

Sexual difference and the conduct of critique (Nietzsche and Irigaray)

Penelope Deutscher
Northwestern University
p-deutscher@northwestern.edu



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Abstract

For Nietzsche, a phenomenon, a belief, a mode of knowledge, or of subjectivity, confronts us with the possibility of creating, rather than presupposing, the criteria for its evaluation. In his *Untimely Meditations*, he widened the parameters of criticizability in just this way, proposing that history might be evaluated from the criterion of whether it is good or bad for life. Nietzsche provokes us to ask what the right question is to bring to history. Stepping back to formulate a response might allow us to appreciate the difference between interrogating the accuracy of historical accounts and assessing their effects.

Keywords: sex; gender; Irigaray; Nietzsche; sexual difference; conduct of critique; *Untimely Meditations*

Resumen. *Diferencia sexual y conducta crítica (Nietzsche e Irigaray)*

Para Nietzsche, un fenómeno, una creencia o un modo de conocimiento o de subjetividad nos enfrenta a la posibilidad de crear, en lugar de presuponer, los criterios para su evaluación. En sus *Consideraciones intempestivas* amplió los parámetros de la criticabilidad precisamente en este sentido, proponiendo que la historia pueda ser evaluada desde el criterio de si es buena o mala para la vida. Nietzsche nos impele a preguntarnos cuál es la pregunta correcta que debemos hacer a la historia. Tomar distancia para formular una respuesta podría permitirnos apreciar la diferencia entre interrogar la exactitud de los relatos históricos y evaluar sus efectos.

Palabras clave: sexo; género; Irigaray; Nietzsche; diferencia sexual; conducta crítica; *Consideraciones intempestivas*

Nothing? This whole that always and at every moment was becoming new? Nothing? This endless coming into life at each moment? Nothing? This whole that had laid by the mantle of long sleep and was reviving all my senses? Nothing, this unfathomable well?

(Irigaray, 1991: 5)

I.

For Nietzsche, a phenomenon, a belief, a mode of knowledge, or of subjectivity, confronts us with the possibility of creating, rather than presupposing, the criteria for its evaluation. In his *Untimely Meditations*, he widened the parameters of criticizability in just this way, proposing that history might be evaluated from the criterion of whether it is good or bad for life.¹ Nietzsche provokes us to ask what the right question is to bring to history. Stepping back to formulate a response might allow us to appreciate the difference between interrogating the accuracy of historical accounts and assessing their effects. To consider forms of knowledge as forms of conduct allows us to appreciate the different types of things one can do with history. Even to approach that question, we're asked to cultivate a sensibility for differentiating such different modes and moods of history as the monumental, the antiquarian, and the critical, and the negative and positive variations of each.

I appreciate the way in which Luce Irigaray also broadens the range of plausible critical moves when she responds to the depictions of women and femininity in the history of philosophy. Confronted with the historical lineage of representations of sexual difference, the right question is not only what is said (still less, whether such discourse is accurate.) The more fruitful interrogation would have us interrogate what is *not* said of women and femininity. Embarking with that question, Irigaray argues of Nietzsche, and of many other philosophers, that their accounts of women and femininity are limited to the mirrors, reversals, similarities, opposites or complements that are relational to a male reference point. To rethink the history of philosophy in terms of its absence – what exceeds or is excluded from the parameters of representation – also indicates that the critical space need not be limited to questioning either the accuracy or justice of representation. Irigaray makes clear that these are not the obligatory conducts of critique insofar as she explores modes of response not reliant on normatively and empirically based criticism. The interrogation of sexual difference in the history of philosophy leads her to a creative project of occupying and then expanding on a possibility for a hypothetical feminine whose embarkation point is its absence in a given philosophical text.

So what takes place in the encounter between these two technicians of transformative critique? What happens when Irigaray acts as a critical reader of Nietzsche, most importantly in her 1980 work *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche*? Devoting no more than some nine pages to Nietzsche's famous remarks about women and life, Irigaray's rejoinder won't be governed by citational practice, nor by a direct critical response. Minimizing reference to

1. See for example, some of the declarations Nietzsche makes in section ten of "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life", among them, his demand that "man should above all learn to live and should employ history only in *the service of the life he has learned to live.*" (2012: 116-117)

Nietzsche's actual comments about women, she avoids a direct tone of hostility or mockery. As Frances Opper (1993) and Joanne Faulkner (2011) have shown in foregrounding Irigaray's self-description, *Marine Lover* is formulated as project with, rather than on, Nietzsche.² The three-part work first establishes Irigaray's response to *Zarathustra*. Irigaray has described this as questioning the philosophical tradition by means of a "passage to another type of language" (Irigaray, 1981: 44-45, translated in Opper, 1993: 92) which, she proposes, also exists in Nietzsche's work. The work reminds us of the multiple possibilities for creative critique, as *Marine Lover* also takes the route of exploring the watery element she takes to be indicative of Nietzsche's relationship to the feminine. Irigaray responds critically to a series of myths about alternative procreations (Adam and Eve, Jesus, Zeus and Athena, Ariadne) with whose sensibility she also affiliates Nietzsche, and she voices a feminine persona answering Nietzsche directly from a position of hypothetical sexual difference she takes him to have excluded.

Her interrogations accord with many of the methodological questions Nietzsche would take to be good, including: How can we best give our attention to the shape and the conduct of forms of thought, knowledge, belief, subjectivity, and their multiple variations? How well-equipped are we to evaluate them, and to innovate with respect to the criteria? How do we bring not just their variations into a space of criticizability, but the effects on us of those variations? How do we connect our greater sensitivity to these effects to an expansion of tactics of critique that results in our own best capacity for becoming otherwise?

Their preference for such questions is important to our understanding of the encounter between Nietzsche and Irigaray. This might more predictably have been framed by what is said by Nietzsche of femininity, of women, young and old, and women's rights, love, marriage, and sexual difference. I don't need to remind you of the Nietzschean passages about women to which feminists and others have objected. It's clear from *Marine Lover* that Irigaray has in mind the Nietzschean depictions of women as savage, natural, superficial, performing beings, incapable of friendship, instructed to bear, not become, the *Übermensch*. But the best potential of the exchange between Irigaray and Nietzsche does not lie with Nietzsche's dismissals and diatribes about women, and Irigaray's response isn't organized by them.

II.

Nietzsche didn't distinguish modes of femininity and of sexual difference with the organized and differentiated approach he brought to modes of history. But no less than of truth, morality, metaphysics, realism, liberal democracy, nationalism (and so on) does Nietzsche ask whether the forms of sexual difference

2. Opper and Faulkner both discuss remarks about *Marine Lover* that Irigaray makes in *Le Corps-à-Corps Avec la Mère* (1981).

that have taken shape are good for life. His different accounts of women could be the dispersed equivalent of the differentiating approach he brings to types of history (the monumental, the antiquarian, the critical), their positive and negative variants. He gives a similarly close attention to the effects of these variants of femininity and sexual difference on others.

Since, often enough, the answer to his question of whether these variants are good or bad for life is negative, we'll hear of woman's tendencies towards weakness, sickness, and reactivity. And since Nietzsche is just as preoccupied with interrogating effects, he inclines towards the assessment that woman is not only the weak half of humanity, but that she "makes the strong weak – she rules when she succeeds in overdoing the strong!" (Nietzsche, 1968a: 164, #864). But like all humans and all entities, women emerge in, and respond to, their environment and the forces acting on them.³ So Nietzsche's characterizations of women do double duty as his characterizations of what is sought from women by particular formations and types of men.⁴ Nietzsche and Irigaray both establish the limitations of men on the basis of the latter's expectations of women, just as with their expectations of metaphysics, truth, history, science, religion, essences, and idols.⁵ Such expectations can be retaken (and on this Nietzsche and Irigaray agree) as a symptomology, an indication of men's self-stunting development.

In Nietzsche's work, we're just as likely to learn that a woman can have other effects, including their action at a distance, one of Nietzsche's best-known descriptions of the effects they can work (1974: 123-124, #60). The woman who becomes pedantic, superficial, petty, and boring, has "unlearned" her capacity for other arts: "her prudence and art – of grace, of play, of chasing away worries, of lightening burdens, and taking things lightly – and her subtle attitude for agreeable desires!" (1966: 163, #232).

But, no less than his disparaging accounts are these positive variations governed by Nietzsche's primary interest in the effects worked on men by women. This imbalance reflects, in part, his account of women's capacity for performance, a capacity he sees as all the more ensured by men keeping their distance so that women can work their best effects. Irigaray sees even the more positively depicted variants of women's artistry, their action at a distance, their capacity to work the vital effects of power and charm, as passages through

3. See for example Nietzsche's negative account of the formations of femininity, including a clerical form, taking shape in new democratic contexts, and climates of respect for women (1966: 167-168, #239).
4. See for example, Nietzsche's remark on the misogynist (1997: 351, #356).
5. In *Gay Science*, he remarks that the love of one's neighbor, of knowledge, of truth, of novelty, of sympathy, and of women, can all be considered manifestations of an egoistic covetousness. The latter is contrasted to the possibility of something rarer between the sexes – friendship, whose thirst is for a "superior ideal: but who knows this love? Who has experienced it?" (1974, #14). See also his account of men seeking in women a feminine essence and an elevated ideal (1966: 168, #239).

death. For even when (as Nietzsche sometimes claims) a woman seeks to be wholly assimilated in the performance of femininity “this show doesn’t suit her, cannot manifest her.” Irigaray concludes that we might need a new “physiology of art” to “interpret her ‘ambiance’”. Rather than interrogating “the fundamental condition of all life,” Irigaray proposes that we need a different kind of critical focus on “that which, already, mummifies life.”

In other words, the Irigarayan perspective on sexual difference prompts a rethinking of Nietzsche’s account of what is good for life. Irigaray suggests that Nietzsche’s concept of life is not as anonymous as it seems, as is already evident in the fact that Nietzsche gives more attention to the effects worked by women on men (negative or positive) than the reverse. On the other hand, Nietzsche does sometimes envisage more positive possibilities of friendship eventually developing between the sexes (see for example Nietzsche, 1974: 89, Book 1, #14), whose relationship he also characterizes in terms of a fecund dualism and an intermittently antagonistic and reconciling relationship he likens to the relation between the Apollonian and Dionysian (Nietzsche, 1967: 33, Section 1, #1). The effects of *this* version of antagonism between the sexes are understood as more mutually beneficial, characterizable as a more positive dance between the sexes,⁶ increasing the forces of both, and associable with the possibilities of human advancement. Yet even when the impact is interrogated in this more evenly distributed way (in term of the effects the sexes could potentially work on each other), Irigaray still considers the Nietzschean question of what is ‘good for life’ unsatisfactory. For one thing, the fact that Nietzsche still gives life itself feminine connotations⁷ is extensively interpreted by Irigaray as an appropriation of the feminine. It is emblematic, for her, that his favoring of “life’s” interests takes shape as an alternative to foregrounding the maternal as life-giving.

Despite their shared interest in the elemental and vital, it becomes clear in the course of this response that Irigaray and Nietzsche are working with different concepts of life. The different inflections are deployed in Irigaray’s suggestion that women and the feminine have become mummified in the Nietzschean accounts of what is good for life. Irigaray argues that the latter criterion does not prove to be good for sexual difference nor women’s lives. The criterion itself supplants the affirmation of maternal origins, she argues. That’s why the philosophy oriented towards the *Übermensch* might be good for life in Nietzsche’s sense, while being, in Irigaray’s sense, no more than flying over life (Irigaray, 1991: 18, 52).

6. This theme is discussed in Deutscher (1993: 179); and see Nietzsche (1968a: 420-421, 425); and Nietzsche (1972: 192).

7. See Nietzsche (1974: 271, #339); and Nietzsche (2006: 84, Book II, “The Dance Song”).

III.

I've suggested that the most interesting dialogue between Irigaray and Nietzsche arises more from attention to what each of them takes to be the right question to direct at the formations of sexual difference they are considering. In fact, both emphasize, in this regard, women's multiplicity:

Now woman is not one. And [...] reducing the outside marks the limit of the method of questioning. Not identical to self, the/a woman does not answer *one* question. The question that would be appropriate to her is always and forever impossible to formulate, even if one wanted to make the effort. (Irigaray, 1991: 88)

It's helpful to recall these remarks, given that the strategy of Irigaray's responses to Nietzsche in *Marine Lover* isn't evident.

So, let's think again about what Irigaray undertakes in the mode of critique when she positions Nietzsche as belonging to a tradition also comprising Greek mythology, Plato, Christianity, and the history of philosophy, in which women are attributed a secondary role, and female origins are denied. She offers a critique of a number of Greek myths in which birth occurs directly from the forehead of male Gods, from the ribs or thighs of men, or through immaculate conception.

She adopts a number of possible personae and hypothetical speaking positions for a denied femininity or sexual difference, amplifying the voice of disavowed maternal and elemental origins, and of denied female alterity dispersed among such figures as Ariadne, the Eumenides, Diotima, Athena, Persephone, Kora, and Demeter. She takes up a speaking position corresponding to women's capture:

“You have always trapped me in your web.” (Irigaray, 1991: 4);

to their appropriation as property:

[...] my whole body divided up into neatly ruled sections Each of them is allotted to one private owner or another [...] each man claimed the whole. (pp. 4-5);

and to their women's mirroring and echoing role in relation to masculinity:

I was your resonance... merely the drum in your own ear, sending back to itself its own truth... Today I was this woman, tomorrow that one. But never the woman who, at the echo, holds herself back. Never the beyond you are listening to right now. (p. 3)

But then think of how Nietzsche describes eternal recurrence as the hardest thought. Would we will life again? Would we say *once more*? For Nietzsche's

Zarathustra, eternal recurrence is in this sense a proposition for how to understand life affirmatively. But Irigaray sees the concept of eternal recurrence quite differently, as an autological desire and as denial of interconnection with women as the condition of living:

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? (p. 26)

Irigaray sees in Nietzsche's account of eternal recurrence an affinity with the myths of origins from male foreheads, thighs, and ribs she deems a repudiation of maternal origins. A similar repudiation would be found in Zarathustra's association of creativity with an alternative means of both bearing and becoming the child, another again in Nietzsche's images of earthly as opposed to watery origins, even in the absence of sea creatures among Zarathustra's friends. Thus in positively exploring the watery element, *Marine Lover's* first section evokes a metonymically associated fluidity she associates with the denial of female origins, including the amniotic fluids she understands to "thwart the eternal return." (Irigaray, 1981: 48-49).

Inserting herself at the limit of Nietzsche's depictions of women, Irigaray suggests the need to add to Zarathustra's account of the abyssal the encounter she takes to be just as difficult from a Nietzschean perspective: the abyss of sexual difference. Its abyssal character would be seen in his aversion to recognizing maternal origins, his interest in supplanting them with alternative narratives of origin and creativity, and his exclusion of a conceptual field within which women would be in excess to "man-made truths." And at this point, Irigaray could be said to switch the frame of critique. If there is an affinity between myths of immaculate conception and Nietzsche's appeal to the idea of eternal recurrence, the latter is not an affirmative (albeit abyssal) thought. Instead it would be available for the kind of caustic humor Nietzsche himself directs at the former in the *Anti-Christ*: "a dogma of immaculate conception into the bargain? *But it has thereby maculated conception*" (Nietzsche, 1968b: 146, #34).

Nietzsche's critique of weak and reactive patriarchal constructions of women could be taken as an implicit auto-critique of those elements in his own work. Irigaray repeatedly characterizes the *ressentiment* of his own accounts of women. But she would also see the potential for auto-critique – in other the resources available within his own work for criticizing his account of sexual difference – would remain restricted to the limits of Nietzschean critique. Nietzsche can sniff out *ressentiment's* aversion and disgust, but Irigaray can also offer a further critique of this form of critique. Its attention to aversion and disgust is, for Nietzsche, an attention to what is bad for "life". But Irigaray sees in Nietzsche's concern for life's interests a denial of debt to maternal origins and, in this sense, an appropriation of women.

IV.

But as a conduct of critique, Irigaray's response to Nietzsche is also governed by a group of terms, some of which one could imagine Nietzsche contesting. First, there is the appeal to what ought not be forgotten – maternal origins, feminine alterity. Second, the aim of denying and aiming to master a feminine other is problematized by Irigaray in part with reference to an ethical register. Third, Irigaray also refracts back to Nietzsche a Nietzschean terminology, most obviously in identifying *ressentiment* and reactivity in his account of women, femininity, and sexual difference. Fourth, when Irigaray speaks for a stance of transformation and creativity with respect to sexual difference, she finds new possibilities within what Nietzsche and others seem to exclude as intolerable, so as to provide a basis for generating hypothetical alternatives for sexual difference. Some elements of Nietzsche's possible response might be found in the critique of the feminist as contra-nature, the abortive woman (1969: 267-268, "Why I Write Such Good Books", #5). But fifth, as we saw, for Irigaray, the concept of life with which Nietzsche would criticize the feminist as bad for life, is itself an appropriation of life, as indicated by life's metaphors of pregnancy and creativity, indications for Irigaray of a denied debt to procreation. We might even conclude that life is not just a different kind of problem for each philosopher but even a matter of different conduct in each case. For Nietzsche it has become a problem of asking what is enhancing, affirming, becoming, stimulation; but for Irigaray life poses problems of recognition, indebtedness, intertwining – and of confrontation with threat, unease, and the negotiation with an alarming rather than bracing abyss.

On the other hand, both Irigaray and Nietzsche would both concur in encouraging a critical evaluation of the conduct of critique. While the conduct of each remains different, each could prod the other into further possibilities for critique of critique. Irigaray leads us beyond what Nietzsche actually said of feminists and women's rights claimants. Perhaps many feminists are among those manifesting a will to truth.⁸ Perhaps, in seeking independence, a woman might well adopt a mode in which she "begins to enlighten men about 'woman as such'." (Nietzsche, 1966: 162, #232) No doubt a woman, or a rights claimant, can be clerical, legalistic, triumphalist. Such criticisms have also been formulated, and powerfully so, within contemporary gender and sexuality studies. They could be addressed to Irigaray but not very specifically – no more than the governmental feminisms targeted by Janet Halley, for example (Halley, 2008).

A more effective dialogue between Nietzsche and Irigaray might take advantage of the critical response they could more specifically direct at each other, while going beyond not only Nietzsche's remarks about feminists, but also beyond the limits of Irigaray's reading of Nietzsche. As we saw, Irigaray

8. See Kelly Oliver's discussion of Nietzsche on the metaphysician, and the feminist's will to truth (1984: 188).

can introduce into Nietzsche's work a field of a possible sexual difference she sees his work as averting – thereby taking critique beyond his actual comments about women. But what of the return gesture – the further possibilities for reading her work from what we understand to be a Nietzschean perspective?

Irigaray will use, in the mode of mimicry or otherwise, a deployment of some of the Nietzschean language – perhaps most obviously in her assertion that Nietzsche's denial of maternal origins repudiates an affirmation of the life given by another because it would fall outside the sphere of creation he can master – and so manifests a Nietzschean form of *ressentiment*, a term she uses a number of times in her discussion of him (Irigaray, 1991: 25, 34, 41-44, 55, 68, 72, 189). But the possibility Nietzsche raises – that feminist theory might usefully engage the question of its own *ressentiment* – which has proved extremely fruitful for theorists ranging from Wendy Brown (1995) to Janet Halley (2008) is not similarly explored by Irigaray. We can also ask, not just how Nietzsche might have interrogated Irigaray, but also what potential he fails to anticipate in women and feminism: most obviously the capacity to give rise to creative and affirmative projects.

This question offers good potential for further provocations between them. Consider how interestingly – one could say, promisingly – this is not the question her work best tolerates, and for just that reason, one could make the case that it's the right one for Irigaray.

V.

In some respects, to look back is to find *Marine Lover* allowing a less satisfying dialogue than should be available. Nietzsche's work offers further potential for pushing back at some of the values mobilized by Irigaray: forgetting, silencing, intolerability. The fact that women are performing for men establishes the latter's dependence on women, who are said to provide the 'material' out of which women as mirrors, inversions, complements, and idols are cut. This leads Irigaray to the language of debt. As Kelly Oliver has observed, a language of indebtedness, finance and borrowing imbues Irigaray's account of mothers, daughters, sisters, and women as resources out of which the various women of the Nietzschean imaginary are fabricated. *Marine Lover* is, as she says, "full of metaphors of economy," (Oliver, unpublished) from its question: "how does man finance the death of his other," to its claim that woman "stakes [man] in a new game without his needing to borrow from the kitty. And therefore go in debt, risk losing" (Irigaray, 1991: 79).

Nietzsche's instincts might have inclined him to see such critique, and the claims of forgetting, appropriation, and silencing as available for critique. His work would offer complex resources for evaluating the aims and modes of forgetting and remembering. We can imagine Nietzschean interrogation, perhaps most particularly of the language of debt. Who knows but that he might have ventured some ironic remark, asking whether an adequate creativity resides with the acts and claims of the creditor?

In speculating along such lines, my aim is not to question Irigaray's resourcefulness in generating levers and strategies for reinserting sexual difference at the heart of these texts. But it is to locate a limit point in *Marine Lover* where critique halts – and to discuss the encounter between the work of Nietzsche and Irigaray as one in which both protagonists articulate their own limits. Insofar as Irigaray articulates the appropriation of women, the refusal of certain forms of alterity, the abhorrence of origin, and the denial of dependence and debt, I've suggested that we also see at work here a certain understanding of the conduct of critique. For example *as* gestures of critique, the depiction of a hypothetical excluded or forgotten voice, of appropriation, of debt, are gestures not given their own history or genealogy. They're not a form of critique made available *for* critique. Most obviously, the address of an ethical framework to Nietzsche is not accompanied by a discussion of the pressure that a genealogy of morals could exert on that framework.

This means that Nietzsche's work would contain further questions for Irigaray. Similarly, perhaps, we might say that Nietzsche could see (in his day) "feminist" aspirations but not the broader range of critical gestures potentially available to the feminist beyond those gestures he disparaged as, for example, clerical or democratic. But from the late nineteenth century to today, many have argued that Nietzsche's work contained resources for feminism beyond his disparaging comments about women. To speculate that it "can certainly be of use to a noble and courageous feminist politics of difference" (Ansell Pearson, 1993: 40; and see Diprose, 1989) as does Ansell-Pearson, is also to negotiate with Nietzsche's failure to recognize that "women – as the history of the women's movement amply testifies – have their own depth, their own courage, wisdom and severity" (Ansell Pearson, 1993: 40). The many scholars making this kind of point, effectively share an interest in exceeding Nietzsche's statements in favor of exploring the capacity of response offered by his work.

To consider what both Nietzsche and Irigaray have had to say about sexual difference, and its limited characterization as indicative of the limits of the philosophers, is also to appraise this encounter as a dialogue between technicians of critique. This because when the two technicians confront each other head on, something stops short. To be interested in the capacities of philosophical frameworks is to imagine how this encounter could continue a little further. For this reason I approach *Marine Lover* with a different kind of question; with an interest in the possibility that Irigaray and Nietzsche don't quite manage to exhaust each other's limits. We could think of further possibilities for their mutual provocation as partly held in reserve in their encounter.

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Penelope Deutscher is specialized in twentieth century and contemporary French philosophy, and in gender and sexuality studies. Current projects are focused on the intersections of biopolitics, reproductive futurism, and the genealogy of gendered rights claims. Her most recent publications are *Foucault's Futures: A Critique of Reproductive Reason* and two co-edited collections, "Foucault/Derrida: Fifty Years On" (co-edited with Olivia Custer and Samir Haddad) and "Critical Theory in Critical Times" (co-edited with Cristina Lafont), with Columbia University Press.

Penelope Deutscher está especializada en la filosofía francesa del siglo xx y contemporánea, y en los estudios de género y sexualidad. Sus proyectos actuales se centran en las intersecciones de la biopolítica, el futurismo reproductivo y la genealogía de las reivindicaciones de derechos de género. Sus publicaciones más recientes son *Foucault's Futures: A Critique of Reproductive Reason* y dos colecciones, «Foucault/Derrida: Fifty Years On» (coeditada con Olivia Custer y Samir Haddad) y «Critical Theory in Critical Times» (coeditada con Cristina Lafont), con Columbia University Press.
