. Benjamin privileges gesture in epic theatre precisely because it is able to interrupt the continuous flow of scenes in time, as well as being ‘the basis of each sequence in time’<sup>32</sup>. If we can agree that Hegel’s dialectic takes place in the sequence of time we can also admit the possibility of bringing this process to a halt. For Benjamin, however, it is not just a possibility but a necessity that we discover dialectics at a standstill, and this is due to the nature of the time at work as the medium of the dialectic. It is only in the later theses ‘On the Concept of History’ that Benjamin explicitly criticises the account of time at work in the concept of dialectic as a continuous process. This will become the ‘homogeneous, empty time’ of Thesis XIV, which he replaces with a notion of time that is ‘filled by the presence of the now [*Jetztzeit*]’.<sup>33</sup>

While Hegel’s dialectic can be read as a continuous process, Benjamin’s is an attempt to destroy the continuity of that process. Benjamin’s dialectics at a standstill reappropriates the Hegelian *Aufhebung* (supersession, preservation, destruction) in order to destroy the ‘homogenous, empty time’ of historicism. However, this is not a purely destructive gesture; Benjamin’s *Aufhebung* also retains what has been destroyed in a totality. Or, as Michael Löwy argues in his analysis of Benjamin’s dialectical conception of culture; the preservation of the *Aufhebung* is also destructive because ‘only by breaking the reified shell of official culture does it become possible for the oppressed to take possession of

---

<sup>31</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*, London, Verso, 1977, p.12.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid p.12



[the] utopian kernel.’<sup>34</sup> Even though the destructive aspect of dialectics does, at times, seem to be favoured or emphasised by Benjamin this destruction always works as a kind of liberating release or rescue. The continuity of the historicist version of history is destroyed to release its historical objects from their imprisonment within it.

Benjamin’s dialectics must also be seen as part of his analysis of modernity. It is not just an abstracted methodology which can then be used to try and see what modernity is ‘really’ like. It is also a direct engagement with the experience and politics of modernity. Another of his criticisms of historicism is that, because of its continuity with tradition it produces the appearance of the ‘ever the same’. Benjamin’s dialectical method engages with this as another aspect of his concern with the experience of and in modernity. Dialectics at a standstill is a way of experiencing which is also trying to experience differently and to experience difference:

It is the unique property of dialectical experience to dissipate the appearance of things always being the same (*das Schein des Immer-Gleichen*). Real political experience is absolutely free from this appearance.<sup>35</sup>

Because this is a political intervention we can describe Benjamin’s dialectics as the political experience of difference.

---

<sup>33</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p.252/3.

<sup>34</sup> Michael Löwy, “‘Against the Grain’: The Dialectical Conception of Culture in Walter Benjamin’s Theses of 1940”, in *Walter Benjamin and the Demands of History*, ed. M.P. Steinberg, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1996, p. 211.

Although Benjamin claimed that his method was dialectical, Adorno was to criticise him for not being dialectical enough. In a response to a draft essay on Nineteenth Century Paris<sup>36</sup> he accuses Benjamin of ‘wide-eyed presentation of mere facts’<sup>37</sup> which is a coded reference to its insufficient (Hegelian) mediation. That this also places it at the ‘crossroads of magic and positivism’<sup>38</sup> does, according to Adorno, bring with it all the weight of the implicit critique of positivism inherent in Hegel’s method.

Hegel’s definition of mediation in the introduction to the *Phenomenology of Spirit* occurs during a discussion that begins with the famous statement that ‘The True is the whole’ in which mediation is understood as,

nothing beyond self-moving selfsameness, or its reflection into self, the moment of the ‘I’ which is for itself pure negativity or, when reduced to its pure abstraction, *simple becoming*.<sup>39</sup>

This simple becoming is essential to the dynamic of the Hegelian dialectic, and there can be no point along the way – as well as no end point – that has not been mediated. According to this dialectic, any result will be due to this mediation. Adorno’s criticism is linked to his concern over Benjamin’s apparent extrapolation from ‘general theoretical discussion’ to ‘concrete representation’.

---

<sup>35</sup> N 9, 5.

<sup>36</sup> Benjamin’s essay is now published as ‘The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire’ in Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire*, London, Verso, 1997.

<sup>37</sup> Adorno et.al. *Aesthetics and Politics*, trans. Ronald Taylor, London, Verso, 1977, p.129.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid p.129.

He considers this to be part of a tendency on Benjamin's part to give 'individual features from the realm of the superstructure a "materialistic" turn by relating them immediately and perhaps even causally to corresponding features of the infrastructure'<sup>40</sup>. This is where the danger of positivism appears. If Benjamin were to take these features of the infrastructure – which Adorno also refers to as 'cultural traits' – as 'facts' of the kind beloved by empiricists, and if he also supposed that that certain key features of the superstructure could map onto these directly, then this might be a fair and accurate accusation.

For Adorno the 'Materialist determination of cultural traits is only possible if it is mediated through the total social process'<sup>41</sup>. We can catch another glimpse of Adorno's Hegelianism in his use of this 'total social process', in that it appears to be a version of Hegel's 'whole' – even if Adorno reverses Hegel's faith in the truth of the whole to a despairing rejection of the whole as the false.<sup>42</sup>

Giorgio Agamben has also interpreted Adorno's criticism of Benjamin's lack of mediation. He helpfully labels the different stances as 'dialectical historicism' (Adorno) and 'historical materialism' (Benjamin).<sup>43</sup> In this criticism he also draws attention to the primacy of the concept of time at work in the competing versions of the dialectic. However he places this difference as emerging from

---

<sup>39</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p.11.

<sup>40</sup> *Aesthetics and Politics* p.129.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.* 129.

<sup>42</sup> For Hegel's statement that 'The True is the Whole' see G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p.11. For Adorno's 'The whole is the false' see *Minima Moralia : Reflections From Damaged Life*, trans. E.F.N. Jephcott, London, Verso, 1978, p.50.

<sup>43</sup> Agamben, 'The Prince and the Frog: The Question of Method in Adorno and Benjamin', in *Infancy & History*, p. 120.



their differing conceptions of the correct interpretation of the relationship between 'structure and superstructure'. As we have seen, Adorno insists on a mediated relationship between these two realms, and this would be an eminently Hegelian mediation. However Benjamin refuses this mediation through his insistent invocation of the monad. He states in a note on the basic doctrine of historical materialism that 'Wherever a dialectical process takes place, we are dealing with a monad.'<sup>44</sup>

The Leibnizian provenance of Benjamin's monads is traced by Andrew Benjamin who shows that they are concerned with 'the internality of the 'historical object'.<sup>45</sup> This can also be derived from Leibniz's statement in the *Monadology* that 'the natural changes of monads come from an internal principle, since an external cause could not influence their inner being.'<sup>46</sup> So for both Leibniz and Walter Benjamin all futural possibilities exist within the monad. But Andrew Benjamin also draws attention to a significant difference in these conceptions of the monad. For Leibniz monads operate in a temporality of 'continuous and continued self-completion'<sup>47</sup> which would deny them the opportunity to explode the historical continuum. Whereas their function for Walter Benjamin is to act as part of a disruptive device.

---

<sup>44</sup> N 11, 4.

<sup>45</sup> Andrew Benjamin, 'Time and Task', in *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy*, eds. A. Benjamin and P. Osborne. London, Routledge, 1994, p.237.

<sup>46</sup> Leibniz, *Monadology*, 11,

<sup>47</sup> Andrew Benjamin, 'Time and Task', p. 239.

Irving Wohlfarth traces Benjamin's use of monads in relation to historical objects back to his re-working of origin (*Ursprung*) in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. He reads Benjamin's description of an origin as 'an eddy in the stream of becoming'<sup>48</sup> as another example of disrupting the continuous flow of time. Wohlfarth describes origin and monad as both involving a leap (*Sprung*) 'or compression of ordinary time and the concomitant emergence of another, more originary temporality.'<sup>49</sup> Benjamin suggests that the historical object is understood, not by opening it up to an external gaze but it is instead revitalized by 'constitut[ing] itself as a monad. In the monad everything that used to lie in mythical rigidity as a textual reference comes alive.'<sup>50</sup> The monad seems to arise through the convergence of the historical perspective and 'our own historical experience' which appears to complete the image.

Far from a lack of mediation which would present the object under the enchanted 'appearance of closed facticity', Benjamin brings together an historical perspective with 'our own historical experience', and is able to bring the object 'into its own'<sup>51</sup> By presenting the object as a monad that has come into its own Benjamin side-steps the question of mediation because a monad must be an already completed or fulfilled process of becoming. In other words a monad can also be described as a totality in which this mediation or simple becoming is

---

<sup>48</sup> Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne, London, Verso, 1977, p. 45.

<sup>49</sup> Irving Wohlfarth, 'Smashing the Kaleidoscope: Walter Benjamin's Critique of Cultural History' in *Walter Benjamin and the Demands of History* Op. Cit. p.193.

<sup>50</sup> *Aesthetics and Politics* p. 137.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 137.

always already underway and at the same time completed. We can only assume from this characteristically opaque reference to monads that the mediation through the total social process that Adorno demands is mirrored within this micro-totality.

The appeal to the monadic construction of the object could be read as an ingenious attempt on Benjamin's part to reclaim the expected Hegelian respectability of his theory without having to overcome his own enchantment by the material minutiae of the text. To describe this in terms of parts and wholes, we could say that by allowing the object to constitute itself as a monad transforms it from being an isolated part of the 'total social process' (the whole) to a whole in its own right. If this is the case we are presented with a complete process rather than a discrete event: a process that, in being unmediated, is stopped in its tracks. However, it is the question of the dynamic or static nature of the dialectic that is one of the major and irreducible differences between Benjamin's and Hegel's conceptions of the dialectic. The monad is not used to smuggle in some respectable Hegelian dynamism, but to exaggerate the static, yet dynamic, nature of dialectics as Benjamin understands it. This use of monads overcomes certain difficulties that we might have in reconciling Benjamin's notion of dialectical images, as dialectics at a standstill, with the more obviously dynamic nature of Hegel's dialectic. In fact, far from being the kind of face-saving gesture suggested above, monads become inseparable from dialectics for Benjamin.



Although Benjamin's reliance on the Leibnizian notion of 'monad' does, in some sense, avoid Hegelianism, he can still be described as carrying out his own supersession (*Aufhebung*) of structure and superstructure. It is the *Aufhebung* in which structure and superstructure become unified in the same monadic entity. As Agamben puts it 'the structure is the superstructure'<sup>52</sup>. However this dialectical *Aufhebung* also has other subtle but crucial differences that distance Benjamin from both Hegel and Adorno. As we have seen above, Adorno accused Benjamin's reading of the Baudelaire and the Paris Arcades of being unmediated. But Adorno's insistence on mediation through the total social process also bears within it a presupposition that the only other possible reading would be one that attributed a causal relationship between structure and superstructure.

As we have seen from the discussion of both Hegel's and Benjamin's conceptions of time at work in the dialectic, for Benjamin the *Aufhebung* of structure and superstructure is not one that will occur as part of an ongoing process. It takes place in this dialectic which is 'at a standstill'. But Benjamin's formulation also guarantees a more materialist dialectic. This is alluded to in the distinction Agamben makes between Adorno's 'dialectical historicism' and Benjamin's 'dialectical materialism'. What is less material about Adorno's method is that by retaining its Hegelian, developmental historicism and the accompanying account of time it still requires an extravagant level of abstraction.

---

<sup>52</sup> Agamben, 'The Prince and the Frog', p. 123.

Agamben suggests that a Benjamin-like conception of time as *Jetztzeit* is required in order to produce ‘a dialectic that is truly freed from all ‘abstractness’’.<sup>53</sup>

To be free of all abstractness would also suggest a freedom from mediation – from mediation of the material monad. Agamben is correct in as much as he diagnoses this freedom from abstraction in Benjamin’s work. He is also able to make a very useful connection to another of Benjamin’s *Aufhebungen* in the early essay on Goethe’s *Elective Affinities*.<sup>54</sup> In this essay Benjamin overcomes the distinction between the material content or subject matter (*Sachgehalt*) and truth content (*Wahrheitsgehalt*) in such a way that they both remain distinct objects of investigation while at the same time directly corresponding to each other.

For Adorno, there are still only two possible positions to take on the relationship between structure and superstructure – either the dialectical or the causal. And, for him, it is always the dialectical that will give the most accurate analysis of the relationship. This can be read as an aspect of his thought that can be traced not only to his avowed Hegelianism, but also to his equally avowed Marxism. He gives his criticisms of Benjamin an explicitly Marxist gloss through his demand for mediation through the total social process. What Adorno considers to be essential to both Hegelian and Marxist analysis is this idea of ‘universal mediation’ which ‘produces the totality’<sup>55</sup>. It is the lack of this ‘universal mediation’ that he diagnoses as being the cause of Benjamin’s theoretical

---

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p.123.

<sup>54</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Vol. 1*, pp.297-360

infirmity. Indeed, because Benjamin lacks this mediation he is accused of lacking any adequate theory altogether.<sup>56</sup>

On the other hand, however, Agamben reads Adorno's commitment to 'universal mediation' as contributing to a blind-spot in Adorno's own thinking. He suggests that this also commits Adorno to an illegitimate level of abstraction. According to Agamben, Adorno's Hegelianism means that he is 'renouncing the concrete grasp of each single event and each present instant of praxis in favour of deferral to the final instance of the total social process'<sup>57</sup>. This is then considered by Agamben to be a betrayal of the Marxian critique of Hegel as a purely 'abstract, formal process'.<sup>58</sup> According to this analysis Adorno's dialectical historicism becomes almost indistinguishable from Hegel's.

If we are to distinguish Benjamin's 'historical materialism' from this 'dialectical historicism' we need to be wary of following Adorno's diagnosis too uncritically. We can agree that there is no universal mediation which would produce a totality, but it does not necessarily follow from this that Benjamin's analysis of the structure/superstructure relationship must fall back into a simple causal model. According to Agamben, Benjamin's analysis is much more faithfully Marxian because,

---

<sup>55</sup> Adorno, *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber, London, Neville Spearman, 1967, p.236.

<sup>56</sup> *Aesthetics and Politics*, p.129.

<sup>57</sup> Agamben, 'The Prince and the Frog', p.118.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p.118.



Marx abolishes the metaphysical distinction between *animal* and *ratio*, between nature and culture, between matter and form in order to state that within praxis animality is humanity, nature is culture, matter is form. If this is true, the relationship between structure and superstructure can neither be one of causal determination nor one of dialectical mediation, but one of direct correspondence.<sup>59</sup>

Benjamin's historical materialism does not lack mediation. It has no need of it, because the poles that are presumed by Adorno to require its services are also shown to be in direct correspondence with each other. Although in his response to Adorno, Benjamin suggests that 'the philological interpretation of the author ought to be preserved and surpassed in the Hegelian Manner'<sup>60</sup>, his *Aufhebung*, is still proudly lacking in any orthodox Hegelian mediation or becoming. Benjamin's *Aufhebung* produces another 'third thing'. The messianic and historical temporalities concerned in Benjamin's mediation lead Osborne to describe it in terms of 'a switch between circuits' rather than 'the production of a shared conceptual space'. This non-Hegelian, transformational retains its futural possibilities as well as holding open the past through thinking the 'now' as *Jetztzeit*.<sup>61</sup>

---

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p.119-20.

<sup>60</sup> Benjamin, *Aesthetics and Politics*, p. 136.

<sup>61</sup> Osborne, *The Politics of Time*, p. 151. Not only does Osborne allow this to be described as a form of mediation, he also constructs a narrative form in which Benjamin's revolutionary temporalities can function. He describes Benjamin's 'now' as 'an integral moment within a new, non-traditional, future-oriented and internally disrupted form of narrativity.' (p. 159). I believe this position to be consistent with my own as it is definitely not an attempt to reclaim Benjamin's now as a form of, what I have described in Chapter 1 as, Story-time.

Agamben shows the methodological continuity between Benjamin's concept of criticism in his early essay on Goethe's *Elective Affinities*. In that essay Benjamin uses a metaphor to try and explain the relationship between material content and truth content. He suggest that,

If, to use a simile, one views the growing work as a funeral pyre, its commentator can be likened to the chemist, its critic to an alchemist. While the former is left with wood and ashes as the sole object of his analysis, the latter is concerned only with the enigma of the flame itself: the enigma of being alive.<sup>62</sup>

The chemist looks for a causal relationship between two substances (the wood and the ashes), but the alchemist focuses on a living unity – the flame. Adorno, the 'dialectical historicist', is like the chemist because he strictly separates the structure and superstructure; by contrast Benjamin, the 'historical materialist' will see a third, single, monadic historical structure.

Agamben calls on the notion of praxis to do the work of unifying structure and superstructure<sup>63</sup> which would support his reading of Benjamin as remaining more faithful to the concrete than Adorno. The idea of praxis would also situate us in the terrain of lived experience (*Erlebnis*) which would again fit more comfortably with the idea of dialectics at a standstill, because it could also be interpreted as an instantaneous and immediate decision which could interrupt the continuity of history.

---

<sup>62</sup> Benjamin, 'Goethe's Elective Affinities', p. 298.

## Reading Hegel Against the Grain.

Although Agamben's reading of Benjamin is useful in determining what dialectics at a standstill might look like, I would suggest that his reading of Adorno's dialectical historicism is flawed. If we were to be convinced by Agamben's reading, Adorno would be committed to a dialectical historicism virtually indistinguishable from Hegel's. However if we turn to Adorno's own reading of Hegel, a picture of both Hegel and Adorno emerges that is in stark contrast to that painted by Agamben. What I would like to show is that rather than being left with the impression of a rigidly Hegelian Adorno, there is a more flexible, Benjaminian Hegel that emerges from Adorno's own reading.

The first clue to support this claim comes from Shierry Weber NicholSEN's introduction to her translation of Adorno's *Hegel: Three Studies*. Here she claims that 'Adorno presents a Hegel read against the grain'.<sup>64</sup> This is an obvious reference to Benjamin's project of brushing history against the grain and must be considered in the light of Benjamin's enterprise. As we have seen in the previous chapter, Benjamin used this phrase in Thesis VII as a way of emphasising the historical and cultural debt owed to the anonymous and forgotten figures of history. By using this terminology NicholSEN is suggesting that Adorno is attempting to make Hegel relevant and useful to whatever has been excluded

---

<sup>63</sup> Agamben, 'The Prince and the Frog', p.122.

<sup>64</sup> T.W. Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies* trans. Shierry Weber NicholSEN, London, MIT, 1994, p.



from his system. This is different from Marx turning Hegel on his head because it is not a mere substitution of the material for the ideal. Instead Adorno is attempting an immanent criticism of Hegel, one which can follow the logic of his theory and system and bring out the contemporary and relevant truth content buried deep within it. The idea of an immanent criticism and its accompanying notion of truth content can once again be traced back to Benjamin's essay on Goethe's *Elective Affinities*. The truth content is what Adorno would like to produce by brushing Hegel against the grain. Instead of a criticism that would explore where Hegel has simply gone wrong, such an immanent criticism will produce the 'truth' in Hegel – even if in Adorno's assessment this is a negative truth.

Even though we can discover a Benjaminian methodology at work in Adorno's approach to Hegel, this is not the same as showing how Adorno 'Benjaminizes' Hegel. The strongest evidence in favour of this claim emerges in a discussion on the role of parts and wholes in Hegel's system. As has been shown above, a useful way of delineating the differences between Benjamin's and Hegel's conceptions of the dialectic is to examine the role that parts and wholes play in their dialectical methods. But having argued that Benjamin, to a certain extent, privileges the role of parts in his dialectic, it is surprising to find Adorno claiming something similar for Hegel. Although he acknowledges that Hegel 'recognized the primacy of the whole over its finite parts'<sup>65</sup> he goes on to claim that 'If Hegel's whole exists at all it is only as the quintessence of the partial

---

<sup>65</sup> Ibid. p.4.

moments, which always point beyond themselves and are generated from one another.’ Although Adorno describes the whole’s debt to its parts in terms of totality rather than monads, it is clear that he considers Hegel’s treatment of wholes and parts as a dialectical relationship which cannot be reduced to a simple opposition. Instead he insists that the category of totality is not a purely abstract metaphysical principle, but that it is instead meant to convey its immanent relationship to the parts of which it is constituted, and to the fact that it does not transcend, or exist beyond, these parts.

For Hegel, the relationship of parts and wholes is the relationship of moments to the system, respectively. Just as with Benjamin’s monads, so the partial moments have the whole ‘already inherent in every one of them’ according to Adorno. He continues by stating that the concept of system at work here already ‘implies the identity of subject and object’.<sup>66</sup> It is here that the influence of Benjamin starts to fail, because the mediation to which Adorno is so committed leads to the collapse of any difference between subject and object. Benjamin’s method has the advantage that it allows differences to be maintained at the same time as they are in direct, unmediated correspondence.

Of course Adorno will insist that the relationship between these wholes and parts must be mediated in a truly Hegelian dialectical fashion – that they must participate in the process of simple becoming. However even though this is still subscribing to a dynamic, processual model of the dialectic, it is no longer a

simple linear model of continuity. According to Adorno's analysis, the connection between the various stages of this simple becoming is unmistakably discontinuous. He claims that for Hegel,

connection is not a matter of unbroken transition but a matter of sudden change, and the process takes place not through the moments approaching one another but through rupture.<sup>67</sup>

If this is the case then it will also have major repercussions for the concept of time that we have attributed to Hegel, because this reading took him to be committed to a continuous process emerging from the 'Now'. Not only will this involve a revised conception of time, but it will also accord with the demand for discontinuity and rupture that occurs throughout Benjamin's work.

The suggestion that Hegel's dialectic is one of rupture and discontinuity is a very unorthodox reading. Adorno recognises this in his own reading of Hegel against the grain when he suggests that even Hegel failed to notice the discontinuity within his own system:

Hegel praised the greater consistency of Kant's successors in comparison with the abysmal discontinuities of the Kantian system, and he even outdid them in this regard. It did not occur to him that the Kantian discontinuities register the very moment of nonidentity that is an indispensable part of his own conception of philosophy.<sup>68</sup>

---

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.* p.77.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.* p.4-5.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.* p.11.



Adorno suggests that this dialectic of rupture and discontinuity can be extrapolated from Hegel's earlier work such as the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. He doesn't go so far as to suggest that this discontinuity is also at play in the later work such as the *Philosophy of Right* or the *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*. These later works are characterised as showing a 'tendency to harmony'.<sup>69</sup> This would suggest that it must be the conflict at the heart of works such as the *Phenomenology* that persuades Adorno of the rupturing form of the dialectic. It is understandable how he might arrive at this decision if we are to take the Master/Slave narrative in the *Phenomenology* as paradigmatic of the Hegelian dialectical process. This is obviously based on the conflict between individuals, and the idea of discontinuity or rupture must be derived from the outcome of this struggle for recognition. Perhaps the discontinuity is also attributed to the moments of recognition within the Hegelian system – the moment when the Master is recognised as Master by the Slave, and the moment when the Master recognises that he owes his own status to his recognition by his slave<sup>70</sup>. It is the temporality of the recognition that Adorno is attempting to negotiate in his reading of Hegel. He is suggesting that this is not another example of continuous progress or steady change, but that the speed of the change is infinite. If he is suggesting that the moment of recognition is

---

<sup>69</sup> Ibid. 4.

<sup>70</sup> It must be noted that Hegel's theory of recognition cannot be taken a separate theory in its own right, as in the theory of time, history, etcetera, it should be treated as an important principle within the overall, interconnected theory. This point as well as a detailed account of the paradoxes that emerge from the fact that the relata (the agents) also being relational within the theory of recognition are laid out in L. Siep's *Anerkennung als Prinzip der praktischen Philosophie. Untersuchungen zu Hegels Jenaer Philosophie des Geistes*. Freiberg: Karl Alber, 1979. As Siep

instantaneous, and that this instant disrupts and ruptures the continuity of the dialectic, then we do indeed have a reading of Hegel that would position him much closer to Benjamin than had previously been imagined.

As we have seen, for Benjamin the dialectic is a process to be interrupted, halted, or blasted open. His criticism of historicism and its 'homogenous empty time' has been described above as a criticism of a Hegelian version of the dialectic. But if Adorno is correct in his analysis of the Hegelian notion of totality, and the total process that would constitute it, then it would seem that this total process is open to the very interruptions and explosive ruptures that Benjamin is advocating. The speed of the change, its suddenness, could make way for a re-evaluation of the notion of the 'Now' which is at work in the dialectic. Instead of the traditional instant which guarantees continuity we could re-describe this Hegelian moment of sudden change and rupture as something more like Benjamin's *Jetztzeit*.

It is interesting to note that although Benjamin obviously influenced Adorno's reading of Hegel, Benjamin, saw his dialectics at a standstill resulting to some extent from Adorno's reading of Hegel. Adorno's study of Hegel was not published until 1963, twenty three years after Benjamin's death, but in some preparatory notes for the *Arcades Project* written in 1934 Benjamin notes '*Wiesengrund* [Adorno's 'German' surname] Dialectical image and dialectics at a

---

points out Hegel sets out his own solutions to these paradoxes in his accounts of 'reflection' and the 'logic of essence'.

standstill in Hegel'.<sup>71</sup> This adds confusion to the provenance of 'dialectical images' because Adorno's first recorded use of this is in his book on Kierkegaard where he directly attributes it to Benjamin.<sup>72</sup> In the same notes it appears that Benjamin has also set himself the task to 'Reread Hegel on dialectics at a standstill',<sup>73</sup> which would suggest that the notion can be traced back to Hegel himself. However, there is no evidence to suggest that Benjamin ever carried out this rereading, neither are there any references as to where Hegel sets out his thoughts on dialectics at a standstill.

I am not suggesting that we can completely revise our analysis of the conception of time in Hegel, merely that Adorno's representation of Hegel would lead to a conception of time that was not so completely continuous. Neither would I suggest that both Adorno and Benjamin are simply misreading or misrepresenting Hegel. Instead I would suggest that in reading Hegel against the grain, as the result of a method strongly influenced by Benjamin's notion of dialectical images, Adorno has discovered the truth content of rupture in the paradigmatic account of continuity.

As should be clear by now, Adorno's main criticism of Benjamin, was his lack of mediation. But it is around this question of mediation that another of Adorno's (perhaps unconscious) Benjaminisations of Hegel takes place. We see this in his

---

<sup>71</sup> *Arcades Project*, p. 912.

<sup>72</sup> 'They may be called dialectical images, to use Benjamin's expression...' Adorno, *Kierkegaard*, Tübingen, 1933, p. 60.



favourable assessment of Hegel's response to the Kantian legacy of extremes (or poles) such as 'form and content, nature and spirit, theory and praxis, freedom and necessity, the thing in itself and the phenomenon'.<sup>74</sup> Adorno insists that these extremes are mediated in Hegel, but in a very specific way. Thus Adorno claims that,

for Hegel mediation is never a middle element between extremes... instead mediation takes place in and through the extremes, in the extremes themselves.<sup>75</sup>

However, Adorno develops this mediation between extremes which is not a middle element in the process into the process itself. Although he refuses a description of mediation as a middle element, the dialectic, as a relationship, remains a process rather than a direct correspondence.

Hegel shows that the fundamental ontological contents that traditional philosophy hoped to distill are not ideas discretely set off from one another; rather each of them requires its opposite, and the relationship of all of them to one another is one of process.<sup>76</sup>

The supposition that ideas can only exist in relationship to other ideas could either lead to, or be derived from, Benjamin's constellations, while the insistence that this relationship must be one of process is antithetical to the static tensions at work in Benjamin's dialectical images.

---

<sup>73</sup> *Arcades Project*, p. 912.

<sup>74</sup> Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, p.8.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p.8-9.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p.9.

Adorno's evocation of extremes in Hegel's dialectic can be read as another aspect of Benjamin's influence on Adorno's thinking. And the attempt to overcome the fixed separation of the poles can be identified as a common motif in both Hegel and Benjamin. Hegel set out to accomplish this through arriving at the subject-object, whereas Benjamin tried varied devices such as the 'third-thing'. What links these attempts further and brings the different dialectics much closer together can be discovered in their shared concern for extremes. We might say that both Benjamin's and Hegel's dialectics are dialectics of extremes.

Benjamin brought together various extremes in his own dialectic and method, not to neutralise or homogenise them, but to produce an explosive combination. It is in the extremes of the past and the present and the extremes of theology and historical materialism that he finds the potent mixture for his dialectical images. He discusses the methodological importance of extremes in his *Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1925). During a discussion of 'ideas' (*Ideen*) he suggests that 'The idea is best explained as the presentation of the context within which the unique (*Einmalig*) and extreme (*Extreme*) stands alongside its counterpart.'<sup>77</sup> Because this is the 'presentation of the context' its shape is determined more by its extremes (or extremities) than by its more average or easily encompassed elements. Indeed it is only by taking account of an object's extremities that we can grasp its shape.

---

<sup>77</sup> *Origin of German Tragic Drama*. p.35.

Benjamin's use of extremes can also be used to show how his later notion of dialectics at a standstill and the stasis at work in the dialectical image is not a stultifying, terminal stasis but an explosive tension. Here in the attempt to present 'ideas', he is not presenting them as fixed or ahistorical. It is through the extremes – the difficult to accommodate elements precariously balanced on the edges and borders of the context – that the ideas come to life: 'ideas come to life only when extremes are assembled around them'<sup>78</sup>

Benjamin's use of extremes here follows from his evocation of constellations, which he considers to be analogous to ideas<sup>79</sup>. What is of particular interest to us here is that it is this very discussion of constellations in the 'Epistemo-Critical Prologue' that was most influential on Adorno's own thinking.<sup>80</sup> And it is here that Benjamin attempts to set out a theory in which general ideas emerge from the particulars themselves in all their differences and extremes. Adorno recognised the groundbreaking possibilities for a materialist theory in Benjamin's use of constellations,

Even at this early stage of the 'Epistemo-Critical Prologue' (1925), and before when he wrote his essay 'Critique of Violence' (1921), Benjamin was doing his

---

<sup>78</sup> Ibid. p.35

<sup>79</sup> A discussion of Benjamin's use of 'constellations' will take place in Chapter 3.

<sup>80</sup> See Gillian Rose, *Melancholy Science: An Introduction to the Thought of Theodor W. Adorno*, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1981, pp. 35-42, 61, 90; Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin and the Frankfurt Institute*, New York, Free Press, 1977; and Adorno's own discussion of constellations in *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984, pp. 162-164.



utmost to avoid a role for mediation in theory. It was in the 'Violence' essay that he called for pure or unmediated positing (*Setzung*). Again this produces resonances with Hegel as he has stated even earlier in his dissertation *The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism* (1919), that 'the concept of positing . . . appears in its fully developed form in Hegel's dialectic'.<sup>81</sup> But this would again have to be a mediated positing in Hegel, not the pure unmediated and even divine positing of the 'Critique of Violence'. The dialectic of extremes at work in the influential idea of constellations – and idea as constellation – was already a dialectic of unmediated extremes. This early methodological innovation would later become manifest in practice in the direct correspondences of his analysis of nineteenth century Paris.

Adorno took Hegel's idealism to lead beyond itself to anti-idealism, and it is in this moment that Adorno sees its truth. In fact it is the process itself which is the truth for Adorno – 'process, that is, is truth itself.'<sup>82</sup> So if we are to take Adorno at his word here, the discontinuity and rupture at work in Hegel's dialectic must be processual. If they are also to partake of the truth they must also be part of the process.

In contrast to this Benjamin's analysis of nineteenth-century Paris and his critique of homogenous, empty time challenge the identification of truth and process. On this analysis truths will only arise out of the explosion produced by dialectical

---

<sup>81</sup> *Selected Writings, Vol. 1*, p. 123.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.* p.37.

tensions. These explosions cannot be reduced to processes because they are instantaneous ruptures that work according to the image logic of the extremes of constellations that defy the notion of process altogether.

It is, of course, this very refusal of process that Adorno recognises in Benjamin's lack of mediation or becoming. Hegel had also labelled such a refusal of becoming as scepticism or nihilism and we could interpret Adorno's criticisms of Benjamin as a veiled accusation of nihilism. But for Benjamin, the charge of nihilism is not always a pejorative one. As we have seen in the 'Theologico-Political Fragment', the method of the task of world politics is explicitly identified as nihilism.<sup>83</sup> This is nihilism that has been placed in a messianic context. Moreover, it is nihilism that is also a precursor of the full-time of pleasure and happiness when Benjamin states that 'the order of the profane should be erected on the idea of happiness'.<sup>84</sup> Although this order of the profane – which is also the world political – pulls in a different direction to the Messianic, it also assists it. Happiness is also given as 'the rhythm of Messianic nature'<sup>85</sup> and what this nature – and all nature – has in common with nihilism is its transience. The Messianic aspect of nature is in its 'eternal and total passing away' and the striving after such a passing is nihilism.

For Benjamin, the passing of time does not lead to a progressive accumulation, redemption or reconciliation through the dialectical process. It inevitable leads to

---

<sup>83</sup> Benjamin, *One Way Street*, p.156.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.* p.155.

ruin – to passing away. But this passing away does not have to result in a passive nihilism. Howard Caygill suggests that, for Benjamin, it also presented the opportunity to produce something new.<sup>86</sup> This would be an active nihilism that would take transience as presenting opportunities and possibilities. Benjamin's concept of time and its static dialectics are an active attempt to destroy tradition, rescue the vanquished and create new possibilities for the future.

In a letter to Scholem, Benjamin brought together his own nihilism with an explicit anti-Hegelianism. He stated that he,

would be surprised if the foundations of my nihilism were not to manifest themselves against communism in an antagonistic confrontation with the conceptions and assertions of Hegelian dialectic'.<sup>87</sup>

As I have indicated above, this is one of very few references to Hegel in Benjamin's work. As Caygill has also pointed out it is curious then that he uses another of these rare occasions to give Hegel the last word. In the final paragraph of the 1935 exposé of the *Arcades Project* Benjamin discusses the 'ruins of the bourgeoisie' in orthodox historical materialist terms of 'the development of forces of production'. However he then goes on to describe the cultural changes at work as 'residues of a dream-world', and that:

---

<sup>85</sup> Ibid. p.156.

<sup>86</sup> Howard Caygill, *Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience*, London, Routledge, 1998. p. 30.

<sup>87</sup> *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin, 1910–1940*, ed. Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno, trans. Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1994, p 248.



The actualisation of dream-elements in waking is the textbook example of dialectical thought. Hence dialectical thought is the organ of historical awakening. Every epoch not only dreams the next, but while dreaming impels it towards wakefulness. It bears its end within itself, and reveals it – as Hegel already recognised – by ruse.<sup>88</sup>

From this passage we might assume that Benjamin owes and acknowledges a great debt to Hegel's identification of the ruse, or cunning, of reason (its ability to recognise, and bring about, the future). But again, this invocation of Hegel is double-edged because it is presented in the context of dreaming and waking.

According to the quotation the dream-elements will always be with us. There is no logic – no reason, or time – that does not also have some dream-logic and dream-time smuggled within it. So the 'textbook example of dialectical thought' that gestures towards continuous development in historical time only does this through dreaming. Historical time is contaminated with dream-time. This is another aspect of the heterogeneity of Benjamin's *Jetztzeit*. Even if historical time is condemned to the sterile progression of empty, homogenous time, the dream-time that is always smuggled within it holds out the possibility of confounding, confusing and destroying its soporific certainties.

Benjamin's dialectic might also be called a post-Freudian dialectic as it also seems to be working with and developing elements of what Freud had suggested about dream-work and the unconscious. According to Freud, one of the tasks of

---

<sup>88</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire*. London, Verso, 1997, p. 176.

the dream-work 'consists in transforming thoughts into visual images'<sup>89</sup>, just as for Benjamin, the revolutionary actualisation of dream elements transforms them into dialectical images. Freud argued that time was a fiction of the ego and that 'The logical laws of thought do not apply to the id . . . There is nothing in the id that corresponds to the idea of time'<sup>90</sup>. However Benjamin refuses to relegate time to being a fiction of the ego, instead he finds the hope of a more complete and fulfilled time in the dreaming of the collective unconscious. For Benjamin dreaming is linked to different times, whereas for Freud, dreaming imposes temporal structures on the non-temporal.

I would suggest that the 'ruse', according to Benjamin, isn't the Hegelian cunning of abstract reason, but the secret workings of dreaming and its different, heterogeneous, instantaneous time. This would then shift the focus of the 'textbook example' of Benjamin's dialectical thought from the 'utilisation of dream elements in waking' to the actual moment of waking from a dream. The moment when consciousness and dream world are both present in a tension that is both rational and irrational. This moment is when the dream can still be understood according to its own logic; it is also the moment when its strangeness and irrational impossibility also appear. As Benjamin puts it himself; 'The Now of recognizability is the moment of awakening.'<sup>91</sup>

---

<sup>89</sup> Freud, 'The Dream-Work' in *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1973, p.209.

<sup>90</sup> Freud, 'Dissection of the Personality' in *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1991, p.106.

<sup>91</sup> N 18, 4.

The time of this Now (*Jetztzeit*) is contiguous with the dream but not continuous with it. It is the proximity of the state of dreaming and waking in a dialectical image rather than their temporal order that creates the conditions that allow Benjamin to label it as dialectical. Again it is Adorno who reminds us of the unorthodox and paradoxical nature of Benjamin's dialectics when he suggests that Benjamin leaves us the 'obligation to think at the same time dialectically and undialectically'<sup>92</sup>.

The complicated relationship between Hegelian dialectics and Benjaminian dialectics is further reflected in other aspects of Benjamin's theory of awakening. While the moment of awakening is described as the now of recognizability, and therefore takes place according to *Jetztzeit*, this awakening is also what aids in the reading of the dream images. The moment of awakening is the critical moment in reading these images because it is in this moment that 'the dream stands still'<sup>93</sup>. However, although this is dialectics at a standstill, Benjamin still also formulates awakening in terms of the popular reduction of Hegel's method to thesis, antithesis and synthesis when he asks:

Is awakening perhaps the synthesis of dream consciousness (as thesis) and waking consciousness (as antithesis)? Then the moment of awakening

---

<sup>92</sup> Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*. p.152.

<sup>93</sup> Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, p. 912.



would be identical with the “now of recognizability”, in which things put on their true—surrealist—face.<sup>94</sup>

This surrealist face is the embodiment of the real state of emergency and the revolutionary realisation of dialectics at a standstill. Rather than the Hegelian progressive, teleological and linear movement and temporality, this is the bringing together of thesis, antithesis and synthesis in to an explosive tension. Benjamin described the surrealist project as ‘to win the energies of intoxication for the revolution’<sup>95</sup>. The space of this revolution involves the interpenetration of body and image space<sup>96</sup>, and its time is the time of the real state of exception signified by the Surrealists’ exchange of ‘the play of human features for the face of an alarm clock that in each minute rings for sixty seconds.’<sup>97</sup> This constantly ringing alarm clock reminds us both of the dialectical synthesis of the ever present moment of awakening as well as the undialectical and non-mediated direct correspondences that take place in the now of recognizability.

---

<sup>94</sup> N 3a, 3.

<sup>95</sup> Benjamin, ‘Surrealism’, in *Selected Writings*, Vol. 2, p. 215.

<sup>96</sup> ‘Only when in technology body and image space so interpenetrate that all revolutionary tension becomes bodily collective innervation, and all the bodily innervations of the collective become revolutionary discharge, has reality transcended itself to the extent demanded by the *Communist Manifesto*.’ ‘Surrealism’, p. 217-8. For a detailed study of Benjamin’s linking of body and image space in relation to dialectical images see Weigel, *Body- and Image-Space*, pp. 19-22.

<sup>97</sup> ‘Surrealism’, p. 218.

## **Chapter 3.**

# **Staged History: The Representation of Tragedy in Nietzsche and Benjamin.**

Revolution is a drama perhaps more than a history, and its pathos is a condition as imperious as its authenticity. (Blanqui)<sup>1</sup>

In this chapter I would like to shift the focus of the discussion from the dialectical aspects of Benjamin's temporalities of history and revolution to its non-dialectical aspects. This shift from dialectics will also involve a shift in the literary and aesthetic models that these temporalities use. Having discussed the temporalities of history and revolution with reference to narrative and images we will move on to see how these can be further elaborated by an examination of their relations to theatrical and musical presentations. This will be conducted through an account of Benjamin's relationship to the theories of Friedrich Nietzsche. In particular I will be exploring the different constructions of historical and revolutionary time that can be extrapolated from Nietzsche's reading of tragedy and Benjamin's reading of German Tragic Drama (*Trauerspiel*).

'Tragedy' is the most hopeless of words. It suggests the inevitability of catastrophic fate: unredeemable and irreparable loss and sorrow. Tragedy is what we ascribe to the most unreasonable personal and public calamities. Tragedy, in this sense, is beyond understanding, it is that which cannot be explained in terms of reason, meaning, or purpose. Tragedy is, of course, also the name of a tradition or form of dramatic presentation. It is the 'Tragedy' of Classical Greek and

---

<sup>1</sup> Cited by Benjamin in N 7, 3. Immediately after a discussion of the 'method' of dialectical materialism and history as a 'constellation of dangers'. (N 7, 2) and immediately followed by a



Modern European Tragedy. I will be looking at both uses of the term as it is used by Nietzsche and Benjamin. In Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*<sup>2</sup> it is explicitly used with reference to Greek Tragedy, although it also resonates throughout this text with the unreasonable and catastrophic. Benjamin's work *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*<sup>3</sup> is more concerned with *Trauerspiel*, the baroque German mourning play, rather than tragic drama in a strict sense, but it does discuss tragedy and in places it also explicitly engages with Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*. By examining these two works and their attitudes and staging of the role of tragedy I have two tasks in mind. The first is to show one aspect of Benjamin's indebtedness to Nietzsche and his attempt to move beyond him. Although, as will be shown below, Benjamin is critical of Nietzsche's treatment of tragedy, his own method owes a great deal to Nietzsche's genealogical method. The other task, which is more central to my project on history and revolution, is to bring other, alternative conceptions of history that are embedded in these texts, to the surface. I will suggest that theatrical models of history can be found to be at work in both of these texts.

## **Nietzsche's Representation of Tragedy**

---

note about the 'Necessity of paying heed over many years to every casual citation, every fleeting mention of a book'. (N 7, 3).

<sup>2</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, 'The Birth of Tragedy' in *The Birth of Tragedy and The Case of Wagner* translated by Walter Kaufmann, New York, Vintage, 1967.

<sup>3</sup>Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* translated by John Osborne, London, Verso, 1985.

As a dramatic form tragedy immediately leads us into problems concerning its presentation or representation. The history or genealogy of tragedy that we are given by Nietzsche traces its emergence from the frenzied ululations of the chorus in Dionysian revelry (the goat song of the intoxicated worshippers) to the more controlled dramatic presentations at the festivals of Dionysus. Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* is really about the death of tragedy or, more accurately, the whole life of tragedy from its birth to its death. For Nietzsche, tragedy was born out of the ecstasies of the worshippers of Dionysus. Its origin is in this collective, intoxicated, immediate expression of wild and chaotic nature, an expression that precedes rationalisation and exceeds individuation. It is, according to Nietzsche's subtitle, born 'out of the spirit of music'<sup>4</sup> which precedes ideas. As it becomes a more formed and formal part of Greek culture, tragedy takes on the features of an Apollonian art form. In opposition to the realm of the Dionysian, the Apollonian is much more concerned with formal beauty, restraint, individuation and illusion. According to Nietzsche tragedy dies when this formal, Apollonian aspect overcomes the Dionysian completely, when Greek culture embraces the rational so fervently that it forgets and rejects the primordial ecstasy. In other words tragedy is born from the pure, almost animal, expression of pain and/or joy, it lives to be tamed and civilised by formal dramatic constraints, and it dies of neglect by individualised subjects.

---

<sup>4</sup> The title of the first edition of 1872 was *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music*, this was changed for the reissue of both the first and second editions in 1886 to *The Birth of Tragedy Or: Hellenism and Pessimism*, although the original title was still retained between the 'Attempt at a Self Criticism' and the Preface.

What is interesting about Greek tragedy as a dramatic form is that it is still at the stage where the Dionysian and Apollonian elements are working together in a productive and profound tension. This is Tragedy's teenage crisis where its adolescent yearnings are still trying to produce a pure expression through an unmediated contact with the primary life forces, while the more sober and sensible, civilised wisdom of age is perhaps more honest in settling for an illusion or representation of truth.

For Nietzsche, there are problems with this representation that arise from the opposition of the Apollonian and Dionysian that he sets up. Although it is often assumed that Nietzsche's text unequivocally privileges the Dionysian over the Apollonian, Peter Sloterdijk in his study of *The Birth of Tragedy*<sup>5</sup> argues that this is never the case; that, in fact, the Apollonian must always also be present to hold the Dionysian in check. Although Nietzsche seems to present himself as the prophet of the Dionysian, 'the Dionysian element is never in power as such'<sup>6</sup> because it is presented or re-presented on stage. This staging is a kind of bracketing out of the Dionysian: 'a Dionysian paroxysm set apart in Apollonian quotation marks.'<sup>7</sup> These Apollonian quotation marks also provide the condition of possibility for expression, or representation, of the Dionysian.

The representation at work here would be representation as 'standing for' something. The problem of the representation of the Dionysian element of Greek

---

<sup>5</sup>Peter Sloterdijk, *Thinker on Stage: Nietzsche's Materialism*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1989.

<sup>6</sup> Sloterdijk, *Thinker on Stage*, p. 24.



tragedy is that there can be no unmediated access to this primordially, at least not through the institution of the theatre. In order to be represented it must be controlled by this theatre of representation and as Jochen Schulte-Sasse states in his foreword to Sloterdijk's text 'Representation, however, is always already Apollonian in nature'.<sup>8</sup> Representation is about gathering together the elements of an expressive idea into a controlled, repeatable structure that has its own clearly marked boundaries and limits. It is a kind of translation into an artificially universal, or at least shared, language: a language that is kept well back from its limits, that is kept in check in order to avoid any ambiguities that might result in excess or escape, that is also harnessed by the myth of transparent meaning and intention. If tragedy is to be an expression of the Dionysian it must necessarily take place through a form of Apollonian representation, it can only be expressed within 'Apollonian quotation marks'.

For Nietzsche the most comfortable artistic vehicle for the Dionysian is music which, for him, is at least beyond the bounds of linguistic and imagistic representation, even if it retains its own form of symbolism:

Language can never adequately render the cosmic symbolism of music, because music stands in symbolic relation to the primordial contradiction and primordial pain in the heart of the primal unity, and therefore symbolises a sphere which is beyond and prior to all phenomena. Rather, all phenomena, compared with it, are merely symbols: hence *language*, as the organ and symbol of phenomena, can never by any means disclose the

---

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

innermost heart of music; language, in its attempt to imitate it, can only be in superficial contact with music; while all eloquence of lyric poetry cannot bring the deepest significance of the latter one step nearer to us.<sup>9</sup>

Dionysian music steps, leaps, even dances, beyond the limits of representation because it is the art form which comes closest to a Dionysian 'absoluteness'.

Nietzsche thinks of music as able to escape the restrictions of representational thought and art. In positioning music as able to symbolise 'a sphere which is beyond and prior to all phenomena' he echoes Schopenhauer's privileging of music as a direct expression of the underlying metaphysical reality of the world. For Schopenhauer music 'is directly a copy of the will itself, and therefore expresses ... the thing-in-itself to every phenomenon.'<sup>10</sup>

Although the Dionysian and its music challenge representational thought, language and art, this does not have to commit Nietzsche to a view that language has necessary limits that cannot be overstepped. The Dionysian aspect of tragedy could be viewed as that which pushes and extends the negotiable boundaries of language. Although the Dionysian rhetoric of *The Birth of Tragedy* often sounds as if it is an attempt to escape the phenomenal world, it can be more accurately described as a celebration of the inescapable entanglement of reality and appearance. Nietzsche 'proclaims this primordial relationship between the thing-

---

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. xi.

<sup>9</sup> Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, pp. 55-56.

<sup>10</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, Vol.1 trans. E.F.J. Payne, New York, Dover, 1969, p.262.

in-itself and appearance'<sup>11</sup>. If there is only one thread that can be followed through from Nietzsche's early to his late writing it must be his attempt to make this relationship concrete; to challenge the appearance/reality distinction to such an extent that both must be abolished, and to bring thought back to the body.

To think of the Dionysian as 'beyond' this world or as only existing in some absolute, metaphysical realm is to misunderstand *The Birth of Tragedy*. If we can think of tragedy and its Dionysian aspect as being encompassed within the sphere of poetry, then according to Nietzsche it 'does not lie outside the world as a fantastic impossibility spawned by a poet's brain: it desires to be just the opposite.'<sup>12</sup>. Although it challenges representational thought and pushes the boundaries of language, the Dionysian is not outside our experience – it is at its very heart – and its representation through tragedy is successful even if it takes place in 'Apollonian quotation marks'.

However, as we have already seen, it is this Dionysian spirit of music that gave birth to Greek tragic drama. The Apollonian form itself is in a quasi-dialectical relationship with the Dionysian: the Dionysian can only be represented within the Apollonian, while the Apollonian owes its existence to the Dionysian, which it is trying to represent. Nietzsche suggests that we are reminded of this during the musical (Dionysian) aspects of the performance.

Thus the choral parts with which tragedy is interlaced are, as it were, the womb that gave birth to the whole of the so-called dialogue, that is, the

---

<sup>11</sup> Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, p. 62.



entire world of the stage, the real drama.<sup>13</sup>

So even though the theatrical form of tragedy is only able to represent the Dionysian in ‘Apollonian quotation marks’, it owes its Apollonian form to the more ‘primal ground’ of Dionysian music. Nietzsche even suggests that even though the form may be Apollonian ‘it represents not Apollinian redemption through mere appearance but, on the contrary, the shattering of the individual and his fusion with primal being.’<sup>14</sup>

This kind of representation is an external depiction of the Dionysian and is unable to copy it mimetically but presents itself in place of it. In the German this would be a *Darstellung* as opposed to the other widely used German word for representation, *Vorstellung*. Although a theatrical performance may be called a *Vorstellung* in the sense of a ‘show’ that is being put on, what concerns Nietzsche is not the relationship between the representation and what is being represented: his concern is with how the Dionysian can be adequately expressed rather than with the mimetic concerns of representation. The show or the actual performance would be the *Vorstellung*, but within the performance another kind of representation (*Darstellung*) is taking place. In Greek tragedy what is being represented is the Dionysian, it is being portrayed through an external representation (*Darstellung*).

However *Vorstellung* and *Darstellung* are not only theatrical concepts, they also

---

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 61.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 65.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 65.

have a history of more purely philosophical and epistemological usage. In this context *Vorstellung* is a notion, concept, idea or imagining; one that is usually thought of as somehow within the subject's mind in the sense of an inner vision or image. This '*Vorstellung*' or idea in the subject's mind is, however, not necessarily mimetic, as both Kant and Schopenhauer make clear. The *Vorstellung* is what is given to the mind through the senses whilst *Darstellung* is the external presentation or exhibiting of such a concept (*Vorstellung*) that gives it a sensible or sensory form.<sup>15</sup> Bearing this in mind, we could describe what is taking place in Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* as the analysis of the Apollonian exhibiting (*Darstellung*) of the Dionysian idea (*Vorstellung*).

In *The Birth of Tragedy* this can already be detected as emerging from his privileging of the aesthetic over the epistemological. Although the problem of representation is an epistemological one, its solution, for Nietzsche, is not in a comprehensive epistemological analysis of how and why this relationship works, but in a meditation on the aesthetic purpose of tragedy. Instead of thinking of *The Birth of Tragedy* as an analysis of the problem of dramatic representation that wants to understand how 'truth' can be represented, it shows that there can only be the representation itself without the 'truth' which it claims to represent. The Apollonian side of theatre is that of its appearance or illusion, but for Nietzsche this becomes the 'mere appearance of mere appearance'.<sup>16</sup> The representation of tragedy, although it is the representation of the tragic ground of existence, is not

---

<sup>15</sup>For a full discussion of the various nuances and translations of these terms see J. Engell *The Creative Imagination: Enlightenment to Romanticism*, Cambridge Mass., Harvard U.P. 1981.

<sup>16</sup> Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, p. 45.

the representation of a fundamental truth. The 'truth' of the Dionysian is not an absolute idea, it is instead an acknowledgment of the basis of existence in pain, terror and joy. Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* is a text full of pain, terror and joy which are all effects and experiences that blur the distinction between the aesthetic and the existential. If there is a truth behind tragedy it is what Sloterdijk calls the 'Terrible Truth!' which is so unbearable that the illusionistic representation of art acts as a distancing device, making the unbearable bearable. Art offers us a 'protective distance from what is unbearable'<sup>17</sup> because it offers us the dream of bridging the gap between representation and what is represented and reaching the epistemological and ontological grail of 'truth' as the unity of subject and object which would result in extinction of both. Greek tragedy is not a method of bearing the unbearable in itself, it is a way of bearing the unbearable through a distance from it. This exhibiting (*Darstellung*) is no longer a representation of the 'truth' that endeavours to get as close as it possibly can to its object, instead it is a 'protective distance' which deliberately keeps away from what is unbearable. What is unbearable is not only that there is no 'truth' but that the chaos is also unknowable.

This distance which become the 'pathos of distance' in Nietzsche's later works<sup>18</sup> means that representations must become autonomous, they will no longer be able to derive any authority from the 'truth' that they purport to represent. What Sloterdijk's reading of this genealogy of 'truth' also implies is that this distance

---

<sup>17</sup> Sloterdijk, *Thinker on Stage*, p. 39.



has been maintained for so long that its object has died of neglect. The ‘terrible truth’ that we must keep our distance from has faded out of existence and we are left with only its distanced presentation (*Darstellung*). If justification is still something that is needed, it will become purely aesthetic because there is no longer any absolute ‘truth’ accessible through representation. Any evaluation of these representations must now depend only on criteria belonging to the representations themselves. Nietzsche’s privileging of the aesthetic does not have to retreat into an arid and abstract formalism based on aesthetic rules and conventions. Even though he repeatedly insists that ‘it is only as an *aesthetic phenomenon* that existence and the world are eternally *justified*’,<sup>19</sup> the justification doesn’t necessarily come from a formal analysis of the ‘aesthetic phenomenon’. What is being challenged is the claim to justification at all.

To privilege the aesthetic in this way is to accept not so much that there is an unbridgeable distance between the representation and the ‘truth’, but that there is no ‘truth’ behind the representation. The relationship is not mimetic because there is nothing to be copied. This affirms illusion as the only and best form of justification we have. For the early Nietzsche the illusions of art, and the Dionysian intoxication and ecstasies that erupt from music or tragedy, all count in its favour because they are able to place us outside of space and time. They allow us to escape the narrow confines of representational thought and its epistemological concerns in order to more freely experience and see wider vistas

---

<sup>18</sup>See *Genealogy of Morals* trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale, New York, Vintage, 1989, First Essay, section 2, and *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1990, section 257.

of life and more varied perspectives of existence.

## **Benjamin's Presentation of *Trauerspiel***

For Benjamin as well as Nietzsche the problem of Tragedy is the problem of its presentation (*Darstellung*). However, although I have described Benjamin in the previous chapter as following a Nietzschean path in pursuing an 'active nihilism', as well as privileging intoxication in places<sup>20</sup>, he is more sceptical about the ability to, or merits of, stepping outside of space and time. His book on Tragedy and *Trauerspiel*, is necessarily concerned with these problems of presentation. It is a work of the most engaged literary criticism which also contains one of his most purely philosophical pieces as its 'Epistemo-Critical Prologue'. Benjamin's first words in this prologue which are his own first words in the book set up the problem of presentation as not only a philosophical one with respect to literary criticism but as a problem for the practice of philosophy itself:

It is characteristic of philosophical writing that it must continually confront the question of presentation (*Darstellung*)<sup>21</sup>.

---

<sup>19</sup> Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, p. 141.

<sup>20</sup>For example see his essays on 'Surrealism' and the writings on his experiences of Hashish use such as 'Main Features of My Second Impression of Hashish'; 'Hashish, Beginning of March 1930'; and 'Hashish in Marseilles', in *Selected Writings, Vol. 2*.

<sup>21</sup>Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 27. I have amended the translation of *Darstellung* which is given as 'representation' throughout this edition to 'presentation' in order to more accurately reflect the aspects of presenting as exhibiting as outlined in the discussion of Nietzsche above.

For Benjamin this is not a question that will disappear with any advance in mathematical or scientific knowledge. Instead it is the question that mathematics and science have neglected to their own peril. To neglect the question of presentation is to leave one path of knowledge untrodden; it is according to Benjamin, to renounce 'that area of truth towards which language is directed'<sup>22</sup>. There is a wholeness of knowledge (*Erkenntnis*) that Benjamin would like to strive towards, but this is not the wholeness of a flawless, positivistic, scientific system, it is an unsystematic wholeness that would draw together science and art. It is also an undialectical wholeness in its non-systematicity and lack of mediation.

Having said that his own first words in this text indicate the concentration on the question of presentation, there are words preceding these; Goethe's words from his book on colour, which already pose the question of creating a wholeness from science and art:

Neither in knowledge nor in reflection can anything whole be put together, since in the former the internal is missing and in the latter the external; and so we must necessarily think of science as art if we expect to derive any kind of wholeness from it.<sup>23</sup>

What is being suggested through the use of this quote and the concentration on the problem of presentation is a rearticulation and re-examination of Nietzsche's meditation on the relationship of art and science in *The Birth of Tragedy*. What

---

<sup>22</sup> *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 27.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27. The quote is from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe: *Materialien zur Geschichte der Farbenlehre*.



Nietzsche identifies as the scientific is the direct descendant of what he sees as Socrates' faith in reason. This faith is given the title of optimism throughout Nietzsche's text, but it is the optimism of a bad faith. Nietzsche sees this Socratic/scientific optimism as a false hope because it supposes that the knowledge attained by the rational method will be able to predict and avoid catastrophes if humans would only use their faculties properly. For Nietzsche the promise of enlightenment reason is a direct descendant of this Socratic optimism. Benjamin seems to follow Nietzsche's criticism of this rational optimism to the extent that he too recognised the need for a realignment of philosophical thinking that would incorporate the methods, styles, and values of art. For philosophy to model itself too strictly on science puts it in danger of forgetting the questions of its own presentation that it must continually confront.

Although Nietzsche does seem to be advocating a pessimism in *The Birth of Tragedy*, his championing of tragedy as the alternative to rationalism complicates the attempt to read this as a simple competition between optimism and pessimism. As Walter Kaufmann points out, the tragedians that Nietzsche takes as exemplary, Aeschylus in particular, do not fit comfortably into the pessimistic mould.<sup>24</sup> Aeschylus is commonly distinguished as producing a major change in Greek thought, pre-empting Socrates to some extent, by describing the foundation of the rational patronage of the city by Athena. His *Oresteia* can much more easily be read as the story of the emergence of a faith in rationality in Greek

---

<sup>24</sup>See Walter Kaufmann, 'Nietzsche and the Death of Tragedy: A Critique' in *Studies in Nietzsche in the Classical Tradition*, eds J.C. O'Flaherty, T.F. Selner & R.M. Helm, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press. 1976.

thought and culture than as a warning about the uselessness of human effort in the face of the gods.

However, we can also read *The Birth of Tragedy* according to Nietzsche's own later assessment of it in *Ecce Homo* which no longer describes it in terms of an opposition between optimism and pessimism. According to this reading, tragedy is not pessimism, but the overcoming of pessimism. The Dionysian element of tragedy can indeed be read as the emergence of an affirmative thinking. But what is being affirmed is a critique of causation, an alternative to the "Rationality" at any price' which is 'a dangerous force that undermines life'.<sup>25</sup> Socrates is linked with an:

unshakeable faith that thought, using the thread of causality, can penetrate the deepest abysses of being, and that thought is capable not only of knowing being but even of *correcting* it. This sublime metaphysical illusion accompanies science as an instinct and leads science again and again to its limits at which it must turn into *art*.<sup>26</sup>

For Nietzsche, science cannot reach through to truth but, in its failure, is transformed into art. It appears then, that Benjamin is also following Nietzsche's lead in reiterating the Goethean dream of scientific and artistic wholeness, that regards scientific knowledge and its cognitivism and causality as only a fragment of the whole.

---

<sup>25</sup>Nietzsche, *On The Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, New York, Vintage, 1989, p.271.

<sup>26</sup> Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, pp. 95-96.

However, we must remember that, for the Nietzsche of *The Birth of Tragedy*, the Dionysian was also only a fragment of the whole. The Dionysian is the missing element from modernity's predominantly Apollonian culture. The beauty and strength of Greek Tragedy was that it brought these two forces together, the Dionysian intoxication and the Apollonian dream. Tragedy gives us a complete representation of existence rather than incomplete, optimistic knowledge. Indeed, tragedy as an aesthetic phenomenon is closer to exhibiting the condition of existence than any scientific knowledge. This brings us back to what Benjamin takes to be the slogan of *The Birth of Tragedy*:

it is only as an *aesthetic phenomenon* that existence and the world are eternally justified<sup>27</sup>

According to Benjamin, what Nietzsche achieves in this book is the aestheticisation of existence. If science, once it has reached its limits, must turn to art he has succeeded, as Lutz P. Koepnick puts it, in transforming the world into 'an aesthetic spectacle'<sup>28</sup>. It becomes pure spectacle, pure representation which is in danger of becoming an 'infinite regression from appearance to appearance of appearance'<sup>29</sup> without any ground or foundation on which to gain some critical or political purchase. Here Koepnick marks an important difference between Benjamin and Nietzsche. Whereas Nietzsche can be read as proposing a complete aestheticisation of existence and truth, Benjamin, whilst retaining a notion of truth that involves contemplation of its object through presentation, is

---

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 52 & 141.

<sup>28</sup>See Lutz P. Koepnick, 'The Spectacle, the *Trauerspiel*, and the Politics of Resolution: Benjamin Reading the Baroque Reading Weimar' in *Critical Inquiry*, Winter 1996.



reluctant to follow Nietzsche into this absolute 'abyss of aestheticism'.<sup>30</sup> He says of Nietzsche that this aestheticisation is 'a high price to pay for his emancipation from the stereotype of a morality in which the tragic occurrence was usually clothed.'<sup>31</sup> Too high a price because it invokes the priceless gesture of non-affirmative nihilism. The abyss opens up only through forgetting the historical and material conditions that gave rise to the 'idea' of tragedy.

Benjamin is never far from a political analysis of whichever cultural target he has in his sights, and in this case it is the politics of presentation that is being interrogated. The difference between tragedy and *Trauerspiel* is not only a purely aesthetic one, the analysis also needs to enlist the aid of the philosophy of history in order to understand the political changes taking place in and as aesthetic representation. He identifies a shift from myth to history in the move from tragedy to *Trauerspiel*. This is also located as an aspect of the move into political modernity. It reflects the loss in faith of a transcendent, eternal, cosmic order in its representation of purely mundane and transient events. Accompanying this, though, is the difficulty of positioning philosophy within a modernity in which art and science remain sundered. Is it a purely cognitive activity that can be firmly placed in the scientific camp, or is philosophy so preoccupied with questions of presentation that it must belong solely to art? For Benjamin

---

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 275.

<sup>30</sup> *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 103. This characterisation of Nietzsche as advocating a complete aestheticisation of existence is more Benjamin's than Koepnick's (or mine) and it could be argued that it is a skewed and unsubtle reading of *The Birth of Tragedy*. However it is important that we temporarily suspend criticisms of this characterisation in order to understand Benjamin's text.

philosophy promises to be a facilitator for the elusive wholeness.

It certainly appears that philosophy is dealing with the realm of presentation when Benjamin states that philosophy has as ‘the law of its own form’ ‘the presentation of truth’<sup>32</sup>. But it is an unfamiliar concept of truth that is being worked out in this text; one which distinguishes it from ‘the acquisition of knowledge’, which is identified as the goal of science.<sup>33</sup> Knowledge is what the scientist possesses and it differs from its presentation. What is important for knowledge is its possession, ‘presentation is secondary’<sup>34</sup>. Truth, on the other hand, is described in terms of ‘essence’, ‘wholeness’, and a certain ‘unquestionability’. But its presentation is of primary concern and unavoidable because,

For knowledge, method is a way of acquiring its object...; for truth it is self-presentation (*Sich-Darstellendes*), and is therefore immanent in it as form.<sup>35</sup>

According to this formula, if philosophy professes a concern for truth it must always already indulge in a concern for presentation.

However if the purpose of the original quote from Goethe indicated an attempt to accomplish a rapprochement of science and art, Benjamin’s emphasis on the presentational character of philosophy would appear to place it more firmly

---

<sup>31</sup> *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 102.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 29-30.

within the artistic camp. However, this presentation, as we have seen, is also the presentation of ideas which include the formal abstractions of science:

If it is the task of the philosopher to practise the kind of description of the world of ideas which automatically includes and absorbs the empirical world, then he occupies an elevated position between that of the scientist and the artist...<sup>36</sup>

Benjamin follows Nietzsche's attempt to overcome the optimism of causation in suggesting that philosophy has become too closely linked with the scientific method of 'the elimination of the merely empirical' at the expense of 'the task of presentation' which it shares with the artist<sup>37</sup>. The ideas that are to be presented are not purely cognitive or conceptual and therefore accessible through scientific knowledge; they do not come under what Benjamin terms 'scientific verism'<sup>38</sup>, which is the positivist scientific obsession with accuracy of material detail – the simple minded facts of positivism perhaps? They are themselves interpretations, but 'objective interpretations' of phenomena<sup>39</sup>, and as such, they reside with truth, which, at this stage, still retains explicit echoes of Platonism and implicit echoes of Schopenhauer, when it is described as an 'intentionless state of being' which is 'made up of ideas'<sup>40</sup>.

However, a closer look at this part of Benjamin's text shows that these are a new and different sort of ideas. Although ideas are discussed in quasi-Platonic

---

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 34.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 36.



language they differ radically from any Platonic framework. Although Benjamin states that ‘The general (*Allgemeine*) is the idea (*Idee*)’<sup>41</sup>, the particulars do not participate in them in any recognisably Platonic way. Although ideas represent phenomena they do not claim possession of them, which in this scheme also means that ‘They do not contribute to the knowledge of phenomena’<sup>42</sup>. Although they are the general they do not rigidly demarcate categories and classes or impose their form on the particulars. Ideas are distinguished from concepts (*Begriffe*) which ‘assist in the presentation of an idea’<sup>43</sup>. In other words, concepts assist philosophy in its basic tasks of description and presentation. Thus there is a doubling of presentation at work here; firstly the presentation of the ideas by philosophy, and secondly, the presentation of phenomena by ideas. Although the language often sounds quasi-Platonic the picture that emerges is one of a network of active and dynamic relationships between all the elements. To represent the Platonic notion of ideas crudely we could say that an eternal and immutable idea imposes its form on a passive particular. Benjamin’s description of this relationship differs because it never turns the idea into an absolute. Even the phenomena that the ideas are presentations of have an active input to their own presentation by being able to ‘determine the scope and contents of the concepts which encompass them, by their existence, by what they have in common, and by their differences’<sup>44</sup>. We can hear the implied echoes of Schopenhauer more clearly in this construction. It sounds like Benjamin’s ideas also function analogously to Schopenhauer’s music which is described as having a universality

---

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 35.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 34.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 34.

which is

by no means that empty universality of abstraction, but is of quite a different kind; it is united with thorough and unmistakable distinctness.<sup>45</sup>

Both constructions allow us not only to find the universal within the particular, but also actively discourage the kind of abstraction that would situate the universal in a separate realm. Benjamin does follow Nietzsche in respect of his own affirmation of the inescapable entanglement of the universal and the particular.

Benjamin's concepts do resemble Platonic ideas in as much as they divide the phenomena into different classes. However this is not accomplished through an absolutist *fiat*; the existence, sameness and difference of the phenomena, in other words their relationships to each other, help to form the concepts themselves. The concepts only group the phenomena together in order to help in their presentation by ideas, but the ideas then turn this whole relationship upside down again when they are described as determining the relationship of the phenomena to each other.<sup>46</sup>

The difference between Benjamin's concepts and ideas is the difference between two varieties of generalisation. Concepts generalise phenomena into classes or groups, but ideas generalise even further in that they determine the relationships of the phenomena encompassed by these concepts to each other. For Benjamin,

---

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 34.

<sup>45</sup> Schopenhauer, op. cit. p.262.

<sup>46</sup> *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 34.

these generalisations are not a way of producing sameness out of difference, they do not attempt to create an understanding of the world by dividing it up into manageable pieces in order to create familiarity. They are definitely not averages of any sort, neither mean, mode or median. He explicitly states that ‘It is absurd to attempt to explain the general as an average’<sup>47</sup>. Instead, as discussed in chapter 2, what is productive about these generalisations is their extremes. Although concepts divide phenomena up into classes, their useful function is in identifying the elements of the phenomena that lie at their extremes. What defines a concept then is not an average grouping that pretends to the sameness of its members, but a group that can maintain difference within sameness. To be at the limit of a concept is also to define its boundaries. Benjamin’s ideas then, map out the relationships of these extremes. He describes them as constellations because they can map the relationships between their elements without detracting from the uniqueness and difference of each of these elements. They contextualise phenomena through showing the shape or pattern of the context. In Benjamin’s own words: ‘The idea is best explained as the configuration (*Gestaltung*) of the context within which the unique and the extreme stands alongside its counterpart’<sup>48</sup>.

Benjamin’s conceptions of truth and ideas arise from his thinking on language, which takes the idea of an originary, prelapsarian, Adamic language of the pure name as a model of intentionless language. This is a theory that he calls a ‘purified concept of language’ in a preparatory fragment for *The Origin of*

---

<sup>47</sup> *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 35.



*German Tragic Drama*.<sup>49</sup> This is the Edenic language which still had access to truth due to the still direct, unmediated relationship between name and object; language based on ‘the expressly immediate, creative word of God’ and ‘the blissful Adamite spirit of language’<sup>50</sup>. What is essential to language, for Benjamin, is not just communication, but communicability: ‘this *capacity* for communication is language itself’.<sup>51</sup> Human language is described as a language of naming, and in naming it communicates. The name itself is what is communicable. In the pure language of God and Eden, language is not a means but a medium. However it is a medium in which communicability is immediately expressed. In this pure language there is no separation between creation, knowledge, and being. For God, to name is to create which is also to make things knowable. For man, who is, of course, made in the image of God, to name is to know. The consequences of the fall reduced language to a means and sundered its immediacy. This also resulted in the separation of knowing, naming and being, and the origin of abstraction in language.

The themes of this earlier fragment reappear in the prologue to the *Trauerspiel* book where they are synthesised with the theory of ideas. According to this theory it is philosophy’s job to recover this originary, intentionless apprehension of words as names, and so present the truth and the ideas of which it is composed. According to Benjamin there can be an objectivity to language and ideas which will derive the objectivity of their presentation from the nature of

---

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 35, translation revised.

<sup>49</sup> ‘On Language as Such and on the Language of Man’ in *Selected Writings, Vol. 1*, p 74.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 71.

language. Charles Rosen, in his commentary on *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* represents this as a theory of meaning, and his description of Benjamin's Ideas is, 'The total range of significance, *represented objectively*, and as a structure of its most distant relationships'.<sup>52</sup> So an idea will convey every possible meaning and nuance of its word, not forgetting the limiting cases and extremities of shared resemblance. Benjamin's ideas are not attempting to form totalities like absolute universals, perhaps they could be described oxymoronically as open universals in that they do form a wholeness or comprehensive pattern without closing off the possibility of change and difference. These ideas will give us a more complete picture than the fragmentary concepts of cognitive knowledge because of their monadic structure.

The idea is a monad - that means briefly : every idea contains the image of the world. The purpose of the presentation of the idea is nothing less than an abbreviated outline of this image of the world.<sup>53</sup>

Benjamin elaborated this esoteric and challenging theory of ideas in the prologue to *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* because he needed to make use of these emphatic notions of truth and ideas with reference to both *Trauerspiel* and tragedy. These two dramatic forms both embody ideas. *Trauerspiel* embodies the idea of mourning or sorrow, and tragedy contains the idea of the tragic not just as

---

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 63.

<sup>52</sup> Charles Rosen, 'The Ruins of Walter Benjamin' in *On Walter Benjamin: Critical Essays and Recollections*, ed. Gary Smith, MIT, Cambridge, Mass., 1988. p 159.

<sup>53</sup> *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 48.

a dramatic form, but also as a cosmic principle or 'ruling force'.<sup>54</sup> Because ideas are monadic, to understand both of these ideas would also be to understand two dramatically different images of the world. On the one hand there is the tragic, or ancient Greek, image, on the other hand, there is the Mourning play or baroque image of the world. The allegorical and fragmentary nature of the Mourning play, along with its tendency to avoid tidy resolution convinced Benjamin that it was also representative as an emergent image of modernity. Tragedy and *Trauerspiel* embody two different ideas and images of the world because they represent two different relationships of phenomena, in this case, different historical circumstances. Even though we have seen that the ideas determine these relationships, they still remain sensitive to the historicity of their components:

When the idea absorbs a sequence of historical formulations, it does not do so in order to construct a unity out of them, let alone to abstract something common to them all.<sup>55</sup>

Thus, as we see, Benjamin's ideas remain open because part of their relationality is necessarily historical.

For Benjamin, what is notable about *Trauerspiel* is that it is, precisely, **not** tragedy; a momentous distinction that he accused most previous theorists of ignoring or failing to notice. *Trauerspiel* had generally been thought of as a form of tragic drama, to some extent a renaissance of the classical Greek form, and as long as it was judged according to this idea it was generally considered to be an

---

<sup>54</sup>He makes this claim for tragedy in a fragment entitled 'The Role of Language in *Trauerspiel* and Tragedy' written in 1916. see *Selected Writings, Vol. 1*, p. 59.

<sup>55</sup> *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 46.



unsuccessful renaissance. Indeed its translation as ‘tragic drama’ also tends to lead to this confusion, whereas if we look to the idea that Benjamin sees as at the heart of *Trauerspiel* we can see that ‘mourning play’ is a more appropriate translation, and one that better reflects the specificity of its form.

For Benjamin, the fundamental difference between tragedy and *Trauerspiel* is that tragedy is based in myth whereas *Trauerspiel* is grounded in history. Greek tragedy, because it takes its object as pre-historical myth, is inevitably tied to an inescapable conclusion.<sup>56</sup> The mythical inevitability of tragedy differs from any notion of historical necessity. Tragedy is somehow beyond reason, the tragic hero is only able to accept and realise a transcendent fate, whereas the heroes of *Trauerspiel* are endowed with a degree of historical agency<sup>57</sup>. Their fate is in their own hands, or at least in the hands of some kind of deterministic history. Tragedy does not need to appeal to any account of causation, as Benjamin points out, a tragic fate due to a miracle is no less inevitable than one due to causation<sup>58</sup>. These important distinctions, which had usually been blurred, allow the specificity of *Trauerspiel* to emerge. In Benjamin’s text the historicity of

---

<sup>56</sup> It is important to note here that this is only true in relation to Greek tragedy. For other forms of tragedy (Shakespearean in particular) the downfall comes about through a character flaw, such as hubris. Shakespearean tragedy might be considered as somewhere between Greek tragedy and *Trauerspiel* because although it deals with individuals it takes their actions and characteristics as symptomatic of the universal. However Benjamin positioned Shakespeare’s tragedy closer to *Trauerspiel* than Greek tragedy, even suggesting that they should be studied using the criteria of *Trauerspiel* rather than tragedy (*Origin* p. 136.) and that ‘Calderón and Shakespeare created more important *Trauerspiele* than the German writers of the seventeenth century’ (*Origin*, p. 127.)

<sup>57</sup> Indeed Benjamin points out that a great deal of the subject matter of the plays was based on historical material, especially the ‘history of the Orient’ *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 68.

<sup>58</sup> *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 129.

*Trauerspiel* starts to shine through and this is what enables a realisation that if we judge it on its own criteria rather than those of tragedy it can be seen as a very successful, timely and even revolutionary dramatic form.

### ***Trauerspiel's Musical Time***

In another preparatory fragment for the *Trauerspiel* book, Benjamin traces the relationship of the language of *Trauerspiel* to that of the pure word of his theory of language. The historical specificity of *Trauerspiel* is reflected in its language which bears the transient, dynamic and disjunctive hallmarks of the emergent modernity. Benjamin states that 'Language in the process of change is the linguistic principle of the mourning play'<sup>59</sup> There is a path that this change follows, but it is not the linear path of a progressive history, it is the sinuous and interrupted path of a river 'as it moves from its source toward a different point, its estuary'.<sup>60</sup> This path also traces a movement of sound which is also a history of sound. 'It describes the path from natural sound via lament to music'.<sup>61</sup> What is interesting in this movement is that music has a redemptive function in *Trauerspiel*. Benjamin endows music with an almost Schopenhauerian or Nietzschean purity of expression.

---

<sup>59</sup> 'The Role of Language in *Trauerspiel* and Tragedy' in *Selected Writings, Vol. 1*, p. 60.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 60. The fluidity of the metaphor of the river will be shown to be significant in relation to Irigaray's thinking in chapter 7. Indeed it is useful to note at this point that Benjamin's own concept of 'Origin' is itself a fluid and dynamic concept. 'Origin is an eddy in the stream of becoming...' (*Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 45).

<sup>61</sup> 'The Role of Language in *Trauerspiel* and Tragedy', p. 60.

Although Nietzsche's analysis of Greek Tragedy described it as emerging from the spirit of music, Benjamin finds *Trauerspiel* moving in the opposite direction, towards music. The difference becomes significant when considered in terms of the models of time at work. In tragedy the fate of the hero is sealed and fulfilled at any and every point. This produces one, singular, closed and circular time.<sup>62</sup> Whereas *Trauerspiel* produced discontinuity and disunity because it is based in allegory and is only resolved in catastrophe. For Benjamin this is closer to musical time:

In the mourning play, sounds are laid out symphonically, and this constitutes the musical principal of its language and the dramatic principle of its breaking up and splitting into characters.<sup>63</sup>

Benjamin also shows that *Trauerspiel*, in its historical specificity, turns away from abstraction and eternalisation. Its focus is the immanence of sorrow and suffering not the transcendent capriciousness of the gods. The fate at work within *Trauerspiel* is natural, mundane and historical and the only access we might have to any universal explanation is also only through the natural, mundane or historical. This notion of fate which eludes any scientific account of causation provides a link between, or continuation of, Nietzsche's formulation of tragedy. The tragic, and its concomitant fate, also seems to dwell in a realm of 'ideas' which come nearer to a wholeness than cognitive knowledge. The idea of the

---

<sup>62</sup> This closed circular time is similar to the time that we shall see Irigaray ascribe to Nietzsche in chapter 6.

<sup>63</sup> 'The Role of Language in *Trauerspiel* and Tragedy', p. 60.



tragic as a more complete, perhaps more cosmic ‘truth’ than the mournful, also shows a certain continuity with Nietzsche’s thinking of tragedy as a more complete or fulfilled expression of existence than the modern, rational, scientific one. However, as we have seen, Benjamin is critical of Nietzsche’s stance which he describes as opening up onto ‘the abyss of aestheticism’. The hope for a Wagnerian rebirth of tragedy is in danger of succumbing to the nihilism of the ‘mere appearance of mere appearance’. Benjamin’s understanding of modernity argues that the theory of tragedy presented in *The Birth of Tragedy* is purely aesthetic and omits ‘any understanding of the tragic myth in historical-philosophical terms.’<sup>64</sup> The latent Schopenhauerianism of *The Birth of Tragedy* is read as Nietzsche’s early madness. Benjamin questions the sanity of placing art at the centre of existence and retains a role for human creativity.

Benjamin caricatures Nietzsche’s Schopenhauerianism in terms of a ‘Nirvana, the slumbering will to life’<sup>65</sup>. This is exactly what the later Nietzsche himself would have described as a passive nihilism – the will to escape this world to gain a peaceful, pain-free, nothingness. However Benjamin’s reading of *The Birth of Tragedy* as preaching the ubiquity of, and an intimacy with, pain and suffering – even if it is a distanced intimacy – is a somewhat idiosyncratic portrayal of Nietzsche’s text. What Benjamin’s concern seems to be is that Nietzsche still places the ‘true author’ of tragedy – which is, at the same time the metaphysical basis of reality – outside the world. While there may be hints of this in a Schopenhauerian reading of *The Birth of Tragedy*, it would be difficult to

---

<sup>64</sup> *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 103.

describe it as an accurate reading of Nietzsche. What Benjamin refuses to notice is that even if we do place art at the centre of existence this does not mean that we have to devolve its authorship to the gods or 'the will'. Benjamin is indeed looking for an active nihilism, and may well have found it in *Trauerspiel* because this places the ubiquity of suffering and its source firmly within the world. At the same time it also points to a possibility for meaning or explanation through the universal at work in the world.

Nietzsche's nihilism is described as nullifying 'the concept of the hard, historical actuality of Greek Tragedy.'<sup>66</sup> The historical accuracy of Nietzsche's interpretation of Greek tragedy is being challenged here. The main charge is that the emphasis on Apollonian illusion is probably wishful thinking on Nietzsche's part rather than historical actuality. Where Nietzsche claims no division between the public and the chorus and therefore suggests a complete immersion in the illusion, Benjamin upholds the division on historical grounds.<sup>67</sup> Again, Benjamin refuses to totally aestheticise the question by refusing to separate the historical context in which the form emerged from its expressive content.

What is central to both readings is that this is still emphatically staged tragedy. It is from its staging that questions of representation (*Darstellung* and *Vorstellung*) arise. According to commentators on both thinkers, this staging is never solely

---

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 103.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 103.

<sup>67</sup> For a full discussion of the historical circumstances of the emergence of Greek tragedy in relationship to Nietzsche's work see M.S. Silk & J.P. Stern *Nietzsche on Tragedy* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1981.

limited to the theatrical boards. Sloterdijk argues that Nietzsche's thinking also takes the form of a dramatic performance, and Adorno suggests that Benjamin's thought undertakes so successful a critique of philosophical subjectivity that humanity itself becomes the space and place of performance: 'Before [Benjamin's] Medusan glance, man turns into the stage on which an objective process unfolds'<sup>68</sup>

Rather than placing art at 'the centre of existence' – which would be the true spirit of tragedy for Nietzsche – Benjamin closes the abyss by placing humanity at the 'centre of art'<sup>69</sup>. This is not simply another humanism. As we have seen from Adorno's assessment of Benjamin's innovations, this is not to be equated with making the human 'centre stage', the most significant and triumphant aspect of the spectacle. Humanity instead becomes the stage itself: the material basis on which the spectacle unfolds; the space of reproduction; the place where 'ideas' and the truth can be contemplated – where they can show us the configuration of the context of the phenomena of history. What Adorno's reading of Benjamin also brings to light is that this place or stage cannot be reduced to the familiar autonomous subject. Just as tragedy and *Trauerspiel* need an historical, political, as well as an aesthetic understanding, so any understanding of the stage of subjecthood needs to come to terms with the historical, material conditions of its construction. The tragic hero was the creation of its time as was the hero of the *Trauerspiel*, both of which reflect the transience of the autonomy of the subject.

---

<sup>68</sup>T.W. Adorno *Prisms*, London, Spearman, 1967. p.235.

<sup>69</sup> *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 103.



Rosen suggests that one of the advantages of the *Trauerspiel* for Benjamin was the obvious ‘staginess’ of its form. Paradoxically it is this obvious falseness that counteracts its illusion. There is no danger of falling into the abyss of aestheticism because the illusion breaks down in a deliberately unsuccessful representation. This formal aesthetic criticism is, of course, also an historical one. As in the theory of ideas outlined above, where the form, the content and the context could all be accounted for, so in this criticism of *Trauerspiel*, the historical context in which it emerged must not be separated from its expressive dimension. Its formal language is described as ‘the emergence of the contemplative necessities which are implicit in the contemporary theological situation’<sup>70</sup>. By this Benjamin means the decline of theological or eschatological certainties, again classic symptoms of modernity. The decline of these theological certainties do not, however, amount to a Nietzschean ‘death of God’<sup>71</sup> for Benjamin. Instead God becomes ‘incorporated into human existence’ through the workings of Capitalism as a religion which ‘is the expansion of despair, until despair becomes a religious state of the world in the hope that this will lead to salvation.’<sup>72</sup>

However, as Andrew Benjamin argues, *Trauerspiel* is a specifically baroque form. As such, he suggests that it maintains a difficult, transitional relationship

---

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 81.

<sup>71</sup> Nietzsche *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufman, New York, Vintage, 1974. § 108. p. 167.

<sup>72</sup> ‘Capitalism as Religion’, in *Selected Writings, Vol. 1*, p. 289.

with modernity, 'within and as the founding of modernity'.<sup>73</sup> What the staginess of *Trauerspiel* reveals is the disorder and fragmentation of the experience of the baroque. Andrew Benjamin links this to the dialectic of awakening that I have described in the previous chapter.<sup>74</sup> The baroque and *Trauerspiel* can be described as the awakening of modernity; the shock realisation of the fragmentary and dislocated nature of experience. This change in the nature of experience is also a change in the experience of time. Baroque allegory can be interpreted as boldly portraying the transience of the world through its ruination. Andrew Benjamin states that 'It is this which, for Benjamin, marks the end of Universal history.'<sup>75</sup> For Walter Benjamin the baroque and its *Trauerspiel* represent a revolutionary moment in and of history; a new experience of time that also produces a new dislocated and disjunctive reading of history. However, as was discussed in the introduction, modernity 'proper' is more to do with the attempt to cover over the disjunctions and dislocations. It seems as if the moment of awakening in the *Trauerspiel* is being presented by Benjamin as a exemplary moment, a moment that has been lost again to the various modern attempts to re-create linearity, totality and teleology.

The difference between tragedy and *Trauerspiel* – the switch from myth to history – also marks the modern decline in the belief in a transcendent agent of redemption. This is, again, Benjamin's own version of Nietzsche's 'death of

---

<sup>73</sup> Andrew Benjamin, *Present Hope*, p. 82.

<sup>74</sup> Andrew Benjamin conducts his discussion of awakening (*Erwachen*) in relation to an analysis of Fascism as another possibility for modernity. One that involves a futural thinking of the eternal. See *Present Hope* pp. 88-97.

<sup>75</sup> Andrew Benjamin, *Present Hope*, p. 84.

God' as the religion of Capitalism. This acceptance of what Benjamin calls 'the hopelessness of the earthly condition'<sup>76</sup> is what contributes to the *Trauer* - the mourning or sorrow - of the *Trauerspiel*. However although it can no longer endorse a true transcendence it represents a false, pretend transcendence. It plays at transcendence, and it is this deliberate 'staginess' which breaks down the illusion. This pretence is its most honest understanding of its own time. The only honest representation it can give of transcendence is as a play within a play. Again the mundane, historical boundaries of *Trauerspiel* might be described as its active nihilism in which the only transcendence is immanent. To apply Sloterdijk's reading of Nietzsche from earlier in this chapter, we could say that the Apollonian quotation marks which allowed the Dionysian to be represented in tragedy become the parodic 'scare quotes' of *Trauerspiel*.

It is significant then that this is *Trauer-Spiel*; mourning-play instead of *Trauer-Drama*. Although we have seen above that the idea at work in *Trauerspiel* was mourning, it also incorporates the idea of play (*Spiel*). To continue using Benjamin's terminology the most accurate way to put this would be to say that the idea of *Trauerspiel* determines the relationships of the various elements of the concepts of *Trauer* and *Spiel*. The best representation of this idea, for Benjamin, is at work in Calderon's dramas where:

The very precision with which the 'mourning' and the 'play' can harmonize with one another gives it its exemplary validity – the validity

---

<sup>76</sup> *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 81.



of the word and the thing alike.<sup>77</sup>

This exemplary validity that takes place in the harmonisation of word and thing is high praise indeed, from the theorist who finds the origin and truth of language in Adamic naming where word and thing combine.

It is through such a Benjaminian analysis that we can find a useful connection between play and history. Having recognised the historicity of theatrical forms, and that, due to different historical circumstances, the ideas contained in tragedy and *Trauerspiel* must necessarily be different, we can also come to realise that philosophies of history themselves must also exhibit their own historicity. Benjamin valorises the philosophy of history to the extent that he calls on its resources as essential to any understanding of tragedy and *Trauerspiel*. The primary motive for this being the desire to avoid slipping into the ‘abyss of aestheticism’. However, at the same time we can no longer ignore the abyssal dangers posed by the historicity of any idea or philosophy of history.

These dangers arise from what we might characterise as the postmodern challenge to the philosophy of history. This would point to the arrogance of the position of any philosophy of history in supposing that it can give a total or comprehensive description – a grand narrative – of what history is in itself<sup>78</sup>. If

---

<sup>77</sup> *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 81.

<sup>78</sup> The obvious, exemplary account of this identification of grand narratives is Jean-François Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1984. Derrida also undertakes what might be characterised as a postmodern critique of the philosophy of history, especially the Hegelian form as represented by Fukuyama, in *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, & the New International*, London, Routledge, 1994.

philosophies of history are also necessarily products of their own historical circumstances, then they can only ever offer a partial or local narrative, or description of the idea of history. The abyss that Benjamin saw in Nietzsche's aestheticism might also be reflected in Benjamin's historicism. By subscribing to a theory that insists on the necessity of historical understanding for criticism he also implies that historical understanding itself must change over time.

Although we might presume that there lurks a 'true' idea of history behind Benjamin's historical-philosophical stance, we must also bear in mind that his ideas are explicitly not closed totalities, especially when it comes to history. According to this theory an idea of history will be true only if it correctly shows the shape of the context within which the phenomena of history relate to each other – especially the extremes. However any judgement about the truth of this idea will only ever be able to be made once history has been completed. The grand narrative cannot be written until the messianic redemption of history. As we have also seen, this redemption may also be the realisation of difference within history which would produce an open multiplication of narratives, rather than a totalising closure. Benjamin's conception of messianic time can not be thought of as a version of universal history because, as his reading of *Trauerspiel* has shown, the Baroque marked the end of universal history. Messianic redemption then is the redemption of history that is not even necessarily a finality or completion it is instead, as Andrew Benjamin puts it, 'the generalisability of thinking the interruption of the present.'<sup>79</sup>

---

<sup>79</sup> Andrew Benjamin, *Present Hope*, p.97.

We need to be wary of suggesting that there is one, all encompassing idea of history that belongs to modernity. For Benjamin it would be the one that would show the configuration of the context; but within the historical context of modernity there are a multiplicity of competing ideas of history. The ironic aspect of what I have characterised as the postmodern charge against modernity and its most characteristic of philosophical enterprises – the philosophy of history – is that it mistakes the most successful idea of history for its only idea of history. Modernity's idea of history is caricatured as a progressive, linear, teleological narrative. Whereas, if we are able to learn anything from Nietzsche and Benjamin, who both exhibit unparalleled understandings of modernity, it is that this monolithic idea of history is itself a myth.

Counter to Benjamin's accusation that Nietzsche failed to have a sufficient historical-philosophical understanding of tragedy, Sloterdijk suggests instead an implied philosophy of history in the programme for a rebirth of tragedy. In highlighting the dramatic aspects of Nietzsche's thought and writing, he suggests that by representing himself as essential to this rebirth due to his affinity with tragic greatness:

Nietzsche drew attention not to the epic but rather to the dramatic basic structure of modern philosophies of history. For that which occurs on the level of greatness is staged not in terms of narrative but in terms of theatre.<sup>80</sup>

---

<sup>80</sup> Sloterdijk, *Thinker on Stage*, p. 20.



Although Nietzsche is often seen as a proto-postmodernist<sup>81</sup> I would suggest that this theatrical idea of history rather than the usual narrative one can remain comfortably within a modernist reading. A combination and juxtaposition of Benjamin's and Nietzsche's versions of the theatricality, or staging of history will prove fruitful in unearthing the competing conceptions of history embedded within modernity.

I have already drawn attention to the 'play' aspect of *Trauerspiel* and Benjamin's analysis would easily place it in the Nietzschean camp of a theatrical history rather than a narrative one. If the narrative is a linear, progressive history, a story of causation and Socratic cognition would remain as narrative while a presentation of mournful catastrophe that develops randomly through human fallibility, caprice and *hubris* could easily be described in terms of theatrical improvisation. But this is again in danger of homogenising *Trauerspiel* and tragedy by setting them both up in opposition to Socratic optimism or causation. What I would like to suggest here is that the thought of theatre as history can be derived from Nietzsche's thinking on tragedy, but that it is Benjamin's analysis of *Trauerspiel* that can help us to think a more timely theatrical thinking of history. This is a thinking of history as shaped by its extremes and inclusive of competing conceptions of modernity.

---

<sup>81</sup> By Jürgen Habermas, for example, in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*. Cambridge, Polity, 1987, particularly chapter 4 'The Entry into Postmodernity: Nietzsche as a Turning Point.'

In making the link between philosophies or ideas of history and theatre we must also bear in mind other literary genres that inform and are informed by philosophies and ideas of history. A useful tool in coming to understand any philosophy of history might be to find its most appropriate literary model. For example, the novel is the most likely candidate for the dominant model of history as narrative. I would suggest that the *Bildungsroman* could be taken as the model of a German tradition of a philosophy of history, one that follows the line from Kant through Hegel and the Romantics. This would be the story of the progressive acculturation of the enlightened, enlightening or enlightenment world rather than an individual.

What then would be the appropriate genre for a theatrical model of history? Sloterdijk suggests *commedia dell'arte*, 'in which the plot is carried along from scene to scene thanks to the improvisational powers of an ensemble of actors.'<sup>82</sup> This gives us a useful alternative to more restrictive ideas of history that insist on a plan or linear direction to history. To think of history along these lines, as involving a group of stock characters that improvise their way through history from one moment to the next. However is difficult to see how this would fit with the notion of tragedy at work in Nietzsche. It would fit more comfortably with the famous comment by Marx that historical facts and persons occur 'the first time as tragedy, the second as farce'.<sup>83</sup>

---

<sup>82</sup> Sloterdijk, *Thinker on Stage*, p. 96.

<sup>83</sup> Karl Marx 'The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte' in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed, Robert C. Tucker, Norton, New York, 1972, p.436.

In a preliminary sketch for *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* Benjamin outlines the differences in how time works in *Trauerspiel* and Tragedy. He suggests that these two forms also relate to, or can be taken as examples of, two forms of historical time.<sup>84</sup> Tragic time is considered to be a form of what Caygill calls 'authentic' time<sup>85</sup>. By this he means that tragic time displays a present that is 'redeemed and completed by gathering its past to itself'. The time of *Trauerspiel*, on the other hand, is an example of 'inauthentic' time, in which the past ruins the present, 'making it entirely in vain'<sup>86</sup>. However Caygill also reminds us that these two options are not presented as opposed moments of a dialectic that needs to be resolved or overcome. They are really irreconcilable distinctions, just as much as Benjamin's distinction between qualitative and quantitative time. 'For we should not think of time as merely the measure that records the duration of a mechanical change... Historical time, however, differs from this mechanical time.'<sup>87</sup>

Caygill finds the main point of conflict between Benjamin and Heidegger's accounts of time to operate around the question of authenticity. For Benjamin,

---

<sup>84</sup> See 'Trauerspiel and Tragedy' in *Selected Writings, Vol. 1*, p. 55.

<sup>85</sup> Caygill, 'Benjamin, Heidegger and the Destruction of Tradition', in *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy*, p.9. Caygill's paper provides an intriguing account of the similarities and differences between Benjamin's and Heidegger's thought and writing, in relation to the questions of historical time, authenticity, tradition, origin and aesthetics. While it is extremely informative about the, sometimes very subtle, differences at stake, his claim that; 'The programmatic sketch for is *Trauerspiel* book, and indeed for his authorship as a whole, thus emerged from a critique of Heidegger.' does seem somewhat exaggerated and difficult to justify.

<sup>86</sup> Caygill, 'Benjamin, Heidegger and the Destruction of Tradition', p. 9.

<sup>87</sup> 'Trauerspiel and Tragedy', p.55.



historical time is 'infinite in every direction and unfulfilled at every moment'<sup>88</sup>.

This infinity of unfulfillment means that there could be no such thing as authenticity within historical time. For Benjamin, there could only be a fulfilment or authenticity *of* historical time rather than *in* historical time. The first reason for this is that Benjamin no longer thinks of historical time as a container in which historical events might 'happen'. Although historical time does still appear to have the form of the transcendental conditions of possibility of events, 'The event does not fulfill the formal nature of the time in which it takes place... to think of its being filled makes no sense.'<sup>89</sup> The other aspect of this is that, for Benjamin, a truly fulfilled or authentic time, would be a messianic time; the time of the last judgement in which history itself would be redeemed. According to Caygill, the crux of the difference between Benjamin and Heidegger lies in the fact that 'For Benjamin there can be no redemption *in* historical time, only the redemption *of* it.'<sup>90</sup>

The time of tragedy would be an example of fulfilment in historical time and could act as a model of authentic historical time because the death of the tragic hero portrays a moment of fulfilment within historical time. 'In tragedy the hero dies because no one can live in fulfilled time.'<sup>91</sup> On the other hand, the time of *Trauerspiel* portrays an inauthentic historical time that remains unfulfilled even at the moment of death:

---

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., p.55.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., p.55.

<sup>90</sup> Caygill, 'Benjamin, Heidegger and the Destruction of Tradition', p. 10.

<sup>91</sup> 'Trauerspiel and Tragedy', p.56.

Death in the mourning play is not based on the extreme determinacy that individual time confers on the action. It is no conclusive finality; without the certitude of a higher existence and without irony...<sup>92</sup>

Because there is no such thing as authentic historical time, for Benjamin, the *Trauerspiel* model presents a more honest, or appropriate, model for Benjamin's active-nihilistic conception of the transience of messianic nature. Historical time follows the same trajectory of ruination and dispersal as presented in *Trauerspiel*.

While Caygill goes on to explore the consequences of these differences in terms of authenticity, tradition, and origin, there are other aspects of this sketch that he does not explore due to the Heideggerian focus of his text. In particular, Benjamin introduces an account of repetition into his thinking of *Trauerspiel*. This repetition can be read as another aspect of the non-fulfilment of *Trauerspiel* time because it is a repetition that eschews closure and universality: 'The time of the mourning play is not fulfilled, but nevertheless it is finite. It is nonindividual, but without historical universality.'<sup>93</sup> Benjamin associated this finitude and non-universality with an account of repetition that he takes to be the founding law of *Trauerspiel*. Because in *Trauerspiel* 'all play, until death puts an end to the game, so as to repeat the same game, albeit on a grander scale, in another world. It is this repetition on which the law of the mourning play is founded'<sup>94</sup> The repetition at work here is not a reproduction of the same; it is a production of difference, which is why 'The nature of repetition in time is such that no unified form can be

---

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., p.56.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., p.57.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., p.57.

based on it'<sup>95</sup>.

The temporality of these various examples of historical time is inextricably linked to their respective artistic forms. Benjamin describes tragedy's temporal character as 'in the form of drama'<sup>96</sup>. However, although *Trauerspiel* is a dramatic form, its formal repetitions and revolutions that allow it to avoid closure, universality, non-unification, fulfilment and authenticity mean, Benjamin no longer conceives it on traditionally dramatic lines. These would still be the forms appropriate to tragedy and its authentic time which can be fulfilled in history:

The mourning play, on the other hand, is inherently nonunified drama, and the idea of resolution no longer dwells within the realm of drama itself. And here, on the question of form, is the point where the crucial distinction between tragedy and mourning play emerges decisively. The remains of mourning plays are called music. Perhaps there is a parallel here: just as tragedy marks the transition from historical to dramatic time, the mourning play represents the transition from dramatic time to musical time.<sup>97</sup>

It is in this closing sentence of this sketch that we are given the strongest clue as to the most appropriate form on which to model a new conception of historical

---

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., p.57.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., p.57.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., p.57.



time. It is music, the detritus of the historical time of *Trauerspiel*, that will provide the most suitable thinking of a revolutionary temporality of history.<sup>98</sup>

To think of history in terms of play and music does not have to result in an irresponsible devalorization of history - post-ideological post-history. The play-ness of *Trauerspiel* was, for Benjamin, the forgotten aspect that kept it from becoming passive, nihilistic tragedy. There is also a kind of thinking of history as play that can be teased out of Benjamin's thinking on *Trauerspiel*: a thinking that also remembers the sorrow and mourning (*Trauer*) at play in history. This thinking recognises the absence of a redemption that would come from outside history, and because of this it would have no choice but to cling to the wreckage of a modernity that still treats the human rather than art as the basis (*Grund*) - Adorno's stage - of existence and history. *Trauerspiel* may have been able to counteract the abyss of illusion by drawing attention to the fact that it was being staged, but the question that we now need to ask is about the stage itself. Can we still believe in this stage or ground or must we come up with another idea of history that is better able to show the shape of the context in which 'the unique and extreme stands alongside its counterpart'?<sup>99</sup>

The reason that history seems to be so problematic today is that it has always been grounded in the human. Although Benjamin may have changed the position of the human from centre stage to the stage itself and given us a clue to the play-like nature of history the challenge remains to see if we can think of a less problematically humanist notion of history. But the only way to remove this stage

---

<sup>98</sup> This musical thinking of historical time will re-emerge in chapter 6 in relation to Irigaray's engagement with Nietzsche.

on which history is played out is to complete history. Perhaps the most tragic thought is the post-historical; that history has indeed played itself out and the theatre itself is an illusion. Perhaps we are left only with the musical remains.

If we take the stage as a Benjaminian 'idea' we can try and tease out the elements of the constellation which are 'extreme' and discover its configuration from them. So if this stage is the human then it is in the extremes of the human that we may be able to find some Benjaminian hope for the redemption of the human and history. The 'human' will, likewise, only be understood as the shape or configuration of the total significance of this word which must be determined by its extremes. The extremes of humanity at any time also determine the historical specificity of the idea of humanity. To recognise the shape of this constellation from its extremes would be to bring about a more inclusive and open ended idea of the living stage of history. By refusing the exclusion of the non-human it opens up passages between the human and the non-human.

Benjamin's fascination with the non-human, the monstrous, and the demonic can be found in his readings of Kafka's animals and Klee's figures. In Kafka he found a writer who could present the forgotten and discarded aspects of culture and history through making use of the non-human: 'Kafka did not tire of picking up the forgotten from animals'<sup>100</sup>. The forgotten in these animals have a kind of anarchic revolutionary potential. Christine Buci-Glucksmann links this to the 'active forgetting' of Nietzsche's essay on the utility and liability of history. According to her reading, Benjamin and Nietzsche share a temporality of

---

<sup>99</sup> *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 35.

<sup>100</sup> Benjamin, 'Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of his Death', in *Illuminations*, p. 128.

revolution which ‘turns back in a suspension of linear, chronological time’.<sup>101</sup> This is because, as Benjamin says, the reflection of Kafka’s animal’s ‘messes a situation up, yet it is the only hopeful thing about it’.<sup>102</sup> His affirmation of the monstrous and the barbaric are further aspects of brushing history against the grain. Benjamin describes Klee’s figures as ‘barbaric’<sup>103</sup>, and his *Angelus Novus* is treated as full of destructive and demonic potential. If we are to understand the stage of history – the human – on which the dramatic music of history is to be played, then we must include these extremes. As Benjamin himself put it: ‘the monster stands among us as the messenger of a more real humanism’.<sup>104</sup>

The hope is that we will no longer exclude those who have often been positioned as somehow on the extremes or outside of humanity. However this hope should not be construed as teleological enough to suggest that there is a posited goal, an end of history in which all the world would become the stage. This would be to lose the power of Benjamin’s constellation metaphor and turn ideas into universals – universes rather than constellations. The human will always be an exclusive idea because of its specificity, as will any idea, but as a constellation its extremities are negotiable and its shape can change radically. If the human is the stage of history it is not a fixed and immutable ground. Instead it would be akin to the staging of *Trauerspiel*, forming patterns of identity through repetition,

---

<sup>101</sup> Christine Buci-Glucksmann, *Baroque Reason: The Aesthetics of Modernity*, trans. Patrick Camiller, London, Sage Publications, 1994.

<sup>102</sup> Benjamin, ‘Franz Kafka’, p. 128. The most potent of Kafka’s ‘discarded, forgotten objects’ must be Odradek which Benjamin describes as ‘the form which things assume in oblivion’ (‘Franz Kafka’, p. 129.) See Kafka’s story ‘The Cares of a Family Man’, in *The Complete Short Stories of Franz Kafka*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer. London, Minerva, 1992.

<sup>103</sup> Benjamin, ‘Experience and Poverty’, in *Selected Writings, Vol. 2*, p. 733.



rehearsal and mourning. In both Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* and Benjamin's *Origin of German Tragic Drama* we can see the genealogical morphing of the stage. As long as there is a space to present history the show will go on, but what shape that space may develop into and how its human configuration will look might only be seen in the stars.

---

<sup>104</sup> Benjamin, 'Karl Kraus', in *Selected Writings*, Vol. 2, p. 456.

**Part 2.**

**Irigaray**

## **Chapter 4.**

# **Irigaray and the Brushing of History against the Grain**



This age is participating in one of the greatest revolutions ever to take place in the relations between the sexes. Only someone who is aware of this development is entitled to speak about sexuality and the erotic in our day. (Walter Benjamin)<sup>1</sup>

Sexual Difference is one of the most important questions of our age, if not in fact the burning issue. (Luce Irigaray)<sup>2</sup>

Irigaray has, notably, not engaged with Benjamin, to date. This may well be because of his own position as a somewhat marginal figure in the western philosophical canon. Indeed part of the project of this thesis is to explore Benjamin and Irigaray's positions as 'marginal' philosophers in relation to the philosophical tradition, as represented by Hegel and Nietzsche. The focus of this chapter however, will be to show that Irigaray's theory is not only revolutionary in its own right, but that it can also be read as a particular enactment of Benjamin's call to brush history against the grain. Her theory will be seen to be more utopian than Benjamin's although this utopianism will be shown to be multi-faceted as well as problematic. I will also be attempting to set out the thinking of historical and revolutionary time implied in Irigaray's texts.

---

<sup>1</sup> Benjamin 'On Love and Related Matters', in *Selected Works, Vol. 1*. P. 229.

<sup>2</sup> Irigaray 'Sexual Difference', in *The Irigaray Reader*, ed. Margaret Whitford, Oxford, Blackwell, 1991, p.165.

## Revolutionary Irigaray

While it would be relatively uncontroversial to say that Irigaray is a thinker who is concerned with bringing about ethical and political changes, it cannot be assumed that she is a revolutionary thinker. In what follows I would like to set out the evidence for my own reading of her as a revolutionary thinker in the most radical of senses. I will argue that she is truly revolutionary, according Agamben's task of the genuine revolution which 'is never merely to 'change the world', but also – and above all – to 'change time'".

The primary reason for suggesting that Irigaray might be a thinker of revolution is that her work embodies a hope for radical change. Radical change is not necessarily synonymous with revolution, but if revolution can be described as an attempt at total transformation then the modification envisaged by Irigaray must be fairly close to this aspiration. She would have us alter the very *logos* of our existence which colours and forms our thought of/and being and truth. If 'woman' and women<sup>3</sup> obtain a recognition and symbolic expression of their own sexuality and subjectivity then the the symbolic order will be 'changed, changed utterly': to quote Yeats on the Irish revolution of 1916.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> I will be using both terms 'woman' and 'women' here to emphasise the difference between 'woman' as the theoretical or cultural representation of the female and feminine, and 'women' as the concrete and specific examples of the lived experience of the female and the feminine. While it would be tempting to explain this in terms of 'woman' as universal, and 'women' as particular, this would miss the emphasis of Irigaray's project which aims to rework the relationship of universal to particular through disturbing the categories of 'woman' and 'women'. For the remainder of this text 'Woman' will be used without quotation marks.

<sup>4</sup> W.B. Yeats, 'Easter, 1916', *The Works of W.B. Yeats*, Ware, Wordworth Editions, 1994, p. 152.

This utter change will emerge from her attempts to disrupt philosophical and theoretical discourse. I will be reading this as a possible candidate for revolution as an interruption of history. By challenging the phallogentric and phallogratic philosophical tradition and its discourse she sets the scene for a change in all discourses,

it is indeed precisely philosophical discourse that we have to challenge, and *disrupt*, inasmuch as this discourse sets forth the law for all others, inasmuch as it constitutes the discourse on discourse.<sup>5</sup>

To set out to change all discourse by disrupting philosophical discourse can easily be translated into revolutionary terms because it is an aspiration to radicalise the whole of our social, cultural, political and economic order.

Why must this transformation necessarily involve revolution instead of revision? An adequate theory of sexual difference could perhaps be constructed using the already available theoretical tools and methods. Revisionist tactics will not work for Irigaray because she considers the problem to be so deeply embedded within the available theoretical tools and materials themselves. To construct any sort of theory is already to be complicit in the exclusion and repression of woman because there is no place for her within theoretical discourse. Irigaray's repeated claim is that the existence of theoretical discourse is dependent on the exclusion and repression of woman and so, no matter how sophisticated the theory, it will

---

<sup>5</sup> Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1985, p. 74.



never be able to properly recognise and articulate the specificity of femaleness and femininity.

Indeed Irigaray's concerns relate to many of those that we have seen emerge in our examination of Benjamin's theory. Her desire to avoid complicity with the existent system reminds us of Benjamin's own concern with complicity in his 'Critique of Violence' essay<sup>6</sup>. Her claim that theoretical and philosophical discourse is itself dependent on the exclusion and suppression of women also relates to the questions of representation and philosophical presentation raised in chapter 3. Indeed these concerns also bring us back to the questions about theatrical models for the staging of philosophy and history, as well as to the issues concerning the relationship between tragedy and history.

In a discussion of her interpretive strategy in reading the texts that define the history of philosophy Irigaray begins to question '*the conditions under which systematicity itself is possible*'.<sup>7</sup> She identifies part of these conditions of possibility for the systematicity of philosophy to be

the *scenography* that makes representation feasible, representation as defined in philosophy, that is, the architectonics of its theatre, its framing in space-time, its geometric organization, its props, its actors, their respective positions, their dialogues, indeed their tragic relations...<sup>8</sup>.

---

<sup>6</sup> Benjamin, 'Critique of Violence', in *One Way Street*.

<sup>7</sup> *This Sex Which Is Not One*, p. 74.

<sup>8</sup> *This Sex Which Is Not One*, p. 75.

Much of her writing can then be read as an analysis of how philosophy presents and represents itself. Just as we have seen that for Benjamin philosophy must continually confront the question of presentation, so for Irigaray it must confront the question of the conditions for presentation. The conditions which ground the presentations of history's form and content as well as its space-time. My own reading here will be primarily concerned with her thinking of the way this space-time has been framed within philosophy and philosophy's thinking of history.

The easiest way to convey her assessment of the philosophical, theoretical and cultural exclusion of woman and women is simply to quote the title of one of the chapters of her *Speculum of the Other Woman*; 'Any Theory of the "Subject" Has Always Been Appropriated by the "Masculine" (*masculin*).'<sup>9</sup> From this title we can derive a fair assessment of her evaluation of the history of Western Philosophy, as well as the social, cultural and symbolic systems that are based on its theoretical constructions. Although we could criticise Irigaray here for her tendency to represent the whole of Western Philosophy as a phallogentric enterprise, what is at issue is not whether there have been exceptions to this monolithic misogyny, but how this appropriation of the subject has worked.

Although Irigaray is concerned primarily with psychoanalytic theories of the subject in the 'Any Theory of the Subject' chapter, I shall be reading it as

---

<sup>9</sup> Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1985, p. 133. While '*masculin*' is translated here as 'masculine' it can mean both male and masculine. Likewise, where Irigaray uses '*féminin*' this can mean either, or both, feminine or female. This complicates the texts leaving the interpretation of whether the reference is to nature, culture, or both, a difficult one.

applicable to strictly philosophical theories, such as Kant's, as a paradigmatic account of the philosophical subject. What brings all these theories together, for Irigaray, is that, as theories, they all participate in the symbolic order. The 'Symbolic' is a Lacanian psychoanalytic term which refers to the ability of the subject to participate in language (*langue*)<sup>10</sup>. Language here doesn't only refer to words, vocabulary and grammatical rules, but, as Joan W. Scott explains, language is

rather, a meaning constituting system: that is, any system – strictly verbal or other – through which meaning is constructed and cultural practices organised and by which, accordingly, people represent and understand their world, including who they are and how they relate to others.<sup>11</sup>

Theories are not only products of language users they can also be historical interventions into, or influences on, the way we use, think about, and construct language. Irigaray's point is that the symbolic that these theories are necessarily and inextricably a part of, is itself a gendered system. In *Speculum* she traces the masculinisation of the symbolic and of all theories, using examples from Plato through to Lacan.<sup>12</sup> To try to sum up this book we could say that the whole of our

---

<sup>10</sup> For a full and accessible account of Lacan's system and theory see Elizabeth Grosz, *Jacques Lacan; A Feminist Introduction*, London, Routledge, 1990.

<sup>11</sup> Scott, Joan C. 'Deconstructing Equality-Versus-Difference: Or, the Uses of Poststructuralist Theory for Feminism', *Feminist Studies* 14, no.1 (Spring 1988), p.34.

<sup>12</sup>With regard to Plato, she executes a lengthy reading of his Myth of the Cave from *Republic* part Seven, section 7, in which she is able to give a convincing account of how it is a foundational move of philosophy to exclude woman and women. See *Speculum of the Other Woman*, p 243-365. I will not try to present a synopsis of her ingenious deconstruction of Plato here, but will merely hint at the associations she makes between the shape of the cave, the womb, and Plato's



culture is based on the exclusion of women and women. A theme that occurs again and again throughout her texts is that this exclusion is more than just a privileging of the male or masculine position – it is not just a crude attempt to enable men to reach and maintain positions of symbolic power – it is also necessary to the whole functioning and maintenance of the system. In the final note of the book she puts it thus:

in relation to the working of theory, the/a woman fulfils a twofold function – as the mute outside that sustains all systematicity (*de dehors mutique soutenant toute systématique*); as a maternal and still silent ground that nourishes all foundations (*maternel (encore) silencieux dont se nourrit tout fondement*) ...<sup>13</sup>.

If the symbolic is really a male or masculine symbolic that depends on the exclusion of woman and women, and if theory is automatically implicated in this exclusion, the problem then becomes one of trying to find a place or method by which woman and women can enter into language. Part of the reason that Irigaray's writing is so impenetrable and strange is that she is attempting to use a language, which she doesn't consider to be her own, – it is not her mother tongue (*langue*), we might say – to express and create a symbolic that would include the female and feminine. She can only do this with the resources available to her and therefore uses a strategy of mimicry to unfaithfully repeat, distort, and therefore, subvert the symbolic that is attempting to exclude her. She writes,

---

privileging of the philosopher's movement away from this 'Hystera' (or womb) towards the sun. This chapter will focus instead on Irigaray's relationship to Benjamin and Kant.

<sup>13</sup> *Speculum*, p 365.

That place may only emerge if the feminine is granted its own “specificity” in its relation to language. Which implies a logic other than the one imposed by discursive coherence. I have attempted to practice that other “logic” in the writing of *Speculum*...<sup>14</sup>.

Irigaray considers the masculinisation of the symbolic, and therefore Western culture as a whole, to be so successfully hegemonic that it even effects the representations of a female/feminine imaginary. The ‘Imaginary’ is another Lacanian psychoanalytic term which describes the stage in the formation of the ego in which an infant can recognise himself or herself as ‘whole’. Because this stage precedes the symbolic and full entry into language it has often been used by feminist theorists to try and construct a developmental stage that might be described as more authentically feminine.<sup>15</sup> According to Lacan this stage involves an intellectual act of re-cognition in which many of the distinctions and ruptures of the mature ego are enacted. Here we discover the distinctions between self and other, subject and object. This recognition takes place in a mirror, but, for Irigaray, the (Lacanian) theory behind this already denies a woman’s ‘specificity of her own relationship to the imaginary’<sup>16</sup> because it is constructed

---

<sup>14</sup> Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter, 1985b, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, p 153.

<sup>15</sup> Examples of very different uses of the imaginary in Feminist Theory include Michelle Le Doeuff, *The Philosophical Imaginary*, trans. C. Gordon, London, Athlone Press, 1989; Moira Gatens, *Imaginary Bodies: Ethics, Power and Corporeality*, London, Routledge, 1996; Drucilla Cornell, *The Imaginary Domain: Abortion, Pornography and Sexual Harassment*, London, Routledge, 1995.

<sup>16</sup> *Speculum*, p 133.

according to what the male gaze would see in a flat mirror. In Irigaray's words, it 'reflects the greater part of women's sexual organs only as a hole (*trou*)'<sup>17</sup>.

Irigaray's task is not only to try and disrupt the symbolic enough to create a place for a female/feminine symbolic, it is also an attempt to refigure the imaginary in such a way that it would allow her to see her own specificity in her relationship to it. She repeatedly mimics the positions that she considers culture and theory to have attributed to women in order to undermine those cultures and theories. By drawing attention to oppositions such as 'subject' and 'object', and 'sun' and 'earth', she is able to emphasise how deeply embedded such binary oppositions are in the representations of the male/female opposition. By taking woman's position as the one that is already given to her in the symbolic Irigaray shows how woman is actually the ground (the earth) upon which man has built his theoretical abstractions.

According to Irigaray, the philosophical subject is only able to set itself up as a subject if it has an appropriate and compliant object to reflect its self-image. Irigaray plays with the idea of woman as the mirror in which man sees an inferior copy of himself. In fact, rather than thinking of the universal subject as the standard by which other subjects are measured, Irigaray suggests that this abstract standard can only exist because woman is,

a bench mark (*repérage*) that is ultimately more crucial than the subject, for he can sustain himself only by bouncing back off some objectiveness, some objective (*de quelque objectivité, de quelque objectif*) ...<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p 89.



These theories of the subject make woman into a flat, static, mirror or object in order to be able to erect the male human's status as subject. If woman is allowed to move, or to curve, or to show herself as she really might be in her own subjectivity, then the male theorists' erections would collapse.

It is Kant's transcendental self that Irigaray takes as a prime example of a construction of the universal subject. The transcendental self, in Kant's system, is what needs to be presupposed in order to bring all the elements of experience together into an understandable whole. It does this through applying the categories and forms, that are the basic framework and structure of our thinking, to our perceptions. This not only brings our experience together into a coherent whole, it also makes the 'I' that is experiencing into a single, coherent self. However, for Irigaray, it is the transcendental nature of this self that is another symptom of the theoretical forgetting of woman and the mother. Because it is transcendental it stands out from, or above, the material world that it both projects and perceives:

Rising to a perspective that would dominate the totality (*tout*), to the vantage point of greatest power, he [the male theorist of the subject (Kant/Lacan)] thus cuts himself off from the bedrock (*ainsi se scinde-t-il de son assise matérielle*), from his empirical relationship with the matrix (*matriciel*) that he claims to survey.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p 133.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p 133-4. The reference to the matrix is part of a continuing play between matter, *mater*, and matrix, which again, is mimicking the positioning of woman as nature, earth, or ground.

Kant's transcendental subject, and any theory of the subject according to Irigaray, distances him from the earth /woman /mother.<sup>20</sup> By doing so he distances himself from the *sine qua non* of his existence, subjectivity and life itself. It is these movements of theoretical abstraction that Irigaray reads as having used woman as a ground or foundation on which to build higher and more ethereal structures and systems which can then leave behind the bedrock of their abstracted being. From Plato's attempts to move towards the sun and the heavenly world of forms, through the universalisation of the Kantian transcendental self, to the self-reflexive Lacanian subject, these theories can all be seen to function on the exclusion of woman.

What is required is a revolution involving not only the theoretical superstructure, but also its base. This revolution will bring to light, not only what the philosophers are trying to reach or create, but also what it is that they are trying to move away from, forget, or destroy. As far as Irigaray is concerned, we could say that, without the Mother there would be no life, without the concrete there would be no abstract, and without the particular there would be no universal. She would like a closer examination and non-misogynistic evaluation of the particular, if that is to be the position that woman is assigned. In a way that is analogous with Benjamin's concern for and attention to specificity, Irigaray calls for an attentiveness to the specificity of each woman's *hic et nunc*. She emphasises the

---

<sup>20</sup> The problem, for Irigaray, writing in French, is one of the language of subjectivity itself.

Another reason why any theory of the subject is always appropriated by the masculine is that the subject in French is a masculine noun (*le sujet*). While the subject is nominally neutral in English, Irigaray's analysis shows how this gendering is still at work at a deeper level.

radical difference not just between men, and their death driven futurity and finitude, and women, but also between women themselves.

Not only is woman positioned as object, matter and ground etcetera, but this ground must be formed out of inert matter if it is to provide the stable foundation for man's status as a subject. This inertia is not only a lack of movement, or change, it is also a way of making woman silent and unrepresentable within theory and culture. Taking the Kantian transcendental subject as paradigmatic, Irigaray re-interprets its powers of projection. The Kantian subject projects and represents the object or objective world through its framework of space and time, the categories, and the schemata of the imagination. But this is much more than a neutral attempt to make sense of the chaos. Irigaray states that man 'projects a something to absorb, to take, to see, to possess . . . as well as a patch of ground to stand upon, a mirror to catch his reflection.'<sup>21</sup>

Irigaray reverses the positions here. She would consider the truth of the matter to be that woman is already there and, as the forgotten mother creates and sustains the subject in a way that is opposed to the Kantian account that has the object as a projection and construction of the subject. Kant recognises the necessity of the object for the formation of the subject, but refuses to allow the object her own voice or representation. To allow the object to speak would upset the unity and coherence of the subject who needed this myth of projection and inertia to become a transcendent subject in the first place:

---

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p 134.



the silent allegiance of the one (*l'un(e)*) guarantees the auto-sufficiency (*l'auto-suffisance*), the auto-nomy (*l'auto-nomie*) of the other as long as no questioning of this mutism as a symptom - of historical repression (*refoulement*) - is required. But what if the object started to speak (*se mettait à parler*)?...<sup>22</sup>

Irigaray's revolution can partly be considered as taking up the position of the object in order to maintain a radical difference from the universal subject that has been constructed by theory. She could be described as trying to elaborate a theory of the speaking object. However, this does not mean that she wants to passively accept the role that has been given to woman by a phallogentric culture. The inertia and silence of the object is only the inertia and silence given to it by the theories that require these qualities in order to create and maintain their positions. Woman and the object only appear to be silent because theory and culture refuse to listen properly, or to be sensitive to their movements and presence. What would enable us to hear woman and the object as well as feel their presence and movement would be a completely different theory of subject and object. It would be one in which the dichotomy of subject and object would no longer be dependent on the object simply being an inert, reflection of the subject. It would be a theory in which the object would be granted existence in her own right.

Irigaray tries to express a theory of radical difference which would move beyond the fixed poles of sameness and difference. She doesn't just take up difference as the opposite of sameness or equality. Instead, she tries to develop a notion of

---

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p 135.

difference that is no longer allied to the sense that it is still just one term or pole of a binary opposition. With reference to sexual difference in particular, she suggests that male/masculine (*masculin*) and female/feminine (*féminin*), are terms

that cannot fittingly be designated by the number “two” and the adjective “different”, if only because they are not susceptible to comparison. To use such terms serves only to reiterate a movement begun long since, that is, the movement to speak of the “other” in a language already systematized by/for the same.<sup>23</sup>

The difference at stake here is no longer to be thought of as what is different from the same. To be different in the prevailing phallogentric symbolic is simply to be different from the same, to be the object of the subject or to be the imperfect copy of that subject. What Irigaray would like us to recognise is a radical alterity that she calls the ‘other of the other’ that escapes being represented as the ‘other of the same’. These terms are again responses to Lacanian theory which explicitly refused the thought of the ‘Other of the Other’<sup>24</sup>. For, Lacan this ‘Other’ is a further aspect of the rupture or ‘cut’ that forms the subject. This splitting occurs at the same time as the subject recognises that it is distinguished from the mother. Lacan identifies ‘the Mother’ as that which actually occupies ‘the place of the Other’.<sup>25</sup> So Irigaray is not only making a direct challenge to Lacan’s theory but also to all theories in which the only

---

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p 139.

<sup>24</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan, London, Tavistock Publications, 1977, p. 311. Irigaray does not capitalise ‘other’ as does Lacan, thus reflecting the less transcendent nature of her ‘other’. I shall follow Irigaray in the non-capitalisation of ‘other’.

<sup>25</sup> Lacan, *Écrits*, p. 311.

possible 'other' was to be the 'other' of the masculine same. The 'other of the other' would be an otherness that is not derivative of, and without reference to the masculinised theory that privileges the same.

Irigaray even questions the possibility of trying to construct another theory from this mimetic procedure, sometimes seeing it as an ongoing revolution, a permanent challenge to the status quo, rather than an attempt to construct a new order. If revision is not feasible revolution must be brought into play:

The issue is not one of elaborating a new theory of which woman would be the *subject* or the *object*, but of jamming ( *d'enrayer*) the mechanism itself (*elle-même*),...<sup>26</sup>

This jamming will also have to operate according to a revolutionary logic if it is not to return or recapture woman for phallocracy, and according to Irigaray, this resource is available through the '*disruptive excess*' which 'is possible on the feminine side.'<sup>27</sup>

Revolution has at least two components, destruction and creation; for the new to emerge, the old must give way in an act of destructive creation or creative destruction. For Irigaray, one of the stages of her challenge to phallogocentric culture, along with an interrogation of the conditions of the possibility of its metaphysical systematicity and a psychoanalysis of its philosophical discourse, 'is to work at "destroying" the discursive mechanism'.<sup>28</sup> Again the logic and

---

<sup>26</sup> *This Sex*, p. 78.

<sup>27</sup> *This Sex*, p. 78.

<sup>28</sup> *This Sex*, p.76.



method need to avoid complicity and possible recapture. So Irigaray elects to use the *mimicry* of femininity and the *style* of the feminine because '[i]ts "style" resists and explodes every firmly established form, figure, idea or concept.'<sup>29</sup>

The destruction of phallogentric discourse and the power structure that it sets up and maintains will come about through a questioning or interrogation of the assumptions about sex and gender that support that discourse. For Irigaray this interrogation is indeed revolutionary because;

if, by exploits of her hand, woman were to reopen paths into (once again) a/one logos (*dans un (encore) logos*) that connotes her as castrated... then a certain sense, which still constitutes the sense of history also, will undergo (*s'en trouvera soumis*) unparalleled interrogation, revolution.<sup>30</sup>

This unparalleled interrogation is revolutionary because it shakes the certainties of the supposed conditions of the possibilities of the systematicity and completeness of metaphysical discourse. By questioning the heretofore hidden motives of the logos she is questioning the whole of the extant interpretation of history.

Irigaray even plays with her revolutionary thinking in terms of planetary rotation. By following this metaphor we can see that Kant's own 'Copernican revolution' placed man at the centre of the universe and, in some respects, was no advance on ancient theories that ascribed maleness to the sun and femaleness to the earth.

---

<sup>29</sup> *This Sex*, p. 79.

<sup>30</sup> *Speculum*, p. 142.

He further distances himself from woman who becomes a satellite spinning around him and reflecting his light. But the earth might have her own revolution:

If the earth turned and more especially turned upon herself, the erection of the subject might thereby be disconcerted and risk losing its elevation and penetration.<sup>31</sup>

As we have seen this revolution would be the revolution of the object, since she has not had the status of subject other than as a defective copy of the same, male subject. This poses a threat to the same, male, subject because he has always required the object to ground and reinforce his own subjecthood. Without the support of the object, the subject is in imminent danger of collapse.

As well as invoking the destructive aspects of revolution Irigaray also undertakes a creative process. Indeed, in true revolutionary fashion the creative aspect cannot be separated from the destructive. In creating a voice for woman, and trying to find a language in which woman and women can articulate their own specificity, Irigaray is destroying the language which is not hers, because it has depended on woman's silence for its own utterance and amplification. The unparalleled interrogation mentioned above will lead to the previously unthought and unthinkable. If woman who has been relegated to the position of passive, aphasic, object starts to speak, if she becomes a subject in her own right, then that which was unimaginable for phallographic discourse would have happened. What could be more revolutionary than bringing about the unimaginable? What will also be involved in the emergence of the unimaginable will be a reworking of the revolutionary dialectic of destruction and creation. What will also be destroyed in

a creative revolution will be destruction itself. As we will see later in the conclusion to this thesis, here again, Irigaray comes close to Benjamin in the links that are made between creative revolution and destruction.

The revolution of the object into the unimaginable female, feminine subject will not come about through a Hegelian type of dialectical movement; through a struggle for recognition between consciousnesses such as that of the 'master' and his 'slave'.<sup>32</sup> As 'matter' and 'mirror' woman has always been the ground of the male subject's own recognition, and so this revolution is about the 'mirror' coming to recognise herself, not in or through the subject's eyes – which would be the only option according to this dialectic – but through her own eyes. Indeed, Irigaray challenges this whole specular metaphysics of sight, often preferring the completion to come about through touch.

Irigaray's revolution is of the most radical kind. Since the unimaginable cannot be programmed, even to plan an outcome might be considered as reactionary. Thus, if the articulation of femininity is to come from a different symbolic economy it will

necessitate operations as yet non-existent (*non encore existantes*), whose complexity and subtlety can only be guessed at without prejudicing the results. Without a teleology already in operation somewhere.<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 133.

<sup>32</sup> This Hegelian dialectic can still be traced in Lacan's work. See Teresa Brennan. *Between Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, London, Routledge, 1989, for a reading of Lacan in which he is seen to rework Hegel.

<sup>33</sup> *Speculum*, p. 139.



This revolution will have no *telos*, neither will it have an *arché*; it is an anarchic revolution because, if it were to follow any of the principles laid down by the economy of the same, it would fail to create any real difference. Irigaray's is another affirmative revolution; positing no definite programme. Her new era of history will only emerge from the fracturing of discourse, syntax, teleology and representation. Even the method she suggests for carrying this out sounds anarchic:

Turn everything upside down, inside out, back to front. *Rack it with radical convulsions*, carry back, reimport (*reporter, ré-importer*), those crises that her "body" suffers in her impotence to say what disturbs her...<sup>34</sup>

## **Irigaray's Benjaminian Revolution**

Having argued that Irigaray can be read as a revolutionary thinker and a thinker of revolution I will now develop a reading of her work as brushing history against the grain. This is also what Joanna Hodge has in mind when she rewrites Benjamin to say that,

There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of misogyny. And just as such a document is not free of misogyny, so misogyny taints also the manner in which it was transmitted from one owner to another. A historical materialist therefore dissociates herself from it as far as possible. She regards it as her task to brush

---

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 142.

history against the grain.<sup>35</sup>

Many feminist critiques of history and the philosophy of history will try to show how woman and women have been excluded, marginalised and ignored by those who have been in the position to decide which events and characters merit a place or role in history. An essential part of a feminist brushing of history against the grain will then be to remember the forgotten and buried history of woman and women. It will be the attempt to find her/their story and the attempt to tell it in the hope that it will be heard, listened to, and understood. More than this, however it will also be an attempt to experience this history through a remembrance (*Eingedenken*) that brings it together with the present in order to project a more just future.

The relationship of woman and women to history is one of absence or, at best, of playing a supporting role. A feminist critique of history would suggest that it has been too frequently viewed as something that has been made by 'great men'. A general critique of the 'great-man' theory of history would refute the possibility of individuals imposing their views and actions on history<sup>36</sup>. A feminist critique, such as Irigaray's, is not only a critique of the 'great-man' theory it is also a critique of less explicitly gendered views of history. For example although the nineteenth century 'Whig' interpretation of history would consider itself to be a

---

<sup>35</sup> Joanna Hodge, 'Irigaray Reading Heidegger', in *Engaging with Irigaray*, eds. Burke, Schor & Whitford, New York, Columbia University Press, 1994, p. 191.

<sup>36</sup> Recent examples of this theory include A.J.P. Taylor's comment that 'the history of modern Europe can be written in terms of three titans: Napoleon, Bismarck, and Lenin.' (A.J.P. Taylor, *From Napoleon to Stalin: Comments on European History*. London, H. Hamilton, 1950, p. 74.)

universal theory based on progressive liberal principles, a feminist reading would still attempt to show the ‘gender blindness’ at work in this theory.<sup>37</sup>

Irigaray’s critique of history can be compared with Benjamin’s when it is applied to various theories of history. It too will show the problematic commitment to a linear narrative of progress in the ‘Whig’ interpretation of history. Although she doesn’t engage directly with historians or philosophers of history we could also use Irigaray to show the masculinist heroics embedded in theories as diverse as Spengler’s and Toynbee’s analysis of the Western civilisation as attributable to a circular patterning of history, and Fisher’s outright rejection of any meaning or pattern of history at all.<sup>38</sup> Irigaray is most likely to have been most directly influenced by the theories of history and historiography of Fernand Braudel and the *Annales* historians. Their structuralist inspired rejection of the ‘pure facts’ of history also showed a healthy hostility to the emphasis on both ‘action -heroes’ and individual events. This method lends itself to a feminist reading which would be able to explain the relationships of gender and power in terms which could also be developed in a post-structuralist reading. More significantly it also produced a theory of historical time which not only avoids the time of linear narrative, but also proposes multiple and different layers of time within history.<sup>39</sup>

---

<sup>37</sup> For an analysis and strident critique of the ‘Whig’ view of history – one that is also ‘gender blind’ – see Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History*, London, Bell 1931.

<sup>38</sup> Spengler, *Decline of the West*, 2 Vols. Trans. Charles Francis Atkinson, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1922. Toynbee, Arnold J. *A Study of History*, 10 Vols., London, Oxford University Press, 1933-48; H.A.L. Fisher *A History of Europe*, London, Arnold, 1934.

<sup>39</sup> See Fernand Braudel, *On History*, trans. Sarah Matthews, London, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1980.



Irigaray can be read as agreeing with Benjamin that history is the history of the victors. This history of victory has been so successful that it has become increasingly more difficult to remember woman and women who have been portrayed as so soundly vanquished that their voices can no longer be heard. While Irigaray accepts the exclusion of women from history she rejects the view that would attribute to them the status of victims. What Irigaray offers us is a way to hear the voices of those women again. The fact that they cannot be heard is not the same as the claim that they have been silenced. Where feminism could build on a project of brushing history against the grain is that, in a similar way that Benjamin considers cultural treasures to owe their very existence to the anonymous as well as the heroic,<sup>40</sup> we also owe our own very existence to another kind of invisible and forgotten presence, the mother. Irigaray takes her place in this struggle as the one who most forcefully shows how the mother has originally and repeatedly been anonymised or written out of history. It is Irigaray who, through her readings of various originary myths, tells us that this culture not only has the anonymous mother to thank for its existence but that it has the murder of the mother to thank for its existence.

This can be seen most clearly in Irigaray's reading of Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, in a lecture entitled 'Body against Body: in Relation to the Mother'. Clytemnestra is murdered by the 'hero' of that piece, Orestes (her son), and he is then vindicated by Apollo and Athena. This is traditionally read as a description of the foundation of the Greek city state on the principles of justice and rationality. However,

Irigaray sees in it something much more disturbing. For her,

One thing is plain, not only in everyday events but in the whole social scene: our society and our culture operate on the basis of an original matricide.<sup>41</sup>

This matricide is not only representative of the attempt to silence and sideline women and woman, it is also one of the original attempts to maintain the power of patriarchy – the power of the husband and the father.

We can start to discern the form of revolution at work in Irigaray's texts from her references to this original matricide. She suggests that,

The substratum is the woman who reproduces the social order, who is made this order's infrastructure: the whole of our western culture is based upon the murder of the mother. The man-god-father killed the mother in order to take power. And isn't there a fluidity, some flood, that could shake the social order? And if we make the foundations of the social order shift, then everything will shift. That is why they are so careful to keep us on a leash...<sup>42</sup>

As with all of Irigaray's writings it is useful to take note of the form and rhetoric of this statement, as well as its explicit content. Again we are presented with the claim that the whole of western culture is based on an original matricide. There are at least two ways to read this claim: either as a straightforward 'fact' that can

---

<sup>40</sup> Benjamin, 'On the Concept of History', Thesis VII, *Illuminations*, p. 248.

<sup>41</sup> Irigaray, 'Body Against Body: In Relation to the Mother' in *Sexes and Genealogies*, trans. Gillian C. Gill, New York, Columbia University Press, 1993, p. 11.

<sup>42</sup> Irigaray, 'Women-Mothers, the Silent Substratum of the Social Order' in *The Irigaray Reader*, p. 47.

be affirmed or denied, or as a deliberately insolent rhetorical strategy that is both playing philosophy at its own game while trying to undermine and change the rules of the game altogether. I will read such statements in the latter spirit as this fits more comfortably with her strategy of mimesis. Here, Irigaray's hyperbolic accusation is followed by a more tentative question about the form and possibility of revolution in a way that reflects the contrast between what we might call the *ancien régime* and the 'new order'. In other words the 'bad' old order can be seen in the form of a set of definite, unambiguous, confident and hyperbolic pronouncements. The revolution yet to come, on the other hand, is posed as a question, one that has not yet taken definite form. The fluidity suggested by the metaphor of a flood may be the fluidity of the logic of a system that is not defined in such a rigid fashion. If the revolution is to come as a flood then the 'everything' that will shift will necessarily include the ways of thinking and structuring thought and representation. The flood may well free 'everything' up permanently, rather than settling back down into different, rigid formations.

There will be a two-fold movement involved in any feminist brushing of history against the grain. There will be an instigation of an alternative temporality of history alongside the more familiar practice of actively seeking historical instances of particular women's contributions to history. Although Irigaray is aware of the latter, in as much as she calls on women 'not to forget moreover that we already have a history, that certain women, despite all the cultural obstacles, have made their mark upon history and all too often have been forgotten by



us.’<sup>43</sup>, she rarely puts this into practice. Her contribution to brushing history against the grain is the more abstract, and perhaps also, the more radical gesture of transfiguring our conception of the shape of history itself. Her concern is, along with Benjamin’s, with the form of history rather than its content. Both of these thinkers are trying to describe a more inclusive form of history and historical time. The suggestion is that the reason for the lack of female figures in history is not just due to lack of research, but due to the fact that our concept of history is another aspect of a patriarchal culture that excludes woman and women. So the dominant modes of conceptualising history must be made more inclusive. The form must be changed in order for the content to be properly revolutionised. It is time to change time.

It is the emphatic sense of remembrance (*Eingedenken*) as practice and its accompanying experience (*Erfahrung*) that was found in Benjamin’s texts that can also be put to work in Irigaray’s texts. If, as she suggests, Western culture is based on the murder of the mother, to remember that murder is also to create an experience. To remember the murder of the mother is also to remember the original exclusion of woman from the symbolic order, which necessarily includes history. Irigaray’s remembrance, in this case, is a remembrance of something that is outside the given symbolic order, and if we can bring Irigaray together with Benjamin in brushing history against the grain we can have a political experience of something outside the symbolic order. In this case brushing history against the grain will create the possibility for a new symbolic order which will include a place for the mother. To retrace the history of the exclusion of women from

---

<sup>43</sup> Irigaray, ‘Body Against Body: In Relation to the Mother’, p. 19.

Western culture will begin to destroy that very culture of exclusion. Irigaray's brushing of history against the grain will instigate a logic of inclusion in place of the phallogocentric logic of exclusion. Indeed, the strict, binary opposition between inclusion and exclusion will also be challenged as a result of this process.<sup>44</sup>

Irigaray's relationship to the Western philosophical tradition is, in some ways, similar to Benjamin's relationship to tradition itself. His messianism was part of a Judaic tradition which is, at the same time, critical of that tradition. Indeed, one aspect of what is philosophically interesting about Judaism is that it could be described as a tradition of critique. To some extent Irigaray could be described as remaining within, or carrying on, the Western philosophical tradition, by carrying out her critique of it. I would argue that she remains within its discourse of rationality by trying to construct a female rationality, and is not, as is sometimes assumed, carrying out a wholesale destruction of rationality. She also uses the traditional texts of the Western philosophical canon – Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, etcetera – and makes them reveal their own silencing and excluding moves and gestures. In Benjamin's terms she makes them reveal their own barbarity.

It is in relation to thinking of meaning in history, and its relation to making history, that we find a relevant example of how Irigaray brushes history against the grain. Thinking of history in terms of genealogy we are faced with seemingly insurmountable difficulties in trying to trace a maternal history in patriarchal or

---

<sup>44</sup> I am also including the 'homogenisation' described by Cavarero in the introduction under the rubric of 'exclusion', as it is an inclusion that disempowers.

patrilineal societies. In patrilineal societies woman has no name of her own: hers is either the name of the father or of the husband. If her history cannot be the history of her name it must be the history of her blood. For Irigaray the maternal genealogy is that of the *sang*, the blood that passes from mother to child. This is the *sang rouge*, the red blood which, for Irigaray, belongs to the 'other of the other'; that is, the other which is not constructed as an inferior resemblance of the male. To posit woman as the 'other of the other' relieves her from her role as man's reflection, it gives her space to create her own identity, rationality and, of course, history. Irigaray reads the symbolic order of patriarchy as endowing woman with only white blood, *sang blanc*, which is a French homophone of *semblant*, semblance. To trace the history of her (red) blood therefore creates an identity which is no longer a mere resemblance.

In a reading of the myth of Antigone, Irigaray sees the point at which this blood tie with the mother becomes buried in history.<sup>45</sup> Because Antigone privileges the blood tie over the *polis* she is excluded from the *polis*. The maternal blood tie is written out of history as no longer able to be a recognisable criteria for citizenship or subjecthood. The exclusion that has taken place here is also shown to lead to the forgetting of the necessity of blood for life. Although Woman is excluded from the *polis*, the *polis* is dependent on her blood for its existence. As Irigaray puts it,

Woman is the guardian of the blood. But as both she and it (*celui-ci/celle-ci*) have had to use their substance to nourish the universal

---

<sup>45</sup> Irigaray's readings of the myth of Antigone will be explored in the next chapter as part of an investigation into her relationship to Hegel and the dialectic.



consciousness of self, it is in the form of *bloodless shadows* – of unconscious fantasies – that they maintain an underground subsistence. Powerless on earth, she remains the very ground in which manifest mind (*l'esprit*) secretly sets its roots and draws its strength.<sup>46</sup>

Irigaray goes on to suggest that this exclusion has been sustained through an active forgetting. Man has memory and history only at the expense of woman forgetting herself. This selflessness involves the destruction and forgetting of woman's self so that man can have a soul, a community, and a history. If woman is to be remembered by brushing history against the grain then the vampire of phallogentric reason that has fed and thrived for so long on the blood of maternal genealogy will have to look elsewhere for its nourishment. As Irigaray warns us,

at times the forces of the world below become hostile because they have been denied the right to live in daylight. These forces rise up and threaten to lay waste the community. To turn it upside down...<sup>47</sup>

As in Benjamin, there would seem to be an active remembrance at work here. One which works as in a 'counter-striving disposition' to the active forgetting of phallogentric reason. This would empower the already buried, the vanquished of history to rise up and destroy the present order: to 'turn it upside down'. Because Irigaray's project is about exploring and creating possibilities for woman and women to be able to create their own identities and histories, rather than to try and participate in a phallogentric history that will only make space for them as

---

<sup>46</sup> *Speculum*, p. 225.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 225.

imitation, it is a challenge to the whole of the history of the West. If she is right about the murderous and excluding moves that have been carried out since the beginning of Western civilization, then to actively remember these moves is the first step on the way to creating a new history, a history which will include woman and women.

Brushing history against the grain through the alternative symbolic of maternal-genealogy is also a way of reintroducing meaning into the history of woman. In this blood-history, the *sang* (blood), is also a homophone of *sens* (sense or meaning), and this is played on so that to remember the *sang* is also to remember both the blood and the meaning of woman in history. This meaning is both what can be understood about woman and women in history, and the creation of value for woman and women in history.

A striking similarity between Benjamin's and Irigaray's thinking can be seen in Benjamin's messianism and Irigaray's notion of 'parousia'. Parousia has a Christian messianic meaning of the second coming of Christ, and this is important for Irigaray's attempt to usher in a new symbolic order; but in using this term she is also playing with Heidegger's use of it in *Being and Time* where he translates it as 'presence'.<sup>48</sup> In Irigaray's usage 'parousia' is both able to do similar work in a critique of the metaphysics of presence as Benjamin's Now-time (*Jetztzeit*) and also offer a hope of redemption. We have seen that for Benjamin the coming of the Messiah is like an interruption in history which destroys and completes history at the same time as it inaugurates a new historical

era and temporality. For Irigaray, 'parousia'

involves the remoulding of the world, of discourse: another morning, a new era in history, in the universe. The end of times, and the access to one time, to one space-time, that are different.<sup>49</sup>

This 'parousia' is needed if woman and women are to be able to take their place as speaking and thinking subjects in their own right. The third age that she envisages as following this 'parousia' will recover woman's history; it will remember woman and women as the real basis of man's being or becoming; the basis that has actively been forgotten. She writes that 'just as it is impossible to suppress "the gods of the underworld," so we cannot, short of death or a turning back, annihilate our living roots.'<sup>50</sup> We could indeed bring this move under the heading of brushing history against the grain in that it is an attempt to uncover the, buried and forgotten basis of our existence through remembrance. There is an active forgetting at work in man's exclusion of woman and the other, and what will come about with this 'parousia', or perhaps what will bring the 'parousia' about, is the remembering of 'the other and his own becoming'.<sup>51</sup>

Like Benjamin's messianic interruption, Irigaray's parousia produces a new temporality: it sets up 'a space, a space-time for sexual difference'.<sup>52</sup> This will also be a heterogenous temporality of non-linearity. Such a heterogenous time

---

<sup>48</sup> See Heidegger, *Being and Time*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1962, p. 47.

<sup>49</sup> Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, trans. Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill, London, Athlone Press, 1993, p. 140.

<sup>50</sup> *Ethics of Sexual Difference*, p. 142.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 142.



breaks open the realm of identity where woman must be relegated to semblance and to the 'other of the same'. Through her plurality, excess, and fluidity woman will be able to live and experience the full history of her difference. This new space-time is needed because of the heretofore untheorised and unarticulated radical alterity of having a different space-time for the maternal-feminine. And again, as in Benjamin, this 'parousia' which will initiate a new temporality is much more than a utopian hope for some unspecified future; it is a promise in the here and now. Just as in Benjamin's theology, 'For every second of time was the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter'<sup>53</sup>, so for Irigaray,

Does parousia correspond to the expectation of a future not only as a *utopia* or a *destiny* but also as a *here and now*, the willed construction of a bridge in the present between past and future.<sup>54</sup>

Here we are given a hope or a promise for justice; a hope that this justice might emerge in the present through something like the blasting open of the continuum of history. The construction of this bridge which joins the past to the future might operate on similar principles of construction as the dialectical image which re-experiences the Then in the Now. Irigaray's 'parousia' will annunciate and engender the anonymous in its destruction of the barbarism of cultural history. It will complete history which will mean giving a voice that can be understood to the forgotten woman and women of history. However, before going on to explore the use Irigaray makes of this parousia it will be helpful to understand how the

---

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, p. 145.

<sup>53</sup> Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 255.

<sup>54</sup> *Ethics of Sexual Difference*, p. 147.

linked notion of utopia also operates in her writing.

## **Irigaray's anti-Utopianisms and Utopianisms**

The question of utopianism in Irigaray's work is one fraught with tensions from the very start. Irigaray is, of course, a thinker of difference – and sexual difference in particular. It is this concentration on difference that convinces commentators such as Jean-Joseph Goux to describe her as an anti-utopian thinker. But as the title of his paper 'Luce Irigaray versus the Utopia of the Neutral sex'<sup>55</sup> shows, this is only a criticism of one very specific utopia. This utopia of the neutral sex is described by Goux as 'the immanent logic of modernity'<sup>56</sup> What he characterises as modernity's egalitarianism is also reflected in certain literary utopias which envisaged a society of sexless subjects – Goux's own example being Anatole France's *Sur la pierre blanche*. This egalitarianism can also be seen to be manifested in various forms of feminisms which demanded equal rights and status for women and men. Goux follows the historical trajectory of the various manifestations of this desire for emancipation through equality. He describes the various stages, starting with the pre-modern, in which sexual inequality was regarded as part of the natural or god-given order; this is followed by the modern which is characterised by a desire for equality of the sexes. What he then calls the ultra-modern result of this modern egalitarianism led to a kind of

---

<sup>55</sup> In *Engaging with Irigaray*, . eds. Carolyn Burke, Naomi Schor, and Margaret Whitford, New York, Columbia University Press, 1994, pp. 175-190.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 178.

sexual neutralisation – the utopia of the neutral sex . It is Irigaray whom he considers to be the postmodern champion of sexual difference. It is she who is able to show the complicity of egalitarianism in patriarchy and who therefore, initiates an attempt to undermine this dangerous neutralisation of difference.

According to Goux, the later Irigaray is able to show that the claims of egalitarianism are no longer able to undermine the patriarchal system of domination that they originally intended to set to rights. He suggests that these egalitarian claims ‘are complicit with the deep logic of this domination’.<sup>57</sup> On a closer inspection of the morphology and rationality of this so-called neutral sex, it turns out in fact to be a ‘masculine neuter’.<sup>58</sup> The dream of the ultimate equality of the sexes is in fact another disappointing wish for sameness and homogeneity – it is the dream of the ultimate maleness of all humanity in which *Mankind* would really be universal. Irigaray does indeed specifically comment on equality feminisms, stating that; ‘at the level of superficial cultural critique, they are well founded, but as a means of liberating women they are utopian.’<sup>59</sup> To emphasise the pejorative aspect of her designation of ‘utopian’ she develops this theme of the wish for the resolution of differences in the most hyperbolic fashion:

To wish to get rid of sexual difference is to call for a genocide more radical than any form of destruction there has ever been in History.<sup>60</sup>

---

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 180.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 177.

<sup>59</sup> Irigaray, *je, tu, nous : Towards a Culture of Difference*, trans. Alison Martin, London, Routledge, 1993, p.12

<sup>60</sup> Ibid p. 12



She invokes the totalitarian face of utopianism through the signification of it as participating in the most abhorrent of contemporary political practices – genocide. If we are to take Irigaray at her word here, then how could we even contemplate striving for the equality of women and men. The force of her language leaves no room for doubt that – in her later work at least – the struggle for equality is no longer an unproblematic assumption of feminism.

However, it could also be argued that the Irigaray of the above statement is more concerned with equality than the earlier Irigaray, even though this is spelled out in terms of equality through difference. Only a few lines later, in the same paragraph, she sets out her project in terms of balance:

It is quite simply a matter of social justice to balance out this power of the one sex over the other by giving, or giving back, cultural values to female sexuality.<sup>61</sup>

Admittedly this is not the identity-equality that Goux interprets as the dream of modernity and the reality of ultra-modernity. For him, Irigaray's exaggerated rhetoric about the genocidal consequences of egalitarianism is an example of what he describes as 'real postmodernism'.<sup>62</sup> However, only a few lines further Irigaray goes on to develop her notion of balance, in order to suggest a way to work towards equality between men and women. But again it is equality through difference:

---

<sup>61</sup> Ibid p. 13

<sup>62</sup> *Engaging with Irigaray*, p. 188.

Equality between men and women cannot be achieved without a *theory of gender as sexed* and a rewriting of the rights and obligations of each sex, *qua different*, in social rights and obligations.<sup>63</sup>

I would suggest that instead of this being classed as ‘real postmodernism’ according to his definition this is rather an example of his ‘ultramodernism’ because of the emphasis on rights and obligations.

Irigaray’s call for an equality in difference that recognises and values those differences would be better expressed in terms of an equivalent social visibility and status. Gail Schwab reads Irigaray as proposing a principle of equivalence, suggesting that such a principle ‘moves beyond the sameness implicit in the concept of equality, and recognises the importance of multiplicity and variety in human experience and life in general’<sup>64</sup>. It is just such a concentration on multiplicity and difference that has always contributed to Irigaray’s theoretical innovation and appeal. Schwab is also right in pointing out that theorists such as Drucilla Cornell draw on Irigaray’s work in order to posit a system of equivalent rights that would affirm sexual difference.

However, Schwab fails to take account of Irigaray’s most extreme anti-egalitarian moments, such as the invocation of genocide cited above. Nor does she consider the possibility of institutional inequality that might arise from such a rigid division of the sexes in law. It is in order to avoid such possibilities that Cornell returns to the notion of equality. Cornell’s claim that ‘We need a vision

---

<sup>63</sup> *je, tu, nous*, p.13

<sup>64</sup> Gail Schwab, ‘Women and the Law in Irigarayan Theory’, in *Metaphilosophy*, Vol. 27 January/April 1996, p 152.

of equality if we are to protect equivalent rights from degenerating into a new defense of 'separate but equal'<sup>65</sup> seems like a necessary supplement to Irigaray's proposals. Cornell suggests the introduction of a programme of rights of equivalence which would also be transformative because they would not only be in place to enable women to participate in the male world, but

Rather, they are designed to enable women to value the choices [they] make about [their] lives and work without the shame of [their] 'sex', even if such choices do not fit into the pre-established social world.<sup>66</sup>

Indeed this equivalence could act as the universal of mediation for which Irigaray has mobilised.<sup>67</sup> As a principle it could mediate between equality and difference, opening up the desired space of communication and recognition.

However, Irigaray's insistence on the irreducible differences between the sexes or genders often leads to accusations of essentialism – whether this is seen as biological, psychological or social. But to assert that differences are irreducible is not the same thing as asserting the essences of two different sexes. Even though she often articulates sexual difference in morphological terms, these morphologies can still be interpreted as open to negotiation and evolution over time.

Although it should be clear by now that there is a definite critique of at least one form of utopianism in Irigaray's more recent work, this cannot be extended into a

---

<sup>65</sup> Drucilla Cornell, *Transformations*, 1993, London, Routledge, p 155.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.* p 141.

<sup>67</sup> See, in particular 'The Universal as Mediation' in *Sexes and Genealogies*, pp. 127-149, for Irigaray's reading of Hegel in which she advocates a rethinking of the universal as mediation.



generalised critique of utopianism itself. There is a definite tension in her work. On the one hand she is vehemently affirming difference, and she is also refusing equality and the whole progressive, teleological and universalist impulses and explanations that are implicit in egalitarianism. On the other hand, however, she wants an equality of difference to be achieved through recognising what she claims to be the universality of sexual difference. It is in her book *I Love To You* that she calls for the instigation of a new era of meaningful communication and exchange between the sexes. In the chapter entitled *Sexual Difference as Universal*<sup>68</sup> she argues that it is only through a recognition and valorisation of this universal difference that a utopia of difference will emerge. Although she doesn't use the term 'utopia' to describe her project here, the emerging thought takes place in a discussion of teleology. For Irigaray, teleology doesn't have to be an unswerving and unstinting, linear progression towards a pre-decided and fixed goal. Instead it is a process of conversing and communicating which will lead to 'the establishment of another era of civilization'<sup>69</sup>. I will call this goal a utopia, because it is an explicit vision of an ideal existence. In her own words it is,

a new economy of existence or being which is neither that of mastery nor that of slavery but rather of exchange with no preconstituted object – vital exchange, cultural exchange, of words, gestures, etc., an exchange thus able to *communicate* at times, to commune . . . beyond any exchange of objects.<sup>70</sup>

---

<sup>68</sup> Irigaray, *I Love To You: Sketch for a Felicity Within History*, trans. Alison Martin, London, Routledge, 1996, pp. 43-48.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p.45

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p.45

This ideal of communicating exchange is a utopia of sexual difference which differs from her earlier work in that it is no longer about discovering or creating or uncovering a speech or symbolic order that would be appropriate for woman or women. Now she seems more concerned with not only producing and validating this discourse, but also of having significant communicative exchange between the different discourses of male and female or masculine and feminine. She asks,

Isn't it time for us to become capable not only of speech but also of speaking to *one another*.<sup>71</sup>

This utopia will also have a proper 'culture of the female' as well as the imperative to recognise and cherish difference. However, because Irigaray insists on transforming it into a universal, we find sexual difference raised to that most respectable and elusive of philosophical categories. Rather than a utopia with a universal neutral sex we are presented with a universalised, utopia of two sexes.

What is most worrying about this particular universalism is her refusal to extend the horizontal model of communication between the sexes to the problem of race. She goes so far as to claim that 'the problem of race is, in fact; a secondary problem'<sup>72</sup>. If we were to mimic Irigaray's own hyperbolicism, we could ask if there is not a latent or implicit danger of genocide lurking in this relegation of other differences. To universalise sexual difference in this way is to prioritise and privilege it whilst at the same time to particularise racial difference and all other

---

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p.45

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p.47

differences. This is where her own utopia begins to resemble the kind of utopias of sameness that she needs to avoid. Even though hers is not a teleology of mastery, but of communication; even though hers is not a universalism of sameness, but of difference, the harmony and difference are limited. The potential closure of utopia has perhaps been weakened by the forces of communication in relation to sexual difference, but they have also been recaptured by the forces of teleology and universalism – the forces of closure.

It is my worries about this relegation of racial and other ‘others’ that lead me to propose Irigaray’s earlier work as a more useful utopianism of difference. I would argue that the change that Irigaray advocates in her earlier work is the change from the desire for universal sameness and stasis to a state of difference and dynamism. In wanting to instigate a new logic of change, mobility and fluid negotiable boundaries which avoid all closure and circumvention, she is at her most radically utopian. Utopianism is about positing another place which is nowhere yet. It is about creating a future that is completely different from the present. So it is also about otherness, even though the always present danger of utopianism is that this otherness is always threatening to collapse into a sameness more ‘same’ than we have ever yet experienced.

What is interesting about her early work is that it is not necessarily positing an ideal state; she is positing an elsewhere which is now nowhere: a place (and time) where woman and women could be woman and women instead of inferior men. And according to Irigaray this ‘elsewhere’ is only now nowhere according to the prevailing phallogocentric symbolic order. In other words, it cannot be



represented in that order and must remain outside – a nowhere, or elsewhere with no symbolic validation. This is radically utopian in that it cannot, and need not, be expressed in the terms of the given (masculine) symbolic order. We could say that she is already elsewhere – she is now - elsewhere. So this utopianism is already one that starts from elsewhere in order to arrive at other ‘elsewheres’, rather than one that sets out from a now-here in order to arrive at a nowhere.

Irigaray does manage to express this departure towards utopianism in her early work, but at this stage it is not a teleological utopianism. It does not set off from an *arché* in order to arrive at a *telos* as the result of a linear progression: ‘she sets off in all directions leaving “him” unable to discern the coherence of any meaning . . . When she returns, it is to set off again from elsewhere.’<sup>73</sup> In attempting to articulate this elsewhere Irigaray is already speaking from it. So in this case utopia is not the creation or the positing of a nowhere or elsewhere, it is the ability to hear and understand the elsewhere. To the extent that we can name this elsewhere we might call it the ‘female imaginary’. Irigaray stresses the plurality of this imaginary and along with this its fluidity. Once again, this is not a fixed utopia – an ideal state or place. Rather it is experienced processes that cannot be understood by the logic of sameness that constructs utopia as a fixed end-state. To be able to understand these fluid utopias of difference,

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

---

<sup>73</sup> *This Sex Which Is Not One*, p.29

*words, but also of getting rid of words in order not to become fixed, congealed in them.*<sup>74</sup>

This movement towards utopia is an ongoing process then, which cannot be fixed in its attempt to reach an elsewhere. The nature of utopian desire is reformulated as a challenge to the idea of utopia as end-state, goal or closure. We need to listen differently to make sense of these utopias because they are articulated in a different register, from a different place, and in a different time. According to Irigaray, what is involved is:

a different economy more than anything else, one that upsets the linearity of a project, undermines the goal-object of a desire, diffuses the polarization toward a single pleasure, disconcerts fidelity to a single discourse . . .<sup>75</sup>

Indeed the ambiguity of these utopias is reflected in Irigaray's own denial of them as utopias, at the same time as she affirms their power for political motivation. She claims that she is 'a political militant for the impossible, which is not to say a utopian. Rather, I want what is yet to be as the only possibility of a future'.<sup>76</sup>

However, having stated that Irigaray's utopianism does not posit an ideal state, this doesn't limit it to a strictly critical role either. We can also detect a positive or constructive moment that projects a utopia of limitless abundance and plurality: 'A sort of expanding universe to which no limits could be fixed and

---

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p.29

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., p.30

<sup>76</sup> Irigaray, *I Love To You*, p. 10.

which would not be incoherence nonetheless.’<sup>77</sup> But neither should we pass over the critical moment. Margaret Whitford describes Irigaray’s early position in terms of destruction and dismantling<sup>78</sup>. She sees the ‘philosophical terrorism’ of *Speculum of the Other Woman* as an attempt to undo patriarchal structures.<sup>79</sup> But although this is a destructive text it is important to remember that Irigaray’s destruction is also a creative act. The attempt to upset the hegemony and complacency of the male symbolic order was not conducted through a nihilistic critique of the metaphysics of presence. The dismantling that was taking place was being done in order to show what lay buried and hidden, behind, beneath, and outside it. The destruction was being carried out in order to help the construction of female subjectivities. To put it bluntly it could also be seen as a project of liberation – whose liberty is both negative and positive. What she is trying to move towards is a freedom from patriarchy which would be free to become something else (elsewhere): not a liberty in equality, but a liberty in and of difference. In one of her most utopic reveries Irigaray describes this as a place of inclusion and liberation: a place where,

There is room enough for everything to exist. Everything is worth exchanging, nothing is privileged, nothing is refused. Exchange? Everything is exchanged, yet there are no transactions. Between us, there are no proprietors, no purchasers, no determinable objects, no prices. Our bodies are nourished by mutual pleasure. Our abundance is inexhaustible: it knows neither want nor plenty. Since we give each other (our) all, with

---

<sup>77</sup> *This Sex Which Is Not One*, p.31

<sup>78</sup> Whitford, ‘Irigaray, Utopia and the Death Drive’, in *Engaging with Irigaray*, p. 381.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 381.



nothing held back, nothing hoarded, our exchanges are without terms, without end. How can I say it? The language we know is so limited . . .<sup>80</sup>.

To imagine a utopia is usually to imagine a different place, a non-place, that is – a place which is not-yet. For Irigaray however, this place is not not-yet, her elsewhere is here and now. Her utopia is a process or place of becoming that merely needs to be recognised as such. A utopia of movement, but ‘These movements cannot be described as the passage from a beginning to an end.’<sup>81</sup>

These movements are a passage, but a passage as a place for moving through, not a place to stop and take root, or become fixed. A passage is a way to somewhere, it is also a way to elsewhere. The utopianism of this passage is more plausible than what we might characterise as a traditional utopian passage, because that would be a passage to nowhere. Elsewhere is somewhere; it is a somewhere that could be anywhere. For the early Irigaray ‘elsewhere’ is a utopia where we can,

Let all our imperatives be only appeals to move, to be moved, together.

Let’s never lay down the law to each other, or moralize, or make war.’<sup>82</sup>

This desire for a place without law, moralising or war would seem to me to be the most utopian of desires. And it is this early utopian refusal to moralise or make laws that sits uneasily with the later works which pay more attention to issues of legislation, civil rights and the like. The earlier utopia in which nothing is privileged also seems to be at odds with the later affirmation of hierarchies

---

<sup>80</sup> *This Sex Which Is Not One*, p.213-4.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p.214.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p.217.

within symbolic orders and the universalisation of sexual difference. Perhaps Irigaray's most utopian writings are also her most impossible. But their impossibility can also create possibilities as a result of their critical and liberating moments. Her early destruction of philosophical, discursive, and perhaps even ideological closure held out a promise of openness, difference and movement. If her own writing has not subsequently lived up to this, must we still reject the original promise? Must we return to stasis, closure and exclusion, or can we still make use of her most utopian promise of the elsewhere?

### **Rhythms of Love and Mucous**

The question of the status of the historical and revolutionary time at work in Irigaray's texts can also be approached through the question of rhythm. Irigaray tends to associate woman with what she terms 'cosmic rhythms'. These are the rhythms of the natural cycles of 'germination, birth, and growth in accordance with the natural economy'.<sup>83</sup> These are also the rhythms of the body that have been forgotten by patriarchal culture. Irigaray contrasts these natural rhythms with the teleological, instrumental and exploitative rhythms of modern agriculture and industry. Although it would be legitimate to criticise Irigaray here for replicating a binary mode of thinking that would position the female/feminine on the side of the natural and the male/masculine on the side of the cultural, we can again allow her this mimetic move in order to problematise those divisions in a more unexpected and original manner. These evocations of the cosmic rhythms

of nature and the body are further attempts to remember what history has forgotten – primarily, life.

The cultivation of nature becomes exploitation, which risks destroying the vitality of the soil and the fertility of the great cosmic rhythms. This is the danger we incur when we forget what we have received from the body, our debt toward that which gives and renews life. When we forget our gratitude toward the living being that man is at every instant.<sup>84</sup>

These rhythmic rememberings take place in the chapter in which Irigaray can be associated most closely with a Benjaminian project of brushing history against the grain. It is only a few pages further on that she will write that ‘We have to move against the current of history for things to be any different. . .’<sup>85</sup> To remember the gifts of life, fertility and growth in the rhythms of the cosmos is also to remember these things through a different time. Just as we have seen that Benjamin’s rememberings in his dialectical images involve not just a knowledge of history, but a different experience of it, so Irigaray’s evocation of fertility and life and generation also involve a different experience of pre-history through a different relationship with the rhythms of history. For her the current of current history is still flowing strongly in only one direction.

Irigaray also associates these cosmic rhythms with love. The different rhythms that Irigaray identifies are also rhythms of love, and for her, there are many

---

<sup>83</sup> *Ethics of Sexual Difference*, p.100.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p.100.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p.104.



different kinds of love. To identify just three, there is 'Love of Same', 'Love of Other', 'Love Between Us'. These all involve different attitudes and directions of relationship, as well as different temporalities of loving. While we might presume from Irigaray's constant championing of difference that 'Love of Same' would be something to be challenged, she in fact describes it in quite positive terms. The 'same' at work here is variously described as 'the archaic', 'that which primevally and necessarily has conceived, given birth, nourished, warmed', and 'indifferentiation from the earth-mother, the first living dwelling place.'<sup>86</sup> So again we can see more evidence in Irigaray for a thinking of sameness; for a different universal that does provide some generality or commonality for human existence. For Irigaray there is a same that needs to be loved. Although she describes this in terms of 'the archaic' etc., it is not to be thought of as an origin that would act as a ground or base for all other love and experience. Irigaray does associate this same with the ontic, but at the same time refuses its assimilation into an 'ontic-ontological split'.<sup>87</sup> This love of the same is a recognition of the necessity and universality of bodies and matter in space-time. It seems that, according to Irigaray, this love of the same is forgotten by man as another aspect of the ancient turn from the affirmation of the body in earlier cultures to the abstracted rationalism of post-Socratic philosophy. Another example of turning away from life.

---

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., p.75.

<sup>87</sup> There is an engagement with Heidegger at work here in her analysis of the 'ontic-ontological split'. She follows Heidegger to a certain extent in suggesting that this would 'merely be an effect of *forgetting*', while she is also critical of what she would consider to be Heidegger's own forgetting of the archaic same or the 'earth-mother' when she continues with her description of this forgetting as 'the result of a jump between the body or the flesh of that which is and that which wishes to be.' Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, p.97.

Although this love of the same sounds like it might be an exclusively female or feminine love, Irigaray suggests that it is also difficult for women to achieve because the symbolism is not immediately available within the prevailing cultural hegemony. Love of the same would have to be more in tune with the cosmic rhythms of nature than the manufactured beats of culture. Love of same obviously also has homosexual connotations, however it must be different to the 'hom(m)osexual' label that Irigaray used to describe most post-Platonic, male theory in *Speculum*, where the same is linked to the figure of man who has forgotten his bodily and material nature. Irigaray also suggests that this love among or between women is also the love of and for the mother and daughter. She does this by playing on the theme of doubleness which is not strictly two, with reference to female morphology:

If women are to establish or make possible a love among us, or a love for the feminine among us, women need to double and play what we are twice over, lovingly. Whether it be

— love for the *nourishing envelope*, both inner and outer, for its skins and its mucous membranes.

— love of the *body*: both of that body we give and of that body we give each other back in return

Women must love one another both as mothers, with a maternal love, and as daughters, with a filial love. *Both of them*. In a female whole that, furthermore is not closed off. Constituting, perhaps, both of them in one female whole that is not closed up, the sign of *infinity*? Achieving,

through their relations with each other, a path into infinity that is always open, *in-finite*.<sup>88</sup>

Again she is not completely rejecting the traditional philosophical notions of absolutes, such as infinity. She is reworking them in what she would consider to be a female or feminine way, in order to bring them back into contact with the living matter/*mater* from which they originated. This produces not only a different topology of the loving subject – one that is not closed off, but open to infinite possibilities – but also a different temporality.

This temporality arises from her thinking of the mucous. Mucous represents the fluid matter which Irigaray takes to be another forgotten aspect of Western, masculinised theory.<sup>89</sup> Mucous provides a link between the living body and birth as well as the sexual act that gave rise to the living body. Irigaray again plays on the exclusion of women from previous theory. She takes up the common theme of women's inferiority, in particular the assumption that women do not really have a soul – or at least as fully developed a soul as men. Rather than arguing that women do indeed have souls she plays with this excluding move to try and speculate on what women might have that could be analogous to a soul, but different from it. She asks,

---

<sup>88</sup> *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, p.97.

<sup>89</sup> See the chapter 'The "Mechanics" of Fluids', in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, for her most direct explanation of the need for a reappraisal of fluids in Western thought.



Does the mucous perhaps take the place of the soul for women? But of a soul that is never spoken? Alien to everything yet said of the soul as such?<sup>90</sup>

It would be a soul that is never spoken because it is the soul of a subject that has not yet been articulated by masculinised theory. This is the soul of a different kind of subject, if mucous takes the place of the soul this would be a more fluid, and a more bodily conception of the subject. A subject that is not based on an idea of fixity, permanence and the solidity of substance. Irigaray's mucous produces a different thinking of substance which disturbs the traditional philosophical thinking of substance by presenting it with its unthought aspects.<sup>91</sup> Mucous is also representative of a loving exchange, as Whitford puts it, 'it is essential to the act of love'.<sup>92</sup>

Although thinking of mucous in this way poses challenges to theories of substance that would be more concerned with the topology or space of substance, Irigaray also implicates it in the temporalities at work in substance. Through the metaphor of mucous Irigaray questions the permanence of substance. She

---

<sup>90</sup> *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, p.109.

<sup>91</sup> Whitford suggests that mucous 'represents the non-theorized' and that 'it lends itself to the representation of the unthought'. For Irigaray, then, it is time to think the mucous. This will present philosophy with one of its greatest challenges because it is linked to her claim that sexual difference is the issue of our age. For Irigaray we cannot adumbrate an adequate theory of sexual difference without reckoning with the mucous. This thinking of the mucous will disturb the nature of philosophical inquiry itself because it elides many philosophical and scientific presumptions because it is 'neither simply solid nor fluid; it is not stable, it expands, it has no fixed form; it expands but not in a shape. Mucous also avoids the visual metaphors of philosophy because 'it cannot be seen in the flat mirror, it is *interior*; therefore it is more accessible to touch than to sight. See Whitford, *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine*, London, Routledge, 1991, p. 163.

produces almost transcendental qualities for mucous when she asks if 'mucous has no permanence, even though it is the "tissue" for the development of duration. The condition of possibility for the extension of time?'<sup>93</sup> She immediately responds to her own confusing question by stating that this would only be the case if we stick to the familiar ways of thinking about the subject which would appropriate the mucous in order to 'erect itself out of' it. So mucous is another forgotten, or ignored ground or origin. The dependence on much of metaphysics on the solidity and permanence of substance is itself dependent on the fluidity and transience of mucous.

## **Parousia and the Between**

Irigaray's invocation of the mucous also takes place in her discussions of parousia. Parousia also relates to utopianisms, both as a utopia and as a '*here and now*' as well as moving beyond them to become an '*atopia*' that would be 'an inscription in the flesh'.<sup>94</sup> On returning to the notion of parousia we can ask: why, if these voices are to be truly woman and women's own voices and not that of a transcendent god, does Irigaray associate them with 'parousia'? The answer seems to be, because the god at work in this 'parousia' is not 'He who forms the transcendental keystone of a discourse used by single gender, of a monosexed

---

<sup>92</sup> Whitford, *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in The Feminine*, p.163.

<sup>93</sup> *Ethics of Sexual Difference*, p.109.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 147.

truth.’ Neither are we offered a god of ‘truth or morality’<sup>95</sup>, but a ‘realization - here and now - in and through the body’.<sup>96</sup> She even suggests that this kind of ‘parousia’ is something that can be found in both Nietzsche and Heidegger. She associates the promise of the presence of god with Heidegger’s statement that ‘Only a god can save us now’ as well as with Nietzsche’s attempt to overcome the need for such a god in his creation of transvaluated values.<sup>97</sup> For Irigaray, however, parousia is the creation of what she calls the ‘sensible transcendental’: the emergence of a language that is capable of remembering woman and mother whilst being able to speak meaningfully and be understood in the polis. It would not only be the coming of god, but also the coming of ‘the other’.<sup>98</sup>

For Irigaray the advent of this new era of the ‘sensible transcendental’ would also be the advent of an era of non-instrumental reason. Reason will be brought back to the body, and its limits and boundaries will be transgressed through its new fluid or mucous nature. The rigidity of instrumental reason also resulted from a forgetting of the elemental sources of existence; indeed for Irigaray these are the four ancient elements, earth, air, fire and water. The remembrance taking place here is a remembrance of the elemental which will lead to a new relationship and experience of the body. She associates ‘parousia’ with the element of air in particular. Air is ‘this first fluid given us gratis and free of interest in the mother’s blood, given us again when we are born’<sup>99</sup>, and the god that arrives with

---

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., p. 140.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., p. 147.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., p. 128-9.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., p. 147.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., p. 127.



‘parousia’ is ‘a god carried on the breath of the *cosmos*, the song of the poets, the respiration of lovers.’<sup>100</sup> These elemental reminiscences are part of an engagement with Heidegger’s apparent resignation that only a god can save us now. Irigaray sees the source of this resignation in Heidegger’s forgetting of the elemental air, and sexual difference.<sup>101</sup> She, however, is not prepared to wait in hopeless resignation for the ‘parousia’, instead she sees a chance to create a new era through remembering these fluid and different others:

This creation would be our opportunity, from the humblest detail of everyday life to the “grandest,” by means of the opening of a *sensible transcendental* that comes into being through us, of which *we would be* the mediators and bridges. Not only in mourning for the dead God of Nietzsche, not waiting passively for the god to come, but by conjuring him up among us, within us, as resurrection and transfiguration of blood, of flesh, though a language and an ethics that is ours.<sup>102</sup>

The annunciation of the ‘sensible transcendental’ will break down or pass through the boundaries between the sensible and the transcendental. This can only be achieved by a fluid or mucous logic such as that inscribed in Irigaray’s texts. According to Irigaray, masculine reason cannot allow for the thought of the sensible and the transcendental coming into contact or having any kind of

---

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., p. 129.

<sup>101</sup> See Irigaray’s *The Forgetting of Air*, trans. Mary Beth Mader, London, Athlone Press, 1999, for an extended meditation and ‘elemental critique’. See also Tina Chanter’s *Ethics of Eros: Irigaray’s Rewriting of the Philosophers*, London, Routledge, 1995, and Ellen Mortensen’s *The Feminine and Nihilism: Luce Irigaray with Nietzsche and Heidegger*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1995, for further discussions of Irigaray’s engagement with Heidegger.

relationship of exchange. But Irigaray's mucous parousia means that what appears is not an immobile and rigid 'God of immutable, stable truth'<sup>103</sup>; it is something much less stable and much more fluid.

These notions of mucous and fluidity in Irigaray's texts work as a way of taking apart and renegotiating the rigid structures and boundaries of phallogocentric reason. The fluidity of mucous guarantees it a mobility that enables it to move around and through these boundaries. This is a mobility of flux and change which can also help in introducing notions of plurality and multiplicity. One way of trying to come to terms with this thought of the mucous in its relation to the 'sensible transcendental' is to think of ectoplasm, which is supposed to be a mucous deposit left in the material world by ghosts or spirits.<sup>104</sup> This is the kind of mucous that can pass between and be at home in both the material and the spiritual, the human and the divine or the sensible and the transcendental.

It is in this mediation or the between of the sensible and the transcendental that we find Irigaray using the figure of the angel. For Irigaray the angel is a familiar figure that can successfully carry out the work of the 'between'. Because the angel is the messenger of god, s/he can pass through the boundaries between

---

<sup>102</sup> *Ethics of Sexual Difference*, p. 129.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110.

<sup>104</sup> The Encyclopædia Britannica describes ectoplasm as 'a mysterious, usually light-coloured, viscous substance that is said to exude from the body of a spiritualist medium in trance and may then take the shape of a face, a hand, or a complete body. It is normally visible only in the darkened atmosphere of a séance. Ectoplasm is said to be the substance involved in the materialization of spiritual bodies, and the levitation of material objects is commonly explained

heaven and earth. Irigaray's angel has much greater powers of agency in brushing history against the grain than Benjamin's. While his angel of history looks on impotently and in horror, Irigaray's

goes from one side to the other, reworking every deadline, changing every decision, thwarting all repetition. Angels destroy the monstrous, that which hampers the possibility of a new age.<sup>105</sup>

While Benjamin's angel of history is able to show us a picture of history that does not conform to instrumental reason or the ideology of progress, it is not able to mediate between heaven and earth. Although it is the 'between' it is not able to bring the mundane into contact with the heavenly. Benjamin's angel also avoids the mediation that may implicate it in a certain complicity in the horror of progress. However, in endowing her angels with powers of transformation, Irigaray doesn't have to make them part of a teleological framework. Theirs is the mediation of a 'between' which is not a means to an end, or a progressive narrative. The mucous mediation of Irigaray's angels actually appear to do the work that Benjamin gives to remembrance (*Eingedenken*), because they are the

mediators of that which has not yet happened, of what is still going to happen, of what is on the horizon. Endlessly reopening the enclosure of the universe, of universes, identities, the unfolding of actions, of history.<sup>106</sup>

---

by the gradual buildup of columns of ectoplasm underneath the objects. At the end of a séance the ectoplasm disappears, allegedly by returning to the medium's body'. (www.britannica.com)

<sup>105</sup> *Ethics of Sexual Difference*, p. 15.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.



These angels open up a closed history in a way that means it can be brushed against the grain. In Benjamin's terms, Irigaray's angels are 'historical materialists' rather than 'historicists': They are the agents who can bring about a hope for the future through an experience of the past in the time of the now, rather than the forgetful believers in progress.

Peter Fenves draws parallels between the politics of pure means investigated in Benjamin's 'Critique of Violence' essay and Irigaray's explorations of sexual difference.<sup>107</sup> He argues that both Benjamin and Irigaray are attempting to 'move outside the space of the legal order'.<sup>108</sup> He makes the link between Benjamin and Irigaray through Benjamin's notion of 'pure means' (*reine Mittel*), arguing that Irigaray's use of mucous and angels both exhibit the properties of these pure means. For Benjamin at least, the General Strike was one example of pure means. This would be a means that had no real use for an end. Pure means can either be read as means-in-themselves, – which would relate them to Kant's account of ends-in-themselves – or as means with deferred or suspended ends. Fenves suggests that pure means are not means-in-themselves because this would endow them with perfection, which would, by definition, mean that they had reached their end.<sup>109</sup> On the other hand, to read them as means purified of their ends through the deferral or suspension of those ends would accord with the discussion of the temporality of affirmativity in Chapter 1. The temporality of these pure means is not homogenous, empty time, because they are not

---

<sup>107</sup> Peter Fenves, '“Out of the Order of Number”: Benjamin and Irigaray Toward a Politics of Pure Means', in *Diacritics*, Spring 1998, p. 43-58.

<sup>108</sup> Fenves, 'Out of the Order of Number', p. 45.

participating in any continuous movement towards some kind of perfection.

In making a comparison between Benjamin and Irigaray Fenves is following Benjamin's suggestion that conversation (*Unterredung*) could also act as a pure means.<sup>110</sup> This would also fit with Irigaray's project of using language to create more fulfilled relations between individuals. However, Fenves, then goes on to suggest that this also would include angels as a 'pure means of communication'.<sup>111</sup> While this description of angels would work for Irigaray's angels who move to and fro opening up avenues of communication, it is not so clear that Benjamin's angels can be so easily reduced to sheer media.<sup>112</sup> Indeed Benjamin's description of the angel of history is that it has its mouth open, but it seems to be incapable of communicating anything to us. Fenves concentrates on the spatial aspects of pure means; the space traversed by the angels, at the expense of ignoring the temporal consequences of the actions of angels. Indeed, the main difference between Irigaray's and Benjamin's angels are that Irigaray's angels are active in mediating, crossing boundaries and opening spaces. Benjamin's angels, on the other hand are usually more like impotent witnesses, unable to help. The most they do is to appear only to disappear. As Benjamin puts it, these angels are like the ones who 'according to the Talmud, are at each moment created anew in countless throngs, and who, once they have raised their

---

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., p. 47.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., p. 48. Fenves quotes from Benjamin's 'Critique of Violence', p. 244.

<sup>111</sup> Fenves, 'Out of the Order of Number', p. 50.

<sup>112</sup> This interpretation of angels as communicating media can also be attributed to Michel Serres.

See his *Angels: A Modern Myth*, trans. F. Cowper. Paris: Flammarion, 1995.

voices before God, cease and pass into nothingness.’<sup>113</sup>

Fenves’ reading of Benjamin and Irigaray stresses the *Mittel*: the middle as well as the means. It is true to say that Irigaray is a thinker of the between, in both spatial and temporal terms, but whether this is a ‘pure’ between; an unmediated middleness, is still debatable. Fenves argues that the mucous does the work of the ‘between’, because it is a material medium of difference.<sup>114</sup> Whilst I would agree with this, it is the attribution of purity to the mucous that may prove problematic in trying to read Irigaray in this way. I would suggest that hers is not a ‘between’ of purity, it is a ‘between’ that elides both purity and its dialectical partner, impurity. This is neither a pure or polluted between, it is a between that doesn’t reject foreign bodies, and yet expects a relationship of mutual desire and respect before incorporating them into itself. While Benjamin’s treatment of pure means may well have benefited from a more fluid thinking of difference, Fenves’ suggestion that ‘the critique of violence cannot, in short, do without a thought of mucous as *reine Mittel*’<sup>115</sup> is certainly misleading.

Although angels are useful in helping us to conceive of the sensible transcendental, Irigaray does not leave the brushing of history against the grain to angels alone. I would suggest that she would have herself and all women, brush history against the grain when she writes that

I search for myself, as if I had been assimilated into maleness. I ought to

---

<sup>113</sup> Benjamin, ‘Karl Kraus’ in *Selected Writings*, Vol. 2., p. 457.

<sup>114</sup> Fenves, ‘Out of the Order of Number’, p. 54.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.



reconstitute myself on the basis of a disassimilation.... Rise again from the traces of a culture, of works already produced by the other. Searching through what is in them – for what is not there. What allowed them to be, for what is not there. Their conditions of possibility, for what is not there.<sup>116</sup>

There is also no apparent reason why this disassimilation should not also be extended to the productions of other ‘others’.

This passage could act as a summary of both Irigaray’s method and her constructive project of producing female identity which is not just the other of a male identity. The method is similar to Benjamin’s in that it looks for what history owes its existence to and has barbarically buried, brutalised or anonymised. By looking at who has been included in history she also discovers who has been excluded from history. Woman and other ‘others’ will appear from a reconstitution of their history as well as from a transfiguration of history. Irigaray’s brushing of history against the grain is an urgent attempt to usher in justice for the heretofore forgotten, excluded, and vanquished. Because it is a hopeful leap into radical difference it involves different logics of fluidity in order to explode the boundaries and rigidity of the ideologies of progress and misogyny. The ‘cultural (r)evolution’<sup>117</sup> that she advocates is based on her fluid logic of mediation and inclusion. What this cultural change also demands are

---

<sup>116</sup> *Ethics of Sexual Difference*, p. 9-10.

<sup>117</sup> See Irigaray, *I Love to You*, p. 130. ‘We know practically nothing about sharing between ourselves as persons, about the sharing of love between two persons. The transition from one stage of individual and collective History to another still needs to be realized by us.’

alternative temporalities of justice: mucousic temporalities of the now-here  
which will produce a visible audible and tangible elsewhere.

---

The foundation for this cultural (r)evolution, its most radical locus, lies in changing  
relations between man and woman, men and women.'

## **Chapter 5.**

**Irigaray's Revolutionary Antigones:**

**The Ironic and the Irenic.**



In this chapter I will be developing the themes of the staging of history and its possible tragic interpretation through some of Irigaray's readings of others' readings of the myth of Antigone. This will also involve an investigation into Irigaray's relationship to the dialectic. Hers is another example of thinking that is both dialectical and non-dialectical.<sup>1</sup> Where it can be described as dialectical, this will be seen to be a radical reworking of the dialectic; a dialectic without conflict and driven by sexual difference.

Sexual difference is, as it were, the most powerful motor of a dialectic without masters or slaves. This dialectic does not have to be tragic because it renders obsolete a certain number of oppositions required for the dialectic of a unique and solipsistic subject.<sup>2</sup>

Irigaray comes back to the figure of Antigone time and again, as Antigone seems to have come back time and again to haunt philosophy.<sup>3</sup> My point of departure will be to refer to Irigaray's own staging and her own point of departure in which she states that

---

<sup>1</sup> In the essay 'Universal as Mediation' in which she reworks Hegel's concept of *Sittlichkeit*, she asks herself 'Will this be dialectical thinking? In one sense, yes, in another, no. As the genders are neither opposed nor in contradiction.' (*Sexes and Genealogies*, p. 140.)

<sup>2</sup> Irigaray, *I Love To You*, p. 51.

<sup>3</sup> The suggestion of Antigone as some kind of spectral presence in philosophy that continually returns to trouble that rational discipline, is one that is taken up by Kelly Oliver in her own reading of Hegel's use of Antigone. See Kelly Oliver, 'Antigone's Ghost: Undermining Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*' in *Hypatia*, 1.1 1996, pp. 67–90.

In order to stage what is at stake in this task, I shall once again take the figure of Antigone – in Sophocles, Hölderlin, Hegel, and Brecht – as my first point of departure.<sup>4</sup>

We can see from the start, then, that there are many Antigones, for Irigaray. Not only does she draw attention to the various representations that we can discover in the historical, philosophical and theatrical, traditions, there are also many different representations of Antigone at work in Irigaray's texts themselves. Sometimes the figure of Antigone is taken to be ahistorical, belonging to a world that does not participate in the cultural development of the community<sup>5</sup>. As we shall see this is quite a common reading and is used by Irigaray to emphasise the exclusion of women from representations of culture and history. At other times Irigaray presents Antigone as 'a production of culture written by men alone'<sup>6</sup>, which emphasises that Antigone can also be read as an exclusively male representation of woman.

Luisa Muraro identifies certain stages in Irigaray's representations of the figure of Antigone. The first representation is in *Speculum* (1974), where Antigone is portrayed as being sacrificed for the maintenance of the symbolic order. Muraro suggests that this representation is similar to the later one of the *Ethics of Sexual Difference* (1984), where 'Antigone symbolises the imprisonment of woman in a symbolic order that is not her own.'<sup>7</sup> She then suggests that there is a turning

---

<sup>4</sup> Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, p. 167.

<sup>5</sup> See Irigaray, *Thinking the Difference: For a Peaceful Revolution*, trans. Karin Montin, London, Athlone, 1994, p.70.

<sup>6</sup> Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, pp. 118-119.

<sup>7</sup> Luisa Muraro, 'Female Genealogies', in *Engaging with Irigaray*, p. 328.

point in Irigaray's treatment of Antigone. Whereas Irigaray had previously read Antigone as embodying a notion of female-female relations, Muraro suggests that from the essay 'The Universal as Mediation' (1986) onwards, Antigone is used more positively as a defender of the community – a community that includes female-male relations. While it is true to say that Irigaray identifies her project of the 'ethics of the couple' in the 'Universal as Mediation' essay, I will be arguing that in the *Ethics of Sexual Difference*, there is already an attempt to use the figure of Antigone to instigate an ethics based on a more general loving relationship. Muraro still considers the representation of Antigone to be a negative one, citing Irigaray's desire to avoid 'Antigone's fate'.<sup>8</sup> However while it would obviously be good sense to avoid Antigone's fate, I will be arguing that Irigaray also sets Antigone up as a model for a loving ethics of sexual difference.

Throughout her various discussions and commentaries on the various uses of Antigone, Irigaray is not always, if ever, identifying with Antigone or identifying Antigone with woman. She has a somewhat ambivalent attitude to this character who is sometimes presented as a male fantasy or myth which denies any of the qualities that would be proper to woman herself. At other times Antigone is used positively as a potentially subversive resource that could help in the revolutionary disruption of patriarchy by use of its own attempt to contain these revolutionary Antigones in its representations. My own purpose in this chapter is not to decide which of these Antigones provides the correct reading of Sophocles, Hegel, Hölderlin, or Brecht, but to try and discover how Irigaray's Antigones can contribute to a deeper understanding of the historical time involved in what I

---

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 328.



have identified as Irigaray's revolutionary project. In order to do this we must first examine, more closely, the uses that Irigaray makes of the figure of Antigone.

## **Eternal Irony of the Community**

The first time Irigaray makes use of the figure of Antigone is in the chapter of *Speculum* entitled 'The Eternal Irony of the Community'. The phrase 'the eternal irony of the community' is Hegel's. It occurs during his discussion of woman's position in the ethical world in section 475 of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. This section itself is part of Hegel's analysis of Spirit (*Geist*), in particular his analysis of the universalism of the ethical life of a community. In order to explain the historical and ethical move from a subjective ethical universal to a more substantive one, Hegel starts by examining the ethical world as exemplified by Greek tragedy. During this stage of history there is still a division in the life of the Spirit. In the later *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, this would, of course, be attributed to spirit's consciousness of freedom not having completed its journey yet because the individual and the state still cannot be rationally identified. 'It thus splits itself up into distinct ethical substances, into a human and a divine law.'<sup>9</sup> Hegel sees this in the division of the community between the law of the family and the law of the state. The law of the family is also the divine

---

<sup>9</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, §445, p. 266.

law and is supported by the reverence for dead ancestors. Hegel suggests that this law of the family is interpreted intuitively by the females of the family:

the feminine, in the form of the sister, has the highest *intuitive* awareness of what is ethical. She does not attain to a *consciousness* of it, or to the objective existence of it, because the law of the Family is an implicit, inner essence which is not exposed to the daylight of consciousness, but remains an inner feeling and the divine element that is exempt from an existence in the real world.<sup>10</sup>

The state law on the other hand is human law and is laid down, interpreted, and enforced by the males of the community:

The brother leaves this immediate, elemental, and therefore, strictly speaking, negative ethical life of the Family, in order to acquire and produce the ethical life that is conscious of itself and actual.

He passes from the divine law, within whose sphere he lived, over to human law.<sup>11</sup>

It is inevitable then, that these two laws will come into conflict, both within the individual and the community. Hegel reads Sophocles' *Antigone* as a prime example of this conflict in which Antigone's intuitive interpretation of the law of the family requires her to bury her dead brother (Polynices) against the express instructions of the human, state law as decreed by the King (Creon). Hegel's concern is with the dialectical overcoming of this division. He will attempt to elaborate a theory in which the division between the divine and family ethical

---

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., §457, p. 274.

law, and the human, state law can be superseded so as to allow a rational identification between both prescriptions and imperatives.

What is at stake here, for Hegel, is the clash of two different universals. The universal (*Allgemein*) of the family, and the universal of the state. The conflict is between two aspects of ethical life, but it also reflects the conflicts that take place within individuals and is therefore partly responsible for the rise of individualism. Hegel finds himself in the difficult position of admitting that these two laws require each other, claiming ‘Neither of the two is by itself absolutely valid’<sup>12</sup> while, at the same time, also appearing to privilege the overcoming or supersession of the law of the family:

Human law in its universal existence is the community, in its activity in general is the manhood of the community, in its real and effective activity is the government. It *is, moves, and maintains* itself by consuming and absorbing into itself the separatism of the Penates, or the separation into independent families presided over by womankind, and by keeping them dissolved in the fluid continuity of its own nature. But the Family is, at the same time, in general its element, the individual consciousness the basis of its general activity. Since the community only gets an existence through its interference with the happiness of the Family, and by dissolving [individual] self-consciousness into the universal, it creates for itself in what it suppresses and what is at the same time essential to it an internal enemy—womankind in general. Womankind—the everlasting

---

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., §§458-459, p. 275.



irony [in the life] of the community—changes by intrigue the universal end of the government into a private end, transforms its universal activity into a work of some particular individual and perverts the universal property of the state into a possession and ornament for the Family. Woman in this way turns to ridicule the earnest wisdom of mature age which, indifferent to purely private pleasures and enjoyments, as well as to playing an active part, only thinks of and cares for the universal. She makes this wisdom an object of derision for raw and irresponsible youth and unworthy of their enthusiasm.<sup>13</sup>

From this quotation it is not difficult to understand why it would even cause the mildest of feminist hackles to be raised. Although Antigone is not actually mentioned in this section and is only referred to once in the text and twice in footnotes in the *Phenomenology*, it is clear that Hegel's model of female ethical action is based on Antigone's actions. Hegel is not merely stating that there would be no community without individuals, he is describing a situation in which there is an irreproachable antagonism between the public and the private. Hegel positions woman as having the main responsibility for the Family, because she 'is associated with these household gods [Penates].<sup>14</sup> This, according to Hegel, situates her as being an internal enemy of the state. This formulation also tends to position woman as traitorous to the community, forever on the verge of destroying its well guarded and hard-won power.

---

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., §460, p. 276.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., §475, p. 288.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., §457, p. 274.

As we have seen before, and will see again, Irigaray takes up the position that Hegel has given her. However she takes it up in such a way that she can subvert the rigidly structured system that this positioning was attempting to reinforce in the first place. However Irigaray takes up the position of traitorous enemy within the community in order to try and challenge the rigid demarcations that are laid out in the Hegelian text. To do this she has to do what Hegel would expect her to do, while at the same time confounding his expectations in the very act of carrying them out. Although woman is positioned by Hegel as the traitor within, Irigaray challenges and confuses this expectation by remaining faithful to Hegel's indictments. She acts out the part of the faithful traitor, thus confusing and threatening the position of the untrusting state.

The above quotation also reminds us of the dependence of Hegel's dialectic on setting up contradictions that must then be overcome. The contradictions at work here include the contradiction between love and law. Antigone's love for her brother brings her into conflict with the law of the state. The contradiction (*Widerspruch*) at work here is between human law, which is male and concerned with the government of the community or the *polis*, and the divine law, which is female and concerned with the individual and the home or the *oikos*. When the male brother moves out of the family into the human law he leaves the sister behind with the wives who become,

the head of the household and the guardian of the divine law. In this way, the two sexes overcome their [merely] natural being and appear in their ethical significance, as diverse beings who share between them the two

distinctions belonging to the ethical substance. These two *universal* beings of the ethical world have, therefore, their *specific* individuality in *naturally* distinct self-consciousnesses...<sup>15</sup>

The conflict then is between the universals of the state and the blood. This is the contradiction that must be overcome in order to produce the next shape or image of the development of Spirit.

Kelly Oliver takes the 1960's feminist slogan of "the personal is the political" as the focus<sup>16</sup> of her reading of Hegel's use of Antigone in his discussion of the ethical order. She concurs that for Hegel, the split between the personal and the political is part of a whole gallery of contradictions that need to be dialectically superseded. The split between the personal and the political is also associated with the difference between the family and the community or nation. These pairs of contradictory opposites also map onto the split between the natural and the cultural. According to Hegel, the family still functions as a natural ethical community while the state or nation functions as a cultural ethical community. The contradictions are not as uncomplicated as may be assumed for Hegel, because the cultural community is not so much the contradictory opposite of the natural community, but that which results from the dialectical supersession of the contradictions at work within the natural community. However Oliver finds an unresolved contradiction at work in Hegel's attempt to overcome all these latent

---

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., §459, p. 275.

<sup>16</sup> Oliver, 'Antigone's Ghost: Undoing Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*' in *Hypatia*, 1.1. 1996, pp. 67–90.



contradictions. According to her reading, Hegel's attempt results in its own contradictions, paradoxes and uncomfortable ironies.

For Hegel the family facilitates the transition between individual and community; it provides the means by which the passage can be made from the unconscious, immediate ethical order, to the conscious ethical order that will be mediated by reason. Oliver describes Hegel's project in the *Phenomenology* as an attempt to 'conceptualize consciousness'. She then goes on to suggest that, for Hegel,

the goal of philosophy is to articulate fully the meaning of consciousness such that there is no difference between that meaning and its articulation. If this goal is reached, nothing remains unconscious or unspoken. To say that the rational is the real and that the real is the rational is to say that only what can be conceptualized is real and that everything real can be conceptualized.<sup>17</sup>

Oliver then identifies the problem that she sees as coming back to haunt the Hegelian enterprise as being that, according to Hegel's own story, woman is not conceptualised and 'is in principle unconceptualizable'.<sup>18</sup> If the purpose of the dialectical method is to bring unconscious elements to consciousness, then it would seem to be committed to also bringing the (unconscious) feminine element to consciousness. However, in order to make the transition to the ethical world, the feminine must be left behind to remain unconscious.

---

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p.70.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p.70.

I take issue with Oliver's reading of Hegel here. While it is true to say that he must leave the feminine and the family in an undeveloped ethical position, his system does provide a place for them in its memory. Although they are seen as being surpassed or superseded, they are also preserved by the Hegelian *Aufhebung*. They are not completely forgotten, rather woman, nature and the family are a necessary memory for Hegel in order to bring about the ethical order of the state. They are indeed brought to consciousness, but as soon as they are, they are also banished because of the paradoxical nature of their involvement. Woman and the family are the uncomfortable necessity for all cultural production. They are not completely forgotten, merely remembered as little as possible. This forgetting is another symptom of the value attributed to women within both Greek and modern culture.

Whether we agree with Oliver's reading or not depends on how we are to understand Hegel's dialectic. Just as we have seen in Chapter 3 that Benjamin made his own use of the term *Aufhebung*, I will also suggest that Irigaray reworks this concept in order to produce different versions of the dialectic. According to Hegel, the development of the ethical understanding in the community, the family (which can be equated with woman) must be superseded. The ethics of the modern state (*Moralität*) for Hegel, stresses the role of the will and intentions of the individual. On the other hand the ethics of the Greek state (*Sittlichkeit*) are more concerned with the actual deeds of the agent rather than any individualised intentions. It is this return of the individual in modernity that leads to the contradiction between public and private. The dialectical treatment of this

contradiction also reflects the dialectical treatment of the family/state contradiction in ancient Greece.

The development of spirit that takes it from the private to the public will involve an *Aufhebung* of woman and the family. In Hegel's story this movement needs to leave the woman and family behind. Although *Aufhebung* involves cancellation it will not be the kind of cancellation that wipes the slate clean. It will be a cancellation that also preserves what it has cancelled. We have already seen that the necessary forgetting of women is also a necessary forgetting of the necessity of women and the family in order to provide the material conditions of possibility for that forgetting to take place. This dialectical cancellation will always also preserve what has been cancelled.

Irigaray's version of the dialectic emphasises the preservative aspect of the *Aufhebung*. However, this preservation of what has gone before in Hegel's dialectical method can also be considered to be a restrictive and oppressive measure. This is the kind of preservation that is practised on dead things. It is the preservation of the specimen jar and the preservation of interesting curios that pose no threat due to their inanimate nature and their containment. Even though it could be argued that nothing is forgotten in the Hegelian system, all those things that have been preserved and superseded have at the same time been killed or captured.

This preservation is also the preservation within a certain conception of history, where what has been superseded is relegated to the past, which, according to the



Hegelian, schema, removes it from the progressive dynamic process. There is another kind of forgetting at work here. The forgetting of other modes of becoming and different, non-teleological movements.<sup>19</sup> It is by remembering these other forms of movement that Irigaray may provoke a rupture in the Hegelian dialectic which has tried to contain them. These dangerous resources may now prove useful for a revolutionary project such as Benjamin's or Irigaray's, who both see potential contemporary relevance and possibilities for a past that can be conceived as dynamic and accessible.

The preservative aspect of the Hegelian dialectic would also be at odds with Oliver's reading of Hegel in which she understands woman to be 'in principle unconceptualizable'<sup>20</sup>. Rather, it could be argued that Hegel's system really demands the conceptualisation of woman, only it is at the same time a conceptualisation of all that threatens its own conceptualisability. Hegel's dialectic, if it does contain this ghost of Antigone, tries to exorcise it through an act of preservation rather than expulsion. It could be said that in its erasure of woman and the family it also preserves them.

Christine Battersby outlines several versions of Antigone and draws attention to the fact that in the 'Eternal Irony of the Community' chapter in *Speculum* Irigaray is not only engaging with Hegel, but also with Lacan<sup>21</sup>. It is this engagement with Lacan that is often passed over in the commentaries on Irigaray's use of

---

<sup>19</sup> These different movements will be explored in more detail in the next chapter.

<sup>20</sup> Oliver, 'Antigone's Ghost', p. 65.

Antigone. The significant difference between Hegel's and Lacan's readings of Antigone is given by Battersby as the fact that Hegel still allows woman to 'represent another universal – spiritualized 'nature'', whereas 'For Lacan, by contrast, nature no longer exists. And neither does 'woman' – except in so far as she acts as the necessary limit to the oedipalized self.'<sup>22</sup> Indeed, it seems that Oliver is reading Hegel's dialectic through a Lacanian framework in which woman is man's 'Other'. The ironic threat posed by Antigone/woman in the Lacanian system becomes 'the threat of the dissolution of the self into the Otherness that bounds it'<sup>23</sup>. This dissolution of the self into otherness is at odds with Hegel's emphasis on the necessary dissolution of the individual into the community. Battersby shows how Irigaray develops a reading of Antigone that plays with both of these versions in order to give "'woman' an identity that is more than man's 'Other'.'<sup>24</sup>

To return to the long quotation from Hegel, we can see that 'Womankind—the everlasting irony [in the life] of the community—changes by intrigue the universal end of the government into a private end, transforms its universal activity into a work of some particular individual and perverts the universal property of the state into a possession and ornament for the Family.' So Irigaray is, to a certain extent, doing exactly what Hegel would have her do; she does in a sense pervert (*verkehrt*) 'the universal property of the state'. According to Carol

---

<sup>21</sup> See the chapter entitled 'Antigones of Gender' in, Christine Battersby, *The Phenomenal Woman: Feminist Metaphysics and the Patterns of Identity*, Cambridge, Polity, 1998.

<sup>22</sup> Battersby, *The Phenomenal Woman*, p.112.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 111.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 112.

Jacobs, Hegel uses *verkehrt* here to signify the ‘non-dialectical alteration, opposition’ that is at work in woman’s ironic threat. However, although Irigaray is playing her ironic and perverted role, she is also ironically perverting Hegel’s expectations in that there is also a dialectical rather than a purely oppositional impetus to her intervention. Irigaray’s intention to complete or reverse the dialectic<sup>25</sup> suggests there would be no significant difference between a completion and a reversal or as if it were possible to do both of these. Indeed, this is probably another playful, ironic moment that shows a sophisticated understanding of the seemingly paradoxical nature of the Hegelian dialectic at the same time as it is poking fun at its tendency to have its speculative cake and eat it.

It is woman’s necessity in Hegel’s dialectical process that provides the irony. It is women who make the functioning and stability of the *polis* possible, while at the same time being defined as outsiders who pose a threat. It will be useful to take a brief look at how this irony works in Hegel’s accusation (or resigned statement) about woman being the eternal irony of the community. On first sight it looks like it is irony in the sense of a rather unfortunate but unavoidable contradiction. In other words Hegel considers it ironic that the spirit can only make progress along its development to absolute reason by being necessarily helped by matter and non-reason. By identifying woman with irony, Hegel comes close to admitting a contradiction that cannot be resolved through a dialectical supersession. Irony, by definition, would suggest contradiction, as it seems that

---

<sup>25</sup> See *Ethics of Sexual Difference*, p.110 where she suggests that ‘the mucous represents perhaps something that would accomplish or reverse the dialectic’.



the irony is also that there will always be contradiction at heart and hearth of the community.<sup>26</sup> The contradiction of the fact that reason and its political community needs maternal birth and nurture in order to undertake its serious projects.

Irigaray is not only insisting on remembering the role of woman, nature, mother and family within the development of history, she is also stressing the value that has been attributed to these necessary figures. To paraphrase Irigaray's reading of Hegel, we could say that Hegel's attitude to woman's role in the ethical state is one of a necessary evil. Her eternal irony is that she reminds us of the nuisance of the natural. This is, of course also the nuisance of nascence; the uncomfortable, and often unwelcome, gift of birth. Irigaray, then, is attempting to develop a new-sense from her critique of the nuisance of nascence.

Woman's irony is a serious business for Hegel, one that has undesirable effects on the equally serious business of philosophy and the state. For Irigaray the irony is also an opportunity to undermine both the whole business of philosophy and its

---

<sup>26</sup> Irony, in Hegel, differs from the irony of the German Romantics, which was an acceptance of the contradictory and paradoxical nature of the world and merely played with the contradictions without either trying to supersede them or privilege either one. This, according to Hegel ends in the conceit attributed to Friedrich von Schlegel of the 'principle of subjectivity knowing itself as supreme'. It also differs from the irony at work in Greek tragedy which produced the opposite of the wishes or desires of the protagonist. Although he traces the use of irony back to Plato's Socratic dialogues, Hegel points out that Socrates' irony was a method directed against the 'conceit of the Sophists and the uneducated. What he treated ironically, however, was only their type of mind, not the Idea itself.' For Hegel, irony has both negative and positive connotations, indeed it drives the need to overcome contradiction which is 'dialectic in the strict sense. i.e.

seriousness. Hegel's use of the tragic irony of Antigone is taken up by Irigaray to be put to comic effect. She uses it to poke fun at the self-important, grand gestures of those male philosophers who try their best to deny their own dependence on bodies and matter. Irigaray is always being ironic, she is constantly making comical use of irony. In doing so she deliberately offends the norms of the philosophico-academic discourse in such a way that she is also able to go beyond its abstract nature. By laughing at the po-faced seriousness of its practices and practitioners she draws attention to the insecurities and obsessions, the fears and denials that may be at work behind the purely rational facade.

There is very often a mischievousness at work in Irigaray's writing. This can be traced to a tradition of female engagement with philosophy and philosophers that goes back as far as the putative founder of Western philosophy himself – Thales. Adriana Cavarero draws attention to this alternative tradition of feminine laughter which she considers to be providing a corrective aspect to the tendency of philosophy to be life-negating.<sup>27</sup> Cavarero discovers, what she terms a 'feminine realism' in the figure of the maidservant of Thrace whom we encounter in Plato's *Theaetetus*.<sup>28</sup> This maidservant is described by Plato as laughing at Thales, who fell into a well because he was concentrating on the sky and the stars instead of paying attention to more worldly concerns. It is Thales' concern with the heavenly and all that is not of this world, and the assumption in this that what is heavenly is somehow more real, that Cavarero identifies as symptomatic of

---

dialectic as the pulsating drive of speculative enquiry.' See, Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, §140, p. 101.

<sup>27</sup> See Adriana Cavarero, *In Spite of Plato*, Cambridge, Polity, 1995, chapter 2, 'The Maidservant from Thrace'.

Western philosophy's rejection of the material, living world. She provides a reading of Parmenides' rejection of change and all subsequent philosophies of being as implicated not only in a rejection of life but also in a misogynistic rejection of woman's contribution to life. She argues that philosophy's obsession with being is partly the result of Greeks' failure to distinguish between 'the "existential" and the "predicative" valence of the verb to be (*einai*)'.<sup>29</sup> What then follows from this is the identification of being with eternity and immutability, thus exiling reality and its truth from the realm of the living, changing, and transient world. The world where humans are born, grow, change, and die.

What feminine realism finds so amusing is that this unchanging world of static truth and absolute sameness could be so interesting to the great philosophers who are supposedly intelligent men. Although we could rescue Hegel from being labelled as one of these laughable philosophers of being by positioning him as a philosopher of change and becoming, there is something that would still appeal to the jocular maiden in his insistence that 'the real is the rational' or his highly obtuse and abstract method and writing. There is still a negation of reality hidden in his philosophical idealism. The kind of abstraction at work in Hegel is what Cavarero terms 'dematerialization' – the rendering of material truth to an immaterial ideal.

The laughter of Cavarero's feminine realism is itself a critique of this idealism:

It has the merit of condensing in a moment pregnant with truth the boring futility of argument. The maidservant's argument is strong with the power

---

<sup>28</sup> Plato, *Theaetetus*, 174a.

<sup>29</sup> Cavarero, *In Spite of Plato*, p. 39.



of facts, with the power of one who belongs to this world where she has her roots and lives out her existence.<sup>30</sup>

At the same time it is also an attempt to show the existence of a female tradition of a more 'realistic' philosophy that bases itself in the material and bodily aspects of human existence. The 'laughter itself becomes the figure of a female symbolic order' that is more concerned with a 'sense of life'<sup>31</sup>.

Although Irigaray could not be considered strictly as a feminine realist along the same lines as Cavarero, she nonetheless participates in this tradition of life affirming laughter:

It is better to laugh than indulge in murderous fanaticism! Yet the limit is hard to make out. We have to laugh while remaining vigilant, laugh to keep the worst at bay and keep our good health, laugh to ward off immediate acts of violence and to give ourselves breathing space.<sup>32</sup>

Irigaray's use of the figure of Antigone, is probably best labelled as tragi-comic, because her light-hearted jibes at the likes of Hegel's 'problem' with women have also a serious side. She is concerned not only with the fictional or mythological violence done to Antigone, but also with the culture of violence and death that both Sophocles' play and Hegel's philosophy play a part in.

That woman is concerned with life more than death is a position that Irigaray wants to repeat faithfully in her mimetic re-presentations of the myth of

---

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 36.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p.56.

<sup>32</sup> *Sexes and Genealogies*, p.115.

Antigone. This is staged in contradistinction to Hegel who is usually read as positioning Antigone as concerned with death and the rights of the dead. He emphasised how, in Sophocles' tragedy, it is Antigone who insists on performing a burial and the taking care of the dead. In Hegel's account of the family in *Phenomenology*, one of its primary tasks is that it takes care of these rights in order to allow the particular man, the one who has died to find his true place among the universal, spirit. Irigaray's re-readings tend to subvert this view by showing how Antigone's insistence on burying her brother Polynices, also creates repercussions for the degree and status of life that she experiences under the patriarchal regime. As we have seen there is no room for woman to become fully conscious in Hegel's ethical world. Irigaray describes Antigone's struggle as an attempt to achieve a '*for-itself*', or consciousness. She argues that, because

women have no language sexed as female, they are used in the elaboration of a so-called neuter language where in fact they are deprived of speech. And this makes it hard for a woman to achieve a *for-itself*, and to construct a place between the *in-itself* and the *for-itself*. In the terms of the Hegelian dialectic, this situation might be analyzed as the female remaining in the *plant* world without any chance of creating an *animal* territory for herself.<sup>33</sup>

The *for-itself* (*für sich*) for Hegel, can become aware of its own self and is able to express this. The plant-like *in-itself* (*an-sich*) has no similar potential: plants do not have the potential to either become aware of or to express themselves; they are excluded from becoming *for-itself*. The need to construct a place between the *in-itself* and the *for-itself* is Irigaray's reworking of the Hegelian being-in-and-

for-self (*Anundfürsichsein*), which brings the in-itself and the for-itself together in an infinite identification.<sup>34</sup> The 'between' would, once again, be the communicating mediation of the sensible and the transcendental, as well as something between the public and the private, and the conscious and the unconscious. Irigaray is suggesting that the amount or quality of life allotted to woman in the Hegelian dialectic is that of plant life. Irigaray goes on to show how Antigone exemplifies this when she is walled up in the cave because she becomes 'like a plant buried in a stone cave which can only live if it manages to get out of its tomb, rise up to the light . . .'<sup>35</sup> Irigaray suggests that by trying to establish her *for-itself* Antigone takes the only action that is left to her in order to escape the confines of the male ethical order. If to live is to get out of the tomb, then Antigone's irony increases because she only escapes this tomb by killing herself.

This concern with death in both Hegel's and Irigaray's treatments of Antigone also confronts the question of war. There are all sorts of ironies surrounding Polynices' death. Not the least of these is the fact that he was killed by his own brother Eteocles, and that Eteocles also died in the struggle with his brother. That this war was being fought between brothers can be taken as an example of the

---

<sup>33</sup> *Ethics of Sexual Difference*, p.107.

<sup>34</sup> Simone de Beauvoir redescribed this using the terms of French existentialism: 'To become God is to accomplish the impossible synthesis of the en-soi and the pour-soi.' (*The Second Sex*, trans. H.M. Parshley, London, Picador, 1988.p. 644) Irigaray's use of in-itself and for-itself here is also marked by Beauvoir's analyses of the existentialists' Hegelian tendency to reduce woman to the 'en-soi, or fixed, lower nature'. (*The Second Sex*, p. 624).



investment in death and war that Irigaray describes in patriarchal culture. It is war that creates both heroes and traitors, the only difference seemingly being that the hero will have fought on the victor's side while the traitor will have been on the side of the vanquished. For Hegel, war serves a useful purpose in binding the community together through a rejection of individual or natural existence:

In order not to let them become rooted and set in this isolation, thereby breaking up the whole and letting the [communal] spirit evaporate, government has from time to time to shake them to their core by war. By this means the government upsets their established order, and violates their right to independence, while the individuals who, absorbed in their own way of life, break loose from the whole and strive after the inviolable independence and security of the person, are made to feel in the task laid on them their lord and master, death.<sup>36</sup>

So, according to Hegel, the real master is, in the end, death, and death will always take precedence over a life that would be lived individually, or outside the community or state. War binds individuals together by creating a common enemy, and the life of the state is always of greater importance than the life of the individual. Indeed, the individual is what poses a threat to the life of the state. So, for Hegel, war is not to protect the state or community from an external threat, it serves to prevent it from being fragmented by the conflicting interests of its own individualised members.

---

<sup>35</sup> There is a strange irony in Irigaray's use of the metaphor of struggling to reach the light which echoes Plato's myth of the cave considering deconstruction of this move towards the light in the final chapter of *Speculum*.

<sup>36</sup> *Phenomenology of Spirit*, §455, pp. 272-273.

This threat posed by individualism is linked to the threat posed by woman as the interpreter of the law of the family. Hegel identifies the ‘duality of a law of individuality and a law of universality’.<sup>37</sup> While the family can also be universal (*das Allgemeine*), it is the natural universal in which the individual is first able to express itself. ‘The *positive* End peculiar to the Family is the individual as such.’<sup>38</sup> This is also borne out by Antigone’s wilful disregard for the law of the state; the law of universality.

Although war is seen as a necessary method of binding the community together, its blame can still be laid firmly at woman’s door, because without her ironic threat there would be no danger of fragmentation. However, it would be wrong to assume that Irigaray is simply asserting the contrary to Hegel’s position on war and the polemic. Antigone is not simply an anti-hero. Irigaray is not advocating the fragmentation of the state in favour of a more naturalised individual. She is proposing a less violent form of mediation that would encourage individuality, and also be able to bind the community together at the same time. Hers would not be a dialectic based on the *polemos*,<sup>39</sup> like the master-slave dialectic, because, as we have seen, the ultimate master in this dialectic is always death. For her the universal or the commonality of the community (the *Allgemeine* of the *Gemeinschaft*) is to be brought about, not through conflict or opposition, but through co-operation and the affirmation of life, love, and laughter. If she were to

---

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., §446, p. 267.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., §451, p. 269.

merely oppose Hegel's hierarchical contradictions, she would still be participating in the war-like logic of his dialectics. She even follows Hegel's lead to a certain extent, only to bring into question the hierarchical relationships that the Hegelian dialectic is based on.

## **Brecht & Hölderlin's Antigones**

Although Irigaray does no more than announce her intention to engage with Brecht's *Antigone*, it will prove useful to try and second guess what an Irigarayan reading of Brecht's *Antigone* might look like. This is relevant to my argument because Brecht's play, and his commentaries and notes on it, are also based firmly on a polemical model. His is very much a post-war German response to Sophocle's tragedy, a production that is attempting to come to terms with the aftermath of Nazism. He sees his play as struggling with the problems of creating 'progressive art in the period of reconstruction'<sup>40</sup>. Taking Hölderlin's translation of Sophocles as his basis, Brecht adds a prologue set in Berlin at the end of the war. The resulting drama Brecht judged to be not just of use or interest at a particular time, but one that should last over time. He thus wrote a 'model' in order to try and establish the standard for his *Antigone*. The first interesting remark to note in an Irigarayan reading is the almost authoritarian ring to Brecht's use of this 'model'. His translators give it the title of 'Masterful

---

<sup>39</sup> As Irigaray's translator notes '*polemos*' is usually translated as 'war', but is also obviously connected etymologically to 'polemic'. See *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, p. 104.

<sup>40</sup> Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, trans. John Willett, Methuen, London, 1964, p. 210.



Treatment of a Model'<sup>41</sup>. Brecht's 'masterful' (*souverän*) treatment is not only an arrogant claim about the artistic, theoretical, and technical accomplishment of his production of the play, it is also 'masterful' in the sense that it is to be obeyed.

'Our new adaptation cannot be handed over in the usual way to theatres to do what they like with. An obligatory model production has been worked out . . . .'<sup>42</sup>

The gendered repercussions of this mastery cannot go unnoticed, which will make participation in a 'pure' Brechtian production problematic. A performer would need to be aware of the power relationships at work in a production and what degree of 'submission' to the 'master' is required.

However Brecht also suggests two possible reactions to the model; it can be treated 'either slavishly or masterfully (*knechtish als auch souverän*)'<sup>43</sup>. What is also at work here is Brecht's engagement with mimesis and representation. He is actively concerned with the traditional aesthetic problems of mimesis, inherited from Plato. He writes about copying the model in a manner that brings a Platonic schema to mind, while at the same time trying to distance himself from Platonic realism. This 'masterful model' is not a Platonic *eidos* because it can be varied.

The most successful imitation or mimesis that Brecht desires would be a repetition that both imitates and varies the model in a productive fashion. This would be the 'masterful' treatment that avoids slavishness. Since Hegel's treatment of the master/slave dialectic and Antigone is so well known, it must

---

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p.209.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p.211.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p.212.

also be assumed that Brecht also had this in mind, as well as the Marxian inversion of the Hegelian system.

If we are to speculate on what Irigaray might do with the Brechtian framework, we would have to conclude that she would find great opportunity to play with the notion of an unfaithful mimesis that could be derived from Brecht's model. However the limitation of the treatment to either slavish or masterful must still be too restrictive for Irigaray's expansive and fluid dialectic. She would ask how sexual difference is manifested in this model, and how it could be subversively imitated to make room for a female/feminine treatment that would be neither slavish nor masterful. Brecht's dialectical method is based on contradiction and, as we have seen in relation to Hegel, Irigaray states that his

method is based on contradiction, on contradictory propositions. Yet sex does not obey the logic of contradiction. It bends and folds to accommodate that logic but it does not conform. Forced to follow that logic, it is drawn into a mimetic game that moves faraway from life'<sup>44</sup>

This must also apply to Brecht's dialectic of contradiction, which is very much based on a polemical model. His *polemos* is also one of warfare and death which closely polices its mimesis. Although Brecht's 'models' leave room for an unfaithful treatment, they still conform to the type of gendered logic that Irigaray associates with the rejection of woman, life, and nature. The only kind of freedom available in Brecht is the freedom of contradiction and conflict, but Irigaray is trying to move away from a logic of contradiction altogether. If Irigaray were to produce a treatment of Brecht's *Antigone* we would hope that her

own particular 'masterful' treatment would be the one that would undermine the whole notion of mastery and the masculinised logic that it incorporates. While she is happy to participate in the game of mimesis, even in the acting and staging of roles, she also is looking for a 'new method'. Although the Brechtian notion of productive mimesis might prove useful in trying to produce a revolutionary attitude and concept of time and history, Irigaray would not be prepared to produce a copy, which is what Brecht would demand.

It is surprising that Irigaray has not yet engaged with Brecht, as they seem to share so many concerns. Not only might there be a fruitful exploration of the notion of the unfaithful or 'masterful' mimesis in these writers, they are also both concerned with mirroring. Commenting on the writing of poetry, Brecht suggests that

Writing poetry has to be viewed as a human activity, a social function of a wholly contradictory and alterable kind, conditioned by history and in turn conditioning it. It is the difference between 'mirroring' and 'holding up a mirror'.<sup>45</sup>

This notion of mirroring as being conditioned by history at the same time as conditioning it is remarkably close to Irigaray's project. She is taking the position of the mirror in *Speculum*, but is both 'mirroring' the masculine order and 'holding up a mirror' to it in order to change the condition of history by showing how that history has conditioned woman as mirror. Irigaray's mirror would differ

---

<sup>44</sup> Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies*, p.139.

<sup>45</sup> Bertolt Brecht, *Poems 1913–1956*, eds John Willett & Ralph Manheim, London, Methuen, 1979, p.483.



from Brecht's, in that it would not show the same reflection due to its curved surface. Her mirror would multiply truths rather than reflecting a single truth.

Another shared concern of Brecht and Irigaray is the theme of rhythm. Brecht often wrote verse with irregular rhythms in an attempt to counteract the 'disagreeably lulling, soporific effect'<sup>46</sup> of rhythmic poetry. It is not surprising that he made this use of rhythmic devices disrupt the soporific continuum because his own version of *Antigone* was based on Hölderlin's. As we shall see below, Hölderlin also laid great emphasis on the dramatic possibilities of rhythm. The question of the status of the historical and revolutionary time at work in Irigaray's readings of the myth of Antigone can be also be approached through the question of rhythm.

As we have seen in the previous chapter, Irigaray also associates these cosmic rhythms with love – and this picks up another theme that appears in Hegel's representation of Antigone. Peter Szondi states Sophocles' tragedy is, for Hegel, one in which 'The collision involved is that of love and law as they confront each other in the characters of Antigone and Creon.'<sup>47</sup> It is clear that Irigaray is taking the side of love although this is a love that wants to transform the law. It is not in opposition to the law, it is a desire that the law allows love to influence its justice. Hegel rules out the relationship between husband and wife as unable to bring about the movement of the individual from the natural to the cultural realm,

---

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p.470.

because it is based on love, not on law. This loving relationship is unable to escape from the natural realm. We can assume from this that the kind of loving in this relationship is almost an animal instinctual relationship – a proto-evolutionary genetic desire for the survival of the species, rather than an ethical relationship of responsibility to the other. It is the wife who succumbs to this animal desire of the survival of the universality of the species, while the husband is rational enough to differentiate a particular relation at stake with an individual or person:

The difference between the ethical life of the woman and that of the man consists in just this, that in her vocation as an individual and in her pleasure, her interest is centred on the universal and remains alien to the particularity of desire; whereas in the husband these two sides are separated; and since he possesses as a citizen the self-conscious power of universality, he thereby acquires the right of desire and, at the same time, preserves his freedom in regard to it.<sup>48</sup>

The different types of desire at work here relate to different kinds of universals. The woman's desire is directed towards the universality of the family and the household gods; the man's desire is linked to the universals of the *polis* and is directed towards that of the community.

As we have also seen from the previous chapter, Irigaray's presentation of the mucous as the unspoken and unthought occupant of the place of the soul would

---

<sup>47</sup> Peter Szondi, 'The Notion of the Tragic in Schelling, Hölderlin and Hegel' in *On Textual Understanding and Other Essays*, trans. Harvey Mendelsohn, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1986, p.53.

also corresponds to the position of Antigone within Hegel's ethical order. Antigone undertakes ethical actions and is at the same time denied knowledge of them as well as being denied a full ethical consciousness. In as much as Antigone also represents a loving approach to ethics rather than a legal one then she is also a participant in a muculent model of ethics.

Irigaray has great hopes for mucous, for her it is even that which 'represents something that would accomplish or reverse the dialectic'<sup>49</sup>. If it were to accomplish the dialectic we can presume that it would produce the contradiction-free subject-object. A reversal of the dialectic, on the other hand, might be another aspect of brushing history against the grain, one in which all those moments and concepts that have been superseded will re-appear from their traces. Although the mucous has heretofore been invisible in history, it has left traces. Traces of different subjectivities and different temporalities in which those subjectivities would operate. The representation of accomplishment or reversal of the dialectic through mucous would, of course be a loving completion rather than a polemical one.

Because Irigaray associates mucous so closely with the act of love, the temporality of her revolutionary reversal of the dialectic demands a sensitivity to its rhythms. She stresses that this must be an act of openness, both in generosity and incompleteness. It is the inability to find this rhythm that she posits as another

---

<sup>48</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, §457, p.275.

<sup>49</sup> *Ethics of Sexual Difference*, p.110.



aspect of nihilism or the ‘anxiety of the chasm, of the abyss’<sup>50</sup>. Rather than having the more usual attitude of disgust towards the mucous, Irigaray espouses a mucophilian ethics which makes use of the movements associated with the mucous to suggest a seamless continuity of duration:

This failure to embrace the mucous leads to the squandering of its abundance, the exploitation of its availability, its joyfulness, its flesh, or to the abandonment and repetition of its gesture or gestures of love, which become broken and jerky, instead of progressive and inscribed in duration.<sup>51</sup>

The fluidity of these loving acts also reflect the continuity of the cosmic rhythms discussed above. However, if this fluid continuity is to play a part in the accomplishment or reversal of the dialectic it must differ from the ‘fluid continuity’ that Hegel finds in the human law.<sup>52</sup> His fluid continuity is used to consume and absorb womankind. This is what he tries to do with Antigone who is seen as antithetical to the human law. For Irigaray, Hegel’s fluid continuity is one that represents a seamlessness and completion that should ideally be free of any gaps or holes. For Hegel, this would help in the closure of the totality of the system, again reflecting what Irigaray would describe as the anxiety of the chasm or abyss. Irigaray’s fluid continuity, on the other hand, is one that would encourage various lacunae and openings. The fluidity of mucous allows for holes to appear in it at the same time that it is continuous. Again there is a generosity at work in this thinking of continuity that would always be susceptible to change

---

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p.111.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p.111.

<sup>52</sup> *Phenomenology of Spirit* p.288.

and open enough to accommodate any shape that would like to be included in its environs.<sup>53</sup> Irigaray's Antigone would have a rhythm of her own – a rhythm that would maintain this inclusive continuity.

As it was Irigaray's expressed aim to engage with Hölderlin's reading of Antigone, and she has not published the results of a sustained engagement, it will also be useful to try and ascertain what is at stake in Hölderlin's reading. Hölderlin is also very concerned with rhythm and its liberating potential. For him rhythm also provides continuity, although this is the continuity of a modernity that at the same time recognises its radical break from what has gone before. Hölderlin differs from Nietzsche in that for him God is not dead, instead the gods have merely flown and can still be glimpsed. There is both a memory of the gods and a futural preparation for their coming in Hölderlin's poetry. Irigaray remarks on Hölderlin's preparation for the gods when she writes that,

Hölderlin says that the gods come to us on a certain *wind* that blows from the icy cold of the north to the place where every sun rises: the East... The god would refer back to a time before our space-time was formed into a closed world by an economy of natural elements forced to bow to man's affect and will...<sup>54</sup>

This would be the preparation for an ancient god of a pre-historic or pre-patriarchal time – a matriarchal god that would not create the separation of nature and culture that would disrupt the cosmic rhythms of a more inclusive space-

---

<sup>53</sup> It is her insistence on continuity and the progressive nature of this continuity that would place her at odds with Benjamin's revolutionary temporality. This tension between these thinkers will be explored in chapter 8.

time. Irigaray does make some suggestions as to what some of the characteristics of this god might be, and these are also linked to her thinking of the mucous:

Because the mucous has a special touch and properties, it would stand in the way of the transcendence of a God that was alien to the flesh, a God of immutable, stable truth. On the contrary the mucous would summon the god to return or to come in a new incarnation...<sup>55</sup>

This would be a fleshy, or sensible god of fluid, dynamic truth. This is also the paradoxical message of her presentation of the 'sensible transcendental'.

Hölderlin could be described as trying to summon up a poetic formula that will recognise the disruptive, or disjunctive, nature of modernity at the same time as it tries to fill in the gaps that may be left by this disruptive thinking. Peter Szondi describes how Hölderlin is able to produce a dialectic that functions according to a thinking of the tragic relation between nature and art as well as between God and man. This differs from the Hegelian dialectic that requires the mediation of more abstract or rational antitheses, while still adhering to Szondi's definition of the dialectic as 'the unity of contradictory terms, the turning of one term into its opposite, the act by which a term posits the negation of itself, and self-division'.<sup>56</sup> For Hölderlin, it is the tragic relationship between god and man that must be thought in any philosophy of history, and it is the distance that has appeared between them that marks modernity's historical specificity. However;

---

<sup>54</sup> *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, p.128.

<sup>55</sup> *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, p.110.

<sup>56</sup> Peter Szondi, 'The Notion of the Tragic in Schelling, Hölderlin and Hegel', p.189.



Hölderlin's dialectical constructions do indeed try to unite these tragically contradictory terms when he suggests that history would be a night in which,

God and man, in order that the course of the world have no lacunae and that *the memory of the Celestial Ones will not come to an end, reveal themselves in the all-forgetting form of faithlessness*, for divine faithlessness is what is best remembered.<sup>57</sup>

It is this 'divine faithlessness' that signifies the paradoxical and utopian nature of Hölderlin's reading of modernity. It is the tragic force that would cover over the lacunae in history, through an act of all-forgetting remembrance.

Irigaray may also have this version of the dialectic in her sights when she announces her mucosic intention to accomplish or reverse the dialectic. Rather than an all-forgetting faithlessness that must be posited to cover over the lacunae in the historical course of the world, Irigaray's method could be described as an all-remembering faithfulness. It would be an all-inclusive remembering as well as a specific remembering of sexual difference. Hölderlin's paradoxical notion of divine faithlessness reinforces the sense of a godless modernity while at the same time projecting a futural re-appearance of the gods. While it would also be possible to read Hölderlin's hymns as expressing nostalgia and regret at the flight of the gods, we must also agree with Szondi's interpretation that they act as a preparation for the coming of the gods.<sup>58</sup> Szondi also suggests that their utopian

---

<sup>57</sup> Hölderlin, *Sämtliche Werke*, p.202.

<sup>58</sup> Szondi, 'The Notion of the Tragic in Schelling, Hölderlin and Hegel', p.48.

structure can be discerned in their ‘extremely intense rhythm’<sup>59</sup>. This rhythm and its interruption is also crucial to Hölderlin’s conception of tragedy in *Antigone*.

Irigaray’s reversal or accomplishment of Hölderlin’s dialectic can be seen most clearly in her transposition of his ‘divine faithlessness’ into her ‘sensible transcendental’. This clearly accords with Szondi’s definition of the dialectic, specifically in providing a ‘unity of contradictory terms’. It also accomplishes a reversal that is not just a mere copy or mirror image. The reversal consists in bringing the sensible and the transcendental together in a way reminiscent of their divorce in Hölderlin’s tragic separations. At the same time we can also discern the accomplishment of the dialectic in Irigaray’s own preparation for the arrival of the gods, or God. This is not only incidentally an accomplishment at the same time as it is a reversal, it is an accomplishment at the same time because it is an accomplishment ‘also as a *here and now*, the willed construction of a bridge in the present between the past and the future’.<sup>60</sup> Irigaray’s version of parousia literally incorporates a different temporality, in that it would be an ‘inscription in the flesh’ in which God would become ‘a realization—here and now—in and through the body’.<sup>61</sup> Just as in Christ’s first coming, this would be an incarnation in all its fleshy reality. This is not necessarily the re-appearance of a Christ-like figure, for Irigaray. It would be the emergence of a new historical era in which spirit and flesh can come together in all bodies, including female-bodies. This

---

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p.48.

<sup>60</sup> *Ethics of Sexual Difference*, p.147.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p.148.

new ethical era would again be sensitive to the material rhythms of the cosmos as well as the transcendental rhythms of the spirit.

As I have mentioned above, the rhythms, of the text were important to Hölderlin, and he invests his writing, both theoretically and practically, with rhythmic cadences. What is also very pertinent is that his own understanding of *Antigone* is that it is a play steeped in revolutionary significances. According to George Steiner, Hölderlin's reading differs from Hegel's, because Hegel considered the play to be 'a dialectic of perfect equilibrium between Creon and Antigone'.<sup>62</sup> Hölderlin on the other hand considers the play to be representative of a moment of 'national reversal and revolution (*Väterlandische Umkehr*)'<sup>63</sup> in which Creon and Antigone both worship the same gods, but experience their respective relationships to these gods in completely different ways. These differences will become manifest in the differences of the laws that they follow. Hölderlin portrays Antigone as lawless (*gesetzlos*), which Steiner suggests 'exceeds legalism and the statutory but is in inevitable antithesis to them'.<sup>64</sup> This reading of Antigone's resistance as revolutionary also ties in with Irigaray's use of Antigone as a figure that might exceed the prevailing legalism through her lawlessness.

What is even more appropriate (and appropriable) for Irigaray in Hölderlin's reading and translation of *Antigone* is the transformative nature of time

---

<sup>62</sup> George Steiner, *Antigones*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1984, p.40-41.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p.81.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 83.



embedded in it. Steiner suggests that Hölderlin attributed ‘a mystery of purpose and of generative energy’ to time which is itself ‘transformative of the classical text’.<sup>65</sup> Indeed it is not only the text that is to be transformed, Steiner shows how there is a radical and ontological thinking of time in Hölderlin’s work that can be used to explain his practice of translation. Hölderlin chose to translate Sophocles’ *Antigone*, not only because he considered it to be a revolutionary work, but also because he considered it the right time to transform the work and release its hidden and contemporary energies, resonances and rhythms. It is in some remarks on Sophocles’ *Oedipus* that Hölderlin draws attention to the notion of ‘divine faithlessness’ mentioned above, and it is at these moments that he identifies a moment of pure human suffering in which ‘there exists nothing but the conditions of time and space’. However it is also at these moments that a ‘categorical reversal (*Umkehr*)’ of both time and the tragic figure takes place.<sup>66</sup>

Hölderlin also associates this ‘categorical reversal’ with the rhythm of tragedy. He identifies a ‘rhythmic sequence of representations wherein *transport* represents itself’. ‘Transport’, here, would be understood as the empathetic understanding or emotional immersion of the audience in the play. However, in order for the representation as a whole to be successful, the rhythms of the series of representations that make up the drama must be carefully balanced. Hölderlin suggests that, in tragedy at least, there must be a point of balance, and this he

---

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 72.

<sup>66</sup> Hölderlin, ‘Remarks on Oedipus’ in *Essays and Letters on Theory*, trans. Thomas Pfau, Albany, SUNY, 1988, p. 108.

calls the '*cesura*, the pure word, the counter-rhythmic rupture'.<sup>67</sup> Hölderlin's interpretation differs subtly from Hegel's, in that the crux of the tragedy; its moment of balance, is not modelled on an equilibrium. The point of balance will not be in the middle because the weight of the rhythms is not distributed evenly throughout the play. Hölderlin even provides a useful diagram to show where the *cesura* lies in *Antigone* (about one third of the way into the play). Hölderlin's dialectic operates here on a moment of rupture rather than a smooth progression. Hölderlin finds these moments of counter-rhythmic rupture in the speeches of Tiresias. Steiner suggests that there is indeed a categorical reversal of time and values here because 'there can be no more cataclysmic *Umkehr* and inversion of values than the exposure of the stinking dead on the earth's sunlit surface and the relegation of the living to the lightless underground death.'<sup>68</sup>

It is this reversal of time and values that can resonate again in an Irigarayan reading of Hölderlin's *Antigone*. The opening word of Hölderlin's *Antigone* is '*Gemeinsamschwesterliches!*' which could be translated as 'shared sisterlyness'. This is a word ripe for feminist reappropriation, even according to Hölderlin's own theory and practice of translation in which the translation should result in a temporal transformation which releases the energies of the original. It is especially appropriate for an Irigarayan, mimetic reworking as it already has connotations of genealogy, blood-relations and destiny. Her own reworkings of *Antigone* might be elaborations on the theme of a revolutionary and timely *Gemeinsamschwesterliches* in the here and now. Although Hölderlin treats

---

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 102.

*Antigone* as a patriotic revolutionary text, it would be a relatively small step to reinterpret it as a feminist revolutionary text through attending to this *Gemeinsamschwesterliches*. Indeed in her most recently published book, *Entre Orient et Occident*, Irigaray finally brings Antigone and Hölderlin together in a renunciation of the logic of humanist patriarchy. She suggests that,

Antigone and Holderlin will be able to reject nostalgias of the still too simple, immediate and ego-logical kind, in order to attempt to build spiritual links between their singularities<sup>69</sup>

Irigaray opens this book with a quote from Sophocles' *Antigone*, which in most English translations reads something like: 'Wonders are many on the earth, and the greatest of these is man'<sup>70</sup>. However there is a different nuance in the French version in that the translation of the Greek '*deinos*' is '*inquiétantes*', which has connotations more of disturbing and worrying than wondering<sup>71</sup>. In fact, the French version is closer to the Greek which is more like 'fearful' or 'dreadful'. Irigaray plays on this disturbing and worrying, and what is most worrying for her about the present epoch is that man still presumes, just as he did in Sophocles' text, that he could conquer and control everything under the heavens. Sophocles is acutely aware of the dangers of man's hubris. The chorus warns that the man who doesn't uphold 'his country's laws and the justice of heaven' will be

---

<sup>68</sup> Steiner, *Antigones*, p.100.

<sup>69</sup> Irigaray, *Entre Orient et Occident*, Paris, Bernard Grasset, 1999, p.31. '*Antigone et Hölderlin pourront y renoncer à des nostalgies encore trop simple, immédiates et égologiques, pour tenter de bâtir des liens spirituels entre leurs singularités.*'

<sup>70</sup> Sophocles, *Antigone*, 332-333.

<sup>71</sup> *Entre Orient et Occident* p .9.



spurned<sup>72</sup>. Irigaray seems to be sharing this sentiment about respecting the laws of the state and the justice of heaven. Although this appears to be a far cry from the earlier, almost anarchistic reading of *Antigone*, the emphasis would be on the justice of heaven or the cosmic laws. Indeed, this would fit with Hegel's reading of Antigone as intuitively interpreting the divine law of the family.

Although, in Irigaray's earlier readings, Antigone generally represents either the imprisonment or exclusion of woman from a symbolic order or culture that is not her own, in her later work she has come to represent a more mediating figure. Antigone is also brought in to suggest that there can and should be a mutual and shared respect between the two different cultures (male/masculine and female/feminine). In an essay calling for civil rights and responsibilities for the two sexes, Irigaray portrays Antigone as an almost conservative character. She states that 'Antigone upholds the need to observe order', particularly with respect to 'the cosmic order' and respect for maternal genealogy<sup>73</sup>. Antigone's respect for order here is important to Irigaray because it is one of the few places that the ancient link between the civil and the religious remains unbroken. Irigaray suggests that the need to respect both the laws of the state and the laws of heaven are manifested in the figure of Antigone. She takes Antigone to be undertaking a major historical intervention when she states that 'Antigone pits one order

---

<sup>72</sup> Sophocles, *Antigone*, 367-375.

<sup>73</sup> Irigaray, 'Civil Rights and Responsibilities for the Two Sexes', in *Thinking the Difference*, London, Athlone, 1994, p. 68.

against another at the time of the advent of male regal power.<sup>74</sup> So Antigone also represents the passage between the matriarchal and the patriarchal.

Irigaray suggests that in the pre-historic time of women's law, the civil and the religious were not strictly separated. So to say that Antigone respects the cosmic order is not necessarily to say that she also opposes the civil order. For the later Irigaray she opposes the rule of Creon and the patriarchal order that this represents. However, this again is not an opposition or contradiction based on the *polemos*. Antigone's respect for the cosmic order and its rhythms also keeps open the opportunity to have other civic orders (male/masculine and female/feminine) functioning in harmony within that cosmos. As the subtitle of *Thinking the Difference* states, her revolution would be moving 'towards a peaceful revolution'<sup>75</sup>. The rhythm of this revolution would, of course, not be the warlike, violent rhythms of the Hegelian dialectic. In Derrida's reading of the passage in the *Phenomenology* that deals with the necessity of war to keep the community from fragmenting, he comments that 'Intermittence—jerking rhythm—is an essential rule. If there were only war, the community's natural being-there would be destroyed'<sup>76</sup>. This jerky rhythm of war echoes the jerky rhythm that Irigaray ascribes to those who fail to embrace the mucous. The nature of the temporalities suggested by the smoother rhythms of the mucous will be explored in the next chapter.

---

<sup>74</sup> Irigaray, *Thinking the Difference*, p.68.

<sup>75</sup> The original French title *Le Temps de la différance* is even more interesting because it also suggests the 'time' of this thinking of difference.

<sup>76</sup> Derrida, *Glas*, trans. John P. Leavey Jr. and Richard Rand. University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 1986 p.147.

## **Chapter 6.**

**Not Dancing but Swimming? Space, Time and  
Movement in Nietzsche and Irigaray.**



In this chapter I would like to explore Irigaray's relationship to Nietzsche; her debts and differences, criticisms and complaints, in order to elucidate further aspects of the conception of time that might be at work in what I consider to be her revolutionary attempt to change our culture. This will be based on a reading of her text, *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche*<sup>1</sup>, as this is her most sustained engagement with his work. I will focus on three main topics: namely space, movement and time. I intend to show how Irigaray's use of space, movement and time are criticisms of Nietzsche's use of these terms at the same time as they can also be described as further developments of them. I will also try to develop Irigaray's criticisms further than she explicitly takes them in order to try and open up a more flexible and inclusive formulation of temporality.

The title of *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche* gives us a good clue to the kind of relationship that Irigaray would like to forge with Nietzsche. In this text the authorial voice positions itself through a loving relationship with Nietzsche, becoming Ariadne to his Dionysus or Echo to his Narcissus. But as we shall see, this loving relationship doesn't automatically lead to the most comprehensive or accurate account of Nietzsche's work. The author's passionate engagement sometimes produces an almost unrecognisable Nietzsche, and we need to bear in mind that this is not always a text that is 'faithful' to Nietzsche due to her method of engaging with him as a lover rather than as a scholar.

---

<sup>1</sup>Irigaray, L. *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche*, trans. G.C. Gill, New York, Columbia University Press, 1991.

Irigaray's method is not one of the rigorous philosopher, spotting the howlers, *non sequitors*, fallacious arguments or self-contradictions within Nietzsche's work. To take that kind of approach to Nietzsche's work would be most likely to end up completely misrepresenting him anyway. Instead she engages amorously with his work. This does not mean that she positions herself as simply adoring Nietzsche or that she turns him into an infallible philosophical hero. This is a much more Gallic affair, one in which the lovers are passionate in every aspect, in their agreements and disagreements, in their misunderstandings and jealousies, as well as in their desires. This is not an affair in which the participants try to conform to each others ideals, (to become the same brings boredom and kills love), instead the differences are maintained thus keeping the interest alive and frustrated. Irigaray's affair with Nietzsche is a love of different bodies, different times, different voices, different lives, and different spaces.

### **Different Spaces: The Mountains and the Sea**

Again the title is useful in informing us of the kind of space within which Irigaray would positioning herself. The author is the *Marine Lover*: a sea creature more at home in the deep, dark depths of the ocean than on dry land. The first part of the book is given the title of 'Speaking of Immemorial Waters' and is a meditation on this imagined female/feminine (*féminin*) aquatic space. In this section Irigaray contrasts her own imaginary of the sea and its enveloping fluidity and darkness against Nietzsche's imagery of mountains and light and air in his

*Thus Spoke Zarathustra.*<sup>2</sup>

Nietzsche uses Zarathustra to announce the doctrine of the *Übermensch* who ‘*shall be the meaning of the earth!*’, and Zarathustra also entreats his audience to ‘*remain true to the earth, and do not believe those who speak to you of superterrestrial hopes!*’<sup>3</sup> These professions of fidelity to the earth are characteristic of Nietzsche’s rejection of all that he called nihilism. Nihilism, for Nietzsche, would include any explanation of meaning that bases its truth outside this temporal world. He considers Platonism and Christianity as two particular forms of nihilism, because both place an absolute truth in a realm outside this world. By so doing, they deny value to this joyful and painful existence that we experience between birth and death.

Through the two dominant themes of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, the annunciation of the *Übermensch* and the vision of the eternal recurrence, Nietzsche could be described as bringing philosophy and metaphysics firmly down to earth. The *Übermensch* doesn’t represent a superterrestrial hope because it is a hope that belongs to the earth. Indeed, the *Übermensch* would be more at home on the earth than the humans who, according to Nietzsche, still hanker after ‘that ‘other world’, that inhuman, dehumanised world which is a heavenly Nothing’<sup>4</sup>.

The ‘overcoming’ that Nietzsche desires will not be a supernatural, or even

---

<sup>2</sup>Nietzsche, F. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale, Harmondsworth, , Penguin, 1969.

<sup>3</sup> Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, p. 42.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 59.



extraterrestrial transcendence, it will be a movement that takes place within the boundaries of the earth. Indeed these boundaries will no longer be the familiar space-time boundaries of a Kantian world. What's more, it will rejoice at what might be seen as having to take place within such a limited field. Although subject to more than one interpretation (as we will later see), the doctrine of the eternal recurrence can be read as a kind of existential test of the ability to do without any hope of 'a heavenly Nothing'. If we can affirm life, as it is, without the safety net of metaphysical stories, then we also are affirming our worldly existence as the only existence available to us.<sup>5</sup> The thought of the eternal recurrence is a worldly (*irdisch*)<sup>6</sup> response to the Christian suggestion that we are only passing through this world on our way to a better one in which there is no suffering. This attempt to sideline worldly pain and suffering is seen by Nietzsche as the most dishonest of gestures which weakens humanity. He would prefer a greater honesty, one that can speak the truth that 'this is all that there is and there is nothing better or more comfortable to look forward to'. Life is not something to be endured so as to gain a just reward, life is to be affirmed. However, this greater honesty requires greater strength because life is easier to endure if we are to be rewarded with paradise. It is the *Übermensch* who would have the strength to affirm the meaning of the earth through his actions and through a transformed relation to space and time.

---

<sup>5</sup>Other readings suggest that this is another form of metaphysics itself, as for example by Heidegger in his study of Nietzsche. Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, 4 vols, trans. Davis Krell, New York, Harper & Row, 1979. I shall return to these interpretations in the 'Different Times' section of this chapter.

<sup>6</sup>'Worldly' is working here to evoke both the Christianity that Nietzsche is rejecting as well as the 'earthly' resonances of the German '*irdisch*'.

But even though one can interpret Nietzsche as a thinker of the *irdisch*, Irigaray still sees him as privileging one of its regions over the other spaces. In the first section of *Marine Lover* she is engaging with *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and one of her concerns here is to draw attention to the physical geography within which Nietzsche places Zarathustra. Zarathustra is most at home on top of his mountain. This is where he does his thinking and meditating and it is also where his most faithful companions are, his Eagle and his Serpent. Although Zarathustra goes down from his mountain to disseminate his wisdom, and his journeys take him up and down the mountain, Irigaray maintains that Nietzsche still privileges height. Zarathustra is never comfortable down among the people where he tries to make himself heard in the marketplace.

However the space that Irigaray describes for Nietzsche/Zarathustra is one that is still caught within many of the metaphysical delusions from which he has tried to extract himself. According to Irigaray's reading Zarathustra's 'descending' (*Untergehen*) and 'ascending' (*Aufgehen*) place him firmly within a tradition of vertical, hierarchical thought, especially since the German terms '*Untergehen*' and '*Aufgehen*' have the connotations of perishing and dying and reviving or being reborn. Although Nietzsche reverses the polarities so that the text equates self overcoming with a deepening of time, it is still height and depth that is privileged. The problem with this verticality is that it is still reminiscent of the kind of transcendence that Nietzsche wants to overcome.

While these movements are taken by Irigaray to be vertical, Nietzsche most often juxtaposes going down (*Untergehen*) with going over (*Übergehen*), which is more of a horizontal movement. Nietzsche is usually thought of as being more concerned with *Übergehen* than *Aufgehen*. His ‘overcomings’ then, are movements across. This is not to deny Zarathustra’s ‘actual’ movements up and down the mountains or his love of the high and airy places. This is an aspect of Irigaray’s deliberate mis-reading of Nietzsche – reading Nietzsche against the grain – in that she concentrates on the direction of the relationship between mountain and earth, which is a vertical one. For her, Nietzsche’s metaphors of ascending and descending still privilege height. To go up is to be over and above, superior. More than this, Zarathustra’s peregrinations to the top of the mountains also bring him closer to the sun.

It is ironic then if we remember that the first words of Plato’s *Republic* are ‘I went down’.<sup>7</sup> Plato’s text also plays with the notion of first having to descend to the world of ignorance before the philosopher can properly ascend to the heights of true knowledge. This metaphor of Socrates’ descent is fully cashed out in the myth of the cave as a journey into the inferior world of appearances in order to

---

<sup>7</sup> ‘I went down yesterday to the Piraeus with Glaucon, son of Ariston. I wanted to say a prayer to the goddess and also to see what they would make of the festival, as this was the first time they were holding it.’ Plato, *Republic* I, 1, 327. What is also interesting about this ‘going down’ is that the scene describes Plato going to a festival of the goddess. This has also been interpreted as another attempt to displace the worship of the goddess in Greek culture. See Christine Battersby ‘Her Blood and His Mirror: Mary Coleridge, Luce Irigaray and the Female Self’ in *Beyond Representation: Philosophy and the Poetic Imagination*, ed. Richard Eldridge, Cambridge, Cambridge University press, 1996.



teach men how to philosophise and follow the truth back up to the sun.<sup>8</sup> What is ironic then is that Nietzsche's Zarathustra appears to be re-enacting this whole scene of what he would describe as the birth of nihilism. The first section of Nietzsche's text tells us about the beginning of Zarathustra's own descent (*Untergehen*) in order to share his wisdom with the people. Just as in the allegory of the cave in the *Republic*, where the sun represents absolute knowledge or the good, Zarathustra also looks to the sun as a source of wisdom. His own first words are addressed to the sun and it is the highest point of the sun – noon – that he reappropriates as his own most potent and significant moment: 'Great star! What would your happiness be, if you had not those for whom you shine!'<sup>9</sup>

Irigaray sees Zarathustra as yet another manifestation of a long tradition of heliocentrism in Western thought which tends to equate the sun and its light with all that is good and true. The movement that is associated with this heliocentrism is also the vertical one where to 'go up' towards the sun is to approach the g(o)od or the true, whereas to descend away from it – to tunnel underground or dive into and under the ocean – is to move towards the shadowy, illusory evils of darkness. Irigaray's most sustained critique of this metaphysics of 'going up' towards the sun/truth/g(o)od is to be found in *Speculum* where she offers an extended analysis of Plato's myth of the cave. *Marine Lover* positions Nietzsche's anti-Platonism as still implicitly caught within the logic of verticality.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> See Plato's *Republic*, part VII, section 7.

<sup>9</sup> Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, p. 39.

<sup>10</sup> Although it appears to be the verticality of the thought that is Irigaray's main concern here, her own work maintains a place for vertical relationships such as female genealogies. For her views on this see *Sexes and Genealogies*, New York, Columbia, 1993. This maintenance of vertical

The portrayal of Nietzsche that Irigaray presents to us is one in which he does not seem to realise the existence of subterranean or submarine space. The only space he seems to recognise is from the ground up. And here we see another wilful misrepresentation of Nietzsche creeping in. For even though Nietzsche problematises and disturbs our notions of surface and depth and could even be argued to reinvigorate the heretofore degraded notion of surface, it is his projection of woman as surface that Irigaray turns back on him as a blind spot in his thinking. Irigaray responds to Nietzsche's maxim that 'Women are considered deep – why? because one can never discover any bottom to them. Women are not even shallow.'<sup>11</sup> She suggests that Nietzsche has failed to familiarise himself with a different kind of space. Despite the 'up' and 'down' movements, Nietzsche remains nonetheless fixed in a vertical axis that privileges the mountainous and airy heights. She uses the metaphor of the sea to articulate this women's space, and is able to make its 'host of sparkling surfaces' 'equally deep and superficial'<sup>12</sup>. Nietzsche can only appreciate the reflective surface of woman/the sea, because his

loftiest gaze does not penetrate thus far into her depths and is still unable to unfold all the membranes she offers to bathe his contemplations.<sup>13</sup>

---

relationships and practices of thought alongside, or perpendicular to, the horizontal is also an aspect of her own work which can prove problematic. For example when it is linked to the practice of *affidamento* by some Italian feminist groups. See Christine Battersby, *The Phenomenal Woman*, Oxford, Polity, 1998 p.119 for a criticism of this practice.

<sup>11</sup> Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, , trans, R.J. Hollingdale, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1968, p. 25.

<sup>12</sup> *Marine Lover*, p. 46.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

In the section of *Marine Lover* entitled 'Veiled Lips' (*Lèvres voilées*) Irigaray discusses what I shall call the logic of castration<sup>14</sup>. This is a way of describing Irigaray's assessment of the either/or logic of the philosophical tradition. It is based on a psychoanalytic reading of this tradition which translates this logic into terms of either having the phallus or being without it. In a discussion of truth she appears to be accusing Nietzsche of still succumbing to this binary logic of either/or. Either something is true, or it is false, appearance. A more sophisticated reading of Nietzsche would show how he undermined the divide between appearance and reality in many places in order to produce a more adequate representation of lived and experienced existence.<sup>15</sup> However, Irigaray is suggesting that his proto-deconstructions still exclude woman from the realm of truth.

Irigaray engages directly with one such occasion; section 232 of *Beyond Good and Evil*.<sup>16</sup> Here the either/or logic of truth and lies are given by Nietzsche in terms of gender:

From the very first nothing has been more alien, repugnant, inimical to woman than truth – her great art is the lie, her supreme concern is

---

<sup>14</sup>I owe this formulation largely to Kelly Oliver who discusses it in her *Womanizing Nietzsche*, London, Routledge, 1995. Although she uses this phrase to frame a discussion on 'Derrida versus Lacan on Having and Not Having.' p.74-82. She also refers to it as a 'game' as well as an 'economy' of castration.

<sup>15</sup> In particular see 'How the "Real World" at last Became a Myth', in Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, p. 40-41. Which ends with 'We have abolished the real world: what world is left? The apparent world perhaps?... But no! *with the real world we have also abolished the apparent world!*'.



appearance and beauty.<sup>17</sup>

Although Irigaray is not trying to represent Nietzsche as adhering to a simple binary logic of truth and falsity, she argues that he fails in his attempt to appropriate femininity to undermine such a logic. By continuing to associate woman with the lie and untruth, Nietzsche uses the logic of castration – the logic of the either/or and the excluded middle – even as he undermines the ‘truth’/‘appearance’ divide. Even if we read this positioning of woman with appearance as a cryptic elaboration of a theory whereby appearance and reality become proper to one another, Irigaray’s reading suggests that this sidelining of woman is another aspect of the exclusion of woman which at the same time turns woman into a forgotten and invisible ground. In this case ‘woman’ is functioning as a ground for truth. Even though woman, is on occasion, sidelined to merely play with appearance, Irigaray suggests that this ‘castration’ is tantamount to making woman the condition for the possibility of truth and representation. By making appearance woman’s primary concern and function, Nietzsche is again relegating her to surface, without depth (or shallowness).

What is intriguing about Irigaray’s reading of Nietzsche is that she is obviously aware of the subtlety of his own linking of truth and woman and the critique of traditional philosophical reason produced by this. On the other hand, what is most frustrating in her reading, is her insistence on apparently reading Nietzsche as continuing to pursue the methods and stances that he has explicitly criticised. It would be easy to reject her interpretation as simply repeating Nietzsche’s

---

<sup>16</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans R.J. Hollingdale, Penguin 1990.

moves without acknowledging her debt to him. However in order to understand Irigaray's reading of Nietzsche we need to ask why she chooses to interpret him in this way. To simply counteract her idiosyncratic interpretations with more sophisticated analysis that would draw attention to Nietzsche's abhorrence of binary logics and objectivist thinking would be to miss the subtlety of Irigaray's engagement.<sup>18</sup> We need to bear in mind that this is not a 'faithful' reading of Nietzsche, and that part of Irigaray's method is to indulge in a '*disruptive excess*' which is unfamiliar to us because it is not the more recognisable rhetorical strategy of polemic.<sup>19</sup> Irigaray knows that Nietzsche has complicated this 'logic of castration' to such an extent that philosophy can never revert to it without engaging with his critique. She is also acutely aware of Nietzsche's conscious destabilisation of the gendered aspects of philosophical thinking and writing. Perhaps this is why she is in love with him? She makes use of Nietzsche's insights to produce a critique of patriarchal culture, but, at the same time she doesn't allow the subtlety of Nietzsche's thinking to deflect attention from his own implication in that cultural hegemony.

It may seem ironic that, in *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche produced his own criticisms of thinking that remains caught in the verticality of height and depth

---

<sup>17</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 232.

<sup>18</sup> For more sympathetic readings of Nietzsche that would counteract some of the more obvious 'excesses' of Irigaray's readings see Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, New York, Columbia, 1988; Alexander Nehemas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature*, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 1985; Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989; Alan D. Schrift, *Nietzsche and the Question of Interpretation*, London, Routledge, 1990.

<sup>19</sup> *This Sex*, p. 78.

precisely through the suggestion that

Perhaps truth is a woman who has reasons for not letting us see her reasons? Perhaps her name is—to speak Greek—*Baubo*?

...What is required for that is to stop courageously at the surface, the fold, the skin, to adore appearance...<sup>20</sup>

While we might expect Irigaray to treat such insights positively she refuses to endorse interpretations of Nietzsche as proto-feminist. For Irigaray, there is still a world of difference between writing *like* a woman and writing *as* a woman. Irigaray loves Nietzsche enough to grant his wish to have no ‘believers’, or to ‘be pronounced *holy*’.<sup>21</sup> She is not a fawning disciple, but a lover who is disappointed by the continued insistence of her lover on maintaining his autonomy from her. Irigaray avoids the charge of plagiarising Nietzsche by treating him with the disrespect that he requested.<sup>22</sup> By mimicking his methods and criticisms she is able to show where he has failed to produce the kind of mutual reciprocity that she would desire.

The problem for Irigaray is that although Nietzsche’s positioning of woman as both truth, and anathema to truth, makes her a ground for truth and representation, she is still placed outside by the logic that dictates the inside and

---

<sup>20</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, New York, Vintage 1974, p. 38. *Baubo* is an ancient Greek mythical figure who, as a personification of the female genitals, is usually represented in the act of boldly exposing herself. See Sarah Kofman, ‘Baubô: Theological Perversion and Fetishism’, in *Nietzsche’s New Seas*, eds. Michael Allen Gillespie and Tracy B. Strong, London, Chicago University Press, 1988, for a reading of Nietzsche’s treatment of ‘truth as woman’. Kofman sees a kind of perversion at work in Nietzsche’s text – one that is related to his ‘indecent glance’. (p. 191.)

<sup>21</sup> Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, p. 326.



the outside, the valorised and the invalid, the potent and the castrated. 'Because she is castrated, she is the threat of castration'<sup>23</sup>. Woman is both castrated and the threat of castration because this logic of castration knows only two possibilities in relation to the phallus. There is either a phallus or there is nothing. This rules out the possibility of there being something else altogether – something female. The logic of castration is another example of the inability to recognise any 'other' that is not an 'other of the same'.

Irigaray again uses female morphology to try and produce a different account of truth. Instead of an either phallus/or nothing system where there is one single truth, the two female lips direct us towards a kind of thinking that can work with more than single units. She suggests that here we have an example of two lips that are not two units and at the same time they are both one, and more than one. They defy the law of the excluded middle:

She does not set herself up as *one*, as a (single) female unit. She is not closed up or around one single truth or essence. The essence of truth remains foreign to her. She neither has nor is a being. And she does not oppose a feminine truth to the masculine truth. Because this would once again amount to playing the—man's—game of castration.<sup>24</sup>

The logic of castration can also be traced through the question of nihilism to the death of the subject. We could even read into Irigaray's discussion a timely

---

<sup>22</sup> 'I do not want to be a holy man; sooner even a buffoon.' *Ecce Homo*, p. 326.

<sup>23</sup> *Marine Lover*, p. 83.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86.

analysis of deconstruction as an attempt to bridge this abyss through negotiation of various binary opposites. Indeed one version of the death of the subject arises through a deconstruction of the binary pairing of subject/object. The unviolated lips would give us an example of how this pairing pre-empts a deconstructive synthesis or abolishment. The two lips are both subject and object, they deny the kind of predication that would demand that they be only one or the other at any particular time. In a direct comparison with discourse Irigaray states that the identity of the subject can no longer be established through its relation to the object, and none of these functions is more important than the other.<sup>25</sup> This is not the death of the subject, but the start of a different understanding of the subject which is not understood as somehow cut off from the object. The subject only dies when it (he) tries to violently refuse and violate an understanding of the female that can't be quantified and calculated on his terms:

Glimpsing that she may sub-tend the logic of predication without its functioning having anything properly to do with her, leads to the fear that she may intervene and upset everything: the death of the subject would be nothing less.<sup>26</sup>

Nothing less than the fear of castration in that the violation takes place in reaction to the suspicion that by her very existence, woman has the power to destroy his predicated erections.

Irigaray's characterisation of Nietzsche as adhering to a single, unitary truth, seems to ignore his perspectivism, in which there are multiple, perspectival

---

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 91.

truths. If Irigaray's theory could be described as a pluralisation of truth that doesn't set up a single feminine truth against a single masculine truth, then we might describe it as an eminently Nietzschean manoeuvre. If it is merely a poetic way of stating that the binary logic of traditional philosophy can be deconstructed, then Irigaray would not have anything to add to either Heidegger or Derrida. However, it is much more than this in that it profoundly contributes to an analysis of Nietzsche's existential and deconstructive epigones.<sup>27</sup>

Ellen Mortensen claims that Irigaray is blind to the question of nihilism.<sup>28</sup> However, I would point out that she engages directly with this problem in her lengthy discussion of the logic of castration. Rather than being blind to it, she illuminates it more clearly as another aspect of thinking that Nietzsche and his followers have failed to transvaluate successfully. The 'nothing' of nihilism which presents philosophy with its meaningless abyss can also be read as another blind spot of the logic of castration. Irigaray describes the 'nothing' as arising from the violent attempt to possess and control this enigmatic sex which is 'more than one', and yet is still unquantifiable. She gives a disturbing account of this

---

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 91.

<sup>27</sup> Indeed it would need to be noted that *Marine Lover* (*Amante marine* 1980) is not only an engagement with Nietzsche it is also a direct engagement with Derrida's 'feminine' reading of Nietzsche in *Spurs*. (*Eperons: Les Styles de Nietzsche*, Paris, Flammarion, 1978). For discussions of Irigaray's engagement with *Spurs* see K. Oliver (op. cit. pp. 83-91) and Tina Chanter *Ethics of Eros; Irigaray's Rewriting of the Philosophers*, London, Routledge, 1995, pp.164-165, 239-239.

<sup>28</sup>Mortensen makes this claim in her paper 'Irigaray and Nietzsche: Echo and Narcissus revisited?' in the *Fate of the New Nietzsche*, eds. K. Ansell-Pearson and H.Caygill, Aldershot, Avebury, 1993.



process in terms of raping, robing and robbing (*violer, voiler, voler*)<sup>29</sup>. The two lips which confound the logic of castration are violated in an attempt to master them, but this violation only separates them and man/Nietzsche

doesn't know how to bring these/her edges back together again. How is the gap thus created to be overcome... Because of him bringing his own project to bear, the abyss arises.<sup>30</sup>

On this reading, then, nihilism arises as a direct result of the violent masculine attempt at mastery. Through the imposition of one mode of thinking on another in order to try and quantify it, and force it to become amenable to an alien logic, an abyss arises.

At the same time, the only way that a masculine logic of castration can attempt to overcome this abyss must also be through an attempt at mastery. Nietzsche's thought of the eternal recurrence is described in terms of this mastery. It is an attempt to overcome or master the threat of the abyss which only refers back to the violator. Nietzsche's 'Thus I willed it (*so will ich es*)' is his way to deny nihilism through the affirmation of the eternal recurrence. But in willing 'it' this 'I' will also will everything and everyone. Irigaray asks 'The eternal recurrence—what is that but the will to recapitulate all projects within yourself?'<sup>31</sup>. In so

---

<sup>29</sup> *Marine Lover*, pp. 103-110. The French words are also related to the spaces and movement I invoke in this chapter. The veil (*voile*) which is used to cover women can also be the sail of a boat. This refers both to the marine motif as well as Derrida's use of the sails in *Spurs*. The robbing (*voler*) can also be flight, which again brings to mind Nietzsche's attempts at overcoming through flight. If flying is what is connected with this robbing, then it is definitely an improper movement for woman.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 105.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

doing she is drawing attention to Nietzsche own attempts at mastery.

The problem, for Irigaray, is not that there can be no 'other' at all in Nietzsche's putative metaphysics, but that any 'other' will once again, for Irigaray, be the 'other of the same'. As far as she is concerned, any 'other', for Nietzsche, will be an 'other' that will be generated by and captured within the closed circle of the eternal recurrence of another male hom(m)osexual subject. The emergence of a real feminine/female other of the other would threaten the mastery that has hitherto been the focus of all the investment – on which everything has been gambled. The investment is in maintaining 'woman' as the other of the same; and

Interpreted in this way, she stakes him in a new game without his needing to borrow from the kitty (*la cave*). And therefore go into debt, risk losing. Mastery (*La maîtrise*). Which the other (of the same) threatens him with.<sup>32</sup>

Most commentators tell us that Nietzsche was at least attempting to overcome metaphysics, even if they disagree on how successful this overcoming turned out to be.<sup>33</sup> What I am suggesting is that this attempt to overcome is already an attempt to master – to be bigger, better and harder than metaphysics. But Irigaray interprets the whole Western tradition of metaphysics as a tradition of mastery. The way to go beyond metaphysics, for her, is not to repeat the same triumphant or arrogant gestures of the 'great' philosophers in showing how wrong they were.

---

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 79.

<sup>33</sup> Heidegger is probably the most famous commentator to point out Nietzsche's failure to overcome metaphysics.

Rather she shows us various aspects of what they have forgotten. Perhaps it is not even a question of going beyond metaphysics at all, but of doing a metaphysics that is no longer an attempt at mastery. It must also be pointed out that this does not imply that it must be a metaphysics of subservience. For Irigaray it would be a metaphysics of inclusion and loving exchange. She is neither Nietzsche's master or slave, she is his lover.

In turning Nietzsche back on himself Irigaray is again playing with the idea of woman as (reflective) surface at the same time as undoing it. She is also undoing the whole specular logic of light and reflection when she uses metaphors of sound instead of light. Again declaring her love for Nietzsche, she positions herself as Echo – the mythical figure who repeats whatever has been said to her and is thus unable to declare her love for Narcissus who is unable to tear himself away from his own reflection.<sup>34</sup> Irigaray considers Nietzsche to be trapped within his own metaphysical narcissism. She suggests that this leaves him so self-obsessed that even, what he considers to be, his relationships with others are only mere reflections. This Narcissus/Nietzsche is so caught up with his own image that he cannot even turn his head to see Echo. The only words he can hear from her are also only his own returned to him. Irigaray disturbs the surface of the pool that Narcissus/Nietzsche gazes into. She disrupts the whole economy and working of the light that supplies the self-same reflection and in so doing she allows us to see what lives below the surface.

---

<sup>34</sup>I am borrowing this insight from Ellen Mortensen's contribution to *The Fate of the New Nietzsche*, 'Irigaray and Nietzsche: Echo and Narcissus revisited?' eds. K. Ansell-Pearson and H. Caygill, Aldershot, Avebury, 1993.



Zarathustra's contemplations are staged as prayers to the sun and the sky. His is a world of light and air, and the only depth he recognises is that from the top of a mountain. As a life affirming philosophy these would seem to be appropriate elements to inhabit. The sun is the source of all energy and so has always lent itself to worship and adoration. Contrast this then with Irigaray's marine world of darkness and the sea. Instead of the life giving energy of sunlight, we are offered the dark, unbreathable element of water. This would seem to be a curious choice for living space. But there is plenty of life in the ocean. It is the place where life (as we know it) emerged. So in some sense we were all born from the sea. In another text 'Divine Women', Irigaray reads woman's 'fishy' associations through various mermaid myths. In this text she traces a movement from fish to bird; from the element of water to the element of air. However although this movement can be attributed to both genders she also points out that:

The constellation we call Pisces is composed of two fishes: one goes upwards to the heavens, the other goes down to the earth, the sea. From the reading of these myths that concern us here, it would seem that the fish going upward is exclusively a male, the fish going down, a female.<sup>35</sup>

The upward movement is another movement towards transcendence, and even divinity. Irigaray is, to a certain extent, advocating this move, for woman, in this text. However the air that these becoming-birds must enter will need to be open to the specificity of their movements. 'Once we were fishes. It seems that we are destined to become birds. None of this is possible unless the air opens up freely

---

<sup>35</sup> *Sexes and Genealogies*, p. 60.

to our movements.’<sup>36</sup> The possible temporalities of this free movement will be explored below.

In *Marine Lover* Irigaray asks Nietzsche/Zarathustra

Perched on any mountain peak, hermit, tightrope walker or bird, you never dwell in the great depths. And as companion you never choose a sea creature. Camel, snake, lion, eagle, and doves, monkey and ass, and. . . Yes. But no to anything that moves in the water. Why this persistent wish for legs, or wings? And never gills?<sup>37</sup>

The sea is seen as hostile because of its lack of air and light. But for Irigaray the metaphor for a different kind of thinking that will allow for the thought of sexual difference is that it is a different kind of breathing. Breathing in the sea is not impossible it just a matter of having gills. The sea is often thought of as a hostile, alien, environment, as almost belonging to another world. But the sea covers more of the world than dry land and it has as many and varied forms of life. Irigaray draws an analogy between the sea and woman. Both have been treated as alien and yet both could also be described as life giving and life supporting.<sup>38</sup>

The new kind of thinking that she is calling for is one that is not afraid to descend, to dive deep into the ocean instead of climbing mountains. It is also one that can imagine life in this darkness – life that doesn’t look to the sun for its source of energy. What becomes apparent when we try to think this is that our

---

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 66.

<sup>37</sup> *Marine Lover*, p. 13.

<sup>38</sup> The life generating and supporting aspects of Irigaray’s metaphor of water also refers to the amniotic fluid in which we have all lived and swum.

way of thinking is so steeped in its heliocentric sun worship that it is almost an impossible thought. But there are sea creatures which do not depend on the sun at all. In some of the deepest and darkest places in the ocean, clustered around vents that release heat from the earth's interior, there are creatures who derive their energy from this energy source alone<sup>39</sup>. In other words they are totally dependent on the earth. Some of these fish also manage to produce their own light, emitted from bodily lanterns.

Although the discipline of biology can accept the existence of life that doesn't depend on solar energy, Irigaray still seems to have difficulty being heard or understood when she suggests that woman and women may be able to exist without the Nietzschean and Platonic sun, or that there is a different space of thought that doesn't need to be preached from mountain tops – a thought that doesn't look to the sky for its inspiration but to the earth itself. Irigaray as a marine lover is much more of a thinker and lover of the (watery) earth than Nietzsche's Zarathustra, despite all his claims. We must be careful here not to attribute a new kind of binarism to Irigaray. She is not setting up a strict opposition between sea and sun, water and air. The earth is largely water just as the common usage of 'man' and 'men' includes women. Irigaray is suggesting that the kind of sun and height at work in both Plato and Nietzsche allows no space or

---

<sup>39</sup>Stephen Jay Gould describes this as upsetting biological laws. He remarks; 'An old saw of biological pedagogy (I well remember the phrase emblazoned on the chapter heading of my junior high school textbook) proclaims, "All energy for biological processes comes ultimately from the sun." . . . The vent faunas provide the first exception to this venerable rule, for their ultimate source of energy comes from the heat of the earth's interior', in *Life's Grandeur*, London, Vintage, 1997, p. 185.



time appropriate to woman. What is required is a thinking that can cope with the specificities of a watery earth that is populated by women as well as men.

It must also be noted that Irigaray is sometimes overly selective in her implied references to Nietzsche and as such, she fails to show that he did sometimes have an awareness of a marine and submarine perspective. At the beginning of Zarathustra's journey he alludes to the sea quite often. Zarathustra is even challenged by the hermit as having 'lived in solitude as in the sea, and the sea bore you. Alas, do you want to go ashore?'<sup>40</sup> Later Zarathustra sails on the sea to the Blissful Islands, so he is not altogether unfamiliar with that element.<sup>41</sup> Nietzsche even goes so far as to position Zarathustra as a fish at one point: a fish that is still unable to go deep enough to fathom life (who is represented as 'changeable and untamed and in everything a woman'). He even hints that Zarathustra finds life unfathomable because men 'always endow us [women] with your own virtues'.<sup>42</sup> In other words that the only reason this woman (Life) is unfathomable is because he is unable or unwilling to use anything other than his own logic or criteria. In this respect Irigaray could be said to owe more to her lover than she is prepared to admit.

---

<sup>40</sup> Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, p. 40.

<sup>41</sup> Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, p. 176. Indeed, Irigaray's reading is at odds with many commentators who emphasise Nietzsche's own fascination with the sea. In particular see Karsten Harries, 'Nietzsche and the Sea', in *Nietzsche's New Seas*, eds. Gillespie and Strong, pp. 21-44. This paper positions Nietzsche as a seafaring explorer. What is also interesting is that Harries also counters Irigaray's claims about Nietzsche's treatment of woman and 'superficiality', suggesting that his texts are both a celebration as well as an impatience with superficiality.

<sup>42</sup> Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, p. 131.

## **Different Movements: The Dancer and The Swimmer**

We will come closer to the nature of the radical difference in Irigaray's thinking if we take a closer look at the movements Nietzsche and Irigaray act out in these different spaces. Nietzsche and Zarathustra both live their lives on the dry and airy land while Irigaray and her sea creature are more at home living in the water. Water is an important element for Irigaray as it is another way to exaggerate the fluidity that she ascribes to woman. Fluidity is a commonly recurring motif in her work and it acts as another sign of difference that is not just oppositional to the dominant masculinist models of thought. Fluidity is given as an alternative to the traditional hardness and rigidity of the philosophical tradition, as she presents it. But it is also a positive and productive device in that it allows new ways for thought to move.

It is in the movement of their thought that we can find more resonant and productive differences between Irigaray and Nietzsche. Because they inhabit different spaces Nietzsche and Irigaray need to find different methods of expressive locomotion. I am suggesting that one of the aspects of Nietzsche that Irigaray is in love with is the fact that his thought does not fit comfortably in the hard and rigid mould of most masculinist thought. His is also a fluid thinking in that it privileges becoming over being and therefore at least has the advantage of some sort of movement and dynamism.

What is also interesting is that Nietzsche aligns woman with change and becoming in the same section that he positions Zarathustra as a fish that fails to fathom the woman called 'Life'<sup>43</sup>. But for Irigaray Nietzsche/Zarathustra's woman is still unfathomable to him because he is not comfortable in the water: he is not at home in the water. If he is a fish, he is very much a fish out of water. We could sum this up by saying that Zarathustra is not a swimmer, but a dancer. Nietzsche gives movement to Zarathustra in the form of dance. This is one of the seductive beauties of Nietzsche's thought and writing. It is the thought of music and movement, and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is his most musical text. Zarathustra sings and dances all the way through this text. However, Irigaray goes beyond Nietzsche in becoming a swimmer rather than a dancer. Zarathustra's dancing is a valiant effort to mobilise thought, but according to Irigaray it is once again caught within the confines of a reactive project. The problem, for her, is that Zarathustra's dancing is an attempt to fly. Yet again it is an attempt to gain altitude in order to look down from the heights, perhaps not with a god-like perspective, but with one that is certainly more god-like than most earth bound humans. 'He who wants to learn to fly one day must learn to stand and to walk and to run and to climb and to dance.'<sup>44</sup> For Nietzsche, dancing is not only favoured because it is the body in its closest communication, appreciation and participation with music, but also because it is the nearest that a human can come to defying gravity. One thing that Zarathustra is insistent upon is that the spirit of gravity should be most vehemently denied. Irigaray interprets this denial as a reactive movement in Nietzsche's thinking because it is another attempt to move

---

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 131.



away from the earth<sup>45</sup>.

In as much as Zarathustra's dancing is an attempt to soar over the ground, any overcoming resulting from this would still be a kind of transcendent overcoming. One that would not be rooted in the earth. Swimming however, is a movement through the element or ground of water. It suggests a more immanent relationship and a fluid becoming. If this is to be truly ichthyic swimming then it will involve the use of gills which further integrates the body of the swimmer with the fluid surrounding her. While the fish passes through the water the water also passes through her.

The thought of the eternal recurrence can also be read as a test of Nietzsche's anti-gravitational powers of flight. He first introduced this notion in the *Gay Science* under the heading of 'The Greatest Weight':

This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you...<sup>46</sup>

This is the thought that is posited as the greatest weight. The test is to overcome this crushing weight through its affirmation. The thought of the eternal recurrence is the 'hardest' thought – the most manfully potent test. It is another

---

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 213.

<sup>45</sup> See Gilles Deleuze's *Nietzsche and Philosophy*. New York, Columbia University Press, 1988 for an extended discussion of the active and reactive in relation to the will to power in Nietzsche's work.

<sup>46</sup> Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, § 341.

trial of strength and pain that will prove the manhood of Nietzsche/Zarathustra..

This is also an explicitly high and airy thought. When Nietzsche describes its genesis as he was out walking in the mountains he recalls that ‘it was jotted down on a piece of paper with the inscription: “6,000 feet beyond man and time”’<sup>47</sup> However, the significance of these different movements through space is not just related to the space that they are movements through. What seems even more fundamental is what kind of measurement they might have, how could we describe them? If we are concerned with more than just the distance moved in space we cannot avoid making reference to time, whether this in terms of speeds, slownesses or acceleration.

Although Irigaray draws attention to the ongoing obsession with mastery in Nietzsche’s texts, she also finds problems in the temporality implicated in the notion of eternal recurrence. Her main concern is that the eternal recurrence is another method for the production of sameness. And if we are to read the eternal recurrence as a trial of strength as well, then it would be an even more consciously, self-centred production of sameness than usual. This self-centredness is another aspect of the voluntarism that can be found in Nietzsche and his ‘I willed it thus’. It is further proof of Nietzsche’s narcissism in that the mastery required is mastery by a solitary individual. However, this objection depends on where Nietzsche can be found in this ring of recurrence. Does he position himself at its centre, or at a single point on its periphery? Either way this is still, according to Irigaray, very much a closed circle from which there is no

escape.<sup>48</sup>

It is escape from this circular trap that Irigaray is seeking, but her movement is not just a reaction or *ressentimental* response to its limiting confines.<sup>49</sup> Her escape from the vicious circle is also a productive move; to try and investigate different and differing temporalities which would be more inclusive. Hers would be shared and sharing temporalities, rather than an exclusive or selfish one. ‘For I love to share, whereas you want to keep everything for yourself.’<sup>50</sup>

Although the representation of Nietzsche’s thought of the eternal recurrence as producing sameness can be regarded as a respectable reading,<sup>51</sup> Nietzsche states

---

<sup>47</sup>In *Ecce Homo*, ‘Zarathustra §1’ trans. W. Kaufmann, New York, Vintage, 1989.

<sup>48</sup> This criticism appears to be another particularly wilful misreading of Nietzsche who explicitly challenged the narcissistic tendencies of the solitary thinker in *The Gay Science* § 183 when he writes that: ‘Those who live alone do not speak too loud nor write too loud, for they fear the hollow echo—the critique of the nymph Echo. And all voices sound different in solitude.’

<sup>49</sup> *Ressentiment* is Nietzsches own concept which would best be translated into English as ‘resentment’. It is part of what Nietzsche terms ‘slave morality’, essentially a purely reactive source of value judgements. This reactivity derives from having to refer to an external source in order to make these judgements:

This inversion of the value-positing eye—this *need* to direct one’s view outward instead of back to oneself—is of the essence of *ressentiment*: in order to exist, slave morality always first needs a hostile external world; it needs, physiologically speaking, external stimuli in order to act at all—its action is fundamentally reaction. (*On the Genealogy of Morals* p. 37)

Nietzsche’s apparent denigration of such external relationships for evaluation, would seem to strengthen Irigaray’s description of him as selfish and solipsistic. However, to present Nietzsche’s thought in such a binary manner is again to misrepresent its complexity. Although *ressentiment* obviously has pejorative connotations, it is also a necessary and creative aspect of evaluation, for Nietzsche.

<sup>50</sup> *Marine Lover*, p. 11.

<sup>51</sup> For example this view is taken by Nietzsche scholars such as Richard Schacht who sums it up as



that: ‘If the world may be thought of as a certain definite quantity of force . . . it must pass through a calculable number of combinations . . .’.<sup>52</sup> If we take this as a commitment to a finite universe, and if the ring of recurrence represents eternity – which must be taken as infinite – then this ‘calculable number of combinations’ must necessarily be repeated as exactly the same, an infinite number of times.

However Irigaray’s reading of the eternal recurrence must be considered as an extremely ungenerous reading, especially as it is presented as an amorous engagement. There are equally respectable ways of reading the eternal recurrence that would view it as antithetical to sameness. Rather than a closed circle Nietzsche also represents the eternal recurrence as the ‘well of eternity’ which can be read as a deepening of time in which recurrence and uniqueness come together.<sup>53</sup> D.F. Krell goes so far as to suggest that ‘the thinking of recurrence abolishes the thought of *the same*’<sup>54</sup> This can be supported from the version presented in the ‘Vision and the Riddle’ section of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, by concentrating on the ‘moment’ – the gateway on the path of eternity – rather than the path itself. Moreover, if we interpret this ‘moment’ as a moment of becoming rather than a moment of being, a different understanding begins to emerge.

---

‘all events are ultimately the same, and so one may likewise speak of the eternal recurrence of the same (sort of) events’ in *Nietzsche*, London Routledge, 1983. p.255. Although his ‘(sort of)’ could be unpacked to produce a different reading.

<sup>52</sup> Nietzsche, *Will To Power*, p. 549.

<sup>53</sup> *Zarathustra*, p. 288.

<sup>54</sup> ‘To the Orange Grove at the Edge of the Sea’ in *Nietzsche and the Feminine* ed. P.J. Burgard, London, University Press of Virginia, 1994.

The moment, when it is described as a gateway, already introduces the possibility of difference. As a threshold it marks a point of difference where two different paths meet:

They are in opposition to one another, these paths; they abut on one another: and it is here at this gateway that they come together. The name of the gateway is written above it: "Moment".<sup>55</sup>

This moment (*Augenblick*) can be taken as Nietzsche's version of the 'Now'. This would not be an instant of homogenous empty time but an active collision of future and past.<sup>56</sup> The moment is always a moment of difference – difference between the forces of the past and the forces of the future. Nietzsche's preference for becoming rather than being enables the moment to avoid being a point on an already determined line. Instead it becomes constitutive of time itself because without the moment to produce this synthesis of past and future the circle would be broken – there would be no time. As a moment of becoming it is the passing of time itself and cannot be abstracted out as a point on a linear series. The moment could perhaps be described as pure occurrence, and the eternal recurrence would be the whole occurrence of time.

By being presented as a gateway on the eternal paths of becoming, each moment also opens up every possibility of occurrence. Each moment is an active constituent in the production of the past as well as the future. And in each

---

<sup>55</sup> Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, p. 178.

<sup>56</sup> Heidegger gives a convincing reading of the moment as this active 'moment' in *Nietzsche*, Vol II, pp 37-62.

moment there is also an eternal recurrence of the same as well as a production of difference from itself.

Krell gives a similar interpretation of the eternal recurrence in his reading of *Marine Lover*.<sup>57</sup> He posits Irigaray's mischievous misreading of the eternal recurrence as a kind of *ressentiment* on her part. Although she does seem to be deliberately misreading Nietzsche at this point, Krell also misses some of the subtlety and ambiguity at work in this misreading. Irigaray is not just choosing to ignore the possibility of using the eternal recurrence as a motif of difference. Instead what she is trying to show is that even if it were to be read as a thinking of difference, it is still a thinking of difference that arises out of and, ultimately, falls back into the same. If it does produce difference or otherness, once again it is the 'other of the same' rather than the 'other of the other'.

In her loving engagement to and with Nietzsche it is the ring of eternity that gives Irigaray the most pain:

for your eternity, everything should always turn in a circle, and that within that ring I should remain — your booty.<sup>58</sup>

She repeatedly uses the metaphor of the wedding ring with reference to the eternal recurrence. It is this sign of love, commitment, co-operation and mutual recognition that turns to out play a part in the rejection and exclusion of others and mothers. It is the self-sufficiency of Nietzsche's notion that hurts. In rejecting

---

<sup>57</sup>David F. Krell, 'To the Orange Grove at the Edge of the Sea' in *Nietzsche and the Feminine* ed. P.J. Burgard, London, University Press of Virginia, 1994.

<sup>58</sup> *Marine Lover*, p. 11.



origin for the eternal self-(re)creation of every moment Nietzsche is again rejecting the idea of maternal birth in order to try and devise a way of birthing himself.

And your whole will, your eternal recurrence, are these anything more than the dream of one who neither wants to have been born, nor to continue being born, at every instant, of a female other?<sup>59</sup>

So with respect to Krell's reading we could also say that, rather than Irigaray producing an inadequate reading of the eternal return, it is Krell who fails to register the nature of Nietzsche's attempt at auto-birth<sup>60</sup>. Krell fails to see that at the same time that 'the thinking of recurrence abolishes the thought of *the same*',<sup>61</sup> it also abolishes the thought of and debt to the other and the mother.

In positioning herself as the lover of Nietzsche we might read this as an unrequited affair. However in also positioning herself as Ariadne, the lover of Dionysus, which would certainly be a well-requited affair, it is still one in which the male partner denies any maternal origin. The third and final section of *Marine Lover* is entitled 'When Gods are Born' and is, to a large extent, a meditation on the effects of the predominance of myths of motherless gods within Western culture. Dionysus is given as another example of a god that managed to evade a maternal birth. He gestated in, and was born from, Zeus' thigh after being taken from the womb of a dead woman.

---

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>60</sup>This tradition of masculine auto-birth is described by Kelly Oliver in her reading of *Marine Lover* (op. cit. pp.119-125)

<sup>61</sup> Krell, 'To the Orange Grove at the Edge of the Sea', p. 192.

Nietzsche's use of the figure of Dionysus is obviously another aspect that Irigaray sees as both useful and dangerous. Dionysus is concerned with bodies and bodily passion, which is something that Irigaray would also like to bring back into philosophy. But Dionysian bodies tend to be passionately violated – often dismembered. The involvement of the figure of Ariadne in this violent and violating frenzy is unclear. Was she captured? Did she flee? Or did she really wake up with Dionysus' dismembered genitals in her hand?<sup>62</sup>

Irigaray's relationship to Nietzsche is equally as unclear. I have already remarked that there is to some extent a deliberate and mischievous misreading. Is Irigaray also both captivated by and attempting to escape from Nietzsche's clutches? Or is she undertaking so violent a deconstruction of his texts that she is performing a dismemberment in order to release him from his logic of castration? This would be too oppositional a model to force Irigaray's text into because there is obviously a fondness at work in her refusal. Irigaray's is a playful text, perhaps even flirtatious, although this could also be a parodic mimicry of the role given to her by Nietzsche. Indeed, to judge her texts by conventional scholarly and logical standards would miss much of the subtlety of movement that is taking place in them. In her relationship with Nietzsche we see Irigaray putting her 'feminine' method of having '*a fling with the philosophers*' into action.<sup>63</sup>

---

<sup>62</sup>This is the version related by Mary Renault in her novel *The King Must Die*, NY, Pantheon, 1958.

<sup>63</sup> It is in response to a question about the method adopted for her research that Irigaray refers to the kind of loving destruction that could be accomplished through this option. *This Sex* p. 150.

Whatever way we choose to read Irigaray's relationship to Nietzsche, it is impossible to ignore the blatant selectivity at work in it. Krell is able to show Irigaray's selectivity in attributing a sea blindness to Nietzsche especially with reference to eternity.<sup>64</sup> It is in fact in eternity that Nietzsche most clearly sees the sea, or rather it is in the sea that Nietzsche locates eternity;

I seek an eternity for everything: ought one to pour the most precious salves and wines into the sea?—My consolation is that everything that has been is eternal: the sea will cast it up again.<sup>65</sup>

However it is in his desire for eternity that Irigaray sees another symptom of Nietzsche's own nihilism. Through a mischievous mimesis of Nietzsche's own thinking – a mimesis that is not wholly parodic – Irigaray moves him into a position whereby his own longing for eternity operates in the same way as he had accused Christianity and Platonism of functioning. In Irigaray's version there is still something of the 'afterworldsman' in this marriage to eternity. And, as Ariadne, she is also refusing this marriage. She also hears the music of *ressentiment* in it:

Eternity, that is the music of one who senses and fears decline. And for passing beyond life and death.<sup>66</sup>

The differing senses of movement and time that I have been trying to draw out here can perhaps be better imagined through carrying on with this musical

---

<sup>64</sup>See Krell, 'To the Orange Grove at the Edge of the Sea', p.194.

<sup>65</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, New York, Vintage, 1968, § 1065.



metaphor in order to provide a workable distinction between flux and flowing. That is to say between their different modes of becoming.

In an extended discussion of the eternal recurrence Joan Stambaugh suggests that Nietzsche thought of time as a dimension of force and that 'the measure of force (as quantity) is fixed, but its essence is in flux...'.<sup>67</sup> She then advises us that 'flowing' is derived from the Greek '*rheo*' which is also the root of 'rhythm' and states that 'A rhythm is precisely not an arbitrary flowing, but the living pulsation of movement'. However I would argue that Stambaugh conflates flux and flowing, which if properly distinguished could help to understand both the common ground and differences between Irigaray and Nietzsche. Flux and flowing can be used to correspond to the different movements I have been trying to highlight in Irigaray and Nietzsche's texts. If, as Stambaugh suggests, flowing is tied to rhythm, then I would like to appropriate flux as the term for a non-rhythmic flowing that is implied in Irigaray's text.

To a certain extent this is my own mischievous misreading of Irigaray's text because she does appeal to the rhythm of the ebb and flow of the sea as what has 'always set the rhythm of time.'<sup>68</sup> However this is described as a much freer time than the mechanical repetition of the eternal return. The tides change in both time and space every day, and they change more due to the gravitational pull of the moon than any influence of Nietzsche's sun and its unchanging, circular rhythm.

---

<sup>66</sup> *Marine Lover*, p. 27.

<sup>67</sup> Joan Stambaugh *The Problem of Time in Nietzsche*, London, Bucknell University Press, 1987. p.175.

These are the rhythms of the cosmos discussed in the previous chapter. There are, of course, patterns that can be discerned in the these rhythms, but these patterns defy the measurement or containment of Nietzsche's solar, circular time.

This is not to say that it is an altogether arbitrary flowing, but that its speeds and slownesses are not dictated by what we would normally consider as rhythm. If I use the term flow as described by Stambaugh, then it would relate to dance because of the regular rhythm associated with that form of movement. I shall use flux then to relate to the movement of swimming and drifting in the ocean, because this is a movement that is not tied to a regular or mechanical rhythm. Irigaray says of Nietzsche, 'he wishes to receive only what beats in time to the rhythm he sets...'<sup>69</sup> When Nietzsche is setting the rhythm of his dance he is setting the repetitive beat of the eternal recurrence. Irigaray refuses to dance to his time or his rhythm. Instead she swims, and her swimming doesn't stick rigidly to the uniform regularity or fixed structure of a rhythmic beat.<sup>70</sup>

In order to show how the timing of these swimming strokes are not determined by repetitive regular rhythm, we need to focus on the musical aspects of songs, melodies or tunes. This can be made more explicit through the seemingly

---

<sup>68</sup> *Marine Lover*, p. 14.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>70</sup> Some other commentators see a stronger relation between Irigaray's thinking and dance. My claim here is not that Irigaray is anti-dance, but that, if she were a dancer, she would dance to different rhythms. See Eluned Summers-Bremner 'Reading Irigaray, Dancing', in *Hypatia*, 15,1, pp.90-124, for an application of Irigaray's notion of the 'sensible transcendental' to European concert dance and dance practice.

inappropriate use of ‘air’ as an alternative word for a tune<sup>71</sup>. I am thinking of the use of this word with particular reference to Irish traditional music where an important distinction between air and tune is maintained. In this genre a tune will usually be an instrumental piece with a definite time signature and therefore a particular rhythm – for example, a jig (6/8 time) or a reel (4/4 time). However an air is usually thought of as the tune of a song, and in unaccompanied, old-style singing (*sean-nós*) or the playing of an air on an instrument there is often no specified time signature or rhythm. An air unfolds at different speeds and rhythms, according to the emphasis and interpretations the text demands and is given by the performer. Jigs, reels, hornpipes, slides etcetera are all types of dance music and their rhythms are irresistible. But airs, often even called ‘slow airs’ (*Fonn Mall*) are meditative, haunting pieces with a free musical centre.

It is this freedom of musical movement that I would like to attribute to Irigaray’s thinking and writing. If we were to describe her swimming in terms of dancing it would be dancing to an air rather than to a tune. It doesn’t follow any dictated rhythm or limit itself to a periodic return or linear, regular progression. In this loving relationship she may well be dancing with Nietzsche, but not according to his rhythm or time. Nietzsche was unable to think of time without thinking of rhythm. ‘Space and time are only measured things, measured by rhythm’.<sup>72</sup> I made the link to time earlier by reference to its ability to measure movement in

---

<sup>71</sup>Although in a text that engages with Heidegger, Irigaray makes use of the element of air as another metaphor for her thinking of sexual difference. Indeed, in this text she also makes use of the musical meaning of air as ‘a piece of music written for solo voice, accompanying lyrics; a tune’. *The forgetting of air* p.5.

<sup>72</sup>Nietzsche, *Werke*, 10:168.



space. But this isn't quite correct for Irigaray. Irigaray's time can proceed without this measurement. Instead this free flowing, variable time isn't something that this musical swimming must fit into. It is part of the expression of the movement and is inseparable from it.

Ciaran Carson reports an anonymous *Fleadh*<sup>73</sup> adjudicator admitting that:

*Ní féidir liom a rá céard é an sean-nós, ach aithním é nuair a chloisim é*

– I couldn't tell you what the *sean-nós* is, but I know it when I hear it.<sup>74</sup>

Which would suggest that not only is there no measure (rhythm) to it, but that there is also no measure (existent logical or discursive framework) by which it can be judged. Yet, the singing of these airs is judged successfully at every *Fleadh*. Irigaray's time is as equally difficult to measure and is certainly not the measure of anything else. It certainly has cycles and patterns, and these may even be regular, but they are not dictated by any cosmic metronome or logic of the same. Hers are different rhythms; rhythms of difference.

Irigaray also attributes this mania for measurement, quantification and identification to maritime navigators who set out to measure, chart, and master the elemental ocean. But it is this attempt to impose such a rigid grid of space and time that cannot cope when faced by a storm. This presents a missed moment of realization for Irigaray, missed because of the fear of their perception of the sea as deep, dark and alien. She describes the scene thus,

---

<sup>73</sup> *Fleadh*, or more properly *fleadh cheoil*, can be translated literally as a 'feast of music', it is a traditional music competition.

<sup>74</sup> Ciaran Carson. *Last Night's Fun*, London, Pimlico, 1996, p.93.

Might they not then be found bent toward the ground, faced with their nothingness, and warding off the abysses? And let no one preach immortality to them at that moment. Let no one tell them that it is divine to throw oneself into the sea—to forget. And who at that moment still thinks of flying upward, in free rapture? Who is still dancing on that heaving deck?<sup>75</sup>

Just as Nietzsche demanded new ears to hear his music Irigaray also demands that we dive into the ocean and swim to the music of difference. The timing of this music will accord with its irregular and a-rhythmic flux-like airs, which in turn depend on a less restrictive patterning of time.

This change in time can be allied to the Agamben's 'genuine revolution' because it is also an attempt to change our culture. This would not be to determine one new homogenised time but different times, different experiences of time. Rhythmic and a-rhythmic. Not a culture but different cultures that could recognise and validate this a-rhythmic experience of time. In the next chapter I will explore how Irigaray relates this to the temporality of the body and how it might also be productive when allied with Benjamin's different temporalities.

---

<sup>75</sup> *Marine Lover*, pp. 49-50.

## **Chapter 7.**

## **Conclusion**



*Two modes of representation are tearing time apart...*

*Two modes of fiction are tearing apart the time of presence. (Irigaray)<sup>1</sup>*

In order to conclude, there needs to be a negotiation taking place between the temporalities of historical time and revolution at work in both Benjamin and Irigaray. It is important at this stage to bear in mind that these figures represent neither two poles of a dialectical opposition that needs to be superseded or synthesised, nor two alternatives that need to be brought together into a more comprehensive admixture. They are thinkers whose theories and implications may be taken to provide useful alternatives in thinking historical time and a revolutionary interruption in, and change of, that time. We need to compare, contrast, develop and miscegenate these lines of thought to see what may emerge.

I have appropriated Benjamin's method of montage in order to create my own 'dialectical image' composed of the tensions between his and Irigaray's versions of alternative temporalities of revolution. In this conclusion I will be showing how this conjunction will be useful to the thinking of revolution and the philosophy of history. According to Benjamin's image logic (see chapter 1) montage is not synthesis, but the gathering together of disparate elements and forms in a revelatory moment. In putting Benjamin's analysis of modernity and its accompanying *Jetztzeit*, together with Irigaray's uncovering of sexual difference and its fluid irregular movements I have produced a constellation of uneasy tensions as well as a common purpose of brushing history against the grain. These tensions are as important in the revolutionary possibilities of this conjunction as

are the similarities. Not only do they act as checks and balances to the various excesses and implausibilities of the other, they also enact the heterogeneity of the desired revolution.

To conclude with a synthesis of Benjamin and Irigaray would be to betray both by homogenising two different modes of thinking difference. In the first part of this conclusion I will show how these important differences relate to the question of revolution and how each thinker is able to contribute to the other. I will also convey through the rhythmic and musical motifs how such a tense montage would operate. In the second part I will show how this conjunction can contribute to current debates about the role of 'new historicism' within the philosophy of history.

## **Part I: Different Revolutions**

Throughout this thesis I have been presenting a radical interpretation of revolution as an interruption of history because this would also bring about a break with the thinking of time that constructs the past as constituent of the present as part of a linear and continual progression. Following Agamben's description of a genuine revolution I would argue that there are (at least) three elements at work in this revolution. The first is the conception of history that is at work in the thinking of revolution. In order to allow for this kind of radical disjunction we also require a conception of history that would not be able to 'recapture' the revolution as another 'stage' or 'era' in its seamless narrative. The second element of revolution

---

<sup>1</sup> *Speculum* pp. 353,356.

is the experience of time and the representation of this time implicit in the conception of history. The third element is the instigation of a new culture that would result from the arrangements and experiences involved in thinking and living this revolution.

In terms of these three elements Benjamin is most obviously helpful in providing an account of history that allows for disjunction. Along with his critique of historicism, the accompanying conception of *Jetztzeit* also sets out an appropriate, revolutionary change in time. On the other hand, Irigaray's major contribution is in proposing radical changes in culture. If modernity is founded on a break with tradition, then it is not only the conceptions of history and time that have been smuggled over into modernity, it is also the invisibility and injustice of a culture that is unable to properly account for and value sexual difference. For Irigaray the significant moment of our culture is not the transition from pre-modernity to modernity – it is not to be thought either as the establishment of the Cartesian *cogito*, the Kantian transcendental subject, or the Nietzschean death of God – but the transition from pre-history to history which she identifies as the 'original matricide'<sup>2</sup>. The new culture to be instigated by an Irigarayan revolution would be one which would focus on the resurrection of the mother – a culture in which women and woman would have cultural significance. Because she has diagnosed the murder of the mother as the foundation and support of culture this radical reappraisal would make everything change by transforming the foundation of social order.

---

<sup>2</sup> See 'The Bodily Encounter with the Mother' in *Irigaray Reader*, p.36.



## Complicity and Nihilism

The first problem that we encountered through Benjamin's attempt to think a genuine revolution was the problem of complicity. A genuine revolution will be one which will not and cannot be tainted by the injustices and barbarity of the 'old' order. This requirement however is already in danger of running into the second of the problems that needs to be thought through: that of nihilism. While the problem of complicity can be avoided through structuring revolution on the model of an absolute break (with tradition), the negativity and destruction associated with this gesture are in danger of eradicating any meaning or purpose and therefore any political or ethical justification for the revolution.

I have used the notion of affirmativity in chapter 1 to describe how Benjamin is able to circumvent the problem of complicity. This was developed chapter 2 to show how affirmativity is an aspect of the 'purity' of Benjamin's method that is later developed in terms of a dialectic without mediation. The fulfilment of Benjamin's revolution is based on a messianic model in which there is a redemption of history rather than a redemption in history. It is the exteriority of the Messiah in this model that also guarantees its freedom from complicity. This has also been seen to be at work in the creation of the revolutionary state of emergency or exception (*Ausnahmezustand*) as a non-complicitous blasting apart of homogenous, empty time. The Messiah does not mediate or negotiate with the 'powers that be', he redeems and legislates. The same will go for the genuine revolution.

We have also seen a useful parallel between Benjamin's and Irigaray's revolutions through her own use of the messianic motif of parousia. However, there is also a significant tension between these two versions of messianic intervention. It seems that for Irigaray this parousia requires mediation to bring it about as well as being a mediating movement in itself. Irigaray defines the relationship of her parousia to history as 'the willed construction of a bridge in the present between the past and the future'<sup>3</sup>. Her associated notion of the sensible transcendental is also described as coming about through a process in which 'we would be the mediators and bridges'<sup>4</sup>. These constructions reflect the pacific and constructive nature of her revolution as well as showing its necessarily complicitous nature.

The parallels and tensions between Benjamin and Irigaray on this question can best be seen through the space, and ultimately the time in and of which this mediation will or will not take place. For Benjamin this revolves around the question of the middle (*die Mitte*), while for Irigaray it concerns the 'between'.

For Irigaray, the 'between' can be understood in terms of her proposal of a new space-time as a temporal, as well as a spatial, interval. She suggests that it is desire that occupies the time of this interval, and the time of desire will only become a revolutionary time if the relationship which constitutes it changes: if the economy of desire itself is altered. The relationships between the subjects and

---

<sup>3</sup> *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, p. 147.

objects of desire must be changed in order to usher in the new era. Irigaray identifies the necessity for 'a different relationship between man and god(s), man and man, man and the world, man and woman.'<sup>5</sup> Because these relationships are those of the 'between', they will be governed by the time of the interval and fulfilled by a new desire. Desire is also a revolutionary force in itself. My own thinking of revolution as an interruption in history draws near to the kind of theorisation of desire that Irigaray suggests takes place 'on the basis of certain observations about a moment of tension, situated in historical time...'.<sup>6</sup> Revolutionary desire also functions around a moment of tension in historical time.

In contrast to the homogenous, empty time that we are attempting to find alternatives to, Irigaray's 'between' is not an empty space-time, but one of constant negotiation, re-negotiation, and recognition. The time of the interval which is also the time of desire is also, inevitably, linked to a passion that recognises the irreducible difference of the other and takes pleasure in the encounter with the unknowable. This passion arises as a result of the interval. While it was desire that occupied the place of the interval, passion will never allow the interval to be crossed. Irigaray wants to bring this pure passion back in to the relations of sexual difference. This would be a passion between the sexes which is also wonder:

Wonder might allow them to retain an autonomy based on their difference.

The *interval* would never be crossed. There would be no consummation.

---

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p. 129.

<sup>5</sup> *The Irigaray Reader*, p.167.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p.167.



Such an idea is a delusion. One sex is never entirely consummated or consumed by another. There is always a *residue*.<sup>7</sup>

For Irigaray this is necessarily a residue of relationship which reflects the irreducibility of sexual difference. However, it also demands mediation while maintaining difference between heterogenous subjects. For Irigaray it is love and passion that does the work of the 'between'. Another useful parallel with Benjamin can be seen in this thinking in which love will always leave a (mucousic) residue. I made reference in chapter 2 to the notion of fulfilment that can be derived from Benjamin's messianic model and that this can be related to the pleasure of sexual gratification. Is this then, Irigaray's version of a fulfilled temporality that is based on the fulfilment of carnal love? Can we rethink the mucousic residue of mediation in terms of the explosive catalyst of Benjamin's *Jetztzeit* which would blast apart the continuum of history by filling it to bursting?

Again, there is a danger in ignoring the tensions at work in such similarities. Because Irigaray's revolution demands mediation it will not sit comfortably with Benjamin's interruption. The mucous is not only related to the residue of irreducibility, it is also related to the mediation between the irreducibles. Benjamin's version of the middle is, on the other hand, constructed around disjunction. Benjamin's concern with modernity rather than sexual difference leads to the necessity of a thinking of the present and thus to *Jetztzeit* as a revolutionary thinking of the now. Such a thinking cannot avoid immediacy. A properly revolutionary alternative for Benjamin must also be without mediation.

---

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p.172.

As we have seen from the analysis of his version of the dialectic in chapter 2 and the significance of Ideas as constellations in chapter 3, the tensions between the various elements and extremes of dialectical images are not mediated, but are instead in direct correspondence. Because Benjamin's philosophy of history operates on a principle of disjunction, what is between or in the middle is a break, rather than a mediated exchange between irreducible differences.

It is the purity and the immediate nature of Benjamin's alternative that would provide a criticism of Irigaray's more complicitous alternative of a culture of intersubjective communication exemplified in more recent writing. Such a criticism would draw attention to Irigaray's failure to construct a philosophy of history appropriate to modernity. I have extrapolated the philosophy of history that has emerged from Irigaray's work throughout this thesis from her theory of sexual difference. However, as such, it can be seen to be lacking in a rigorous thinking of the present and its disjunctive immediacy in favour of a more organic conception of history as the legacy of an original matricide.

However the absolute purity of Benjamin's position is also problematic. We have seen that both Benjamin and Irigaray criticise absolutist methods of philosophy (universal history and monolithic maleness respectively). The call for a non-complicitous revolution can then be construed as too absolute a conception of revolution and therefore impossible to accomplish on the concrete, everyday level. The problem arises from trying to make the particularities of revolution fit a universal concept. Benjamin and Irigaray both share a philosophical methodology that no longer requires the particular to come under the concept in such a

dictatorial fashion. Benjamin's *Jetztzeit* is precisely derived from an attention to the *nunc stans*. Irigaray's reversal of the dialectic flows from her omnitemporal insistence on the *hic et nunc* of every individual as other, as well as the necessity of their interaction and communication. The ordering of absolute, non-complicitous revolution would not only deny the significance of particularity, it would also shut down the avenues of communication and mutuality between individuals and communities. On the other hand Irigaray is most useful in helping us to think of an open coexistence of recognisably different agents by bringing us back to the body as the site of the concrete particularity of everyday life. This would be a concrete revolution which brings justice to embodied subjects of history, time and power.

As well as a Benjaminian criticism of Irigaray in terms of complicity, we can also discover an Irigarayan criticism of Benjamin in terms of nihilism. In chapter 2 I described the aspects of nihilism at work in Benjamin's theory as active nihilism, and this was done in order to distance him from interpretations that would describe him as adhering to a metaphysics of pure destruction. While the theme of destruction is clearly important in his philosophy of history it is a destruction that when related to tradition becomes 'a destruction of destruction'<sup>8</sup>. Another parallel and another tension comes into view when Benjamin's destruction of destruction is considered beside Irigaray's pacific revolution. Her critique of the philosophical tradition can be interpreted as an attempt to destroy a tradition of destruction as

---

<sup>8</sup> See Alexander García Düttmann, 'Tradition and Destruction' in *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy*, for a detailed reading of Benjamin's position on destruction and tradition. What is most pertinent



can Benjamin's destruction. However Benjamin's target is, more specifically, fascism<sup>9</sup> not the dominant trends of Western philosophy. Indeed Irigaray's characterisation of the tradition of Western philosophy as inherently destructive would have to include Benjamin, especially as he is explicitly concerned with destruction. As I have stated in chapter 4, it is this apparently monolithic view of the history of Western philosophy and culture that is one of the weakest moments of Irigaray's work; but even if we reject her own totalisation of history in favour of a view that allows moments of dissent and construction to appear, there is still indisputably, a destructive aspect to Benjamin's thought.

I have drawn attention to the numerous examples of nihilism in Benjamin's work as well as his own explicit self-identification as a nihilist. It is his construction of historical time as the time of ruination, and messianic time as a time of transience that best exhibit his nihilistic tendencies. On the other hand it is the historical focus of this nihilism that also contributes to its activity. Benjamin's criticism of what he considered to be Nietzsche's too passive nihilism was that it was not accompanied by a rigorous enough historical analysis. What this means is that an active nihilism is not a denial of meaning due to the transience of history, but that all meaning is historical and will only become fulfilled at the revolutionary moment in which it will be 'citable in all its moments'<sup>10</sup>.

---

in this reading is that Düttmann regards Benjamin's destruction as productive and revolutionary in which 'revolution is tradition's *memory*' (p.47).

<sup>9</sup> It is Düttmann who makes this more specific claim. Ibid, p. 39.

<sup>10</sup> *Illuminations* p. 246.

As I have argued in chapter 6, Irigaray is an eminently 'earthly' thinker who eschews the nihilism that Nietzsche would have attributed to 'afterworldsmen'. Her parousia and sensible transcendental are to be found in and through living beings and their fleshy materiality. Benjamin's messianic model does, however retain enough exteriority to be in danger of coming under a Nietzschean description of nihilism. Even Benjamin's happiness is nihilistic, both on his own, and on Nietzsche's terms, because it is seeking the downfall of the earthly.

Irigaray's revolution is not nihilistic because it is not setting out to destroy one position in order to set up another. Instead she transfigures one position by recognising other positions. It is the recognition of sexual difference and the multiplication of perspectives that are entailed in that, and can be extrapolated from it, that will lead to the transfiguration of the dominant patriarchal models.

What I am arguing is that such a revolutionary transformation of patriarchy does not have to be construed as destructive because it will still maintain modes of male/masculine becoming and identity. In other words, Irigaray is not setting out to murder the father in order to re-instate the mother, she is wanting to re-instate the mother in order to open up whole new worlds and space-times for everyone.

The tension between Benjamin and Irigaray's different takes on the tradition of destruction can best be seen in terms of their dialectics. Irigaray's dialectic is not only a reversal of the (Hegelian) dialectic, it is a multiplication of the dialectic. As a reversal it does indeed work backwards, opening up superseded oppositions in order to affirm their difference and maintain the space-time between them (which is also the space-time of the between). Irigaray's critique of

Hegel's dialectic as absolute process adheres to a non-nihilistic, insuperable negativity of difference that, rather than working in a progressive and linear manner in order to bring subject and object together, works backwards in order to draw attention not only to the space-time between subject and object, but also between subjects. Hers is a futural undoing of the dialectic in which its tightly woven fabric is unpicked in order to appreciate the individual threads in all their difference.

Although Benjamin's is also not an absolute process or a progressive elimination of difference, it is a violently destructive gesture which operates on the basis of bringing various elements together in order to harness the ruinous potential of their tensions. The question of nihilism would tempt us to try and substitute the affirmativity and destruction of Benjamin's dialectics at a standstill with the more fluid negativity of a reversal of the dialectic. However, as has been stressed throughout, Benjamin's notion of dialectics at a standstill and the revolutionary and active nihilistic consequences of this are inseparable from his analysis of the disjunction, disruption and discontinuity at the heart of modernity. To replace this aspect of his theory with a more continuous model would be to render his theory unrecognisable and to eliminate what has been shown to be the most helpful aspects in attempting to create alternative temporalities of revolution.

### **Continuity and Discontinuity**

Benjamin's lack of complicity and his active nihilism have both been shown to be attributable to his rigorous thinking of the discontinuity of, and as, modernity.



Irigaray's mediated and non-nihilistic thinking can, on the other hand be related to her mucousic thinking of fluidity and its reversed developmental dialectic. Through an examination of the fluid, rhythmic and musical aspects of the question of continuity and discontinuity these two models can be made to work together through their similarities and differences.

In terms of their similarities we can note a certain coincidence if we turn back to Benjamin's notion of origin. Revolution is also concerned with new beginnings so it would be appropriate to appropriate this term in order to think of revolution not only as a destructive event, but also as an originating one. What is of particular concern here is that Benjamin's construction of origin presents us with more fluid aspects of his thinking.

Benjamin discusses the dialectic of destruction and origin in terms of citation, and we are justified in applying this model to history by recalling that the redemptive or revolutionary moment of history is also the time when the past has 'become citable in all its moments'. The revolutionary destructive citation

summons the word by its name, wrenches it destructively from its context, but precisely thereby calls it back to its origin... In quotation the two realms – of origin and destruction – justify themselves before language. And conversely, only where they interpenetrate – in quotation – is language consummated.<sup>11</sup>

In terms of history then, redemption will only take place when the past is destructively ripped from its context in order to be returned to its origin. This is

precisely how the dialectical image operates. The 'then' is destructively repeated in the 'now', and this both creates tensions with the origins of the 'then' as well as originating a new 'now'. This is also why Benjamin's nihilism is an active nihilism; because destruction is inseparable from origin and it is only through realms acting in direct correspondence that revolutionary temporalities will emerge.

The destructive aspect of these temporalities are most closely associated with the commitment to disjunction and discontinuity. However the originating moments also suggest a fluid emergence of novelty from becoming.

The term origin is not intended to describe the process by which the existent came into being, but rather to describe that which emerges from the process of becoming and disappearance. Origin is an eddy in the stream of becoming, and in its rhythmic movement (*Rhythmik*) it swallows the material involved in the process of genesis. That which is original is never revealed in the naked and manifest existence of the factual; its rhythm (*Rhythmik*) is open (*offen*) only to a dual insight. On the one hand it needs to be recognised as a process of restoration and reestablishment, but, on the other hand, and precisely because of this, as something imperfect and incomplete.<sup>12</sup>

This is an incomplete and dual process of becoming and disappearance, restoration and imperfection. As an eddy origin disrupts the regular flow of the stream of becoming. It is not a fixed entity but only recognisable as a cyclical

---

<sup>11</sup> *One Way Street and Other Writings*, p. 286.

disturbance that will change its position and properties according to the volume and rate of flow.

This embryonic thinking of fluidity in Benjamin's origin could be developed through the application of Irigaray's exemplary employment of fluidity. This revolutionary fluid origin which is inextricably linked with destruction can be likened to the fluidity that would jam the machinery of the solidity and regularity of patriarchal discourse. That it is also a necessarily incomplete origin suggests that it would be comfortable in an affirmatively aqueous environment. The explicit fluidity of Benjamin's origin allows us to move towards a position in which Irigaray's fluid continuity can be disturbed by turbulence and vortexes. Fluid mechanics would enable us to construct a model in which turbulence can also create gaps or disjunctions within a chaotic, multidirectional, and yet continuous flow.

That these aquatically situated movements are described as rhythmic does not necessarily mean that they adhere to the regular repetitive movements of mechanical time. Because they are water-based rhythmic movements they are more likely to be conducive to the irregular 'natural' rhythms of the Irigarayan swimmer. It could also be the case that Irigaray's cosmic rhythms are also echoes of the happy messianic rhythms described in Benjamin's *Theologico-Political Fragment* as the rhythms of transient nature:

---

<sup>12</sup> *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p.45. translation modified.



the rhythm of Messianic nature is happiness. For nature is Messianic by reason of its eternal and total passing away.<sup>13</sup>

But even though both of these can be contrasted with the regular, mechanical beats of culture, we should be wary of completely homogenising different fluid rhythms and timings. Indeed because Benjamin is so concerned with modernity there would need to be room for the mechanical and technological rhythms of modern culture alongside the ambient irregularities of 'nature'. Neither is Irigaray completely blind to the revolutionary potential of some technology, yet she would stress that any use must be carried out in a culture that also pays due attention to the natural and the cosmic.

All true insight forms an eddy. To swim in time against the direction of the swirling stream. Just as in art, the decisive thing is: to brush nature against the grain<sup>14</sup>

Here we have another example of the emergent fluidity of Benjamin's thought as well as an attempt to put it to critical use in order to discover different and revealing perspectives. Time being likened to a swirling stream is fluid and flowing, yet able to be resisted through a brushing of nature against the grain which would cause disruptive and disjunctive eddies. The decision which leads to insight is what disturbs the flow and causes erratic, rhythmic vortexes. This aphorism can be read to show how Benjamin and Irigaray share similar movements in which their times will also overlap. But they will only meet in passing. The encounter will involve Irigaray drifting with and through the natural

---

<sup>13</sup> *One Way Street and Other Writings*, p. 156.

and irregular currents, while Benjamin will be striving against the flow. What should we make of this meeting in the waters? Their different times and movement will only be productive if they are left to swim around each other in their highly different styles. To try to synthesise these two thinkers would only produce a blatantly contrived and choreographed synchronised swimming.

However a musical model of multiple tempos and temporalities is helpful in conveying the power of this fluvial encounter. A musical reading of Benjamin would allow us to see the time of the destructive and originating revolution as both fluid and static. Indeed, as we saw in chapter 3, Benjamin diagnosed the language of *Trauerspiel* as moving towards the condition of music. Not only can music provide a model for the heterogeneity and disjunction of time through devices such as irregular rhythms, rubato and fermata, it also expresses a more radical heterogeneity through its non-representational gestures. Music's gestures towards an unrepresentable otherness can also give expression to more radical forms of alterity present within modern forms of time. It is in this musical moment that Benjamin and Irigaray sit most comfortably together. To listen to their polytemporal music would be to not only experience the different and discontinuous temporalities of modernity, but also to hear the voices of repressed others who have been struggling over different representations of time.

Music is also a process of becoming in which there is no fixed state of being. However, even though music can be understood as temporal becoming, this does not mean that it has to be given the status of an absolute process, or even a linear

---

<sup>14</sup> Benjamin G°, 20, *First Sketches in Arcades Project*, p. 843.

progression. It is the moments of silence that produce disjunctive breaks as do repetitions variations and ornamentations. What I am proposing here is a revolutionary fusion of musical genres: a musical montage. Rather than thinking of such fertile fusions in terms of the dilution or betrayal of a tradition or genre, they can be viewed as the instigation of a completely new genre. In this case it will be the production of revolutionary temporalities of history that can accommodate revolutionary disjunctions within a new culture of pacific mucousity. One that recognises the important differences between the models of revolution and time at work in Irigaray and Benjamin while also producing a new revolutionary genre that can make use of the discontinuity of Benjamin's timing within the inclusive continuity of Irigaray's irenic dialectic. There is room for the disjunctive operation of *Jetztzeit* within a mucousic multidirectional history that is open to sexual difference. The purpose of proposing this as a fusion is to emphasise the heterogeneity of revolutionary times as well as the different modes of fulfillment that will be engendered.

Irigaray's continuous, organic becoming of fluid continuity – the ambient rubato of corporeal and cosmic water music can be criticised in terms of a purely Benjaminian framework<sup>15</sup>. Although I have identified the similarities to a Christian temporality of teleological expectation through the promise of new era

---

<sup>15</sup> Although there are arguments for describing Irigaray's temporalities as disjunctive they miss the more organic nature of Irigaray's corporeal language. See Ewa Plonowski Ziarek 'Toward a Radical Female Imaginary: Temporality and Embodiment in Irigaray's Ethics', *Diacritics*, 28:1, Spring 1998, pp. 60-75 for one such reading which insists on a 'disjunctive temporality of history' through a reading of the temporality of the body. However I would argue that Ziarek has failed to fully think through the mucous in her concentration on a body that is fragmented into scraps and debris rather than a more organic conception of a body of multiple and yet interrelated parts.



and parousia as able to be interpreted as coming too close to an Hegelian Christology, it is what I consider to be her musical utopianism that holds open the space for a more radical alterity. This can be seen most clearly in her earlier works in which the struggle for the representation of time was also linked with a recognition of real otherness.<sup>16</sup>

While there are important differences in the rhythms of becoming in the two models we can more easily supplement Benjamin's embryonic fluidity with Irigaray's more comprehensive mucous logic. The beauty of this supplementation is that it does not have to contradict the disjunctive and discontinuous basis of his temporalities of revolution. This is a thinking of fluidity and the mucous which can also allow for disjunction and discontinuity by paying attention not only to the differences between the rhythms of fluid and solid mechanical movements, but also to the turbulences, eddies, gaps, blocks, dams, floods and deluges. If Irigaray's revolution is a flood and Benjamin's is an explosive interruption we can bring the two together in an explosion that will not only reveal the disjunctive temporalities of history and thereby bring justice to all those hidden by the progressive and continuous logic of history, it will also release a flood of fluid new relations between irreducibly different others.

## **Part II: New Historicism and the Philosophy of History**

There are many areas of the philosophy of history in which this tense conjunction of Benjamin and Irigaray will be able to make useful contribution. Not least with

---

<sup>16</sup> see *Speculum* pp.353-55.

respect to debates about the 'end of history'. Benjamin's messianism and Irigaray's parousia both provide different models of ends which could be cashed out in terms of difference. One interesting avenue of research would be to explore the plural and non-teleological ends of history opened up by such a pairing. However the tensions between continuity and discontinuity discussed above will prove most immediately helpful in contributing to the current debates on the role of 'new historicism' or 'new historiography'<sup>17</sup> in the philosophy of history. I will conclude by showing briefly how the Benjamin/Irigaray constellation is able to contribute to these discussions and, more importantly, move them beyond questions of pure historiography, and beyond new historicism.

New historicism is a term associated with a critical movement which rejected what it saw as a the positivist belief of earlier historicists that the historical past could be represented objectively. Along with this came a rejection of a monolithic view of history and the introduction of different and dissonant voices as well as a recognition of the historicity of the historian, philosopher or writer's own position.<sup>18</sup> In recent debates concerning historiography it has also come to be used in conjunction with practices that are often gathered together under the label of 'postmodernism'.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> The term 'new historiography' was coined by Frank Ankersmit, in his *History and Tropology: The Rise and Fall of Metaphor*, Berkeley, 1994.

<sup>18</sup> See John Brannigan, *New Historicism and Cultural Materialism*, London, 1998, for a comprehensive survey of the positions set out for new historicism by Stephen Greenblatt, Louis Montrose and others.

<sup>19</sup> For example see, Jürgen Pieters, 'New Historicism: Postmodern Historiography between Narrativism and Heterology', in *History and Theory*, 39, pp. 21-38.

The current arguments about new historicism, or postmodern historiography focus on the problems of representing the past and are often reduced to purely epistemological concerns about how it is possible to have knowledge of past events or whether we are able to represent those events accurately. While there is a great deal of agonising over the necessary selectivity and processes of exclusion of historiography, the discussion is often reduced to the depressingly familiar choice of relativism and ‘realism’. It is the opponents of new historicism who often identify themselves as ‘realists’<sup>20</sup>. What is assumed by this position is that the appropriate methodological rigour applied to the requisite amount of primary sources will in the end reveal history the ‘way it really was’. Rather than repeating the arguments against the naïve historicism of the realist school, I will show how the kind of thinking that has emerged from the conjunction of Benjamin and Irigaray’s revolutionary times can move beyond such an opposition.

Although I will be showing how Benjamin and Irigaray can help us through such an impasse, it is important to note that they can also both be closely associated with the new historicist movement. Indeed Benjamin’s theses *On the Concept of History* appear under the heading of ‘Sources’ in at least one textbook on the new

---

<sup>20</sup> This can be seen in the exchange between Perez Zagorin and Keith Jenkins in the Journal *History and Theory*. Perez Zagorin, ‘History, the Referent, and Narrative: Reflections on Postmodernism Now’, *History and Theory*, February 1999, vol. 38, no. 1, pp. 1-24. Keith Jenkins, ‘A Postmodern Reply to Perez Zagorin’, *History and Theory*, May 2000, vol. 39, no. 2, pp. 181-200. Perez Zagorin, ‘Rejoinder to a Postmodernist’, *History and Theory*, May 2000, vol. 39, no. 2, pp. 201-209. Also the debates reprinted from the journals in *The Postmodern History Reader*, ed. Keith Jenkins. London, Routledge. 1997.



historicism.<sup>21</sup> This might seem perverse for a thinker who was so vehemently critical of historicism. However many of the new historicists' criticisms of 'old' historicism can indeed be seen to be similar to Benjamin's, and his unparalleled historical sense has been put to good use to bolster this genre. It may also seem at odds that Benjamin's avowed modernism could be introduced into a genre more identifiable as postmodernist. This could be clarified through a tangential discussion of postmodernism as either integral to or 'after' modernism, but that is not our primary concern here.<sup>22</sup> Irigaray can also be associated with this movement as she is more often treated as a 'postmodern feminist' in that she shares certain poststructuralist theories of representation and signification such as a Lacanian idiom, as well as being actively engaged in trying to promote different voices in history.

In order to convey the productivity of the Benjamin/Irigaray nexus to a thinking of new historicism, I will be taking the work of Michel de Certeau as a representative example of an increasingly significant theorist of that movement. Although he died in 1986, his work is only now being taken up by philosophers of history. Indeed his own situation as belonging to a Jesuit tradition which he considered to be in need of disruption through a recognition of its racial others also illustrates the possibilities of extrapolating the relevance of Benjamin and

---

<sup>21</sup> This is in *New Historicism and Cultural Materialism: A Reader*, ed, Kiernan Ryan, London, Arnold, 1996.

<sup>22</sup> To pursue this question see Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, David Harvey *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Inquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1989, and Frederic Jameson *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. London, Verso, 1991.

Irigaray to other others. Many of the themes of his work are reflected in the concerns elaborated throughout this thesis. Issues such as the rupture of history, different temporalities, constructions of the body, and musical interpretation. While this will enable me to contribute to discussions on these and other themes, what is of greater significance is that I will also criticise certain problematic historicist tendencies as well as extending the limitations of Certeau's historiographical concerns.

What is most notable about Certeau's approach to history is that it too can be described as 'brushing history against the grain'. He uses a heterological method in which '*intelligibility is established through a relation with the other*'.<sup>23</sup> This pays attention to silences and breaks in order to expose the 'other' of history. His starting point is the historians' assumption that history and historiography are concerned with other times. Historical objects, because they are in the past, are treated as absent, which also entails a crucial difference from the present. In order to make sense of history, historians use time as an ordering principle. By dividing time into past and present, history can be ordered and constructed into a rational and intelligible totality. This is a prototypically modern activity in that it too is based on a rupture: an essential 'differentiation between the *present* and the *past*... . This rupture also organises the content of history'.<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, trans. Tom Conley, New York, Columbia University Press, 1988, p. 3.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, p. 2.

According to Certeau there are also different temporalities at work the modes of representation of different historiographies. There are also alternative approaches that involve different practices or temporalities. One such practice is that of the mystics which can be seen to involve a different relationship to the ordering of historical time.

The mystic is seized by time as by that which irrupts and transforms; hence time is for him the question of the subject seized by his other, in a present which is incessantly the surprise of a birth and a death. The endlessness of instants that are beginnings creates therefore a historicity in which continuities lose their relevance, just as institutions do. These events... continually contradict the time produced by historiography.<sup>25</sup>

Not only does this suggest alternative temporalities to those of historiography, it is also coincidental with the alternative temporalities of revolution that are at play in the Benjamin and Irigaray conjunction. The irruption, transformation, and endless instants of beginning, in which continuities lose their relevance, conform with the Benjaminian extremes of the constellation, while the surprise of a birth and the loss of institutional relevance can be given an Irigarayan emphasis.

Irigaray is also heterological, not least in remembering and uncovering, making heard the forgotten of history as well as the forgotten mother, birth and body. Her writing explicitly participates in these different practices of time. In the chapter entitled '*La Mystérique*' of *Speculum* Irigaray appropriates the mystical voice of

---

<sup>25</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable* vol. 1: *The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, tr. Michael B. Smith, London, Chicago University Press, 1992, p. 11.



Saint Teresa of Avila in a poetical critique of the 'specula(risa)tion' of woman.<sup>26</sup>

This is a mimesis of the kind of madness Certeau suggests is repressed by the rational pursuit of historiography. Irigaray uses such a heterology primarily to disturb the history of philosophy, but it could just as easily be used to aid the recovery of other histories. That Certeau also interprets mystical texts in terms of bodily expressions also supports a reading such as Irigaray's that would posit the body as one of the forgotten elements of history.

Certeau's own historical sense gives weight to the new historicists' emphasis on the historicity of historiography. At any time there will only be a certain range of representational possibilities available. These make up the limits of 'what can be thought'<sup>27</sup>. The role of the heterologist then is to run up against, and if possible transgress, these limits in order to reveal the 'other of reason, or of the possible'.<sup>28</sup>

Certeau's own method is based on a psychoanalytic framework using a model of the unconscious to try and grasp these historical silences. The unconscious here is constructed on a Lacanian model where it is to be thought of as the repressed of language rather than something buried deep within the psyche. There are, of course, other heterological interpretative devices such as deconstruction, or Foucauldian genealogy and archaeology.<sup>29</sup> What is of consequence here is that

---

<sup>26</sup> *Speculum* pp. 191-202.

<sup>27</sup> Certeau, *The Writing of History*, p. 44.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* p. 43.

<sup>29</sup> Indeed Certeau was very influenced by Foucault's archaeological method, and made significant use of analyses of power structures in his investigations of racial others, with particular reference to the effects of colonial exploitation in South America.

Benjaminian dialectical images combined with Irigarayan mimesis can also be read as an effective heterological admixture.

This coincides most clearly with the musical interpretation outlined above. Certeau also appropriates music's relation to the inexpressible as a non-rational presence within modernity.<sup>30</sup> This directly relates to a musical interpretation of Benjamin's critical identification of the expressionless (*das Ausdruckslose*) which he explicitly links to Hölderlin's 'counter rhythmic rupture' – the caesura.<sup>31</sup> This can also be the originating eddy in the irregular rhythmic flow. Certeau sees music as an unconscious spiritualism in modernity. This interpretation of music will be of value in a Benjaminian model, both of allegory as non-instrumental readability, and of contributing towards the higher conception of experience as including religious experience, as set out in *On The Program of the Coming Philosophy* discussed in chapter 1.

Certeau's method of interpretation also takes musical cues. Any musical performance is an interpretation of a historical object in the present. One way of recovering the others of history is to abstract reports, for example of mystics, from their own historical context and reintroduce them, or repeat them in ours. These reports can be treated as tunes which like the 'airs' of the *sean-nós* singers will be a musical version of Benjamin's historical strategy in which an image of the past is to be recognised and repeated in the present in order to alter contemporary

---

<sup>30</sup> Certeau, *The Writing of History*, p. 183-4.

<sup>31</sup> 'Goethe's *Elective Affinities*' in, *Selected Writings, Vol. 1*, p. 340-341.

experience.<sup>32</sup> Musical performance as repetition and interpretation can also be applied to Irigaray's mimicry in which she repeats refrains from the history of philosophy in a subversive register. Indeed this must also relate to the thinking of quotation which renews in the present what has been ripped from the past.

The mechanism for repeating the alterity of the past in the present, according to Certeau, is a form of Freud's 'return of the repressed'. According to this theory the gaps and silences of history are the result of an active forgetting which refuses certain aspects and events in order to create an intelligible history. However at certain times what has been excluded will re-appear as 'what, at a give moment, has *become* unthinkable in order for a new identity to *become* thinkable.'<sup>33</sup> In other words there are certain forms of alterity that will, at certain times, interrupt and alter forms of identity.

This absent presence of history is the proper historical object for the new historian. Certeau uses the Lacanian psychoanalytic terminology of the 'real' (*réel*) for this object. As such the real is not available to discourse, it is more like a 'nature' even though it is always in a dynamic relation with culture. This is why it will emerge at the points of strain in historiological discourse, and can only be heard in the silences. The rift between discourse and the body is a symptom of a dualism that also separates the body from discourse and there is a desire in this, and other, versions of new historicism to get in touch with the real and to somehow make the silent body legible.

---

<sup>32</sup> see Thesis V, *Illuminations*, p. 247.



## **Beyond New Historicism**

While this debate, as it has been conducted in the journals, is primarily concerned with historiography and the interpretation of historical texts I would like to add the necessary rejoinder that there will always be a more substantive theory of history implied by such discussions of its representations. Indeed Certeau's discussion of the necessity of the rupture and breakage between the present and the past in modern historiography reflect the temporalities of modernist constructions of history. More importantly however, as I have stressed throughout this thesis both the representation of history and the disputes over its times are also necessarily political questions. They are questions about justice, rescue and recognition. Any engagement with history, whether historiographical or theoretical is a political practice. Although many of the realist camp would deny this and argue that we can arrive at an objective account or a universal history, this is in fact another, consciously or unconsciously, concealed conservative political position. History is inescapably entangled in the politics of representation. Brushing history against the grain is a conscious attempt to re-align a narrative that has been given to us by 'the victors'. As such both Benjamin and Irigaray can be seen to be accepting the responsibility of historical practice in an honest and resolute stance.

Although it is clear that Benjamin and Irigaray can contribute to new historicism, especially in its Certalian variation, there are also many important areas in which they can help to explore the problems of such a position. The most significant of

---

<sup>33</sup> Certeau, *The Writing of History*, p.4.

these is the new historicists' desire to get 'in touch with the real'.<sup>34</sup> The problem with this is that it appears that the new historicists are lapsing back into the positivist approach to history that they had originally criticised. While it is true that this involves the production of other histories, my worry is that in resorting to reference to the real it becomes merely another version of objectivism or 'realism'.

This problem can be seen to arise from the fact that new historicism is generally taken to refer to a group of interpretative strategies. Indeed Certeau is certainly involved in the production of a theory of interpretation – a Lacanian psychoanalytic reading of history. In other words, because it is attempting to understand history through interpretation new historicism can be described as a hermeneutical method. While many theories of hermeneutics would refuse the suggestion of any final interpretation, there are dangers involved in striving towards such finality. This is precisely what Benjamin criticises in his rejection of Ranke's desire to articulate the past 'the way it really was'.<sup>35</sup> Hermeneutic historicism is based on a method of empathy (*Einfühlung*); in particular, empathy with the victors.<sup>36</sup> Such an empathetic understanding is in danger of identifying with a progressive narrative of the totality of history which is at odds with the fragmented image-time at work in this thesis. In the end, the purpose of a revolutionary philosophy of history is not to strive for epistemological certainty through any sort of empathetic method, it is to create an inclusive culture of

---

<sup>34</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, 'The Touch of the Real', *Representations*, 59, 1997, 14-29.

<sup>35</sup> Thesis VI, *Illuminations*, p.247.

difference through a materialist engagement with history. While such an engagement will necessarily have to take account of the politics of language and representation involved its primary role is to intervene by fanning ‘the spark of hope in the past’ in order to recognise ‘a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past’.<sup>37</sup>

This enterprise will be much more productive if it refuses to follow the empathetic course of new historicism, opting instead for a radical and critical hermeneutic which incorporates plural accounts of history. Indeed, as critical hermeneutics it will be related to Nietzsche’s critical history (see the Introduction) by producing pragmatic and concrete histories which are useful for everyday life. This is why Irigaray’s model of production is so helpful in brushing history against the grain. It is her use of the imaginary – the dimension of perceived or imagined images – which she wrests away from the influence of the real that can instigate social transformation. Instead of trying to ‘get in touch with the real’ we can use methods of productive mimesis in conjunction with a revolutionary philosophy of history to produce different imaginaries, different histories and different times.

---

<sup>36</sup> For Benjamin empathetic understanding was merely ‘an attempt to provide a disguise under which idle curiosity masquerades as method.’ (*Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 54.)

<sup>37</sup> Thesis VI, *Illuminations*, p.247, Thesis XVII, *Illuminations*, p. 254.



## **Bibliography**

Adorno, Theodor, W. *Aesthetics and Politics*, trans. Ronald Taylor, London, Verso, 1977.

Adorno, Theodor, W. *Hegel: Three Studies*, trans. Shierry Weber NicholSEN, London, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1994.

Adorno, Theodor, W. 'Introduction to Benjamin's *Schriften*', in *Notes to Literature. Volume 2*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1992.

Adorno, Theodor, W. *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*. Trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989.

Adorno, Theodor, W. *Minima Moralia: Reflections From Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott, London, Verso, 1978.

Adorno, Theodor, W. *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984.

Adorno, Theodor, W. *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber, London, Neville Spearman, 1967.

Adorno, Theodor, W. 'Progress' in *Benjamin: Philosophy, Aesthetics, History*, ed. Gary Smith. London, University of Chicago Press, 1989.

Ahers Rolf. 'The Dialectic in Hegel's Philosophy of History' in *History and System: Hegel's Philosophy of History*, ed. R.L. Perkins, New York, SUNY, 1984.

Agamben, Giorgio. *Infancy and History: Essays on the Destruction of Experience*, London, Verso, 1993.

Agamben, Giorgio. *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1999.

Ankersmit, Frank. *History and Tropology: The Rise and Fall of Metaphor*, Berkeley, 1994.

Arendt, Hannah. *On Revolution*, London, Penguin, 1990.

Axiotis, Ares. 'Fiat vita, pereat veritas: Nietzsche's Untimely Reflections on Hegel's Dialectic of History', *Bulletin of the Hegel Society of Great Britian* 23/24, 1991.

Balfour, Ian. 'Reversal, Quotation: (Benjamin's History)', *Modern Language Notes*, 106, 1991.

Battersby, Christine. 'Her Blood and His Mirror: Mary Coleridge, Luce Irigaray and the Female Self' in *Beyond Representation: Philosophy and the*



*Poetic Imagination*, ed. Richard Eldridge, Cambridge, Cambridge University press, 1996.

Battersby, Christine. *The Phenomenal Woman: Feminist Metaphysics and the Patterns of Identity*, Cambridge, Polity, 1998.

Baudelaire, Charles. 'The Painter of Modern Life', in *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, trans. and ed. Jonathan Mayne, Phaidon Press, Oxford 1964.

Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*, trans. H.M. Parshley, London, Picador, 1988.

Benjamin, Andrew. *Present Hope: Philosophy, Architecture, Judaism*, London, Routledge, 1997.

Benjamin, Andrew. 'Time and Task', in *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy: Destruction and Experience*, ed. Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne. London, Routledge, 1994.

Benjamin, Walter. *Aesthetics and Politics*, trans. Ronald Taylor, London, Verso, 1977.

Benjamin, Walter. *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. London, Belknap Press, 1999.

Benjamin, Walter. *Berliner Kindheit um Neunzehnhunder*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1981.

Benjamin, Walter. 'Central Park', trans. Lloyd Spencer, *New German Critique*, 34, Winter 1985.

Benjamin, Walter. *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans. Harry Zohn, London, Verso, 1997.

Benjamin, Walter. *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin, 1910–1940*, ed. Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno, trans. Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1994.

Benjamin, Walter. *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem, 1932–1940*, ed. Gershom Scholem, trans. Gary Smith and Andre Lefebvre, New York, Schocken Books, 1989.

Benjamin, Walter. *Gesammelte Schriften*, vols I–VIII, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp Verlag, 1972–.

Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, London, Fontana, 1992.

Benjamin, Walter. 'N [Re the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress], trans. Leigh Hafrey and Richard Sieburth, in *Benjamin: Philosophy, Aesthetics, History*, ed. Gary Smith, London, University of Chicago Press, 1989.

Benjamin, Walter. *One Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter, London, Verso, 1979.

Benjamin, Walter. *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne, London, Verso, 1977.

Benjamin, Walter. *Selected Writings: Volume 1: 1913-1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, London, Belknap Press, 1996.

Benjamin, Walter. *Selected Writings: Volume 2: 1927-1934*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, London, Belknap Press, 1999.

Benjamin, Walter. 'Theories of German Fascism: On the Collection of Essays *War and Warrior*, edited by Ernst Jünger', trans. Jerolf Wikoff, *New German Critique* 17, Spring 1979.

Benjamin, Walter. *Understanding Brecht*, trans. Stanley Mitchell, London, Verso, 1977.

Berman, Marshall. *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity*, London, Verso, 1983.



Berry, Philippa. 'The Burning Glass: Paradoxes of Feminist Revelation in *Speculum*', in *Engaging with Irigaray*, ed. Carolyn Burke, Naomi Schor, and Margaret Whitford, New York, Columbia University Press, 1994.

Brannigan, John. *New Historicism and Cultural Materialism*, London, 1998.

Braudel, Fernand, *On History*, trans. Sarah Matthews, London, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1980.

Brecht, Bertolt. *Brecht on Theatre*, trans. John Willett, London, Methuen, 1964.

Brecht, Bertolt. *Poems 1913–1956*, ed. John Willett and Ralph Manheim, London, Methuen, 1979.

Brennan, Teresa. *Between Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, London, Routledge, 1989.

Brewster, Ben. 'Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project', *New Left Review* 48, 1968.

Buci-Glucksmann, Christine. *Baroque Reason: The Aesthetics of Modernity*, trans. Patrick Camiller, London, Sage Publications, 1994.

Buck-Morss, Susan. 'Aesthetics & Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered', *New Formations* 20, Summer 1993.

Buck-Morss, Susan. *Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, Cambridge MA, MIT Press, 1989.

Buck-Morss, Susan. 'Fashion in Ruins: History after the Cold War', *Radical Philosophy* 68, Autumn 1994.

Buck-Morss, Susan. *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin and the Frankfurt Institute*, New York, Free Press, 1977.

Butler, Judith. *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'*, London, Routledge, 1993.

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, London, Routledge, 1990.

Butler, Judith. *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth Century France*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1987.

Butterfield, Herbert. *The Whig Interpretation of History*, London, Bell, 1931.

Calvert, Peter. *Revolution*, London, Macmillan, 1970.

Carson, Ciaran. *Last Night's Fun*, London, Pimlico, 1996.

Cavarero, Adriana. 'Equality and Sexual Difference: The Amnesias of Political Thought', in *Equality and Difference: Gender Dimensions of Political Thought, Justice and Morality*, ed. G.Bock and S.James, London and New York, Routledge 1991.

Cavarero, Adriana. *In Spite of Plato*, trans. Serena Anderlini-D'Onofrio and Áine O'Healy, Cambridge, Polity, 1995.

Caygill, Howard. 'Benjamin, Heidegger and the Destruction of Tradition', in *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy: Destruction and Experience*, ed. Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne. London, Routledge, 1994.

Caygill, Howard. *Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience*, London, Routledge, 1998.

Certeau, Michel de. *The Mystic Fable* vol. 1: *The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, tr. Michael B. Smith, London, Chicago University Press, 1992

Certeau, Michel de. *The Writing of History*, trans. Tom Conley, New York, Columbia University Press, 1988.



Chanter, Tina. *Ethics of Eros: Irigaray's Rewriting of the Philosophers*, London, Routledge, 1995.

Cohen, Margaret. *Profane Illuminations: Walter Benjamin and the Paris of the Surrealist Revolution*, Berkeley, California University Press, 1993.

Cook, Deborah. 'Nietzsche, Foucault, Tragedy', *Philosophy and Literature* 13, 1989.

Cornell, Drucilla. *The Imaginary Domain: Abortion, Pornography and Sexual Harassment*, London, Routledge, 1995.

Deleuze, Gilles. *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson, New York, Columbia University Press, 1988.

Descartes, René. *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol.I, trans. J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, D. Murdoch, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985.

Derrida, Jacques. *Eperons: Les Styles de Nietzsche*, Paris, Flammarion, 1978.

Derrida, Jacques. *Glas*, trans. John P. Leavey Jr. and Richard Rand, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1986.

Derrida, Jacques. *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf, London, Routledge, 1994.

Deutcher, Penelope. 'Irigaray Anxiety: Luce Irigaray and her Ethics for Improper Selves', *Radical Philosophy* 80, November/December 1996.

Deutscher, Penelope. *Yielding Gender: Feminism, Deconstruction and the History of Philosophy*, London, Routledge, 1997.

Dienstag, Joshua Foa. *Dancing in Chains: Narrative and Memory in Political Theory*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1997.

Diprose, Rosalyn. *The Bodies of Women: Ethics Embodiment and Sexual Difference*, London, Routledge, 1994.

Düttmann, Alexander García. 'Tradition and Destruction' in *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy: Destruction and Experience*, ed. Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne, London, Routledge, 1994.

Engell J. *The Creative Imagination: Enlightenment to Romanticism*, Cambridge Mass., Harvard University Press, 1981.

- Fenves, Peter. ‘ “Out of the Order of Number”: Benjamin and Irigaray Towards a Politics of Pure Means’, *Diacritics* 28:1, Spring 1998.
- Ferrell, Robyn. ‘The Timing of Feminism’, *Hypatia*, vol.14, no.1, 1999.
- Findlay, J.N. *The Philosophy of Hegel*. New York, Collier Books, 1958.
- Fisher, H.A.L. *A History of Europe*, London, Arnold, 1934.
- Freud, Sigmund. *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, trans. James Strachey, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1973.
- Freud, Sigmund. *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, trans. James Strachey, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1991
- Frisby, David. *Fragments of Modernity*, Cambridge Mass., Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1988.
- Fukuyama, Francis. *The End of History and the Last Man*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1992.
- Fuss, Diana J. ‘ “Essentially Speaking”: Luce Irigaray’s Language of Essence’, in *Revaluing French Feminism: Critical Essays on Difference, Agency, and Culture*. eds. Nancy Fraser and Sandra Lee Bartky. Bloomington. Indiana University Press, 1992.



Gatens, Moira. *Feminism and Philosophy: Perspectives on Difference and Equality*, Cambridge, Polity, 1991.

Gatens, Moira. *Imaginary Bodies: Ethics, Power and Corporeality*, London, Routledge, 1996.

Geulen, Eva. 'Toward a Genealogy of Gender in Walter Benjamin's Writing', *The German Quarterly* 69:2, Spring 1996.

Gould, Stephen, J. *Life's Grandeur: The Spread of Excellence from Plato to Darwin*, London, Vintage, 1997

Greenblatt, Stephen. 'The Touch of the Real', *Representations*, 59, 1997, pp. 14-29.

Gross, Elizabeth. 'Philosophy, Subjectivity and the Body: Kristeva and Irigaray', in *Feminist Challenges: Social and Political Theory*, eds. Carole Pateman and Elizabeth Gross, London, Allen & Unwin, 1986.

Grosz, Elizabeth. *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction*, London, Routledge, 1990.

Grosz, Elizabeth. *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists*, Sydney, Allen & Unwin, 1989.

Habermas, Jürgen. 'Walter Benjamin: Consciousness Raising or Rescuing Critique', in *On Walter Benjamin: Critical Essays and Recollections*, ed. Gary Smith, Cambridge MA, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1988.

Habermas, Jürgen. *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. Frederick Lawrence, Oxford, Polity, 1987.

Hamacher, Werner. 'Afformative, Strike: Benjamin's "Critique of Violence"' in *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy: Destruction and Experience*, ed. Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne, London, Routledge, 1994.

Harootunian, Harry D. 'The Benjamin Effect: Modernism, Repetition, and the Path to Different Cultural Imaginaries', in *Walter Benjamin and the Demands of History*, ed. M.P. Steinberg, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1996.

Harries, Karsten, 'Nietzsche and the Sea', in *Nietzsche's New Seas*, eds. Michael Allen Gillespie and Tracy B. Strong, London, Chicago University Press, 1988.

Harvey, David. *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Inquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1989

Heckman, Peter. 'The Role of Music in Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 30:4, October 1990.

Hegel, G.W.F. *Introduction to The Philosophy of History*, trans. Leo Rauch, Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Company, 1988.

Hegel, G.W.F. *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1977.

Hegel, G.W.F. *The Philosophy of Fine Art*, trans. F.P.B. Osmaston, London, G. Bell and Sons, 1920.

Hegel, G.W.F. *Hegel's Philosophy of Nature*, trans. M.J. Petry, London, Allen & Unwin, 1970.

Hegel, G.W.F. *Philosophy of Right*, trans. T.M. Knox, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1967.

Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1962.

Heidegger, Martin. *Nietzsche*, 4 vols, trans. Davis Krell, New York, Harper & Row, 1979.



Hölderlin, Friedrich. *Sämtliche Werke*, Friedrich Beißner, Stuttgart,  
Kohlhammer, 1985.

Hölderlin, Friedrich. *Essays and Letters on Theory*, trans. Thomas Pfau, Albany,  
State University of New York, 1988.

Irigaray, Luce. *Amante marine. De Friedrich Nietzsche*, Paris, Minuit, 1980.

Irigaray, Luce. *Ce Sexe qui n'en est pas un*, Paris Minuit. 1977.

Irigaray, Luce. *Entre Orient et Occident*, Paris, Bernard Grasset, 1999.

Irigaray, Luce. *Ethique de la différence sexuelle*, Paris, Minuit, 1984.

Irigaray, Luce. *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, trans. Carolyn Burke and Gillian  
C. Gill, London, Athlone Press, 1993.

Irigaray, Luce. *The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger*, trans. Mary Beth  
Mader, London, Athlone, 1999.

Irigaray, Luce. *I Love To You: Sketch for a Felicity Within History*, trans. Alison  
Martin, London, Routledge, 1996.

Irigaray, Luce. *The Irigaray Reader*, ed. Margaret Whitford, Oxford, Blackwell,  
1991.

Irigaray, Luce. *je, tu, nous: Towards a Culture of Difference*, trans. Alison Martin, London, Routledge, 1993.

Irigaray, Luce. *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche*, trans. G.C. Gill, New York, Columbia University Press, 1991.

Irigaray, Luce. *L'oubli de l'air: chez Martin Heidegger*, Paris, Editions de Minuit, 1983.

Irigaray, Luce. 'The Question of the Other', *Yale French Studies* 87, 1995.

Irigaray, Luce. *Sexes and Genealogies*, trans. Gillian C. Gill, New York, Columbia University Press, 1993.

Irigaray, Luce. *Sexes et parentées*, Paris, Minuit, 1987.

Irigaray, Luce. *Speculum. De l'autre femme*, Paris, Minuit, 1974.

Irigaray, Luce. *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1985.

Irigaray, Luce. *Thinking the Difference: For a Peaceful Revolution*, trans. Karin Montin, London, Athlone, 1994.

- Irigaray, Luce. *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1985.
- Jacobs, Carol. 'Dusting Antigone', *Modern Language Notes* 111, 1996.
- Jameson, Frederic. *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. London, Verso, 1991.
- Jenkins, Keith. *The Postmodern History Reader*, London, Routledge, 1997.
- Jenkins, Keith. 'A Postmodern Reply to Perez Zagorin', *History and Theory*, May 2000, vol. 39, no. 2, pp. 181-200.
- Jennings, Michael. *Dialectical Images: Walter Benjamin's Theory of Literary Criticism*, London, Cornell University Press, 1987.
- Kafka, Franz, *The Complete Short Stories of Franz Kafka*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer, London, Minerva, 1992.
- Kant, Immanuel, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith, London, Macmillan, 1929.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays*, trans. Ted Humphreys, Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Company, 1983.



Kaufmann, Walter. 'Nietzsche and the Death of Tragedy: A Critique' in *Studies in Nietzsche in the Classical Tradition*, eds. J.C. O'Flaherty, T.F. Selner & R.M. Helm, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1976.

Koepnick, Lutz P. 'The Spectacle, the *Trauerspiel*, and the Politics of Resolution: Benjamin Reading the Baroque Reading Weimar' in *Critical Inquiry*, Winter 1996.

Kofman, Sarah, 'Baubô: Theological Perversion and Fetishism', in *Nietzsche's New Seas*, eds. Michael Allen Gillespie and Tracy B. Strong, London, Chicago University Press, 1988.

Kojève, Alexandre. *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. Raymond Queneau, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1980.

Krell, David Farrell. 'To the Orange Grove at the Edge of the Sea' in *Nietzsche and the Feminine*, ed. P.J. Burgard, London, University Press of Virginia, 1994.

Kristeva, Julia. 'Women's Time', in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi, Oxford, Blackwell, 1986.

Lacan, Jacques. *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan, London, Tavistock Publications, 1977..

Lacan, Jacques. *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1979.

Lacoue-Labarthe, Phillippe, and Jean-Luc Nancy. *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Criticism in German Romanticism*, trans. Philip Barnard & Cheryl Lester, Albany, SUNY, 1988

Le Doeuff, Michèle. *The Philosophical Imaginary* , trans. C. Gordon, London, Athlone Press, 1989.

Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm. *The Monadology and Other Philosophical Writings*, trans. Robert Latta, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1898.

Lloyd, Genevieve. *Being in Time: Selves and Narrators in Philosophy and Literature*, London, Routledge, 1993.

Löwy, Michael. “‘Against the Grain’”: The Dialectical Conception of Culture in Walter Benjamin’s Theses of 1940, in *Walter Benjamin and the Demands of History*, ed. M.P. Steinberg, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1996.

Löwy, Michael. ‘Walter Benjamin and Surrealism: The Story of a Revolutionary Spell’, *Radical Philosophy* 80, 1996.

Löwy, Michael. *Redemption and Utopia*, London, Athlone Press, 1992.

Lukács, Georg. *The Theory of The Novel*, trans. Anna. Bostock, London, Merlin Press, 1971.

Lyotard, Jean-François. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1984.

McCall, Tom. 'Plastic Time and Poetic Middles: Benjamin's Hölderlin', *Studies in Romanticism* 31, Winter 1992.

McCarney, Joseph. 'Shaping Ends: Reflections on Fukuyama', *New Left Review* 202, November/December 1993.

Marcuse, Herbert. *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1960.

Marx Karl. 'The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte', in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker, New York, Norton, 1972.

Mortensen, Ellen. *The Feminine and Nihilism: Luce Irigaray with Nietzsche and Heidegger*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1995.



Mortensen, Ellen. 'Irigaray and Nietzsche: Echo and Narcissus revisited?' in *The Fate of the New Nietzsche*, eds. K. Ansell-Pearson and H. Caygill, Aldershot, Avebury, 1993.

Muraro, Luisa. 'Female Genealogies', in *Engaging with Irigaray*, eds. Carolyn Burke, Naomi Schor, and Margaret Whitford, New York, Columbia University Press, 1994.

Niethammer, Lutz. *Posthistoire: Has History Come to an End?*, trans. Patrick Camiller, London, Verso, 1992.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1990.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Birth of Tragedy and The Case of Wagner* trans. Walter Kaufmann, New York, Vintage, 1967

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, New York, Vintage 1974.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *On the Genealogy of Morals, and Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale, New York, Vintage, 1989.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. 'On the Utility and Liability of History for Life', in  
*Unfashionable Observations*, trans. Richard T. Gray, Stanford, Stanford  
University Press, 1995.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale,  
Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1969.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Twilight of the Idols*, trans, R.J. Hollingdale, Harmondsworth,  
Penguin, 1968.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, New York,  
Vintage, 1968.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Werke, Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, eds. Giorgio Colli and  
Mazzino Montinari, Berlin and New York, Walter de Gruyter, 1967 –.

Nye, Andrea. *Words of Power: A Feminist Reading of the History of Logic*, New  
York, Routledge, 1990.

Oliver, Kelly. 'Antigone's Ghost: Undermining Hegel's *Phenomenology of  
Spirit*' in *Hypatia*, 11:1, 1996.

Oliver, Kelly. *Womanizing Nietzsche: Philosophy's Relation to the "Feminine"*,  
London, Routledge, 1995.

Osborne, Peter. *The Politics of Time: Modernity and Avant-Garde*, London, Verso, 1995.

Osborne, Peter. 'Small-scale Victories, Large-scale Defeats: Walter Benjamin's Politics of Time' in *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy: Destruction and Experience*, eds. A. Benjamin and P. Osborne. London, Routledge, 1994.

Pensky, Max. *Melancholy Dialectics: Walter Benjamin's Play of Mourning*, Amherst, Mass', 1993.

Pieters, Jürgen. 'New Historicism: Postmodern Historiography between Narrativism and Heterology', in *History and Theory*, 39, pp. 21-38.

Plato, *Republic*, trans. H.D.P. Lee, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1955.

Plato, *Theaetetus*, trans. Robin A.H. Waterfield, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1987.

Popper, Karl. *The Open Society and its Enemies: Vol. II: The High Tide of Prophecy: Hegel, Marx, and the Aftermath*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1945.

Renault, Mary. *The King Must Die*, New York, Pantheon, 1958.



Rochlitz, Rainer. *The Disenchantment of Art*, New York, Guildford, 1996.

Rose, Gillian. *Melancholy Science: An Introduction to the Thought of Theodor W. Adorno*. Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1981.

Rosen, Charles. 'The Ruins of Walter Benjamin', in *On Walter Benjamin: Critical Essays and Recollections*, ed. Gary Smith, Cambridge Mass., Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1988.

Ryan, Kiernan. *New Historicism and Cultural Materialism: A Reader*, London, Arnold, 1996.

Schacht, Richard. *Nietzsche*, London, Routledge, 1983.

Scholem, Gershom. 'Walter Benjamin and his Angel', in *On Walter Benjamin: Critical Essays and Recollections*, ed. Gary Smith, Cambridge MA, MIT, 1988.

Schopenhauer, Arthur. *The World as Will and Representation, Vol. 1*, trans. E.F.J. Payne, New York, Dover, 1969.

Scmitt, Carl. *Politische Theologie, Vier Kapiteln zur Lehre von der Souveränität*, Munich-Leipzig: Duncker and Humbolt, 1922.

Scott, Joan C. 'Deconstructing Equality-Versus-Difference: Or, the Uses of Poststructuralist Theory for Feminism', *Feminist Studies* 14:1, Spring 1988.

Siep L. *Anerkennung als Prinzip der praktischen Philosophie. Untersuchungen zu Hegels Jenaer Philosophie des Geistes*, Freiberg, Karl Alber, 1979.

Silk, M.S. & J.P. Stern. *Nietzsche on Tragedy*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1981.

Singer, Peter. *Hegel*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1983.

Sloterdijk, Peter. *Thinker on Stage: Nietzsche's Materialism*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1989.

Sophocles. *The Theban Plays: King Oedipus, Oedipus at Colonus, Antigone*, trans. E.F. Watling, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1947.

Spengler, Oswald. *Decline of the West*, 2 Vols. trans. Charles Francis Atkinson, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1922.

Stambaugh, Joan. *The Problem of Time in Nietzsche*, London, Bucknell University Press, 1987.

Steinberg, Michael P. 'The Collector as Allegorist: Goods, Gods and the Objects of History', in *Walter Benjamin and the Demands of History*, ed. M.P. Steinberg, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1996.

Steiner, George. *Antigones*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1984.

Summers-Bremner Eluned, 'Reading Irigaray, Dancing', in *Hypatia*, 15:1, 2000.

Szondi, Peter. 'The Notion of the Tragic in Schelling, Hölderlin and Hegel', in *On Textual Understanding and Other Essays*, trans. Harvey Mendelsohn, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1986.

Taylor, A.J.P. *From Napoleon to Stalin: Comments on European History*, London, Hamish Hamilton, 1950.

Taylor, Charles. *Hegel*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1975.

Tiedemann, Rolf. 'Historical Materialism or Political Messianism? An Interpretation of the Theses "On the Concept of History"', in *Benjamin, Philosophy, Aesthetics, History*, ed. Gary Smith, London, University of Chicago Press, 1989.

Toynbee, Arnold J. *A Study of History*, 10 Vols, London, Oxford University Press, 1933-48.



Turetzsky, Philip. *Time*, London, Routledge, 1998.

Vasseleu, Catherine. *Textures of Light: Vision and Touch in Irigaray, Levinas and Merleau-Ponty*, London, Routledge, 1998.

Von Ranke, Leopold. *Fürsten und Völker*, ed. W. Andreas, Wiesbaden, 1957.

Walsh, Lisa. 'Her Mother Her Self: The Ethics of the Antigone Family Romance', *Hypatia* 14:3, 1999.

Weigel, Sigrid. *Body- and Image-Space: Re-reading Walter Benjamin*, trans. Georgina Paul, London, Routledge, 1996.

Whitford, Margaret. *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine*, London, Routledge, 1991.

Whitford, Margaret. 'Irigaray, Utopia and the Death Drive', in *Engaging with Irigaray*, eds. Carolyn Burke, Naomi Schor, and Margaret Whitford, New York, Columbia University Press, 1994.

Witte, Bernd. *Walter Benjamin: An Intellectual Biography*, trans. James Rolleston, Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 1991.

Wohlfarth, Irving. 'Smashing the Kaleidoscope: Walter Benjamin's Critique of Cultural History', in *Walter Benjamin and the Demands of History*, ed. M.P. Steinberg, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1996.

Wolff, Janet. 'The Invisible *Flâneuse*: Women and the Literature of Modernity', in Andrew Benjamin (ed.), *The Problems of Modernity: Adorno and Benjamin*, London, Routledge, 1991.

Wolff, Janet. 'Memoirs and Micrologies: Walter Benjamin, Feminism and Cultural Analysis', *New Formations* 20, Summer 1993.

Wolin, Richard. *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1982.

Yeats, William Butler. 'Easter, 1916', *The Works of W.B. Yeats*, Ware, Wordworth Editions, 1994.

Young, Robert, *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West*, London, Routledge, 1990.

Zagorin, Perez. 'History, the Referent, and Narrative: Reflections on Postmodernism Now'. *History and Theory*, February 1999, vol. 38, no. 1, pp. 1-24.

Zagorin, Perez. 'Rejoinder to a Postmodernist', *History and Theory*, May 2000,  
vol. 39, no. 2, pp. 201-209.

Ziarek, Ewa Plonowska. 'Toward a Radical Female Imaginary: Temporality and  
Embodiment in Irigaray's Ethics', *Diacritics*, 28:1,1998.

Žižek, Slavoj. *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, London, Verso, 1989.

Žižek, Slavoj. 'Why a Dialectician should lean to count to Four', in *Radical  
Philosophy*, 58, 1991.