

Luce Irigaray and divine matter

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Seldom can an intellectual appeal have appeared so *intempestif* as Luce Irigaray's call for a female divine. When not entirely swept up in the whirlwind of pragmatic existence, progressives have been consecrating their creative and political energies to the struggle with metaphysical identities and the limits imposed by heterosexist culture, while recourse to the divine has largely been the preserve of conservatives clinging defensively to the certainties of a guaranteed order. Analogies with Heidegger's ontological need come to mind, with its seeming superfluosness at a time of rapid change and imminent crisis. Yet, since *Sexes et parentés*,¹ the need for the divine has occupied a pivotal if not central role in Irigaray's philosophy, as she attempts to envisage a beyond to the confines of patriarchy and, indeed, to envisage an ethics of sexual difference. Here I will attempt a mere general outline of Irigaray's position; I contend that her divine is both very material and one that might function to release relations between women from a purely moral horizon. By extension, women might be released from their social role as the moral guardians of unethical societies.

Irigaray's divine matter is to be compared with two other forms of materialism: historical materialism and Bataille's Nietzschean libidinal materialism, the one predicting the death of God, the other declaring it a *fait accompli*.² The one leading to the reduction of man to a means, the other leading to the violent negation of man. Historical materialism might be construed as having no *outside* in its circle of material as always already social, and Bataille's general economy of base materialism might be said to have no *inside* as energy flows ineluctably towards its own expenditure, all excess. The divine matter of Irigaray depends simultaneously on the need for an outside and an inside; it is both within and without. It is unashamedly positive,

1 Paris, 1987.

2 I do not have the space to fully develop this comparison here, although it does inform this paper.

in that it expresses her desire to go beyond pure negation in order to avoid the politics of simply making demands, since Irigaray insists that slavery is not overcome by the mere defeat of the masters.³ Of course, any such positivity risks accusations of collusion of some sort, risks some colonising assimilation. It would be vain to attempt to exempt Irigaray from such criticism, for acceptance of her analysis and its solutions does inevitably entail such risks. However, suspending cynicism for a moment, the following considerations should be borne in mind. Irigaray is not engaged in an exercise of transcendental idealism; she has no privileged access to truth and is as hermeneutically situated as her critics. She is not claiming to represent woman or women, nor play the role of prophet, mediating between divine will and the popular mass. She is less concerned with stating what the divine is (or should be) than with setting out the structural possibility or necessity of the divine; she is more concerned to elaborate the ontological possibility of the divine as an existential-hermeneutic condition, than to list its features as if it were a being, ontically conceived. That said, as this divine is not mystical, she does on occasion offer ways of interpreting, appropriating and creating it, at least for the female divine.⁴ This because I believe that she, more than anyone, is aware of how strange a conception it is, not only because we have rationalised God out of any credible discourse (except as a logical buttress for a given system in which affective needs are deemed to be misplaced), but because the female divine has been outlawed in monotheistic cultures and tends to evoke images of weekend Mother Earth cults—await the ensuing outburst of laughter at such an incomprehensible absurdity.

3 In her most recent work, *J'aime à toi*, Paris, 1992, Irigaray continues to develop what she sees as the third stage of her *oeuvre*, that is, to examine the possibility for relations between the male and female sexes (the first stage being a critique of patriarchy, the second an exploration of *le féminin*). She signals her interest in Hegel and attempts to develop a dialectic for the two sexes. Thus, any positivity will be mediated by the labour of the negative, reworked by Irigaray as the limit gender represents.

4 For example, her discussions of women's right to virginity and to motherhood are more than just legalistic strategies; they offer valorised ideals for women. See 'Pourquoi définir des droits sexués?' in *Je, tu, nous*, Paris, 1990, 101–15.

The structural basis of Irigaray's argument is appropriated from Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity*,⁵ hence it is firmly rooted in dialectical thought and in his insistence that man has both an inner and an outer life. Yet she displaces the terms of this within and without from Feuerbach's sensuous materialism and his generic notion of species being (*genre*) to an elemental materialism and an insistence upon *genre* as gender.

Religious consciousness, then, is taken as the paradigm of human consciousness. 'Consciousness in the strictest sense is present only in a being to whom his species, his essential nature, is an object of thought', writes Feuerbach (*Essence*, 1). Human consciousness is one that objectifies its own nature as an object of thought, enabling it to be both self-reflectively self-conscious and to constitute other things or beings similarly as objects. This process, for Feuerbach, derives not from the self-differentiation of the concept in Hegelian terms, such that the other is an ideal construction on the flip-side of the same concept, but rather from the existential duality of real existent beings. It does not originate in some scientific or rationalistic understanding, then, but in a consciousness that has always manifested itself in and through religion, in the essence of man as will and affection, or in his needs deriving from the reality of his sensuous materialism, which give rise to the feeling that sustains religious belief. Such experience becomes uniquely human when recognized as that of a true other who is nevertheless the same as the self, so that man's subjective affectivity acquires an objective form via the other; man is simultaneously 'I' and 'Thou'. By such a recognition, man is constituted as a species being or *genre*, which both forms collective identity and enables individuality to emerge in that it is the universal facilitating the factor of differentiation. It is by no means a universal transcending space and time, for man as a species being has evolved historically according to the nature of his religious projections, of the divine he has made of his objectivity in a given era. But it is transcendent and infinite, for while the supernatural quality attributed to this objectivity has often deluded man into believing that his outside is totally other to himself (when a non-alienated conception would realize that man is the only

5 Trans. George Eliot, New York, 1957.

true source of his own divine), his objectivity has to be infinite to enable him to realize his finitude. Without the projection of a perfection as a collective affirmation, man as such could not exist; no subjectivity or society has existed without divine assistance.

No wonder, then, Irigaray argues, that woman struggles to define herself as such, that she has neither subjectivity nor objectivity.⁶ For woman has no God, no divine, no goal. Without a God, what becomes of her will? To the extent that it can be said to be hers at all, it is a kind of amorphous meandering, at best a passive nihilism, for not even affirmative nihilism is possible for those with no God to destroy. Her will, such as it is, is tied to the will of the other, which because totally other, not from within her at all, leads to her subjection and alienation in external goals (whether in the form of man, child or social duty). And it is pertinent to ask, I believe, if this lack of an objective outside appropriate to the will of women does in fact leave them in a chasm where wills shoot out and deflect off one another in seemingly random fashion so that the only way to seek to grasp and comprehend them seems to be individually, consequently in terms of morality alone. The search and speculation is endless, however, if the individuality in question does indeed turn out to be a black hole.

The problem, according to Irigaray, gravitates around the fact that man has defined himself with reference to his own *genre*, and in so doing believed his divine to be representative of the whole of the *genre humain*. Hence the logos is given to be neuter, or as the masculine generic, just as, she argues the *il(s)* functions in language.⁷ Should the question of sexual difference be raised, then the neutrality of this representation is thrown into doubt, as when, for example, a woman wishes to represent the divine and to speak the word of the divine during the Christian sacraments. If the universal nature of the masculine is then invoked, she must attempt to embody his words, but even that has proved an unacceptable image of incarnation until very recently, when the rationalised religion has finally begun to accept the logic of its own rationalism

6 See 'Femmes divines' in *Sexes*, 67–85.

7 Throughout her work, but for a summary see, *Je, tu, nous*.

(albeit reluctantly). Yet what do such reforms amount to in terms of a philosophy such as Irigaray's? An equalisation to the same, woman speaking of a sacred order that is his, her will mirroring his because, in projecting his divine as his own, man has still projected his other as the flip-side of his conceptual self. He has yet to recognise himself in his own material existence and to recognise the material existence of his true other—the female *genre*.

This double existence, this double divine, therefore requires another materialism and another divine. In making such a shift, Irigaray is following Marx's assertion, in the *Theses on Feuerbach*, that Feuerbach's conception of essence is an abstract indwelling of the man who has isolated himself, but this time he is isolated not from the social as such but from the other sex, from nature. Despite the apparent materiality of his feelings and affections, the consciousness to which this gives rise is celebrated by Feuerbach for being on the side of consciousness, for transcending nature. So human nature produces a consciousness for which nature is merely the other side of species-consciousness; matter and form are thus always defined by man. Hence, Feuerbach describes the celebration of communion as a celebration of man's transcendence of and differentiation from nature. While the consumption of bread and wine does signal man's dependency, the true glory lies in man's consciousness of his ability to superimpose form and value upon such matter and to be aware of matter as such; a pure celebration of self-consciousness, rather than, as Marx would seek, a recognition of the means of transcendence found in the product of social labour.

We might speculate on the meaning of the bread and wine for Irigaray's philosophy of sexual difference. Wouldn't it be a celebration of nature and a recognition of the collective debt owed to it? Not for the purposes of differentiating consciousness from nature, nor for reducing nature to a means, but for the purpose of a physical and spiritual replenishment for the two sexes by means of *le corps sexué* and *sang rouge*. In any case, Irigaray seeks to locate the source of the divine in the passional, material existence of the two

sexes,⁸ whereby the inside/outside dialectic operates within the horizon of an elemental materialism with cosmological scope. In an interview, 'L'autre de la nature', she says:

Quand je parle de nature, je ne reprends pas le sens que ce terme a généralement dans la culture occidentale: nature humaine, nature de l'âme, nature psychique (...) Il faut retrouver la nature en deçà ou par-delà notre tradition socio-culturelle. Retourner aux éléments cosmiques: le feu, l'air, l'eau, la terre, souvent oubliés et en même temps surexploités dans notre univers technocratique. Éléments matériels, physiques, indispensables à la vie, constitutifs du corps et de son milieu, le plus souvent refoulés des discours qui font loi. Comme le féminin?⁹

Who knows the implications of this futuristic return to the elements? Elizabeth Gross has argued that it is a textual strategy, the elementary particles being emblems rather than substantial units or the basic data of reality.¹⁰ They have a metaphorical rather than referential status, facilitating a terminology for the passionate and for a corporeal sexual difference denied in dominant discourse. The latter point is undoubtedly true, as Irigaray does make poetic use of the language of the elements. But to construct any strict differentiation between reference and metaphor is to misconstrue Irigaray's use of language, and not only Irigaray's.¹¹ For while it would be patently absurd to claim for her discourse of the elements the status of a truth scientifically understood the mythical is deemed to have as much potential purchase on reality as so-called contemporary scientific discourses, confined as they are to a certain hermeneutic circle or cultural imaginary. We might construe this imaginary as Nietzschean-inspired, with its emphasis on chance, accident, multiplicity,

8 Irigaray's philosophy has always entailed a certain reclaiming of materiality; in *Ce Sexe qui n'en est pas un*, Paris, 1977, her project is described thus: 'Pour chaque philosophe—à commencer par ceux qui ont déterminé une époque de l'histoire de la philosophie—il faut repérer comment s'opère la coupure d'avec la contiguïté matérielle, le montage du système, l'économie spéculaire' (p. 73).

9 *Sorcières*, XX, 1980, 14–25.

10 *Irigaray and the Divine*, Sydney, Local Consumption Occasional Paper, IX, 1986.

11 Irigaray is of course operating within the parameters of the post-structuralist discourse on language and she has various 'styles' but perhaps the most apt summary of her own use of language is to be found in this comment she makes upon Christ: 'Même ses paroles visent à toucher plutôt qu'à prouver ou convaincre' (*Amante Marine*, Paris, 1980, 194). Not that she is to be seen as a Messianic figure!

breaks with the past and so on. According to Irigaray, the modern scientific subject is principally interested in disintegration and catastrophies and that which surpasses human capacities and natural rhythms.¹² She cites as examples relativity theory, big-bang theory, quantum mechanics, and the general trend towards paring down matter to ever-smaller particles that require ever more technical methods to convince us of their existence. Not to mention, in the human sciences, Freud's death drive, the prevalence of everything anti- or post- or deconstructive in philosophy, the packaging of the individual into various identities in sociology and into semes in semiology. In short, they are all, to varying degrees, negative, foregrounding explosion, discharge and entropy.

So it is with the language of the elements that Irigaray attempts to reinstate and develop a passional materialism that is nevertheless concerned with and able to articulate a sense of rhythm, balance and equilibrium.¹³ It is envisaged on a scale that is simultaneously universal and human, from a source that is within and beyond the human, yet conceivably manageable by the human, or rather, by men and women. In envisaging such a vital source Irigaray is able to view creation less as the product of destruction and more a circulation of energy, a harnessing and reharnessing of energies for which the subject is a mediation and a bridge, not a bridge to the unknown and forgetful loss, but to the creation of what she calls the sensible transcendental.¹⁴

The sensible transcendental is both universal and particular since it emanates from a passional corporeal energy that accords with particular sexual economies or rhythms, either the female or the male. Thus it is universal for each sex as the transfiguration of their flesh, but particular to that sex. As a transfiguration of flesh it facilitates a consciousness but one which is always material. Hence, the locus of differentiation is not between the social and

12 See 'Le sujet de la science, est-il sexué?' in *Parler n'est jamais neutre*, Paris, 1985, 307–21.

13 Irigaray's more recent work reveals a strong interest in Buddhism and in yoga, and in the possibilities they present for cultivating body and flesh spiritually; she sets out the benefits of practising yoga in a pamphlet, *Une attention au souffle dans la vie, la pensée, l'amour*, published by Irigaray, 1992. Nevertheless, she remains critical of the Buddhist hierarchical model of sexual difference and of what she sees as the lack of reciprocity in its model of love.

14 See *L'Éthique de la différence sexuelle*, Paris, 1984, 124.

nature, but between the male and female economies, two kinds of nature providing the resources for both subjects respectively, as they in turn do for one another. Infinity is accordingly bound for Irigaray, it both enables a sense of accomplishment (or realisation) and sets out a form, a limit, without which affectivity would be amorphous. This is not a teleology, since the transcendental, or projected divine, is *un devenir*; indeed, for Irigaray becoming is divinity. Thus it is historical, man is not the end of man, nor woman the end of woman. By paying heed to their corporeal materiality they will always *be*, but in the process of becoming.

So, what does such an exaltation of divinity offer *women*? Given that Irigaray is not speaking of some weekend cult, it is clear that for her this has to be a central issue if women are to come to be as women. They can will their own becoming, and feel this as the creation and perfection of their subjectivity; they can have a goal and value for themselves, beyond that stipulated by the other sex, for whom their only value is as mothers or virgins, or better still, virgin-mothers; for whom they are attributed most value to the extent that they reproduce the masculine form, or have a son, the mother's access and path to infinity, as in Mary's Assumption.¹⁵ Having an infinite would enable women to know finitude on their own terms, to die their own death (rather than always being present at the others' deaths), and that means, to change. The divine is not, therefore, some unifying homogenising force imposing its will upon all women across space and time. Indeed, it ostensibly facilitates the measure of individuality, and provides an objective through which women can at last begin to communicate and relate without the distancing mediation of men and without the terrifying proximity of immediacy in which they rub together as open wounds. Most importantly, as the divine is what exists for its own sake, passionate divine love is a love of the self, a mirror to reflect women's own beauty back to themselves as an identity value rather than to reflect their means status, their suffering and chastity, and their masquerade.

15 Irigaray gives a dazzling reinterpretation of Christ and of certain New Testament episodes in 'le crucifié', the final section of *Amante marine*.

Hardly a call to love thy neighbour, then, the divine is the path or way to self-love which, since it is determined in relation to one's *genre*, calls for respect for the collectivity in the same measure, although this is most emphatically not on the basis of a rather masochistic idealistic concern for the other prior to the self. Rather than sacrificially renouncing their own will, women would be forging a collective will to help them give direction to their own will. I would interpret such a conception of will as that which would enable us to tie down disparate wills to something other than individual morality; in fact by providing a minimalist collective framework for ethical relations based on respect, women might be freed from the oppressive responsibilities of morality; the chasm filled, men could no longer fill it themselves with their will, buttressing their own ethical system by placing the burden of morality upon women. Men would be forced to take responsibility for their own ethics.

Should the possibility of such a divine ever arise, and therein lies another paper, it may also be seen as a structural possibility of releasing women from their function as fetish-objects and the focus for erotic violence. The limit represented by the female as a gender would be completely different or other to the one man has created for himself in his systems. It would not be a limit to transgress if he is to find the *jouissance* of excess, his return to the same, his unity with the continuum of material being, or his fusion with mother earth. Or, in other terms, he would no longer have to break the limit of the hymen in order to realise its exchange value, to affirm the value of his sacred by violently debasing it.

For Irigaray, these conceptions all rest on a false premise of primordial unity which, no matter how allegedly material, is a conceptual absolute, another mythical origin. Sexual difference she argues is always already in play, if only man were able to recognise it. Differentiation does not, then, necessarily ensue from the split between same and other to be overcome, something man or his reason created in order to propel his dialectic; nor is it a limit he establishes only to transgress. The limit is given to men and women in their material sexual difference, which she believes they should enhance and spiritualise for their respective becoming. They are not same and other, but other and other—this she posits as their eternal mystery and the motor of

their becoming, the basis for their becoming lovers.¹⁶ In their marriage they are never one, always two; limit is never overcome, transgressed; men and women are each to have their own divine. And there is a suggestion that this time women might be the messengers of the Incarnation:

Après l'enveloppe pleine d'eau de notre séjour prénatal, nous avons à construire, peu à peu, l'enveloppe d'air de notre séjour terrestre, air encore libre à respirer et à chanter, air ou se déploient nos apparences, nos mouvements. Nous avons été poissons. Nous aurions à devenir oiseaux. (Sexes, 78)

Birds or angels of the Annunciation, women are to incarnate their divine here on earth. Timely good news—or a rather untimely and even unwelcome announcement? Only time will tell.

¹⁶ See, particularly, 'Toi qui ne seras jamais mien' in *J'aime à toi*, 161–70.