

THE GRAMMAR OF FEMININE SEXUALITY

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Luce Irigaray, *Speculum de l'autre Femme*, Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1974, pp. 463; and *Ce Sexe qui n'en est pas un*, Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1977, pp. 219.

Luce Irigaray's books on women are little known, especially to English readers, and even in French articles, they have not received the attention they deserve. She published *Speculum de l'autre femme* (1974) and *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un* (1977) in the collection "Critique" of *Les Editions de Minuit*. In general terms, the attempt is to provide us with a new reading, and interpretation, of the "black continent" of psychoanalysis. More precisely, Luce Irigaray tries to show the extent to which feminine sexuality has been thought of in the framework of masculine parameters.

Her basic claim is that given the theoretical framework of psychoanalysis, especially in Freud and in Lacan, women were doomed not to be recognized as women. This, Irigaray argues, derives from the fact that psychoanalysts did not question the discourse of all discourses, the one which dominates philosophy and which permeates the general grammar of our culture: the discourse of mastery (C., pp. 129, 155). In other words, where women are concerned, psychoanalysis still is an enclave in philosophy and in religious mythologies (C., p. 123). This fact would also explain a lack of concern for, and assessment of, the socio-economic factors and rules defining the condition of women.

Given the topic, the radicalness of many of Irigaray's claims, and the original ways in which her studies are structured, her books are not easy to read. This difficulty stems not merely from the fact that Irigaray writes in a manner which is consonant with recent attempts to create a new "écriture," but also because her way of writing is, in itself, her thesis. Arguing that "the/a" woman has been excluded from the *production* of discourse, the present alternative for women studies is, she claims, to *go through* the dominant language where women have been connoted as castrated and as forbidden from *parole*, and then to open new paths.

The issue is to alter the phallogocentric order, in such a way that a non-hierarchical re-articulation of sexual differences may emerge as a possible and

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desirable horizon (C., pp. 156, 143). A feminine view, it is argued, does not postulate the One or the Many, the reproduction or the representation (C., pp. 147-148). In any case, the issue is certainly not to invert or revert the phallogocentric order and thereby to attempt to provide us with a new "concept" or a new "logic" of femininity (C., pp. 151, 122). The issue rather is to put into practice the tabooed difference of women in going through language and to disengage women fully alive (*vivante*) from males' conceptions (C., p. 211). In other words, the point would be to get to a *mimesis*, but in Plato's second sense of the term which meant a production, rather than a mimicry, inverted or not.

Irigaray's books are challenging in many ways. At the crossroads of psychoanalysis, philosophy and religious mythologies, they already require a break with the well-spread habit of mono-disciplinary studies. Besides, as I have said, part of her thesis is to create a new way of writing and thinking on, about and for women. This appears not only in Irigaray's style — she usually breaks down a phallogocentric "logic" or ontology, often in a humorous manner — but also in the non-linear structure of her books.

Speculum de l'autre femme begins with a long chapter on Freud and ends with an equally long chapter on Plato's allegory of the cave. This pattern, Irigaray admits, may suggest that she considers history the wrong way up. Yet, she says that her "incontournable volume" may be read in any order: "the/a woman never shuts herself up (again) in a volume" (S., p. 296).

Significantly, this important statement appears in the "anti-conclusion" presented in the body of her book. There, one also finds a series of eight short studies on (and around) relevant passages taken from Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, Descartes, Kant, Hegel, in addition to some writings from the mystics (Maître Eckhard, Ruybroek L'Admirable, Angèle de Foligno). A similarly disconcerting structure appears in *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un*. In addition to two "interviews" — essentially meant as further explanations on her first book — Irigaray presents a collection of already published articles, in particular on (and around) Freud, Lacan, Marx, and the mechanics of the fluids.

The non-linear structure of Irigaray's books, together with the non-linear approach used within each chapter, is already evidence of a systematic attempt to alter the phallogocentric economy of the Logos and language, without falling into a gynocentric inverted world. A "classic" reader may find it easier to acknowledge this pattern by starting either with Irigaray's first chapter on Freud's writings on women (in *Speculum de l'autre femme*) or her fifth chapter on Lacan's account of women entitled "Cosi fan tutti" (in *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un*). In both cases, the "quotations" together with Irigaray's multiple way of altering them are easier to pinpoint.

Acknowledging Irigaray's shrewd criticisms of the logic of inversion when talking of women is a crucial condition for understanding her theses. This has

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not been done yet, as may be seen in the superficial accounts of her studies by most critics. For example, Claude Alzon — in *La femme mythifiée, le femme mystifiée* — devotes a chapter to Irigaray's books in which he cannot see any more than a plea for a gyneco-centric inversion of the phallogocentric order. "The martyr of the Holy Vulva," he writes, wants a speculum in place of the ruler. This kind of irony — itself a good illustration of the kind of contempt for femininity as a genuine *theoretical* issue which Irigaray challenges — ignores the radical question here at stake.

According to Irigaray, indeed, the inversion thesis itself derives from the old dream and grammar of symmetry and its corresponding hierarchy of the sexes. As a (so-called) fatal "logic," it exhibits the general inability of our forms of rationality to think about "the other" as different. In its most general terms, Irigaray argues, femininity is precisely "the" other of our culture (*C.*, p. 163). This appears in many ways, but most strikingly in the fact that women are usually defined as want, defect, absence, envy, reverse-of-men. As Irigaray puts it, women are defined in terms of the male standard "*à une inversion près*," that is, with *that* exception that women are defined as an inversion of men, as their bad copies (*S.*, pp. 63, 70). And the radical question here is: is it so very unthinkable that the other does exist? (*C.*, p. 128)

One of Irigaray's most interesting and subtle arguments is found in her thesis about the complex structure ("*l'aporie*") of language. Indeed, she argues, we can say both that there is no language but a male language *and* that we do not know males' language properly. The problem of women, therefore, lies at the very crossroads of language *both* as a (sexually) neutral vehicle and a cultural instrument which is specified by a masculine set of rules, metaphors and limits. Indeed, rationality prescribes that we talk either as a sexually neutral being or as a male. In this context, Irigaray argues, femininity must be seen as the limit of philosophy and of rationality itself (*C.*, p. 146). Important as it is as historical fact, the argument that males have created language for their own exclusive use cannot be sufficient to explain the peculiar nature of the myth of the neutral man.

According to Irigaray, men claim (and pretend) to define everything in a sexually indifferent manner (*C.*, p. 127). However, in giving specific meanings to basic concepts (such as Being, Subject, Logos, Origin, Principle, Telos, etc.), they use a logic of identity, an ontological *a priori* of sameness, a dialectical model itself in search of the movement toward unity, etc. (*S.*, pp. 27-28, 46-50, 92-93). Furthermore, the specifications of this univocal economy of the logos are given by means of a series of metaphors which give priority to sight, look, instruments, solid and photologic properties, and which thereby undervalue, if not altogether ignore, metaphors related to touch, proximity, envelope, fluids, etc. Presumably, the latter would be more adequate to refer to women (*S.*, pp. 93, 109; *C.*, pp. 23-29, 111, 128); but be that as it may, it is

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significant to realize the extent to which non-solid and non-photologic metaphors are given a subordinate, if not altogether irrelevant, status in the phallogocentric grammar of symmetry.

Thus, Irigaray argues, the economy of the logos, with its linearity, its property/propriety and its instrumentality defines the Subject as a dominant being and a sovereign — including its ideal picture in the concept of God — a system of symbols to which women have no access (C., pp. 71, 63, 145-147, 184-185). The sense in which this Subject is the “present figure of jealous gods,” the exclusive standard of truth and meaning, is what Irigaray calls the phallus symbol, the phallogocentric grammar of culture which “the/a” woman always overflows. When they talk about the Subject, she says, philosophers make it clear that women are not the subject of discussion.

To be sure, at a formal level, this univocal economy of the logos would not seem to be a relevant clue to the very presence of a masculine standard. Yet, as Irigaray forcibly suggests, it is a crucial rule of this formalism to ascribe a secondary status (if not irrelevance) to any specification defining males as the exclusive standard of human beings. This is the reason why the set of metaphors used in psychoanalysis, philosophy and religious mythologies are so important as heuristic devices, though they are usually denied such a value by an appeal to the fact that they are “merely” metaphors. But, as Irigaray puts it, such metaphors must be seen as the “ruse of reason,” given their overwhelming presence and their systematically hierarchical usage in the economy of the logos.

Besides her account of the complex structure of language, the most important and, I think, original contribution of Irigaray's books to women studies is her account of the set of *relationships* between femininity as a bad copy of the male and femininity as a means of reproduction. The dilemma here — which illustrates anew the “*aporie*” of language — may be summarized as follows: though they are “*interdites*,” that is, though women are denied as genuine subjects, as producers of meanings and symbols, and as genuine partners for exchange, women are also “*inter-dites*,” that is, they are told in between the lines of the grammar of culture. Irigaray's basic claim is that, when they are not defined as inverted males, women are systematically ascribed the *kind of indifference*, of undifferentiation which is necessary for masculine parameters (rules, standards, principle, telos, etc.) to make (their) sense. This *undifferentiation* by which all science, logic and discourse is sustained, together with the fact that femininity is that which functions under the name of the *unconscious*, shows that women are ascribed a status of silent plasticity *in order to* remain the grounds to launch and limit the phallogocentric production of language and symbols (C., pp. 22, 67, 94, 99, 122). Thus, women are denied the very *ambivalence* by which males can evolve at all levels of

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rationality, theories; symbols and legislation in a productive manner (*S.*, pp. 132-133).

This operation, to be sure, is not performed in a simple way. Involved in the process is a series of reductions which Irigaray analyses carefully: the ascription of the multiple side of the One *versus* Many dialectic to women; the further reduction of this multiplicity to a "class," which dissolves women into numerically interchangeable entities; the reduction of the system of proper names to a pattern of property and monopoly; the further reduction of womanhood to motherhood, which is perhaps the paradigm of all paradigms, to the extent that motherhood is the very symbol of silent plasticity and thereby denied as an active and properly productive process.

The matrix, a twofold symbol of the principle of origin and of speculation, is the emblem here. The crucial point is that as a symbol it *must* be defined as a non-determined entity, by a concept of undifferentiation which is made necessary for the symbol, and concept, of women-mothers to remain available *for* further specific (phallogentric) specifications. This appears not only in the classical structure of matter, be it prime matter, but also in similarly determined concepts such as the object, the real, the principle of origin, etc. This basic pattern of the economy of the logos is illustrated, in effect, in most of Irigaray's chapters, whether in Freud's view of women as reduced to envy of the male or to castrated mother or in Lacan's "logical" account of women as the other of men, or again in philosophical writings. Strikingly convincing in Irigaray's main thesis about the (logically necessary) reduction of women to this undifferentiated entity are the excerpts from Plotinus. They concern the definition of matter in terms of impassiveness, inertia and undifferentiation, the latter being quite explicitly said to be "absolutely necessary for the matter to be totally different from any form that might penetrate it and thereby remain altogether and for ever unchanged as the very receptacle for *any* thing" (*S.*, pp. 215-217).

A similarly suggestive reading of other philosophical views is proposed. For example, Irigaray's chapters on Plato are quite revealing, both on the necessary plasticity of "reality," matter, appearances, and on the self-preserving nature of the cadastral survey of properties, forms, telos, etc. Plato there appears to have presented the twofold moves later at work both in Plotinus and Descartes. The *cogito* is presented as an attempt to cross out all origin and re-engender the whole universe in such a way that men's thought be the proper matrix of all things. Again, Irigaray offers quite interesting hints in her reading of Marx's puzzles over the enigma of money and the abstraction of goods: both are presented as examples (and consequences) of the inability to allow any differentiation which is not already settled in the phallogentric economy of the logos, the latter being taken in its concrete and social sense.

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Considering the radicalness of Irigaray's approach to the question of women, as well as the crucial relevance of the many questions she raises about the general grammar into which this question is pre-determined, it seems high time that we go beyond the mere irony of her studies. It is time to realize the heuristic value of most of her theses and to undertake a series of verifications for which her reflections provide so important a rationale. When we realize that the overwhelming dilemma in which women studies find themselves — either charged with a denial of differentiation for purposes of equality or with a denial of similarity for the purposes of liberation — may be a "logical" consequence of the kind of grammar of symmetry which Irigaray so cleverly brings to light, we realize at the same time how crucial and urgent it is to go through the dominant forms of rationality anew.

In this context, it is to be hoped that Irigaray's studies be translated. To be sure, this undertaking would be quite a challenge. Yet, it would not only make her important contributions to women studies accessible, but most probably provide us with a test case of her very thesis about the subtle nature of the genderization of language. Indeed, the point would be to see whether we find, say, English equivalents to the French linguistic items and devices exhibiting the type of phallogentric structure which, she claims, permeates the very grammar of our culture. The point would also be to gather cross-cultural data in order to test the extent to which political symbols themselves obey a grammar which either trivializes the issue of equality between men and women, or *a priori* declares the fatal and logical untenability of any attempt to improve the feminine condition.

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