Luce Irigaray
In the Beginning, She Was
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Luce Irigaray's recently published book returns to the terrain of her early philosophical work in *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1974; English translation 1985): the origins of Western philosophy and the place accorded to "nature, woman, Goddess"---the "she" of the title---in the pre-Socratic tradition. The topic of the book is also "our" current situation in which Irigaray argues that a truly just culture respectful of the differences between men and women has yet to appear. For readers acquainted with Irigaray's previous work, this book's poetic style will be familiar from *Speculum* but also from more recent texts such as *The Way of Love* (2002) and *Between East and West* (2002). Irigaray has written elsewhere of her efforts to move beyond the "critical" approach that brought her recognition among English-language audiences with *Speculum* and *This Sex Which is Not One*. *In the Beginning, She Was* continues the "constructive" project Irigaray identifies as her current philosophical task. This task is to cultivate a relation between-two, a duality not a dualism, that can best express the "living real" of differences between sexes, generations, and cultures.

Comprised of six chapters, the book brings together three essays previously published in edited collections alongside three unpublished essays. As a whole, the collection offers a series of engagements with the problems engendered by what Irigaray describes as the enclosure of a world within sameness, the inaugural moment of Western philosophy in which the relation to a living, natural world is cut off, and another parallel world governed by logic is created. She returns to the work of pre-Socratic philosophers such as Parmenides, Heraclitus, and Empedocles to read for the traces they bear of an earlier relation to the world in which a "she" is the origin or source of truth, the inspiration for knowledge. For Irigaray, Western philosophy's enclosure within sameness entailed both a separation from the natural world and the creation of a parallel world of language that neutralizes the openness and continual transformation of the "living real." She argues that the legacies of this enclosure are everywhere present in our social, political, and legal structures. Hence the return to the "beginning" of her own philosophical tradition to unearth the point at which another relation between truth and nature was elaborated, an origin point she argues has long been neglected and forgotten.

The first essay in the book, "The Ecstasy of the Between-Us," serves as the introduction, and given the material in subsequent chapters, it carries out this task well. It condenses many of

the key themes of the rest of the book: origins forgotten, covered over, obscured, and foreclosed; the openings and closures that structure existing relations between men and women as subjects; and the possibilities of cultivating relational identities that will inaugurate a new era of human becoming. As such, this chapter also offers in condensed form a guide to Irigaray's philosophy as it has developed in the last decade. She writes of the necessity of recognizing the limits of oneself and of others as an alternative rendering of the relationship to a transcendent, an extension and elaboration of her concept of the "sensible transcendental" in *The Ethics of Sexual Difference* that here opens out to "the other here close to me but different from myself" (16). She returns to the theme of "cultivation" of oneself and of a relation to the other, including other species, as a task requiring attention to the body, the breath, and the energy of the encounter with another, themes treated in *The Forgetting of Air* and *Between East and West*. Yet she also develops and picks up elements of her earlier work that have received far less sustained attention. For instance, she returns to the subject of her dialogue with biologist Hélène Rouch in *Je, Tu, Nous* (1993) on the placenta, here figuring the placenta as an enveloping space of closure. She writes, "Human being, at least the masculine human being, is submerged in a world that he partly produces and from which he is not separable. He thus finds himself isolated, cut off from every relation outside his placenta" (13). Although this may appear at first to be a curious metaphor and an inversion of the characterization of the feminine subject as "childlike," Irigaray suggests that this almost fetal state of the masculine subject in relation to the maternal is a starting point for a new relational culture. The birth of the masculine human subject into a sufficiently differentiated identity, one that fully acknowledges its debt to but also its difference from the maternal subject, could inaugurate a new era of mutual hospitality, generosity, and the flourishing of human becoming.

The central chapters of the book return to the pre-Socratic tradition in order to elaborate what has been lost, and what could be gained, by the "cultivation," in Irigaray's terms, of a new relational culture between-two, and specifically between the different worlds of men and women. In Irigaray's philosophy, these differences are not primarily the effect of a process of socialization (of the "gendering" of feminine and masculine in the way feminist understandings of gender might describe "gender norms" or the "gendering" of spaces, roles, and behaviors). Rather, the differences Irigaray alludes to refer precisely to the duality and bodily specificity of men and women as two parts of humanity, both partial in relation to the whole, and both necessary for generation. Hers is a rigorously dualist vision, but what seems to save this vision from falling entirely into stereotype is the exhortation to consider neither masculinity nor femininity as yet sufficiently distinct from each other. Neither has achieved their full potential; framing them as "opposites" rather than as specific yet-to-be-realized "sexuate belongings" impoverishes the possibilities for a fully realized relational culture. She is expressly wary of claims to "neutralization in a universal 'someone'" (161) implied by notions of multiplicity and the universality of an anonymous "people." To fully realize the subject one is, instead, requires returning to and transforming the relation to oneself, one's body, and one's relationship to others.

In chapters 2, 3, and 4, Irigaray situates the works of Empedocles and Heraclitus, among others, as expressions of the boundary between an archaic world of feminine divinities and a world governed by a "logical economy" in which knowledge is presumed to speak to all, and to be conveyed by a common language with its own internal rules. Only with difficulty does this language transmit or convey the reflective contemplation of the real. Chapter 2, entitled "When Life Still Was" begins with the moment when logical systems and "language games" began to repress the difference, wonder, and mystery of feminine divinity. Irigaray's readings

in these three chapters are often lyrical, alternating between the first- and third-person voice as she writes of the wandering of the thinker, the not-yet-born, the relation between Love and Discord, and the creation of *logos*, of words and symbols that are never adequate to the real. For Irigaray, the task of opening the world closed off by language and logos is made possible through dialogue, a dialogue between man and the other that would "reopen a closure that the tension between opposites within only one world has sealed" (47). Chapters 3 and 4, respectively entitled "A Being Created without Regard for His Being Born" and "The Wandering of Man," continue this reflection on the creation of the dichotomy of Being/non-Being and all that is left out or neglected by a forgetting of the divine One that was She, the Goddess. Here Irigaray's interpretation of the form in which the pre-Socratic philosophers received their inspiration, for example Parmenides' journey with the Goddess in his *On Nature*, is a rumination on the deprivation of energy and vitality endured by philosophy's enclosure within its own world.

Chapter 5, "Between Myth and History: The Tragedy of Antigone," returns to terrain that may be more familiar to Irigaray's readers, given the treatment of the myth of Antigone by many other feminist political philosophers and theorists as a dramatization of the relationship between the feminine subject and paternal authority. This chapter also includes a brief autobiographical reflection in which Irigaray considers her own experiences of exclusion from academic institutions and networks and of her solace in the natural world. Here, Irigaray revisits her reading of the play by Sophocles in *Speculum*, elaborating on how Antigone's story can be revisited as a means to recover aspects of "natural" laws that are silenced, obscured, and cast out in the transition to a social order that values obedience to a sovereign over obligation to kin. She situates her reading of Antigone in contrast to Hegelian and also feminist interpretations that place an emphasis on Antigone's conflict with a masculine or paternal order. Rather, her aim, as she reflects on her reading from *Speculum*, is "one of entering another time of History, reviving the message of Antigone and pursuing its embodiment in our culture" (116). In this chapter, Irigaray frames her interpretation of Antigone's tragedy as the defense of a particular kinship order in the larger frame of her duty toward the defense of a cosmic order and respect for life. The revival of Antigone's story thus calls for fidelity to "the unwritten laws inscribed in nature itself: the respect for life, for its generation, growth and blossoming and the respect for a sexuate transcendence between us---first of all between children of the same mother, but more generally between all the children of our human species, of our mother nature" (137). Her reading here departs from what she identifies (as have some of her critical readers) as the more closely Hegelian reading of Antigone in *Speculum.*

In the book's final chapter, "The Return," Irigaray elaborates on the process by which men and women can experience different forms of "self-affection." She references the difference that the bodily specificity of boys and girls can make to their own understandings of themselves, their relationship to the mother, and to their different "intuitions" about their own birth. Like the introductory chapter, this concluding chapter revisits some of the key motifs of Irigaray's current philosophical work and adds to them a reflection on the middle-passive voice (no longer used in English but part of the construction of the Greek language that Irigaray suggests offers a model for cultivating the self-affection proper to each subject). *In the Beginning*'s return to Greek culture may be nostalgic, but Irigaray sees this return as a signal of the desire for a "return to our own self, within our own self, through self-affection" and a return to "our own body, our own breath" to resist the neutralizing and isolating forces of contemporary life.

The text expects a familiarity with the pre-Socratics, with Parmenides, Empedocles, Heraclitus, and with the myth of Antigone. As in many of her previous works, her other philosophical interlocutors include Hegel, Nietzsche, and Heidegger, often in the background, although at other times they are more explicitly foregrounded. Nevertheless, Irigaray's writing is accessible or relevant to the interdisciplinary field of feminist theory insofar as she argues trenchantly for a cultivation of the differences between men and women, of the forms of "self-affection" proper to each, and of a dialogue and relation that would recognize the limits of each one's world. The meaning and implications of this argument have not lost their resonance in the feminist and philosophical circles in which this book will be read: what would it mean to recognize difference not as hierarchy, competition, dualism, or opposition, but as duality, as difference between-two? And what would it mean to hold open a space for the "living real," for fluidity, change, and becoming rather than stasis and the anonymity of universal sameness?

Irigaray suggests that one way to imagine another relational schema between men and women is to consider desire for the other and the relation between brother and sister as models for ethical relation, as ways of imagining love as an ethico-political force. Her call to recognize our own limits in relation to another's world (including the world of nonhuman others) through these models speaks to some of the most pressing ecological and political issues of the contemporary moment: political conflict, the exploitation of nature, the uncertainty of environmental change, the hostility of states to those who are deemed "different." Irigaray's writings on the nature of the feminine and the relations between men and women have long been read as normative by many of her critics, and this is in part because her writing appears only tangentially directed at the current social transformations of sexual identity and relational life. Yet her work continues to incite, inspire, and invoke alternative possibilities for ethical relations across differences. Given that her readers are drawn from a transdisciplinary audience from the humanities and the social sciences, and from the worlds of therapeutic, artistic, and political practice, this book offers both an evocative reading of the pre-Socratics and the myth of Antigone that will interest specialist readers in classics and philosophy (given the need for a relatively high level of familiarity with pre-Socratic texts), as well as a rumination on relations with nature, difference, the ethics of dialectical encounter, and the question of "natural belonging" in the feminine and masculine that will have wider resonance. Although it would make a dense introduction for readers new to her work, it is an elegant and beautifully expressive book that encompasses and further elaborates on some of the weightiest, and most intriguing, of Irigaray's philosophical problems.