

Women Taking Place: the First Step Toward an Irigarayan Ethics

Chung-yi Chu

Intergrams 3.2(2001):

<http://benz.nchu.edu.tw/~intergrams/intergrams/032/032-chu.htm>

The notion of ethics I have in mind is one that takes the body, its pleasures, powers and capacities into account.

Moira Gatens{1}

Contrary to Hegel's suggestion, women are not vegetables, pregnant with a meaning which awaits an action to realise man's self-image.

Rosalyn Diprose{2}

Woman ought to be able to find herself, among other things, through the images of herself already deposited in history and the conditions of production of the work of man, and not on the basis of his work, his genealogy.

Luce Irigaray{3}

What Sort of Ethics Do We Need?

So far I have not yet provided a definition of ethics. Usually we think of ethics as either the study of the logical status of our moral judgements or as setting down a set of universal principles for regulating behavior. Yet we should not assume that individuals are present as self-transparent, isolated, rational minds and that embodied differences between individuals are inconsequential. Thus even if we grant that ethics is about moral principles and moral judgements, it is also about location, position and place, because "ethics" is derived from the Greek word *ethos*, meaning character and dwelling, or habitat. Therefore, from this understanding of *ethos*, we can follow Rosalyn Diprose to define ethics as "the study and practice of that which constitute one's habitat, or as the problematic of the constitution of one's habitat, or as the problematic of the constitution of one's embodied place in the world" (Diprose, 19).

This kind of ethics does not stress universal principles. What is involved is rather different understandings of the components which make up our spatio-temporal being-in-the-world. As an ethics based on the problematic of place rather than on universal rational principles, it recognizes a constitutive relation between one's world (habitat) and one's embodied character (*ethos*). And Irigaray's ethics of sexual difference belongs to this category. Based on the problematic of the constitution of one's *ethos*, it locates the body as the locus of one's *ethos*-where the body is constituted by a dynamic relation with other bodies in a social context of power, desire, and

knowledge. It interrogates the means by which identity and difference are generated in the cultural production of sexual difference. To her, the constitution of sexed identity and difference is such that women are excluded from the position of the subject of discourse and social exchange.

According to Irigaray, what must be examined in an ethics of sexual difference is the "economy of the interval" between the (male) subject and discourse, between the subject and his world, and between the subject and woman (*An Ethics*, 6). The "interval" is the distance or difference created between the subject and his others such that he can claim autonomous self-identity. We must emphasize that this interval is created, not given. Within the economy which creates the interval between man and woman, Irigaray finds that in order for man to constitute his place in the world, woman is denied a place of her own.

Moreover, women not only lack a place of their own in this economy of difference, their difference is also understood and constituted in relation to man's identity-as lacking what man is said to have. Consequently, there is no sexual difference to speak of: only sameness or a lack. Hence Irigaray wants real sexual difference to take place, and to create an ethos for women. She, like Foucault, also recognizes that one's place or ethos is constituted in and through the body. In other words, new modes of being for women will emerge from a reconstitution of female habitats. This ethics of sexual difference is a material practice, an opening of one's embodied ethos toward other possibilities. Women's habitats have been altered, and with this we would expect attendant changes in embodiment. Yet traditional concepts of femininity such as those of mother and whore, work together with new images of femininity and ideals of female independence to produce paradoxical habitats for women. Contradictions arise: all too often our bodies, in assuming an ethos of resistance to patriarchal power, wear the marks of self-negation, for instance hysteria and agoraphobia. Yet a return to more conventional habitats will not solve the problem. Since the individual's "moral identity" is not given but socially constituted through a normalizing relation to a moral code, ethics may be found to be unethical insofar as it reproduces inequalities.

Then what sort of ethics do we need? Certainly not the usual approaches which both perpetuate and remain blind to the mechanisms of the subordination of women. Most urgently, ethics must concern with the itinerary of the social constitution of sexed bodies and the conditions for the production of sexed identity and difference. In other words, it involves *different modes of self-constitution*. Otherwise women just reflect forms not their own, merely repeating themselves according to an image provided by others. On the other hand, man's self-image depends upon woman conforming (whether in submission or at a distance) to an image that man has constituted for himself, then if woman does not conform to this image, she effectively wields a dagger against his notion of self.

Even if what things "are" can never be decided, concepts of "woman" have their material effects in the constitution of the bodily self that is a woman. A woman may not believe in man's discourse on her, but given the constitutive effects of this discourse on woman's difference, to imply, however carefully, that it doesn't concern herself at all is a little hasty. Man creates an

image of woman as other in order to secure his corporeal identity. Thus we need a unique approach to the ethics of sexual difference which both locates and subverts mechanisms of sexual discrimination.

We need to turn to Irigaray, who, unlike her predecessors, does not count on an ideal constitution of sexual difference which is not really a difference because a woman, as a result of this relation, will be devoted to the universalization of a body as a sign not of herself, but of her brother. She declares: "Woman ought to be able to find herself, among other things, through the images of herself already deposited in history and the conditions of production of the work of man, and not on the basis of his work, his genealogy" (*An Ethics*, 10). Accordingly, we must reject man's morality formalized into a system of ethics. And we should recognize that men have ethical obligations toward women qua women. Nevertheless, up until now ethical relations between the sexes are exclusively limited to the sphere of familial and conjugal ethics. Historically, women have been reduced to the role of wife/mother; they are quite simply not thought to be *whole* beings. Ethical relations take place only between whole persons and consequently they are the preserve of men. Ethical relations among women fare even worse than ethical relations between women and men: these relations are in the realm of the unthinkable.

The Feminine in Philosophy: What the Systematic Exclusion Covers Over?

Hence an ethics of sexual difference is not possible without a non-traditional, fecund encounter between the sexes. However, only man has been the subject of discourse. Woman, on the other hand, has always been relegated to the position of the object. Upon such unequal footings, a true and substantiated encounter is impossible. Moreover, philosophical representations of human embodiment have had detrimental effects on notions of women and femininity. As a result, women's status as (fully) "human" has sometimes been in question. Ever since Aristotle, woman is a defective man because she cannot fulfill her potential. Margaret Whitford sums up: "For our culture, identity, logic, and rationality are symbolically male, and the female is either the outside, the hole, or the unsymbolizable residue. At most, she may occupy the maternal function" (Whitford, 69). Under such circumstances, it is not possible that a more fecund fusion of horizons comes into being.

Therefore, we should restore (or grant for the first time) the status of subject to women first, and then establish an ethics of sexual difference. If, following another French feminist philosopher Michele Le Doeuff, we could view the entire philosophical discourse as the "philosophical imaginary," then we would agree that "Philosophical texts offer *images through which subjectivity can be structured* and given a marking *which is that of the corporate body.*" {4} Hence philosophy is not innocent of the types of the practices in which philosophers as well as common people engage in. This explains why Irigaray launches an interrogation of what she sees as the masculine theory of the subject elaborated by Western philosophy in the middle section of *Speculum*. She declares, through the title of the first article in this section, that "Any Theory of the 'Subject' Has Always Been Appropriated by the 'Masculine.'" To her, philosophers have created only a transcendental (male) subject whose existence depends upon appropriating and denaturing the sensible (feminine). So in her initial engagement with the Greek philosophers, notably Plato and Aristotle, she pays special attention to the **sidelines** of philosophical discourse. Thus in the middle section, also entitled "Speculum," she devotes the second article "Koré:

Young Virgin, Pupil of the Eye" to exposing the pretentiousness and circular reasoning of Plato. Though her style in this section is particularly dense, sinuous, even theoretical-lyrical, with an epigraph from Plato's *Timaeus*, 46a-c, the reader is directed to seek its connection with Platonic philosophy.

Under scrutiny, the reader will discover that Irigaray's target here is the long tradition of western ocularcentrism. As early as 1966, she wrote that "distortions of language can . . . be related to a distortion of the *speculare* experience" {5} (emphasis mine). In other words, she shares with many other feminists a deep suspicion of the visual representation of women. To her, as well as to them, owing to the hierarchizing of the senses, women have received only misrepresentations. They are not granted the rights to delineate themselves. Thus she wants to restore to women their rights to represent themselves not according to masculine parameters. And this endeavor can be contextualized in the broader history of ideas. For instance, a discussion of her is included in Martin Jay's fascinating book *Downcast Eyes* (1993), in which he offers a general consideration of the history of Western attitudes toward sight in its various guises. As a huge volume in intellectual history, it is mainly concerned with the denigration of vision in the twentieth century French thought. Seen in this context, Irigaray's hostility to visual primacy should be incorporated in the same trend of thought.

Yet Jay's treatment of Irigaray covers only the second half of a chapter on "Phallogocentrism" devoted to Derrida and Irigaray, and he subtly accuses Irigaray of reducing Derrida's double reading into a univocal single one. {6} As a result, the chapter is visibly imbalanced in terms of the lengths of treatment each received. Moreover, his stress is mainly on Irigaray's explicit critique of Freud and implicit critique of Lacan's reading of Freud; he does not pay sufficient attention to Irigaray's reading of other philosophical texts. However, Jay still credits the link between ocularcentrism and phallogocentrism to the contributions of the post-1968 French feminists, and among them Irigaray distinguishes herself for the thematic weight she gives to it (Jay, 526). In Irigaray's critique of the "overcathexis of the eye" (*Speculum* 47) of psychoanalysis, we see clearly that psychoanalysis, a "science" trapped in an economy of "presence" (of phallic signifier), is still grounded in accounts of visual experience. She has explicitly pointed out that man's eye is "substitute for the penis" (*Speculum* 145). However, with subjectivity always denied to women, I cannot agree with Jay's statement that Irigaray argues "for a *new* feminine subjectivity empowering those who were the victims of patriarchal domination" (Jay, 539; emphasis mine).

Though my project is not as ambitious an undertaking as Jay's, I would like in this paper to delineate how Irigaray "embodies" the feminine subject through her *rereading* of Plato and Aristotle. In other words, there is a traceable itinerary in her investigation of the Western philosophical tradition, in how she makes the feminine subject *take place*. Even though her writing is notoriously nebulous, and she is reluctant to conform to the academic regulation of adding notes for precise references on the ground she explains fully in the only endnote at the end of *Speculum*: ". . . But if, in the resistance set up against that male imaginary, distortion gave rise to discomfort, then, perhaps?, something of the difference of the sexes would have *taken place* in language also" (*Speculum*, 365; emphasis mine). As will become clear, in this paper I will *reread* Plato and Aristotle from an Irigarayan perspective across her works from *Speculum* to *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, to see how Irigaray employs discourse to

restore women back to their place.

Nevertheless, Irigaray's textual practice is notoriously radical, and is a mimicry of the philosophical discourse she deals with. This strategy of mimicry can sometimes be confounding as to the true tenor of her own discourse. However, as I already emphasized elsewhere, Irigaray intends to problematize the **representational** systems that inscribe women's body as lacking and dependent. {7} She no longer desires to privilege the sense of vision, but rather emphasize the importance of other senses, in particular touch. Her subversion of the discursive mechanism aims to be both subtle and witty. Hence as a reader I have to engage in a close reading of her re-representation of the western philosophical tradition. In my opinion, in *Speculum* she is chiefly concerned with representation, whereas in *An Ethics* she made an ethical turn, which tries to go beyond ocularcentrism.

However, it should be noted here that ocularcentrism is an almost universal phenomenon and has an extremely strong hold. As we know, Martin Jay in his introductory chapters has documented how vision has been credited as the "noblest of the senses" from Plato to Descartes (1-82). {8} The twentieth-century denigration is hence only a reaction against the long held hegemony, coming from mainly phenomenologists like Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty or feminists like Irigaray. In order to unsettle this founding trope of western metaphysics, Irigaray seeks to question, for instance, the privileging of whiteness over blackness, or light over darkness.

Irigaray's discontent with ocularcentrism propels her to proclaim that "Any Theory of the Subject Has Always Been Appropriated by the Masculine," psychoanalysis included. Man in the male imaginary is constructed as a "transcendental subject," and "[rises] to a *perspective* that would dominate the totality." "[H]e thus cuts himself off from the bedrock, from his empirical relationship with the matrix that he claims to survey. To *specularize* and to speculate" (*Speculum*, 133-34; emphases mine). Woman, or the other, in this scenario, is conceptualized as the material base, i.e. the "bedrock," "matrix," or "'matter' upon which he [the subject] will ever and again return to plant his foot in order to spring farther, leap higher, . . ." (*Speculum* 134). Hence the failure of the philosophical tradition to address the place of woman lies in its refusal to acknowledge the material contributions of women. In other words, whether he was elevated to the heights of God, or is entreated to go down into the depths (of human psyche), the subject remains in *specular* imprisonment. Yet as man seeks to rise higher and higher, "nature" poses resistance by a rivalry within the hom(m)ologue, {9} by disrupting "the economy of discourse," when the "object" started to speak. Which also means beginning to "see," etc. (Ibid., 135; emphasis Irigaray's).

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Accordingly, woman should refuse to submit to (such a) theory, because if she does so she "is renouncing the specificity of her own relationship to the imaginary" (*Speculum*, 133). In other words, if woman is to take place, she should strive to articulate a different feminine sexuality other than "women and traits viewed as feminine" presented in the theories of major philosophers. As the beginning piece in the middle section "Speculum," this article points out that subjectivity is denied to woman by an entanglement between ocularcentrism and language

through its metaphoricity or "masculine" games of tropes and tropisms. In other words, language shares and perpetuates the specular mediation between men and matter. Consequently, woman's sexuality is always equated with her reproductive organs. In order to fight against the destiny of being fixed as a fetishized, inert object, "castrated of words," woman needs to be aware of man's employment of words to stifle her "beneath all those eulogistic or denigratory *metaphors*" (*Speculum*, 142; emphasis mine).

As a link between the earlier section on Freud and the following investigation into the tradition of western philosophy, "Any Theory of the Subject" serves as a manifesto and entreats proof in the following examinations. Doubtless to say, its goal is a "new *despecularization* of the maternal and the female" (*Speculum*, 146; emphasis mine). In other words, Irigaray is not satisfied with the convention that women serve as *flat* mirrors to men, yet without their own mechanism (a *concave* mirror) for a new distribution of the power of the scientific method and of "nature." So when we move back to the "Koré" article with which I began this paper, we'll see how Irigaray throws doubt upon the "scene of representation". {10} In this article full of (critique of) Platonic terms, she first points out the function the optical apparatus, or mirrors, plays in the stage setup. Nevertheless, if the young virgin (woman) serves as the pupil of the eye (man) that controls the inflow of light, then she becomes an indispensable medium between the perception and the perceived reality. Through the reflection of the mirror, the matter/form, the power/act dyad is established. Since for Plato, light is still "too corruptible, too shifting and inconstant to form the basis of the relationship to the self and to the All" (*Speculum*, 148), he finds the usefulness of relays of mirrors in his search for higher Truth. Therefore he relies on Reason-or natural light-that ensures a steady illumination, yet it is one without heat or brilliance.

The Hierarchical Difference

However, according to Irigaray, this Platonic reasoning also contributes to the denigration of women. Since there's no consideration of "*desire*," the Platonic distinction between reality and appearance is doomed to fail. Hence we should first trace how the prevalent theme in western philosophy that woman as the weaker, secondary sex, inferior to man, gets rooted in Plato's thought, also a male imaginary. Irigaray exposes that in Plato's scenario, the truth (of sameness) will always get rid of its *material support*, in this case the *silver backing* (i. e. woman) of the mirror it depends on. Though Plato advocates the immortality of the soul, he also implies by his recounting of the creation myth in which woman is depicted as both temporally and metaphysically secondary. Thus Irigaray is not satisfied with the fact that in Plato's refinements of theory, women have always served as the mirror, which will ultimately be dispensed with. She points out that Being, the Whole in the Platonic system, though intended to signify a supreme existence, is "already caught up in a speculative economy, as a kind of *waste product*, if the ultimate good to which man claims to aspire is the reality of all being outside its constitution as appearance" (*Speculum*, 150; emphasis Irigaray's). Ultimate good, reality, appearance. Here Irigaray intends to intervene the sleight of hand, which relegates women to the status of (non-permanent) appearance, a negative term in Platonic philosophy. She questions, in other words, the Platonic formation of Truth: how Plato presupposes the existence of Form while forgetting the importance of concrete examples (Appearances). In still other words, man's speculation would transform the technique of philosophy into a *matrix of appropriation* for him. Here we have a dialectics, or tug of war, between the sensible and the intelligible. By erecting a form, which is "always the same," still upon the *matrix of appropriation*, Plato differentiates the former from the latter.

In the aforementioned words ostensibly indifferent to sexual difference, Irigaray employs representational supplementarity to intervene the working of the optical instrument, i. e. the flat mirror, employed by masculine culture to represent women as well as for self-representation. And we will notice that as she attempts to unsettle the rule of "re-presentation," her language becomes extremely "metaphorical" and versatile toward the end of this article, as opposed to woman's normal destitution in language.

When we read this article along with the next one on Plato, we will find still more contradictions in Plato's dialogues. For instance, Irigaray points out that in *The Republic*, Plato (or Socrates) on the one hand maintains that woman will fulfill the same function as man, as guardians of the state. Yet on the other hand, he also believes that woman will perform her duties *less well*, as a result of her inferior nature. Without rigorous argumentation, the prejudice against woman persevered all along. We cannot list all the absurdities when Plato emphasizes that there is a very great natural difference between men and women. Woman, on the other hand, occupies only the place of *index* in Plato's works. That is, the references to woman in his works indicate the relative level of (un)importance woman plays in Plato's time. The message is clear: woman has no value of her own. Furthermore, in Plato's conceptualization, woman is a kind of creature bordering on man and brute; man will be transformed into woman as a kind of punishment. Here an implicit hierarchy between man and woman is established. Woman will go down the road to materialization and trivialization, whereas man will go up the road to ascension and divinity.

If we accept Irigaray's **re-representation** and **re-interpretation** of the history of western philosophy, we will not be surprised to find that she turns to Aristotle in the next chapter. For Aristotle makes several definitions of woman according to his *speculation*. In his famous distinction between form and matter, Aristotle privileges form over matter. Because form to Aristotle is the essence of all creatures, whereas matter is only the substance upon which form must be erected. Predictably, he associates woman with (formless) matter, which cannot be shaped in any distinct mold. And to him, this formlessness is a deficiency. Because according to his conception, woman is *biologically* inferior to man owing to their physical differences. Whereas according to Nancy Tuana, for Plato, "what is significant is the nature of one's soul, not the configuration of one's body" (Tuana 23). Having made a distinction between soul and body, Plato argues that it is the soul that is essential, that is, it is the soul that *is* the person. Significant differences between women and men must then be attributable to differences in their souls, not in their bodies. Yet Aristotle's position is in sharp contrast to Plato's. Aristotle argues that the soul is inseparable from its body, for form cannot exist apart from matter and the soul is the form of the body (*On the Soul*, II. 1). Thus, differences in the soul will be reflected in the body.

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However, what appears to be Aristotle's systematic examination of the biological differences between the sexes turns out to be biased speculations in order to legitimize sexism. Ignorant of the existence of the ovum, Aristotle postulates that the child is the sole offspring of man, which represents form. The prime matter, or first matter, namely the natural substance of the menstrual fluid, does not enjoy the ontological privilege attributed to form since her weakness (formlessness) is the foundation upon which the supreme elevation of God is erected.

In other words, woman's form has to be seen as mere privation. Woman remains the simultaneous co-existence of opposites. She never achieves the status of subject because of the bias against woman, whereas man can take full possession of himself through his possession of certain forms.

Yet it is "Plato's *Hystera*," the last section of *Speculum*, that Irigaray elaborates at length her accusation that western philosophy has estranged human beings from their origin in the material/maternal. As a celebrated assault on Plato's "allegory of the cave," it reveals how Plato legitimates phallogocentrism. Resisting mimicking the dominant male scopic regime, Irigaray seeks to move beyond the hierarchy it supports. Instead, she lays bare its theatricity. From her point of view, the discourse of Reason and Truth remains blind to its own circular self-generation, to its domestication of Otherness, and to the fear that keeps in place its specular machinery. She subverts and reinvests with new meaning the classical association of femininity with materiality. As is well known, there is a set of etymologies which link matter with *mater* (mother) and matrix (i. e. the womb). This association is also present in Aristotle's conception of woman. According to Aristotle, woman is "merely a receptacle" yet "whose dimensions must be determined in case they prove threatening or in case she can no longer be overcome by the father's logic and assertion of precedence and prior existence" (*Speculum*, 166)

Irigaray points out: "the 'sensible'-the maternal, the feminine-for their diversity, discontinuity, and process cannot be boiled down to a single model" (*Speculum*, 359). Though there is always a systematic exclusion of femaleness from male texts, the other can always get away with the tyranny of the one. In Irigaray's reading of Plato's cave, when the other is abandoned, it can still put representation back into play. For "[t]wo modes of representation are tearing time apart" (*Speculum*, 353; emphases Irigaray's). In this scenario, the feminine is always allotted to the category of the sensible. Whenever women are mentioned in Plato's dialogues, they are treated as if they "do not count." They are to be dismissed, dispatched away out of the public sphere, so that men can carry conversations on.

Toward A Non-hierarchical Ethics

However, is there really no escaping of this ocularcentric metaphoricity? In the first step, we may ask: can Irigaray, or can we, speak outside the circle of phallogocentrism? Yet strictly speaking, this is not a question of "outside" or "inside." Her strategy is actually a maneuvering among the boundaries. Secondly, it is not so easy to grasp the contradictions in philosophical texts as symptoms of patriarchal thinking. As we know, patriarchal thinking attempts to achieve a fake universality by repressing sexual difference. But what do we mean by sexual difference? Clearly not through the gaze of the evil eye, or eagle eye/I, {11} as we found that Irigaray makes a (swift, or slow) turn in her *An Ethics*. There she is very much prophetic and visionary in her tone, yet I must admit that this is a very difficult book. Up until now, there is still no substantial explication or elucidation of this book except two doctoral dissertations. {12} However, in order to understand Irigaray, we have to know both the Hellenic and Christian traditions, for according to my understanding, Irigaray is immersed in both, a typical continental philosopher. So is there a split, or fusion, between the two? I hope there is truly a fusion. As the Bible says: "Thou shall

love thy neighbor as thyself," (Luke 10: 27), so she includes four sections (as the four Gospels in the New Testament) on Love, which move from ancient Greek philosophy to the late Emmanuel Lévinas. It's a gradual escalation, starting from a manifesto to her re-reading of Lévinas. Though she herself had suffered from a traumatic experience of being ousted from her teaching position by Lacan, she now tries to suggest another way out, a new kind of salvation, not wholly depending on sight or vision, but rather on touch, another sense, a sense felt by both men and women, even if they are/were blind.

Though unfortunately I cannot trace the etymologies one by one, like the translators Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill have done, yet through repeated readings I gradually get her message. For the benefit of the Chinese readers, I would like to eliminate ambiguities and difficulties and produce a text that is *no more* challenging than the original. It might be necessary for Irigaray to create new forms of words because she would like to spread new ideas in a very *different* way. However, I admit that it is very difficult for the Chinese to grasp the ancient Greek words, such as *aspoemos*, *aesthesis*, *hypokeimenon*, *morphé*, and *apatheia*. To engage with her textuality is extremely challenging, because she is projecting a beautiful utopian world, which will provide our salvation.

I. Woman Taking Her Own Place

Though the analogy between the Aristotelian place and sexual relation seems rather far-fetched at the first glance, Irigaray establishes an ingenious association with Aristotle's *Physics*, itself a marginal text in terms of philosophical weight in his oeuvre, to interrogate the status traditionally allotted to woman, namely that she is conceived as place, and serves as place for one (either male or female) to stay contained and enveloped. This may already have been taken for granted, yet Irigaray here intends to reopen the case, and thus treats it as a polemic, aiming at radical cultural shifts. As far as man is concerned, the issue becomes to separate the first and the last place, which can lead to a double downshift. By this Irigaray means one in relation to the unique mother and one in relation to the unique God. Yet the two quests cannot intersect ceaselessly. The split between first (i. e. the mother's womb) and last (i. e. God) has still to be resolved.

For the woman herself, since she is place, she cannot return to herself (for she is already occupied). Her difficulty to move from one place to another remains a problem. In other words, her mobility becomes the crux of the matter. Woman should be able to "move within place as place." If "she is to be able to contain, to envelop, she must have her own envelope" (*An Ethics*: 35), which in one possibility refers to the Spinozist God. In addition to "clothing and ornaments of seduction," she also needs "skin" (Ibid.). In Irigaray's words, "she must lack neither:

--- body
--- nor extension within,
--- nor extension without,
or she will plummet down and take the other with her" (Ibid.).

In other words, Irigaray maintains that woman must be able to both situate and contain herself.

Here sexual relation, as a parallel to place, poses another difficulty. Since place is neither matter nor form, but rather transportable, like a vessel, it can be separated from the thing. Thus the independence of place in relation to matter and form may be understood by this to mean that place itself is that toward which there is *locomotion*. Thus Irigaray affirms that "the masculine is attracted to the maternal-feminine as place" (*An Ethics*, 39). However, what place can the masculine offer *in turn* to attract the feminine? The masculine should also constitute itself as a *vessel* to receive and welcome. Yet unfortunately, "the masculine's morphology, existence, and essence do not really fit it for such an architecture of place" (*An Ethics*, 39).

Is man able to receive woman in the reverse of herself? Or, in Irigaray's words, "Can he beckon to her and welcome her into himself once he has separated himself from her? Since he must separate himself from her in order to be able to be her place. Just as she must move toward him. If any meeting is to be possible between man and woman, *each must be a place*, as appropriate to and for the other, and toward which he or she may move" (*An Ethics*, 39-40; emphasis mine).

Yet again, according to one moral position, woman is supposed only to be a container for the child. Sometimes, i. e. during sexual intercourse, she may be a container for the man. But never for herself (*An Ethics*, 41). And the last interdiction accords with Freud's theory that it is necessary for woman to turn away from her mother in order to enter into desire of and for man (*Ibid.*).

It is, in fact, a question of becoming a thing for the self and for the other. In traditional conception, man and woman could not become things at the same time. That is to say, they cannot achieve their becomings simultaneously. Hence there remains to Irigaray a problematic (or polemic) of place. Though the female sex (organ) is neither matter nor form but vessel, yet this vessel may have its form altered, and by woman herself as well. "Therefore *she is also matter and form* insofar as she is woman" (*An Ethics*, 43; emphasis mine). Here I would like to quote Irigaray at length:

The boundary of the containing body might be the bodily identity of woman, reborn and touched anew by inner communion, and not destroyed by nostalgia for a regression in utero. The dissociation of love and desire would, in this case, have little meaning, nor would the sexual have an amoral, or nonethical, character. On the contrary, the sexual *act* would turn into the act whereby the other gives new form, birth, incarnation to the self. Instead of implying the downfall of the body, it takes part in the body's renaissance. And there is no other equivalent act, in this sense. Most divine of acts. Whereby man makes woman feel her body as place. Not only her vagina and her womb but her body (*An Ethics*, 50-1).

Indeed, according to Irigaray, "Woman, insofar as she is a container, is never a closed one. Place is never closed. The boundaries touch against one another while still remaining open" (*An*

Ethics, 51). Hence she concludes agreeing with Aristotle that "the place of a thing is the innermost motionless boundary of what contains it." Yet concerning the representation of feminine *jouissance*, it corresponds to water flowing without a container, with the parts of it moved. This reduction, a female *placelessness* reduced to fluidity, is generally considered to be the non-procreative aspect of female *jouissance*. Thus there is a division of woman into two: on the one hand, she is habitually devalued in relation to the fluid; on the other hand, she is valued in relation to the solid (the child). Yet deprived is the subtlest part of herself: the *invisible* place she contains.

Here we witness again Irigaray's deep suspicion of the visual representation of woman. For this invisible place, which is capable of the production of intimacy, plays the crucial role of an alchemist who keeps the sexual (act) away from repetition and degradation. Also, a second container, imperceptible and yet there, offered up to man in the sexual relation. And this container should be offered back to her in a sort of irradiation outside of her "grace" from within. Hence she would be re-contained by the weaving of space-time that she has secretly conceived.

Female sexuality, under such an alchemy of female desire, is then the most spiritual. For it "[a]lways work[s] to produce a place of transcendence for the sensible, which can become a destructive net, or else find[s] itself, remain, in endless becoming" (*An Ethics*, 53). Here Irigaray introduces her famous oxymoron sensible transcendental. To her, this would serve as a bridge between the split of the quests for the first and the last place mentioned earlier, and between man's time (i. e. historical time?) and the time of the universe, which are unfortunately often cut apart.

In other words, through her imaginative and innovative rereading of Aristotle's place, Irigaray projects to the reader an ideal sexual relation in which between the one (man) and the other (woman), there would be mutual enveloping in movement. In the end, the one and the other move around within a whole. Yet it is entirely different from the current scene in which the one and the other destroy the place of the other, believing in this way to have the whole, which is in fact illusory, and destroy the meeting and the interval between the two.

In the current conception, the whole is a closed circle, closed to the other. Yet Irigaray is thinking of a different whole, which moves in a circle, i. e. moves in relation to another. With a place of attraction, a place of place, where bodies embrace. Then would man "become *place* in order to receive" and "has received female *jouissance*?" And woman would "become *place* because she has received male *jouissance*" (*An Ethics*, 55). To Irigaray, it requires a transition from physics to metaphysics. Then would woman be transformed "from the physical receptacle for the penis to the enveloping of a receptacle that is less tangible or visible," which would finally *take her own place*. {13}

In order to let women take place, Irigaray develops the idea of the *interval*, i. e. the gap between what women have always been and what they could become. This concept is neither

exclusively space nor time, but rather a disruptive movement. Though space and time have been traditionally conceptualized as co-efficient-space as matter-form, time as interval-intermediary, Irigaray would like to transform this configuration. In the place of God, she renames the interval "desire." The maternal and feminine space woman serves, in the male imaginary, has always to be abandoned, or obliterated, and hence is **unrepresented**, or represented only as weakness, disability, or lack.

Consequently, if women do not have a place of their own, they in a sense are non-existent. And this refers not only to bodily existence. Women remain the conditions for men's becoming; women, on the other hand, cannot **become**. Their sexuality has historically been defined as dark and mysterious. Yet we cannot continue assuming an alleged symmetry between the sexes. Rather, there is sexual difference, which, according to Irigaray, is not one among many, but a founding, fundamental structural difference, on which all others rest, that cannot be dissolved easily without causing psychic and social damage.

II. Love as Intermediary

Through her re-reading of Plato's *Symposium* (*An Ethics*, Sec. 1, Ch. 2), Irigaray again subverts the traditional conception of love. Drawing on a represented dialogical volleying between Diotima, the woman philosopher absent at the *Symposium*, but represented by Socrates, and Socrates himself, Irigaray declares that love is a sorcerer, (or sorceress), who is also "an *intermediary* between pairs of opposites: poverty/plenty, ignorance/wisdom, ugliness/beauty, dirtiness/clean-liness, death/life, and so on" (*An Ethics*, 24). Thus contrary to our general conception of love as a bright, beautiful Cupid, a great god, Irigaray agrees with Diotima that love is a philosopher love(r). Moreover, "love is a *daimon*" ("Amour est un Demon.") (*An Ethics*, 23; *Ethique*, 29), which according to the translators is a Greek word meaning a tutelary divinity, a spirit. (See *An Ethics*, 23, note 3.) In other words, love is "neither beautiful nor good"; rather, he is *amediator*, with exceptional parentage (father *Plenty* and mother *Poverty*). In other words, he is again an oxymoron. In Irigaray's conception, he is able to generate (or regenerate) something not limited to procreation. So it follows that "Eros [Amour] is a seeker after wisdom [a philosopher], and being a philosopher, is midway between wise and ignorant" (*An Ethics*, 24). Hence Irigaray provides us a new conception as well as a new genealogy of love. To her, love is a (kind of) philosophy, and it is "not a formal learning, fixed and rigid, abstracted from all feeling" (*Ibid.*, 24). Love is a flexible, even fluid element, through which changes become possible. And likewise, the philosopher is also *not* "a learned person who is well dressed, has good manners, knows everything, and pedantically instructs us in the corpus of things already coded" (*Ibid.*).

Through Irigaray's (re)interpretation of Diotima, love as a philosopher (either he or she) is "a sort of barefoot waif who goes out under the stars seeking an encounter with reality, the embrace, the knowledge or perhaps a shared birth [*connaissance, co-naissance*] of whatever benevolence, beauty, or wisdom might be found there" (*An Ethics*, 24). According to her, love should not be only a beloved (*aimée*), i. e. of unparalleled beauty, delicate, perfect, and happy. Yet we as the mediated should learn to "go toward what is kind, beautiful, perfect, and so on," but do not desire to possess it.

Contrary to Socrates, who believes that when a (male) lover (*amant*) possesses what he pursues, he will really be happy, Irigaray apparently has doubts about this Socratic answer. Thus in the second section, Diotima retorts to Socrates against his view that the chief goal of love is "engendering in beauty" (*An Ethics*, 25). To her, the creation of beauty, of a work of art, does not suffice. So Diotima *laughs at* Socrates' naivety, for in his dialectical and dialogical method he already forgets the most elementary truth about love.

However, Irigaray is disappointed that Diotima suddenly speaks of cause in an astonishing way. For instead of leaving the child to germinate or ripen in the milieu of love and fecundity between man and woman, Diotima re-enters into the chain of causality and therefore forgets about the *mediator*, the *intermediary*. Irigaray shows her regrets: "Diotima's methods miscarries here" (*An Ethics*, 25)

Though Irigaray's critics have had different interpretations of her re-reading of Plato's *Symposium*, {14} her question of Diotima's split between mortality and immortality is worth pondering. In other words, Irigaray is not satisfied with the current model that the child replaces love as the intermediary, and love dies at the moment. To her, Love's aim should be to realize, to fulfil the immortal in the mortal between lovers, yet contrary to Diotima's goal, we now only have a beloved, not a female lover (*amante*).

In other words, in Irigaray's dialogism, {15} she cannot be satisfied with Socrates' re-interpretation of Diotima, for she "speaks in many voices." However, "[a] traditional monologic reading of Irigaray" that privileges one voice over all the others will not suffice (Schwab 57). She projects to break through love's enchantment, to build up a bridge between immanence and transcendence, which is connected with the Irigarayan sensible transcendental (*transcendental sensible* in French).

Lots of people have discussed this term, for instance Margaret Whitford who, in her *The Irigaray Reader*, has explained it to be "the overcoming of the split between material and ideal, body and spirit, immanence and transcendence, and their assignment to women and men respectively. Each sex should be able to represent both possibilities" (Whitford 1991b: 19, 117). Thus we should look forward to a new heaven and a new earth, in which we shall truly acknowledge the sexual difference(s) between men and women, not asking vainly for sexual equality without taking into consideration the physiological and spiritual differences between the two.

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Therefore, first, we should acknowledge that human nature is two. {16} Irigaray now looks forward to a new kind of spiritual rejuvenation, for women as well as for men. However, besides love, we should also look into the other 3 domains: law, language, and religion, because they are all interlocked like the 4 Gospels. {17} Henceforth in the article "I Love to You" ("J'aime à toi"),

she provides a sketch of a possible felicity in history. Of course this title is already a linguistic twist. For in ordinary French, it should be "Je t'aime" ("I Love You"). Through inserting a preposition "à" ("to"), Irigaray is projecting a different gender relation. To her, love should always be an intermediary, which will help keep a "safe" distance, a relation of indirection (i. e. non-incorporation) to you. She says: "I do not subjugate you or consume you. I respect you (as irreducible)" (109).

"To" indicates a sign of non-immediacy, of mediation between lovers. In phenomenological terms, Irigaray is talking about intersubjectivity. Yet she does not follow exactly the path of Merleau-Ponty. {18} For her, revolution starts with language, but does not end with it. Hence she is looking forward to something *tactile*, both in the spiritual and physical senses. In other words, we should not only "think through the body," yet think *beyond* the body, as the chapter "La Mystérique" in *Speculum* indicates.

Second, in law, or juridical systems, Irigaray also provides many different proposals. Predictably, she again stresses the importance of maternal genealogy. For instance, in "Sexual Difference as Universal," she insists: "Women have a different individual, and to some extent collective, history" (*I Love to You*, 47). Then in "Donning a Civil Identity," she hopes that "Each man and woman is, from birth, a full citizen" (*I Love to You*, 53). So what she argues for is citizenship as birthright. Contrary to Deutscher who ridicules that her ideal for civil reform is only a repetition of messages in her whole oeuvre, I still find new and fresh ideas in her proposals, not just a stylistic betrayal to *Speculum* (172). For Irigaray, "Law is protection for life and the means to cultivate interiority. It attests to the fact that differences in the properties and qualities of life-being woman or man, for example-require a civil law that is guaranteed by the State" (*I Love to You*, 53).

However, Irigaray is also aware of the fact that "In our abstract and commercial cultures, it is actually only in *sexuality* that the return to self take place (God generally being defined as an *outside-the-self*), but this return amounts to an annulment, a return to zero for energy and the interiorization of desire" (*I Love to You*, 55; emphases mine). In other words, she is dissatisfied with our cultural "entropy" in the child alone. To her, God is *now* both *inside* and *outside*, and His gender is androgynous.

If the love between woman and man is indeed interior, we shall come to a non-Hegelian end of History. And the function of the negative (the antithesis) would have a different (i. e., other than the Hegelian dialectical) meaning. In Irigaray's own words, "Such a change in the nature of the constitution of subjectivity and the recognition of the other as another, irreducible to me and unthinkable in terms of my spirit, could be the opening-up of a period of History yet to come" (*I Love to You*, 56-7). So at the end of "Donning a Civil Identity," she reiterates the importance of "transformations in the law and in the symbolic processes of language and the languages of discourse" (*I Love to You*, 57).

Of course Irigaray's appeal is still interlocked with religion. However this is the domain that her critics ignore most. {19} Yet how could any westerner talk about the "reshaping of sexual identity" (Deutscher 170) without taking the dominant Christian tradition into consideration? Thus to the third domain, I would like to *reemphasize* the deconstructive aspect of her new concept(ualizat)ion in terms of spiritual history. And I would restrict myself to the transformation of the Hellenic tradition in this paper.

How to get rid of the hierarchical difference(s)? Though Irigaray's re-reading of the Platonic and Aristotelian ethics in *An Ethics* seems *very literal*, yet it is actually an innovative way of viewing the interrelationships between man and woman. At first glance we might find her discussion of "place" irrelevant to sexual ethics, yet following her argument we'll discover a parallel between the issue of place and the issue of sexual difference. She hopes to see a mutual attraction between man and woman when both can offer a *place* to each other, not just woman serving the function of vessel to man in the sexual act and procreation.

Thus I find Irigaray's *sensible transcendental* and *interval* highly ambitious. To her, *interval* marks as a changeable distance between things. Irigaray intends to provide woman a place of her own, both temporal and spatial, or spiritual and corporeal, not restricted to the western philosophical imaginary that acknowledges only the male sex, making women "homeless" in the symbolic order. In other words, unlike Freud, she does not only talk about the male and female sex (organs), but also employs a different perspective of place to describe the sexual act and gestation, as well as an alchemy of female desire. And beyond lies a transition from physics to metaphysics (*An Ethics*, 55).

That is to say, Irigaray would like to see male and female mutually dependent upon each other, allowing space for each other. Here her dispute with Aristotle is that if woman serves as the container, or external covering, for man, man in turn *should* also serve as a container for woman. The problem is *how*. This is a task that challenges men. Owing to the physiological difference, woman is always conceptualized as passive, hence place is also considered passive; whereas man is conceptualized as active, and interval is also not a fixed space. It can be eliminated when transgressed by a touch through skin. However, as Irigaray says, the problem of desire is to suppress the interval without suppressing the other.

Resting on an analysis of the double structure of time, Irigaray calls for women's sense of their own genealogies, based on a bond of grateful recognition of the maternal as a site of origin. And these countergenealogies will be the inroads to a new symbolic system by women. Through assertion of a radical dissymmetry between the sexes, Irigaray posits a female, sexed, thinking subject who stands in a dis-symmetrical relationship to the masculine. Thus woman as a subject has always been excluded in the masculine system of representation, because she is in excess of it and as such is **unrepresentable**. In order to represent women, we need alternative figurations of the subject, including different feminine and masculine subject positions. Above all, we need a new way of relating to ourselves. Thus we women need to love ourselves differently. Woman should no longer depend on man's return for her self love.

In the traditional scenario, woman has to serve the role of the mother in the constitution of man's love of self. In her love of self, woman is loved/ loves herself through the children she gives birth to. Hence she has a different relation to exteriority from the man's. Historically, woman has to stop loving herself in order to love a man who, for his part, would be able, and indeed expected to continue to love himself. Whereas she has to renounce her mother and her auto-eroticism in order not to love herself anymore. In order to love man alone. To enter into desire for the man-father. Thus women have no access to society and culture: they are abandoned to a state of neither knowing each other nor loving each other, or themselves. They often find themselves "homeless" in the symbolic order.

In order to change this, we need to change the traditional society; it shouldn't be organized by and for men only. Women need to establish new values that correspond to their creative capacities. And we would recognize society, culture, and discourse as *sexuate* and not as the monopoly on universal value of a single sex.

Then will women take place, and we will be able to look forward to a real ethics of sexual difference.

Notes

1. Moira Gatens, *Imaginary Bodies: Ethics, Power, and Corporeality*. London: Routledge, 1996, 28, n. 8.
2. Rosalyn Diprose, *The Bodies of Women: ethics, embodiment and sexual difference*. London: Routledge, 1994, 62.
3. Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*. Trans. Carolyn Burke and Gillian Gill. Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1993, 10.
4. Michele Le Doeuff, *The Philosophical Imaginary*, trans. C. Gordon, London, Athlone, 1989, 19, emphasis mine.
5. Irigaray, "Communications linguistique et spéculaire," *Cahiers pour l'analyse*, 3 (May-June, 1966), 55.
6. To Jay, Irigaray's project is only a feminist appropriation of Derridean arguments (Jay, 541).
7. I have discussed in detail in a preceding paper which remains unpublished at this moment.
8. Jay in "Introduction" cites recent scientific discourses to explain the traditional veneration of vision. Then in ch. 1 he provides an overview of the supreme status of vision from Homeric Greece to Cartesian perspectivalism.
9. Irigaray uses this word to emphasize that ordinary language is always already constructed by man ("*homme*").

10. Margaret Whitford is the first person to point out that Irigaray situates her discussion of western philosophical texts as of scenes of representation. See Whitford, *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine* (London: Routledge, 1991), 104-5.
11. For an explanation of the Eagle Eye/I, please read Mark C. Taylor, *Altarity*, (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1987), Ch. 1, "Conception," on G. W. F. Hegel, sec. 3, "Eagle Eye/I: Panoptics of Speculation."
12. The two are by, respectively, Caldwell, Anne Irene, *Toward an Ethics of Sexual Difference: Reflections on Luce Irigaray*, U. of Notre Dame, 1998. And by Tuley, Laura-Camille, *Ethical Possession: A (Re)Reading of Womanly Soul in Luce Irigaray*, SUNY: Binghamton, 1998.
13. In the English translation, it is rendered "which makes place" (*An Ethics*, 55).
14. For instance, see Barbara Freeman, "Irigaray at The Symposium: Speaking Otherwise," *Oxford Literary Review* 8: 1-2 (1986), 170-77. Freeman does not want to produce a "correct or corrected reading of *The Symposium*, but rather to employ the text as leverage in a feminist wager" (171).
15. For Irigaray's dialogism, please read Gail M. Schwab, "Irigarayan Dialogism: Play and Powerplay," in *Feminism, Bakhtin, and the Dialogic*, eds. Dale M. Bauer and Susan Jaret Mckinstry, Albany: SUNY Press, 1991, 57-72. Hereafter abbreviated as Schwab.
16. For a discussion on this aspect of human nature(s), please see "Human Nature Is Two," in *I Love to You*, trans. Alison Martin, London: Routledge, 1996, 35-42.
17. For a division of Irigaray's *I Love to You* into 4 domains ("law, language, religion, and love"), please read Penelope Deutscher's (albeit) somewhat negative review, *Hypatia* 13: 2 (Spring 1998), 170-74.
18. I shall discuss this in detail elsewhere.
19. For instance, Deutscher's review article (see n. 12) mentions little, if anything, about this aspect, at all.

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