

The Flesh Made Word: Luce Irigaray's Rendering of the Sensible Transcendental

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Luce Irigaray's concept of the "sensible transcendental" is a term that paradoxically fuses mind with body while, at the same time, maintaining the tension of adjacent but separate concepts, thereby providing a fruitful locus for changes to the symbolic order. It provides this locus by challenging the monolithic philosophical discourses of the "Same" which, according to Irigaray, have dominated western civilization since Plato.³ As such, the sensible transcendental refuses the logic that demands the opposed hierarchal dichotomies between time and space, form and matter, mind and body, self and other, and man and woman, which currently organize western civilization's discursive foundations. Instead, it provides a useful means for helping women to feel at home in their bodies, and it signifies the implementation of an ethical praxis based on the acknowledgment of sexual difference. Such a praxis demands philosophical, theological, juridical, and scientific accountability for systemic sexism and, in its acknowledgment and validation of the alterity of sexual difference, it respects life in its various forms and its vital relationship with biological and physical environments.

Can she alone feel the music of the air trembling between the wings of the angels, and make or remake a body from it?

—Luce Irigaray, *Marine Lover: Of Friedrich Nietzsche*, 176

In the religious and philosophical traditions of western cultures, women have been denied a language that allows them direct access to God; consequently, their ability to transcend the material conditions of their lives has depended upon the mediation of men. This situation has fostered the subordination of women in that men's guardianship of the symbols that designate the divine has constituted a crucial means for maintaining the secondary status of women. In practical terms, the question becomes: how can women effectively refute their ingrained subordination in law, custom, discourse, and social space unless they reflect the godhead (however conceptualized) as surely as men do? Moreover, how can societies that conceptualize the godhead as exclusively masculine fully acknowledge and respect the alterity of women who exist as individuals in their own right and who express their own desire except through the creation of language that permits a new relationship between men and women? Finally, how can

men acknowledge the corporeal male body, and how can women gain means to narrate unmediated female transcendence except through an unsettling eroticization of traditional philosophical language, one that assists exchange yet refuses trespass? Feminist philosopher, psychoanalyst, and linguist Luce Irigaray grapples with these difficult and provocative questions in her body of work. This essay engages Irigaray's work to re-fashion language, especially as she strives to empower and celebrate women by creating a vocabulary that permits them to move past the legacy of patriarchy, which still lingers in an increasingly globalized world. To this end, Irigaray proposes a woman's language, a *parler femme*, based on female morphology.¹ A key purpose of this language is to facilitate access to new conceptual models that will provide women with images of their transcendence as embodied beings and thereby demonstrate each woman's potential to access and unconditionally reflect the divine.

In the essay that follows, my main focus will be on one of Irigaray's key concepts, the "sensible transcendental."² This term paradoxically fuses mind with body while, at the same time, it maintains the tension of adjacent but separate concepts, thereby providing a fruitful locus for changes to the symbolic order. It provides this locus by challenging the monolithic philosophical discourses of the "Same" which, according to Irigaray, have dominated western civilization since Plato.³ As such, the sensible transcendental refuses the logic that demands the opposed hierarchal dichotomies between time and space, form and matter, mind and body, self and other, and man and woman, that currently organize western civilization's discursive foundations. Instead, it provides a useful means for helping women to feel at home in their bodies, and it signifies the implementation of an ethical *praxis* based on the acknowledgment of sexual difference. Such a *praxis* demands philosophical, theological, juridical, and scientific accountability for systemic sexism and, in its acknowledgment and validation of the alterity of sexual difference, it respects life in its various forms and its vital relationship with biological and physical environments.

My discussion of how Irigaray's view of the sensible transcendental mediates the homo-social discourses that fund western ideas, discourses, values, and mores and how this term demands ethical accountability will begin with a discussion of sexual difference, which provides the necessary context for conceptualizing the term. After noting its ambiguity and multiplicity, I will explore the sensible transcendental's applicability for a re-imagined language of relationship between men and women. This exploration will be followed by an analysis of the sensible transcendental's use of textual space,

specifically in regard to the collapse between the signifier/signified and the “interval” between the sensible and the transcendental which, Irigaray says, can be mediated by “angels.” I will also discuss complicating factors that thwart the efficacy of the sensible transcendental for re-conceptualizing and thereby re-organizing lived reality.

Irigaray begins *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* by stating that the articulation of sexual difference is an element that is essential for our “salvation” from the “repetitive proliferation of *status quo* values” that are leading us to our “destruction” (5). In noting western civilization’s historical failure to articulate this difference, either “empirically” or “transcendentally,” she states:

It is surely a question of the dissociation of body and soul, of sexuality and spirituality, of the lack of a passage for the spirit, for the god, between the inside and the outside, the outside and the inside, and of their distribution between the sexes in the sexual act. Everything is constructed in such a way that these realities remain separate, even opposed to one another. (15)

Irigaray urges that women (as desiring beings who are yet to be invented) must discover their own voices and speak out on their own behalf in order to achieve a re-association between the mind and the body through an alternate poetics. Thereby, they offer hope for our culture’s future. She adds that the authentic articulation of sexual difference means entry into a female symbolic domain, which is outside of but also in relationship with the existing male symbolic domain (9). The emergence of this new symbolic domain demands a complete re-construction of lived reality, one that is based precisely on the sexual difference between man and woman (7). Its effect will be to facilitate, through concepts that are “never . . . simply one” (*TSNO* 31), the construction of a female imaginary, a new poetics based on female morphology,⁴ and a discursive system that will reclaim for women a “dwelling” within their bodies while it acknowledges their potential as transcendent beings.⁵ Likewise, this new symbolic domain will induce the traditionally male-authored cultural discourses to modify the language they use in a manner that recalls to men the male body—his flesh, his earthiness, his dependence upon the “air” that he breathes, and his engagement with the environment in which he lives.⁶

For Irigaray, both women and men urgently require new “envelopes of identity” that will permit them to see themselves as potentially divine and to access each other as lovers (*ESD* 82). However, she stresses that the

inscription of viable dwellings for both the female divine and the embodied male can only be realized by modifying the deep structure of language, which holds important implications for philosophical discourse. Without this modification, she argues, the male subject will continue to entomb himself in his sepulcher of “sameness,” and thereby distance himself from a vital and sustainable existence based on his embodied difference. In her words:

In all his creations, all his works, man always seems to neglect thinking of himself as flesh, as one who has received his body as that primary home . . . which determines the possibility of his coming into the world and the potential opening of a horizon of thought, of poetry, of celebration, that also includes the god or gods. (127-28)

Because of their unitary and visually-based discourse, men attain subject positions of distanced, disinterested observers in the homo-social discourses of law, science, religion, and philosophy. Their disengagement arises in the forgetting of or the neglecting of human flesh. Omission of or disdain for the body generates the split subjectivity and alienated consciousness of modern men who are cut off from biological life and so lived experience. Moreover, the disenchantment of the world due to science and technology has created a reality defined in terms of the measurements of form, extension, movement, and magnitude.⁷ Since this quantitative bias damages both the self and the other in its refusal to acknowledge the body, Irigaray contends that men urgently need to recover the awareness that they are embodied beings, composed of flesh, bone, and blood. Moreover, this recuperation can only be mediated through the intervention of a concept that discovers the divine in the carnal.

As for women, without a language of the sensible transcendental, they are buried beneath the mono-Truth of philosophical discourse, or they are lost within a mental diaspora that does not allow them to hold a subject’s position. As it stands, any difference between men and women can only be defined in masculine language. The subjective “I” enunciated by a woman dwelling within the “envelope” of her woman’s body does not exist, or it can exist only in the aporias, in the “fecund” silences and the slips between his voice only speaking the Truth, that are writing his story and imposing her reality. Consequently, Irigaray emphasizes women’s urgent need for means to recuperate the female body and to validate female transcendence. According to her:

We lack, we women with a sex of our own, a God in which to share, a word / language to share and to become. Defined as the often obscure,

not to say hidden, mother-substance of the word / language of men, we lack our subject, our noun, our verb, our predicates: our elementary sentence, our basic rhythm, our morphological identity, our generic incarnation, our genealogy. (from *Sexes et Parentés*, qtd in Whitford 141)

For Irigaray, women have no means to author the boundaries that define them because they have no words of their own. Her solution to this conundrum is to re-think and to re-articulate women in relationship to their conception of the self, to each other, and to God, and one means to do this is by implementing the sensible transcendental. In this respect, Margaret Whitford provides a usefully broad definition of the term. According to her, the sensible transcendental

is a condensed way of referring to all the conditions of women's collective access to subjectivity. From one point of view . . . it can be seen as the symbolic order in its possibilities of and for transformation, in other words, language as a field of enunciation, process, response, and becoming, but a field in which there are two poles of enunciation, so that the "I" may be "male" or "female," and so may the "you," so that the speaker may change positions, exchange with the other sex; it follows too, that the divine other must also be potentially of the female sex. And so we find the sensible transcendental is also referred to as a god. (47)

As Whitford recognizes, Irigaray deploys the sensible transcendental within a "field of enunciation" that questions the necessity for hierarchal dichotomies between the intelligible and the corporeal and between divinity and flesh. She also recognizes that the term provides a potential threshold for the articulation of female sexual difference from a second place of enunciation that is not marked by inferiority. This place bears its own separate relationship to the symbolic domain, which is not the same as man's relationship to the phallus, but bases its symbols upon the morphology of the woman's body. In this way, the sensible transcendental helps to construct a reality wherein the commerce between lovers yields a sexual act that is fulfilling to both sexes and never becomes a demonstration of the mastery of one over another.

At this point, I would like to make two points about the impact of Irigaray's terminology and style on traditional philosophical discourse. First, when studying Irigaray's agenda to create a productive exchange (or,

in her words, *copula*) between spirituality and carnality, it is important to pay attention to the manner in which her words situate the sensible transcendental within an arena of seduction. Her text eroticizes spirituality, and she imbues it with the poetry of lovers. The words she chooses are laden with images of fecundity, fruitfulness, multiplicity, sensation, and the body as they navigate the abstract terrain of philosophical discourse. As an example of this point, note the following passage where Irigaray writes of a symbolic terrain that attempts reconciliation and a healing that moves beyond entrenched dichotomies:

The flesh of the rose petal—sensation of the mucous regenerated. Somewhere between blood, sap, and the not yet of efflorescence. Joyous mourning for the winter past. New baptism of springtime. Return to the possible of intimacy, its fecundity, and fecundation.

But time enters in. Too closely connected with counting and with what has already been. (*ESD* 200-01)

Here, Irigaray's words seduce philosophy with their sensuality, marking it with a poetry that unfolds spirituality through exquisite sensation, while also suggesting the sterility of and the harm done by the western philosophical tradition. She links her words together in startling combinations in order to question and re-align old oppositions. She divides terms to show their multiplicity, and she unfolds the divine within the carnal. In addition, the words she chooses evoke ecstasy, doing so with an eroticism and an immanence that spiritualizes between the "lips" of a new poetics.⁸ This poetics is meant to actualize female morphology in language, suggesting as possible what is thought impossible and always speaking the spirit as flesh and the flesh as transcendent.

Irigaray's eroticization of philosophical language leads to the second point I want to make about her terminology and style. Her words often have imprecise boundaries; they refuse definition and they frequently do not acknowledge the cognitive abyss of paradox. Instead, her writing brims with complex ambiguities, improbable juxtapositions, and refused contradictions. Her words frequently form clusters of nuance and association that push at the logical boundaries of language. Seminal associations between words that have become established through long usage are dislocated by Irigaray—such as those of sun/light/time, which are typically conflated with truth/God/man, and of earth/darkness/space, which are typically collapsed into body/death/woman. In urging the idea of a sensible transcendental that imbues transcendence with carnality, her desire is to (re)invent,

a non-unitary, multi-registered language in which one can freely speak women's sexual difference, and do so from outside the trajectory of phallic language (*TSNO* 68). Therefore, she chooses words that startle, elude, and provocatively question established certainties. For instance, she tells her readers that "angels" are "not unrelated to sex," as Gabriel's visit to Mary proves, and that our bodily "mucous should no doubt be pictured as related to the angel" (*ESD* 15; 17). Both Irigaray's refusal to bind her terms with conventional meaning and her eroticization of philosophical discourse are gestures toward a textual space from which to construct a female symbolic domain that will recuperate the "wonder" of knowing that the beloved other is amazingly and utterly different.⁹ Her refusal of typical meanings and her eroticization of abstract discourse also allow women to find a sensual transcendence in language that places them in immediate and unimpeachable relationship to the divine.

In that the sensible and the transcendental inhabit the same discursive space, they must work together: they write/speak that which "is neither one nor two," and one word cannot construct meaning without the other word. Yet, for Irigaray, the sensible transcendental also configures a passage in-between, doing so in the adjacency of its two words. This "interval" both doubles within and divides across sexual difference; so that, even as a mutual "space of . . . attraction" forms between lovers, separation also always occurs (*ESD* 13). Here, it should be emphasized that the split between mind and body is mediated only through a re-discovery of and an insistence upon the interval as complete separation between the female and the male. It is precisely when and where women gain a symbolic domain that can no longer be accessed, claimed, or colonized by male desire that they can begin to discover and articulate their own desire. According to Irigaray:

If there is no double desire, the positive and negative poles divide themselves between the two sexes instead of establishing a chiasmus or a double loop in which each can go toward the other and come back to itself.

If these positive and negative poles are not found in both, the same one always attracts, while the other remains in motion but lacks a "proper" place. What is missing is the double pole of attraction and support, which excludes disintegration or rejection, attraction and decomposition, but which instead ensures the separation that articulates every encounter and makes possible speech, promises, alliances. (9)

Thus, in the reality that will materialize through the mediation of the sensible transcendental, women and men will inhabit two different symbolic domains, two disparate subjective grounds, and therefore two separate intervals of desire based on their sexual difference. To create these separate domains, men need to relinquish their claims to ventriloquism and the possession of women and re-discover themselves as male subjects housed within male flesh. Women must reclaim the female body as a dwelling place for themselves as female subjects who always reflect what is divine. The result of this relinquishment by men and this reclamation by women will be a more ethical and satisfying relationship between the sexes. As such, the expression of the sensible transcendental can render substantive benefits to the lived realities of both men and women.

Although she is frequently criticized for her return to biology, my position is that Irigaray's insistence upon a "double desire" and an "interval" between the sexes does not arise from an essentialist position that argues the case for sexual difference based upon a biological imperative. Instead, through the displacement and re-creation of the words that we use and their linked concepts, she presents a strategic challenge to the culturally constructed gendering of the sexes. In the western philosophical tradition, this cultural construction has taken many guises in order to perpetuate masculine discourses at the expense of female desire and women's right to self-determination. In this light, Irigaray's call for a female symbolic ground and a *parler femme*, which "speaks (as) woman" and uses terms like the sensible transcendental is the necessary first step to a more ethical distribution between the sexes of the power to create and transform lived experience. It is also a call that demands re-thinking and re-doing our lived reality in ways we cannot yet begin to understand. Still, the materialization of the reality implied by an ethics of sexual difference is fraught with difficulty even though it is desirable for the direct access it gives women to language and thereby to God. Among other things, there is the sheer improbability of its happening in the discernable future: it entails not only a restructuring of our current symbolic order, but also the creation of an entirely new order. However, the efficacy of Irigaray's project to (re)invent language appears to be more workable on a smaller scale, specifically in the production and use of key terms like the sensible transcendental. A broadening and reiterated use of a particular term can trigger slow, but discernable, change in how we think about and construct reality. It can do so by persistently and consistently troubling received ideas through the use of language that disrupts the binary oppositions underpinning key power relations that structure the

way things are.¹⁰ While unable to drastically alter current reality, the use of a term that challenges entrenched ideas can lead to the use of other terms, and so lead incrementally to a change that will recognize women as rightfully reflecting unmediated divinity and men in intentional recuperation of their mortal bodies. In this way, the sensible transcendental facilitates the creation of a new epistemological and ethical horizon for philosophical *praxis*, rather than offering just another utopian philosophical conceit by an ivory tower intellectual.

One of the provocative images with which Irigaray hopes to effect mediation of the “interval” between the sexes and transformation based on the sensible transcendental is the manifestation of “angels” in lived experience. Irigaray’s angels are evocative of potential. According to her, they “circulate as mediators of that which has not yet happened . . . Endlessly re-opening the enclosure of the universe, of universes, identities, the unfolding of actions, of history . . . Angels destroy the monstrous” (*ESD* 15). Their gestures refuse the fallen body. Their emphasis is never proper or proprietary. They are never rigid. And they do not worry about proportion or size or position. Angels always refuse the trajectory of the norm. Angels, as Margaret Whitford suggests, could be considered “an alternative to the phallus” (163). Their mobility and multiplicity evoke women’s sexuality through a “coming and going between the two” sets of “lips that . . . cross over each other like the arms of the cross, the prototype of the crossroad between”—lips which take in without swallowing whole (*ESD* 16; 18). As such, Irigaray’s angels are related to women’s sexuality and to speech. Their gestures herald the embodiment of a multiplicity of ideas and figures that will never be contained by ordinary language or orthodox representation. They offer a new syntax that articulates the celebration of woman’s body, the harmony of lovers, and the delightful play of endless possibilities. They are very unlike Walter Benjamin’s angel of history who is propelled on the trajectory of a storm with his wings immobilized and his back against the future, as the wreckage of the past piles skyward before his eyes.¹¹ Instead, Irigaray’s angels offer a means for verbally linking carnality and divinity because their gestures figure the word from and in kinship to the flesh. Thereby, they offer a seductive example of how her ethics help us to re-conceptualize lived reality with the language of the sensible transcendental.

Since it pursues different definitional directions simultaneously and thereby suggests thought-images that are “neither one nor two” (*TSNO* 26), the sensible transcendental can assist in creating a dwelling place where the spiritual and the carnal can meet and fruitfully generate symbols which are

conducive to the embodied well-being of both sexes. At the same time, by maneuvering language so that body meets mind and woman meets God without interference, the sensible transcendental is a term that poses a collapse between the signifier and the signified. In this regard, engaging Irigaray's writing in order to analyze the effects of sensible transcendental on philosophical discourse can be a complicated and unsettling process due to the term's slipperiness, and refusal of closure.

Irigaray's language effectively de-familiarizes the conventions used for approaching and interpreting texts. While reading her text, I found myself approaching the threshold of a different way of perceiving reality without ever arriving there. Moreover, my endeavor to analyze the sensible transcendental in terms of its applicability for actualizing sexual difference became enmeshed in the compound of the diffuse allusions, destabilizing images, and de-centered points that characterize Irigaray's writing about the term. For example, in Irigaray's first chapter of *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, my effort to steer some of the important points that she makes about the sensible transcendental into the usual narrow funnel of claim, warrant, argument, and evidence yielded an unwieldy proliferation of images and ideas. The multiplicity of possible meanings frustrated the neatness of a clearly defined, logical thesis.¹² How was I to articulate my unruly sense of the sensible transcendental as proximate syntax, mimesis, diffusion, collapsed space and time into the linear trajectory that writes inside the rules of conventional text? My reading became finally, and more productively, an act of translation.

The point I want to make here is twofold: first, the notion that a second translation in English is needed for reading Irigaray beyond the one from French to English intrigues me, since translation is already only an approximation. The doubled lapse in any correspondence between words and concepts adds emphasis to the thought that she may actually be succeeding in clearing the space needed for a truly alternative language by untying the tight correspondences that lend self-evidence, substance, and credence to our reality—a language that will speak of woman in relation to her own desire and in contact with her own god(s). Second, I find the collapse of the distinction between signifier and signified that is posited in the sensible transcendental impossible to effectively negotiate, despite the concurrent positing of an angel-mediated “interval” between the sensible and the transcendental.

I am not entirely comfortable with Irigaray's postulation of a “feminine syntax” that “would involve nearness, proximity, but in such an extreme

form that it would preclude any distinction of identities, any establishment of ownership, thus any form of appropriation” (*TSNO* 134). That this new syntax would neutralize male sexual primacy is a favorable point in that the male-sexed being would figure an equivalency that is not the “same” as that of the female-sexed being since she can no longer be owned by masculine language. Yet, Irigaray’s transposition of the vertical and hierarchal distance that logically structures western cultures’ representations of ideas and values into an anterior horizontal syntax—a syntax of proximal adjacency that expresses sexual difference—proves to be a dilemma. There seems to be no means for representation in this space of intimate contact. Perception and dimension (in terms of a depth that is not an abyss and of a slippage that permits the language needed for a new symbolic discourse) appear to be missing. Where is the representational domain needed for the arbitrary play of language that fosters the articulation of wor(l)ds?

That women and men can both be in union with and separated by a language of the sensible transcendental is a posited starting point for the expression of men’s corporeality and women’s unmediated relation to the divine. However, Irigaray’s postulation of the sensible transcendental only vexes the foundation of unitary representation. In her work on the sensible transcendental, she does not provide a platform for the presentation of women in the “elsewhere” of the new language she postulates, nor, as noted by her critics, does she account for racial differences or for sexual differences other than those between a heterosexual man and a heterosexual woman. At this point, my admiration of and desire to incorporate her critique as a practice conflicts with my need, as a product of American feminism, to see individual women recuperated from their historical obscurity in order to re-present them within, and so re-appropriate for them part of, the existing discursive field.

These differences aside, Irigaray’s argument that women must be allowed to re-create themselves from the horizon of their sexual difference is crucial for re-thinking philosophical, theological, juridical, and scientific discourses. As Irigaray points out, women must refuse to act as the screen for the one-dimensional projection of man’s ideal or as the resource for his civilization. They need to turn away from the (de)naturalized, replicating, mute, mutilated body, without memory, that is determined by the male-defined mother’s body, and turn toward dwelling within bodies defined by themselves for themselves. They need to re-story their past and re-map their future. In the process, they need to reclaim the unmediated right to transcendence. Only women can initiate this change, and push their en-

agement with language beyond the ingrained givens of western cultures. And they should not wait; they have waited too long. Although sometimes frustrating, one possible route for this change is through Irigaray's language of the sensible transcendental. It provides a productive step towards the ethical accounting that is needed to address the systemic sexism that is still funding the discourses of western civilization.

The sensible transcendental offers a means for those who would have women express themselves beyond the hierarchal dichotomies of mind and body, form and matter, sacred and carnal, as well as for those who would re-house women in viable skins and vibrant subjectivities in order to (re)create the world. For Irigaray, without the mediation of angels who create a passage that refuses reductive dichotomies, women can never reflect god or transcend nature. Without a language of the sensible transcendental, women lack the interval that sets those limits that can yield to the beloved other and also shield the self from invasion and appropriation. Yet, as she stresses, men also need the language of the sensible transcendental. They must be made aware of the inextricable kinship between the air a man's body breathes and the spirit his God breathes into him. They must be made so self-consciously sensible that they no longer neglect dwelling within their own male flesh or fail to respect woman's need for female gods and a world ordered for her on her own terms. If a respectful link is established between lived experience and man's ideal, if male civilization turns toward and reverently regards the angels, perhaps then men will remember that the mother is not theirs. Irigaray's attention to the possibilities of a sensible transcendental for men, as well as for women, is another reason why she is an important addition to any discussion of philosophy or religion as-usual.

As such, the sensible transcendental offers both seed and site for the enunciation of a new reality based on sexual difference, a reality that forms the "periphery" of a comfortable "dwelling" for women in this world.¹³ It offers both women and men a new, more benign way of regarding themselves as fully engaged with life, with each other, and with their god(s). Its symbols facilitate a language that includes difference: a fleshly-man; the mother-divinized; Eros, full-bodied and spiritual; myriad angels who are messengers gesturing/touching/dwelling along side of and in-between the body and the soul; a mucosity which marries divinity to flesh; and two sets of lips that form a crossroad between sexuality and speech. Since they are deeply rooted in a female imaginary, these symbols can effectively engage in the revision of those imperative categories and logical oppositions that too often pathologically structure traditional cultural discourses about women.

They might mediate with an actual and vital difference (the difference of the woman subject and female sexual desire) the paucity characterizing the existing relationship between the sexes, a relationship that has so far proved to be a mirror held up to that “sameness” needed to perpetuate traditional discourses and representations. They might provide, Irigaray says, “[a] birth into a transcendence, that of the other, still in the world of the senses (“sensible”), still physical and carnal, and already spiritual. It is the place of incidence and junction of body and spirit, which has been covered over again and again” (*ESD* 82).

Irigaray’s words are optimistic.¹⁴ Her “other” is an unimpeachable alterity endowed with a language that cradles transcendence in the senses and embodiment. Yet, is it possible for women to refute the monolithic and bewildering indifference of the “same” with a new language of contact? Can they refuse re-absorption within that discourse which cuts them off at the neck and scatters their parts in the pile that grows at the feet of Benjamin’s angel of history? Can they effectively re-figure themselves through the defensive insularity of a dwelling that is utterly theirs, utterly outside the already givens of their lived reality—even as a first step? No single or simple answer exists. The language of alterity that instigates a renewed engagement with experience based on sexual difference must also infiltrate those discourses about women that have been given, unnecessarily and to women’s harm, over to men. It is at this point that I think Irigaray’s response falls short. To re-create alterity, women must also re-work from inside the language they already have. They need to refuse to concede that the language they now speak and write belongs absolutely to the father, or that women can only express themselves through silence or gesture or pre-oedipal pulsations. Until they can effectively claim their own separate discursive space, women must lay claim to the plasticity, to the play, and to the give and take of language within the extant symbolic order. In doing so, they can employ it to re-define themselves and their desire from the inside of representation in a manner that refuses the terms of subordination, and in a manner that men can and do respectfully acknowledge. Still, in addition to the infiltration of the given language, the birth of new poetics and of new ways of being and becoming in our world is urgently needed. We want both a mythology and a reality that remembers that as human beings we breathe air, eat flesh, exist in skin, mark earth, and that we need our gods, both male and female. In this light, the potential horizon opened by Irigaray’s conception of the sensible transcendental could, given the genesis of its “language/house,” ameliorate the mental collapse, ethical bind, and empirical destructiveness

that inform much of western civilization. Simply stated, and in spite of its difficulty, the possibility that unfolds from an ethics based on sexual difference prefigures a viable, compassionate, and more ethical world. As such, the sensible transcendental could act as an offering against despair.

Notes

¹As the essay will show, in the many debates concerning various essentialisms attributed to Irigaray, my position is that her mapping of a symbolic terrain from female morphology is not of necessity essentialist. On this point, see Margaret Whitford, *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine* and Tina Chanter, *Ethics of Eros: Irigaray's Re-writing of the Philosophers*.

²My discussion of the sensible transcendental is based on Irigaray's *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, which will hereafter be parenthetically abbreviated *ESD*.

³In *Speculum of the Other Woman*, Irigaray critiques Plato's creation of a masculinist philosophy that is based on sameness throughout "Plato's *Hystera*." *Speculum of the Other Woman* will hereafter be parenthetically abbreviated *SpOW*.

⁴For discussion of the female imaginary and of female sexual morphology as these relate to multiplicity, nearness, and language, see Irigaray, "This Sex Which Is Not One" and "The 'Mechanics' of Fluids," both in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, on pages 23-33 and 106-18, respectively. Irigaray's *This Sex Which Is Not One* will hereafter be parenthetically abbreviated *TSNO*.

⁵Irigaray borrows the idea of "dwelling" from the German philosopher Martin Heidegger. See his "Building Dwelling Thinking," in *Basic Writings*, 347-63.

⁶For discussion of man, philosophy, and air (as an element essential to biological life), see Irigaray, *The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger*. Also, see the section entitled "An Ethics of Sexual Difference," in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, 116-29.

⁷This point is made by Carolyn Merchant in *The Death of Nature*. Throughout this text, Merchant analyses the impact of the scientific revolution on our thinking. According to her, after the scientific revolution "[a]ll spirits were effectively removed from nature. External objects consisted only of quantities: extension, figure, magnitude, and motion. Occult qualities and properties existed only in the mind, not in the objects themselves" (205).

⁸For descriptions of Irigaray's ideas concerning a new poetics based on the woman's two sets of "lips," see "This Sex Which Is Not One," in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, especially pages 23-33. Also, see "The Invisible of the Flesh," in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, especially pages 166-67.

⁹See Irigaray, "Wonder: A Reading of Descartes," *The Passions of the Soul*, in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, 72-82.

¹⁰One important way in which Irigaray troubles masculine discourse is through intentional mimicry, which is defined in *This Sex Which Is Not One* as "[a]n interim

strategy for dealing with the realm of discourse (where the speaking subject is posited as masculine), in which the woman deliberately assumes the feminine style and posture assigned to her within this discourse in order to uncover the mechanisms by which it exploits her" (221). Another important means by which Irigaray questions this discourse is in the challenge she presents to the logical oppositions that underpin western discourses via her creation of new symbols of alterity, like the sensible transcendental and angels, which frustrate such oppositions.

¹¹According to Walter, Benjamin, in "Theses on the Philosophy of History": A Klee painting named "*Angelus Novus*" shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. The storm is what we call progress. (257-58)

Rosi Braidotti discusses Benjamin's angel of history in relation to Irigaray's incarnate angels in *Nomadic Subjects*, 307-08.

¹²I am not asserting that Irigaray does not have a strong thesis. Quite the contrary, her demand for a language of sexual difference (given the traditional sameness of cultural discourses since Plato) is clear, strong, and consistently reiterated throughout her *oeuvre*. Rather, difficulty arises because an analysis of Irigaray's subversion of orthodox gender arrangements demands thinking about the creation and the implementation of an as yet un-thought language.

¹³Whitford makes this same point in *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine*. According to her:

What links god, language, and woman is the idea of becoming. And god and language are both defined in terms of house or habitation for dwelling. What is needed for women then is a habitation that does not contain or imprison them. Instead of an invisible prison which keeps them captive, a habitation in which they can grow is the condition of becoming, and of becoming divine. The sensible transcendental is a divine whose advent is still ahead of us; blood/flesh/man must find its own symbolic expression in language, becoming the other pole of sexual discourse. The flesh made word in the threshold of the female sex. (47)

¹⁴Added to charges of essentialism, Irigaray's ideas have been criticized for being too abstract and utopian, and therefore not useful for practical application.

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