



Exchanges: the Warwick Research Journal

Volume 1, Issue 1, October 2013

<http://exchanges.warwick.ac.uk>

'Exchanges' - Conversations with...Luce Irigaray

Katharina Karcher

‘Exchanges’ - Conversations with... Luce Irigaray

Katharina Karcher, University of Warwick

*Luce Irigaray is the Director of Research in Philosophy at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique de Paris. A doctor in linguistics and philosophy, a leading cultural theorist, an experienced therapist and author of more than 30 books on a range of subjects, Luce Irigaray truly is an interdisciplinary thinker. Thanks to support from the **French Embassy in London, the Institute of Advanced Study, the Centre for the Study of Women and Gender, the Society for Women in Philosophy (SWIP), and the Departments of English and History**, she visited the University of Warwick on 7 June 2013. A lecture and roundtable discussion was attended by students and academics from many different departments, forming questions and ideas across and beyond disciplines. The day concluded with a reception and animated conversations that carried on until late in the evening. Before leaving Warwick, Luce Irigaray kindly agreed to give an exclusive interview to ‘Exchanges’, some of which is included in this discussion of her ideas.*

KK: What inspires you?

LI: My taste for truth and justice, my longing for sharing desire and love, and my consideration for an ethics of intersubjectivity respectful of mutual differences, beginning with those rooted in our natural belonging.

Most people know Luce Irigaray for her early work, which offers “a criticism of the Western tradition as constructed by a single subjectivity” (Irigaray 2008:124). While *Speculum of the Other Woman, This Sex Which Is not One* and other writings from this period are discussed in undergraduate and graduate courses in the humanities and in social science, many students and scholars in these fields have yet to discover her recent work.

I first encountered Irigaray’s writings as an undergraduate student in gender studies in 2005. At the time, I was a great fan of Butler’s concept of gender performativity, and I considered theories of sexual difference essentialist without properly engaging with them. In her essay

‘This Essentialism Which Is Not One: Coming to Grips with Irigaray’, Naomi Schor (1994) criticises this position. She rightly argues that charges of essentialism tend to be more essentialist than the feminist positions that they reject so emphatically.

When returning to Irigaray’s work as a postgraduate student, I discovered that it provides us with a theoretical and ethical framework to rethink difference and feminist politics. For Irigaray, hierarchies and inequalities cannot be overcome with egalitarianism but with a new approach to difference. Rather than extending male rights and duties to include women, Irigaray suggests that we should acknowledge and embrace sexual difference.

When asked to comment on her method in an interview with Stephen Pluháček and Heidi Bostic, Irigaray responded: “I don’t think it’s possible to speak of one single method. Criticizing and constructing necessitate different procedures. Moreover, my manner of criticizing is new because it has recourse to interpretation more than to simple judgement” (Irigaray 2008:9).

KK: What led you to the particular historical focus in your new book *In the Beginning, She Was*, in particular, Greek culture?

LI: I wanted to go further than in *Speculum* and question the work of the Pre-Socratics but also some aspects of epic or of tragedy – especially of the *Illiad* and the *Odyssey* by Homer and of *Antigone* by Sophocles –which tell of the origin of our culture. This is crucial to understand what happens in our epoch with the loss of values on which our tradition was based and also to envisage how to build a culture on new values that have to be shareable by all at a world level.

In the eyes of many feminists, Irigaray’s position seems “strangely reminiscent of the position of defenders of patriarchy: both stress women’s differences from men” (Grosz 1994:90). Yet I think that Irigaray’s argument is a fundamentally different one. She highlights that the prevailing symbolic and political order is based on a subject who is: “one, singular, solitary, historically masculine, the paradigmatic Western adult male, rational, capable” (Irigaray & Guynn 1995:7). In this order, there has – argues Irigaray – “never really been an other” (ibid p.8), since every difference is merely understood as a deviation from the masculine model.

KK: Your work has influenced scholars in a broad range of fields, such as philosophy, literature, theology, law, the natural sciences and linguistics. Where would you situate yourself now, and is your position today different to the past?

LI: It is quite natural that the work of a philosopher takes into account and acts upon the other fields of thought. Only recently the sciences pretend to be autonomous with respect to philosophy, but it is partly an illusion because the orientation of their research obeys basic patterns that are neither defined nor thought by scientists. However the scientific methods, and above all the scientific techniques, more and more escape the philosophers who often become subjected to scientific viewpoints because they are incapable of interpreting them. For my part I try to think about a possible becoming and blossoming of humanity in our epoch as is and in the future. A thing that remains to be cultivated is our relational being, especially as sexuate. This aspect of ourselves has been neglected by culture; now it ought to be its conscious foundation in order to develop our humanity. This requires us to construct a culture in which two different subjects are recognized and coexist in the world with mutual respect for their difference(s). I have not changed my mind from *Speculum*, but I must cross various stages to realize my project, and of course the discourse is not the same at each stage.

Luce Irigaray's recent work has focused on the question of how a feminine subjectivity could emerge from the Western tradition and explores ways in which masculine and feminine subjectivity "could coexist, enter into relation without submitting or subjecting the one or the other, and construct a world shareable by the two with respect for their own worlds" (Irigaray & Guynn 1995:8). According to Irigaray, a new relation between masculine and feminine subjects opens up the possibility to rethink a range of other differences that divide humanity including ethnic, cultural and religious differences.

In order to give a concrete example for a positive relationship to difference, she drew on a chapter of her new book *In the Beginning, She Was* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012) and offered a reading of Sophocles' *Antigone* that focused on her respect for the cosmic order, for the generational order and for sexual difference that this figure exhibits. This sparked some vivid

questions in discussion: How can we develop a positive relation to difference in the current political order? How does sexual difference relate to people who identify neither as men nor as women? What about other factors of difference such as race, class, sexuality and age?

KK: The book examines art as mediation towards another culture. Do you find any particular attitudes or ideas emerge when working or discussing ideas with those in arts disciplines compared to the sciences?

LI: Generally those who practise art more express themselves from their embodiment and maintain a connection with sensitivity, also through their use of matters that differ from that of scientists. Thus their way of behaving and their speech are also different. For example, they wonder about the privilege of sight, form and representation as the best manner of interacting with others, a concern that inspires them in a really different way from scientists. The artistic mediation is particularly essential today in order to rebuild culture on bases that correspond to a cultivation of our living nature and its sharing instead of its domination and substitution by a constructed culture that divide us between nature and culture, does not fit all the living beings, and prevents them to coexist together.

In the coming months, there will be more opportunities to hear Luce Irigaray speak in the UK. In 2013, the University of Bristol was awarded a Leverhulme Trust Visiting Professorship to host Luce Irigaray for two years. As part of this collaboration, she will give two public Leverhulme Lectures; the first to be held in Autumn 2013, and the second in 2014. In June 2014, the University of Bristol will host Luce Irigaray's annual seminar for those undertaking doctoral research on her work. More information on the seminar and on the application process can be found here: <http://workingwithluceirigaray.com/>.

References

Grosz, E. (1994), 'Sexual Difference and the Problem of Essentialism', in *The essential difference*, N. Schor and E. Weed (eds) Bloomington ; Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, pp. 82-97

Irigaray, L. (2008), *Conversations*, London: Continuum

Irigaray, L. and Guynn, N. (1995), 'The Question of the Other', *Yale French Studies*, 87, pp. 7-19

Schor, N. (1994), "This Essentialism Which Is Not One: Coming to Grips with Irigaray." In *Engaging with Irigaray: Feminist Philosophy and Modern European Thought*, C. Burke, N. Schor, and M. Whitford (eds), New York, NY: Columbia University Press, pp. 57-78.