

Luce Irigaray

Teaching



edited by Luce Irigaray with Mary Green

Luce Irigaray: Teaching

Edited by Luce Irigaray with Mary Green



continuum

Continuum International Publishing Group
The Tower Building
11 York Road
London
SE1 7NX
www.continuumbooks.com

80 Maiden Lane,
Suite 704
New York
NY 10038

© Luce Irigaray, 2008

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any information storage or retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publishers.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: HB: 1-8470-6067-6
978-1-8470-6067-9

PB: 1-8470-6068-4
978-1-8470-6068-6

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

Typeset by BookEns Ltd, Royston, Herts.

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Cromwell Press Ltd, Trowbridge, Wiltshire.

Afterword

Michael Worton

University College London, United Kingdom

Luce Irigaray is rightly celebrated for her thoughtful unveilings of the gendered dimensions of social discourses, and she is undoubtedly one of the most significant – and most distinctive – voices of modern feminist thinking. However, it is important to recognize that her work and its implications go well beyond the boundaries of gender studies. She has written on fields ranging from art and architecture to education, to linguistics, to political theory, to theology, and her work is studied in schools, colleges and universities across the world, as well as increasingly shaping policy-making.

Underpinning all her work is a commitment to expose the prejudices that determine behaviours and prevent us from living more openly and more in dialogue with others, with ourselves, and with what we do and say. Challenging and provocative, her work is a significant ethical intervention into debates about how we live today.

Irigaray is, above all, concerned with the relationship between philosophy, or thought, and collective and individual behaviour. In her work, she has consistently and forcefully argued that what we often call ‘the Western tradition’ is grounded in a desire to master the physical world. Nevertheless, this mastery – which is a quintessentially masculine drive and activity – seeks to construct a human, social world whose force and durability is derived from the fact that nature is harnessed and exploited in ways that ultimately, and determinedly, sever humankind from direct contact with the essence and the movements of the natural world. As Irigaray reminds us, this culture is one created by men and largely for men, and is one which continues to promote, as well as depend on, an androcentric world-vision that maintains a system of structuration and divisions as a result of male domination.

A striking feature of the Western tradition is that it is based on the logic, and the teleology, of identity and sameness. In this tradition, otherness gives rise to uncertainty, even to fear – as is seen particularly strongly in national anxieties in the West about immigration. This can lead only to ever deeper retrenchment into narrow, self-protective identities, whereas what we need to do is fully to recognize difference, complex and daunting as that can be. We then have to embrace otherness and finally – the most difficult step of all – be inhabited by

otherness, and have all of our behaviour informed by dialogue with alterity, and even plural alterities.

The notion of dialogue is at the heart of Irigaray's thinking, and also of her practice. For instance, she chose the title *Dialogues* for a conference organized around her work in Leeds in 2001 – *International, Intercultural, Intergenerational Dialogues about the Work of Luce Irigaray*, and published the proceedings – in a special issue of *Paragraph* in 2002 – with dialogic interventions from her. The Irigarayan dialogue is on the one hand a new pedagogic form of Socratic dialogue; it is also more than a two-way interaction, calling out to others, and involving others, in an ongoing conversation towards discoveries.

For Irigaray, sexual difference is 'a reality which constrains us to pursue the becoming of consciousness, that leads to a new stage of the development of humanity. But without enacting this stage, the human as such does not exist' ('Questions', in Florinda Trani, 'From the same to the other', in *Dialogues*, p. 65). As she repeatedly makes clear, sexual difference is to be conceived in broad terms, because 'subjectivity is constituted differently by man and woman and [...] they live in two worlds foreign to one another' ('Questions', in Heidi Bostic, 'Reading and rethinking the subject in Luce Irigaray's recent work', in *Dialogues*, p. 30).

It is undoubtedly true that in modern times 'the relationship with alterity is, paradoxically, more and more foreign to our day-to-day behaviour' (Irigaray, 'Beyond All Judgement, You Are', in *Key Writings*, p. 66), as we struggle to negotiate a world that is increasingly complex. The Western tradition has taught the (male) subject the importance of having regard for truth and of respecting and dealing with his equals – by which he means those who share in the same world and the same identity as him. His cultural conditioning, however, can lead him so to privilege equality that he chooses to deny alterity as alterity, engaging in paternalistic processes of assimilation, with, as Irigaray reveals, serious consequences:

While he may be overwhelmed by the problem of alterity, the strategy adopted by him will be to raise the other to the status of an equal and similar – a woman is as good as a man, a black is as good as a white – rather than to educate consciousness to perceive itself as limited, both on the level of sensibility and on the level of thinking. At worst, the masculine *I* will accept to descend, in his own eyes, a few levels in his established intellectual performances. Isn't a man feminine too? And isn't a white man also a little black?' (op. cit., p. 72; italics in original)

What is fascinating in Irigaray's work is the way in which she treats difference as a phenomenon, rather than simply as a problem. For her, difference is something that all human subjects need to analyse and creatively engage with, instead of seeking to marginalize it, deny it, or obliterate it. Respect for the difference(s) of the other is crucial in all exchange, whether this be linguistic or amorous. But it is important to move beyond that respect towards a new and more complex mode of living out identity. Identity is not about self-identity, or

is only in part about self-identity – which, in any case, is itself seamed-through by difference. To use Irigaray's terms, identity must always be 'relational'. And 'relational' identity is always in a state of becoming. In an interview in 1996, she described her thinking in anthropological terms 'When I speak of relational identity, I designate that economy of relations to the self, to the world and to the other specific to woman or to man. This identity is structured between natural given and cultural construction' (Stephen Pluháček and Heidi Bostic, 'Thinking life as relation', in *Man and World*, 29, p. 353).

In her thinking, Irigaray steers a careful but creative course between essentialism and cultural relativism, aware of the dangers of each, but not wholly denying them. Indeed, one of the most engaging dimensions of her work is its openness and its *inclusiveness*. This does not mean any lack of rigour; on the contrary, she obliges us to scrutinize attentively every sentence and even every word, in a quest for meanings that will make sense of the world. †

While there is rigour in her thinking, there is also poetry in her expression. In her writing, she uses voices from philosophy, sociology, linguistics, theology, history and so on, fusing these all into a single distinctive voice marked by what one might call 'a discursive diversity'. And, remarkably, the Irigarayan voice holds together, whilst also declaring its own referential and allusive complexity. In this, it is a linguistic enactment of the kind of diversity that is the focus of her thinking.

Irigaray does not like to repeat; rather, she seeks always to innovate, to invent – in the sense not so much of creating *ex nihilo* but of discovering, of coming upon new perspectives, of learning to listen with another ear and to speak in a new language, one which is always potentially within our standard discourses and grammatical structures.

An abiding concern for her is the fact that our inability satisfactorily to establish and maintain communication not only indicates a failure in social interactions, but leads to dysfunction both at the individual and at the collective levels:

Since communication between us has not been put at the centre of our becoming human, we have become a little mad. For example we say that something is the very truth, but we do the opposite, divided in this way between saying and doing, perhaps because we do not produce a discourse of our own. We repeat, on the one hand, and we act, on the other. (Irigaray, 'Conclusions', in *Dialogues*, p. 207)

For Irigaray, dialogue or conversation must always be about discovery, a voyage into unknown territory whilst also being built on sacredness. This operates in terms of the relationship with the other, who can never be fully known, but who, for this very reason, is therefore a possible *you* and who, thanks to his or her irreducible and unappropriable difference, can ensure that they – or we – both can live again in and through duality and dialogue.

This also operates in our reconnecting with our own cultural traditions. Irigaray has written movingly about how she has for years 'navigated on the

raft of [the] truths [and] dogmas' of the Roman Catholic tradition which is an important part of her cultural tradition, speaking of how she has been 'wounded by them' and thus 'distanced [herself] from them', but has returned to these 'truths and dogmas' in order to interrogate them, strengthened by her journey into the feminine, into *her* feminine. As she writes:

I have therefore returned to my tradition in a more enlightened manner, more autonomous as a woman, and with a little Far Eastern culture which has given me some perspective on my own beliefs and taught me much about the figure of Jesus. I discovered him to be a master of energy. ('The Redemption of Women' in *Key Writings*, pp. 150–1)

In her relationship with the faith in which she was educated – and she is an example of how we can actually negotiate dialogically with that apparently oppressive tradition – she does not think to turn irrevocably away from it, or to destroy it, but rather to rediscover it as *transformed* – and transformed precisely by the difference that we ourselves as transformed beings can bring to it. In Irigaray's case, the differences that she brings include, she indicates, her own greater independence and selfness as a woman, and her encounters with Far Eastern traditions. However, there are also, I would argue, other forces at work in this reconnection. In her essay 'Fulfilling Our Humanity', for instance, Irigaray writes:

Religious is the gesture which binds earth and sky, in us and outside of us. Which cultivates the terrestrial so that it does not harm the celestial and which venerates the celestial in such a way that it does not destroy the terrestrial. (*Key Writings*, p. 190)¹

This poetic evocation of the nature of the religious phenomenon certainly has Eastern resonances in it. However, her expression also shows how Irigaray's work as a philosopher has been part of her ability to reconnect with faith issues, in that her discourse echoes that of Martin Heidegger in his 1951 lecture, 'Building, Dwelling, Thinking'.² The dialogue at stake here is not simply that of Luce Irigaray and Catholicism, but represents a network of interconnections and allusions that offer, simultaneously, individual and global perspectives.

In her recent work, Irigaray has insisted on the importance of the change of method as well as the change of attitude that is necessitated by the consideration of the other genuinely recognized as other. Her new dialectical method is not a singularly focused critique; rather, it seeks to displace established positions and to inscribe an irreducible difference as process and not only as state: as both the foundation and the driver of her thinking. Criticism can often be negative, but, in her interrogation of the constitution of subjectivity itself, Irigaray stresses the radical and the anti-negative nature of her critique: 'It affirms that no "I" can exist without a "you". This "you" can no longer be or remain an absolute "I", a God of my gender for example. It must be a subjectivity on my level, but radically different' ('Questions', in Trani, 'From the same to the other', in

Dialogues, p. 64).

One of the most exciting features of the last ten years of Irigaray's thinking, as is demonstrated by the essays in this book, is the way in which she simultaneously considers the individual and the social, the local and the global. An important development in this respect is the move in her thinking from a consideration of 'speaking [as] woman' to a broader focus on language as a site of difference and as a facilitator of creative dialogues through difference. She has recently argued powerfully for the importance of language and multi-linguistic communication, not only locally in families, but also in terms of creating truly universal and democratic systems: 'In all families, but above all in multicultural families, the question of language is decisive. [...] Speaking only in one language is not a good way for constructing a universal democratic culture' ('Introduction', in *Dialogues*, p. 2).

Irigaray reminds us that while subjectivity is different for men and for women, and while this difference is more complex than we usually think it is, it is important to recognize that subjectivity is not only a question of individuals: it needs also to be placed, problematized and thought on the social level, and – urgently today – in a global context. She seeks to contribute to the development of 'a new civic society in which democracy itself is recast' (see especially Irigaray, *Democracy Begins Between Two*).

For Irigaray, it is vital to locate the individual, sexually, politically and, indeed, emotionally in the global context, to accomplish a genuine progress towards the new vision of democracy that drives much of her current thinking. As she argues, 'cultivating the individual as global is necessary for humanity in order to resist globalization. And it is also necessary to pursue the becoming of humanity as humanity' ('Questions', in Bostic, 'Reading and rethinking the subject in Luce Irigaray's recent work', in *Dialogues*, p. 30).

Irigaray has done, and continues to do, much to challenge the intellectually restrictive binarism of the 'nature versus nurture' debate, demonstrating to us how these two views of social development interact with each other and can lead much more to dialogue with each other. As she shows both in general terms and in speaking of herself, it is crucial to recognize that each of us is culture-bearing and thereby contains the potential for significant (self-)transformation. Her challenge is to the Western tradition on both the general and the specific, personal level. This serves to remind us that to bear one single culture – or what one thinks of as a single culture – is inevitably to diminish one's capacity for transformation, and to condemn oneself to defensive conservatism. Irigaray seeks also to encourage us to look beyond our subjectivities and beyond the conventional boundaries of our cultures in order to find new ways of thinking and a new civic language of citizenship.

Just as she shows that difference is neither bad nor good in itself, but has the potential to bring creativity to our own becoming and to social relations, so she exposes how diversity is not in itself either good or bad, but compels us to think beyond notions of selfness and subjectivity, which could be no more than articulations of retractive narcissism. It is Irigaray's positive approach to the challenges of globalization and of interdisciplinarity that makes her work

so timely as well as so important. She proposes critical anatomizations of a wide variety of social practices. More meaningfully even, she offers new contextualizations, changing our horizons – our possibilities – and suggests creative ways of moving towards them.

Notes

1 Irigaray uses this same modified Heideggerian rhetoric in her review and renewal of the figure of Antigone in her essay 'Civil Rights and Responsibilities for the Two Sexes', in *Key Writings*, pp. 202–13.

2 This appeared in German in 1954 as 'Bauen Wohnen Denken', in *Mensch und Raum, Das Darmstädter Gespräch 1951*.

♦

- Irigaray, Luce, *Between East and West: From Singularity to Community*, trans. by Stephen Pluháček (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).
- Democracy Begins Between Two*, trans. by Kirsteen Anderson (London and New York: Continuum and Routledge, 2000).
- I Love to You: Sketch of a Felicity Within History*, trans. by Alison Martin (New York and London: Routledge, 1996).
- je, tu, nous: Toward a Culture of Difference*, trans. by Alison Martin (New York and London: Routledge, 1993).
- Speculum: Of the Other Woman*, trans. by Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985).
- Thinking the Difference: For a Peaceful Revolution*, trans. by Karin Montin (New York: Routledge, 1994).
- Sexes and Genealogies*, trans. by Gillian C. Gill (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).
- Nietzsche, Friedrich, *The Use and Abuse of History*, trans. by Adrian Collins (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1957).

Afterword – Michael Worton

- Heidegger, Martin, 'Building, Dwelling, Thinking', in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. and introduction by Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971) pp. 145–61.
- Irigaray, Luce, *Democracy Begins Between Two*, trans. by Kirsteen Anderson (London and New York: Continuum and Routledge, 2000).
- Dialogues: Around Her Work*, editor and contributor, special issue of the journal *Paragraph*, 25:3 (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002).
- Luce Irigaray: Key Writings*, ed. by Luce Irigaray (London and New York: Continuum 2004).
- Pluháček, Stephen, and Heidi Bostic, 'Thinking Life as Relation: An Interview with Luce Irigaray', *Man and World*, 29 (1996), 343–60.

She took part in the seminar for students doing their PhD on her work held by Luce Irigaray at the University of Nottingham in May 2004. She has also assisted Luce Irigaray in the presentation of her exhibition of the words and drawings of Italian Children, 'Chi Sono Io? Chi Sei Tu?' [Who am I? Who are You?], at University College London in November 2003 and at the University of Nottingham, May 2004. In January 2007 she was awarded a prestigious three year ESRC/RCUK Interdisciplinary Early Career Research Fellowship to explore the role of schools design in building sustainable communities. The project is shared between Schools of Architecture and Education of the University of Nottingham.

Michael Worton is Vice-Provost and Fielden Professor of French Language and Literature at UCL (University College London). He was chair of the HEFCE/AHRC Expert Group on Research Metrics, and is a member of the HERA/European Science Foundation Steering Committee, 'Building a European Index for the Humanities', a member of UUK/SCOP/HEFCE Measuring and Recording Student Achievement Steering Group, and of the Advisory Board, Clore Leadership Foundation. He is also a Director and Trustee of The Council for Assisting Refugee Academics (CARA). From 1998–2006, he was a member of the AHRB/AHRC Council, chairing first the Museums and Galleries Committee and then the Knowledge and Evaluation Committee. Broadly speaking, his research focuses on twentieth- and twenty-first-century literature and on aspects of critical theory.

Esther Zaplana is near completion of a PhD on contemporary musical performance and female vocality at the International Centre for Music Studies, University of Newcastle, United Kingdom. She is currently teaching in the Department of Languages, Faculty of Arts at the Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha, Spain, and has also taught in the Department of Modern Languages in the University of Northumbria, United Kingdom. Her research interests include cultural, feminist and theoretical approaches to aesthetic questions in musical performance, with particular emphasis on the work of Luce Irigaray and French feminism, as well as the relationship between the visual and the auditory and self-representations of women. She has published on the cultural meaning of music and gender, and Spanish and English feminists' narratives.