LANGUAGE.borderlines: In your work a concern with language, influenced by anthropology, psychoanalysis and semiotics, runs like a continuing thread back to the essays of the early sixties. But there is also a more philosophical bent and you just said you are as much a philosopher as a psychoanalyst...

Luce Irigaray: I'll tell you about my education, that explains many things. I began by studying philosophy and modern literature with a thesis on the pure thought and pure poetry of Paul Valéry. After I came to France I studied psychology, psychopathology and psychoanalysis. Then, to enter the Recherche Scientifique Française (Centre National de Recherche Scientifique) where I've been since 1964, I worked on the pathology of language and linguistics. At the same time, I started psychoanalytic practice while working at the RSP as well. That means I've never been in psychoanalysis full-time. I've always done both.

LUCE IRIGARAY

is a French feminist whose work on psychoanalysis and language has become known in North America largely through a few translations in Signs and New French Feminisms and a great deal of rumour. Two of her books, This Sex Which Is Not One and The Speculum of the Other Woman have just been published in translation by Cornell University Press.

I met with Luce Irigaray in Paris in early May 1985, a week before she was to leave for Bologna to give a course. Negotiating conditions for the interview — time limits, questions only, no discussion — she sounded, as the French always do, formal and abrupt. In person, she looked much more fragile: just over five feet tall, with greying hair, she paced and clasped her hands. The interview which I have translated here was conducted in French. "I don't," she said, "speak the language of imperialism."

Thanks to Christel Verbuyt, who was interested enough in what Irigaray had to say and generous enough to transcribe the interview.

Language. Persephone And Sacrifice

An Interview With Luce Irigaray

Conducted And Translated By Heather Jon Maroney

How has the development of the women's movement affected your work?

In working on language, I also began to ask questions on the sex-typing (sexuation) of language, about the fact that language was not neutral, even, for example, pathological languages. We knew about the difference between the hysterical and the obsessional. Even if there were some men hysterics, it is, in the main, a pathology which is more typical of women. The obsessive is more male. Even with schizophrenia where they never say that there is a sex difference, I found that there is an obvious difference. For men the object is a mania of language, for women, it's the body. Thus, little by little, the fact that language is sex-typed (sexué) was imposed on me. I knew that already in daily life, but I really learned it in working on discourse. For me, that was very important because it gave me the evidence, in some very important work on the production of discourse which is still partially published, to affirm the things I affirmed. Many women — and men sometimes too — have since begun to say that language is sexist, but, when questioned, they don't know how to prove it. So many become discouraged and go back home, to their theoretical home at least, because they cannot respond. They haven't done the necessary preparation. The work is long, painstaking, patient, scientific. But the work exists, I did it, I'm going to speak about this area in Bologna.

Well then, while I was doing that research, I wrote Spectreum and then This Sex Which Is Not One. From that moment on there was an enormous demand from women and groups for me to speak on that subject. So to reply to your question: all this work was done before the flowering of the women's movement, certainly in France. I've been at it since 1966-67.

THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

What has your relationship to the women's movement been since then?

When the women's movement began in France, for me it was, I don't know how to say it, a question of ethics to go to certain demonstrations, to be a militant in certain things; it was coherent with my thought. But I did not begin to think in a certain way at a certain time. My development was different from that of some other women; it was, above all, a development from thought, of the ethical coherence of my thought.

I related to some, not all, women's groups. I was not part of any closed group. Because what is important for me is thought above all, freedom to think and ethical freedom. I can go from one group to another — unless they throw me to the waves — because, once more, it's such a deep and important conviction not to be shut up in any small group. I'm neither for nor against a strict psychoanalytic approach (enjus/gamble), for example. There are feminists who reject me because I have a psychoanalytic training. I find that a little stupid, a little short-sighted. Because the liberation of women needs psychoanalytic science — one must be critical to be sure — but it needs it. I ally myself with certain groups for large demonstrations; I have even participated fully in the organization of some demonstrations. But I do not have an alliance with any single group; that I refuse absolutely.

What issues do you think are important to work on?

Well, in France there is the liberalization of contraception and abortion. For me, it is a large international issue. I have almost as many alliances abroad as in France and I was one of the people who organized the demonstration in Montreal.

I think that answers your question a little. There is also the beginning of an answer in This Sex.

You suggest that there are material bases that must be changed if there is any possibility of changing male-female relations...

Certainly, but I think, contrary to the implications of Marxism, that in order to change the economic structure, it is necessary to change the structure of language. This is absolutely essential for what I want to say.

Exactly how does one change the structure of language and how does that lead to changes in social structure?

Well, it's difficult to explain what the social is. Whatever the difficulties I've undergone from the university or from some others, many people are interested in what I have to
say. Now that's a social phenomenon. Everyone tries to silence me, but when I go some place many women, young women, come to hear me. I find this very, very important. It's a social phenomenon. And, in general, these women tell me, "Oh, it's the first time in my life that I can breathe, that I've discovered something." I believe that today, in this century, the smallest things sometimes link up with the largest and most important.

Do you think that there is a women's language that has been repressed? You talk about "phallicistic man" and the patriarch but you also talk about "the maternal feminine" and the matriarch not only as repressed, but, if I read you correctly, as a focus of struggle because of the fact that women exist not just as objects but as subjects who escape from the limitations, the circle, drawn around them. You talk about this in relation to the castrating mother...

I'd like to know where I speak of the castrating mother...

In quotation marks.

Ah, yes. Because now, when some things in women's lives are blocked or when the women's struggle has passed its peak, the response has been, "Mothers are castrating." Well, my response is this: mothers are castrating because they are prevented from being whole subjects. They may be, but we must analyze society to understand why.

Let me put it more sharply: is there a language of women to discover or to construct...

Both. The opposition doesn't make much sense. It's as if you said to someone who has been in a car accident or has never had the use of one leg, "Well, you must now become a whole personality." Thus, it's discovery and construction both at the same time.

PERSEPHONE

Why have you made the mother-daughter relationship a focus for study?

Because in a focus, a focus of social obscurantism. It's the most victimized, the most obscure relationship. The mother-daughter relationship is the dark continent of dark continents. It is there that the real identity of the woman, of the mother, of the relationship between the two is lost. And, I would add, of the social body, because this relation is an infrastructure of the social body which has been harnessed within the abyss and will overwhelm it when it returns.

In ancient cultures, there were mother-daughter goddesses who were goddesses of agriculture, goddesses of spring, summer, and who were banished to bring into being the culture of male-gods. Thus, the relationship which is today made completely impossible was the one defined in ancient cultures: mother-daughter. It's the first relationship that was in some ways divine, made divine for the earth's fertility. I don't know if you know this story. It's extremely interesting and important that this relationship which was the most holy, the most fertile, without which men could not eat, could not live, has been buried up to the point that women have been made to believe that they do not want to have a little girl, for example, that they prefer, as Freud pointed out, to have a little boy. It's extraordinary. I'll give you an example. The earth and fertility goddess — she had several names, Proserpine, Ceres or Demeter — was only productive with her daughter who was called Persephone. When her daughter was abducted by the god of Hades who wanted to make her his wife, the earth and fertility goddess said, "I will not produce any more," and the earth became sterile. The god of Hades was obliged to return her daughter to her for spring and summer. Otherwise, the earth became sterile. It's an extraordinary story, and one that was completely forgotten.

But you also have viewed the mother-daughter relationship as not just nurturing, but one where nurturing can turn to ice. In La Croisement Même (The Same Relief) the mother gives her daughter ice (la place) to eat...

What I said in the first sentence of that text is that there is a kind of immediacy of feeding (child-raising) (nourriture) without (self) image. There is both: there is ice and there is imageless feeding. If the woman, the mother, has no identity, has no image of herself, what does she see in the mirror? She sees the mirror ice (la place). I don't know if you remember the text. The mother needs to nurture and if she doesn't, she no longer exists. I think that there is something there, something true. It is not only ice, it's a lack of identity. This loss of identity, of the pos-

I think, contrary to the implications of Marxism, that in order to change the economic structure, it is necessary to change the structure of language.

THE SOCIETY OF SACRIFICE

Today we have entered into societies which can be called sacrificial. Do you agree? Societies of sacrifice. Whatever there was in our ancient societies, the sacrifice of the scapegoat, of a person, of a victim, there is today in the sacrifice of cyclical wars. I think that these rituals of sacrifice on which our societies are founded are born from the exclusion of the ancient goddesses, Demeter-Persephone, who were based in cycles that were much more natural. Basically, we have forgotten our cosmic roots and I think that it is very important for thought and urgent for the world economy that we remember them. But, when I say that, people who think they're very intelligent say, "Oh, my god, she's a little ecologist." No, it's not a question of ecology, it's really a question of thought. But it's very general.

Have you any plans to make another film?

Are you asking me if I want something new? People talk about the new, but what does it mean? Until now, I have never met anyone who has really understood what I mean. Then, why do something new? If thought is truly profound, what does it mean to do something new? You must let it develop, let it become manifest. For the ancient goddesses, the new was the cycle of seasons, it was not to push false innovations, artificial innovations. It was natural flowers and nourishing plants — not artificial flowers. "Do you understand? I think it's very important." (English in original).
Several North American feminist writers, like Nanc-
cy Chodorov, Mary O'Brien and Dorothy Blument-
stein have recently begun exploring the implications of
what they see as distinct forms of consciousness
that are related to mothering and that women share.
They suggest that this relation is a potential source
of new values for the women's movement. Do you
agree?

I would also say sexual difference. But for
sexual difference to be creative, not merely
procreative, it is necessary, as I explained in
"L'éthique de la difference sexuelle," that
each sex relate to its Same (son même).
That's to say that there's a good relation be-
tween the mother and the daughter, among
women themselves; that there is a good re-
ation between the father and the son and
among men themselves. Love of the Same
is necessary for there to be love of the Di-
f erent. And from this point of view, it is
t rue that the mother-daughter relation is
the most complex and much more potenti-
ial, productive.

I recently heard something that hurt me
very much. A friend said, "Oh, she's talk-
ing about the mother-daughter relation-
ship again." Perhaps I speak about it badly
and too much, but it is clear that it has an
enormous revolutionary potential. It
demands a particular ethic.

NEW ETHICS OF FEMINISM

What kind of ethic?

An ethic of patience, of generosity. Be-
cause it is not only necessary for us to repair
what our mothers have not done for us but
it is necessary to repair for others what their
mothers have not done for them. We must
invent new relationships. We must repair
the ill that men do to women, what women
want to run to men for and what they com-
to listen to us for. They eat you, you who
are a woman, and they must eat freely.

Are you supposed to be the universal
mother who produces unceasingly, without
being paid, without anyone worrying what
happens when you go home? When I decid-
ed several years ago that I wanted to be paid
because I wanted this question to reenter
social relations, it created a terrible drama.
It upset the rules a little. I said that I no
longer wanted to be a kind of devouring de-
manding/persecuting thing; no, I wanted
to be paid. And it was also a way of getting
out of the traditional mother-daughter re-
lationship. You asked what practical means
there are — that for example was one. In
any case, in Europe, perhaps less so in the
United States, it's a scandal if an activist in
the women's movement says that she wants
to be paid. Except for the most politicized
women who understood at once what I was
saying — that it was obvious.

For eight years I had worked for free.
And then I'd hear women say, "We are mili-
tants" — as if I wasn't! — but I think that
militancy for me today is to try to say no
to sacrifice, to the sacrificial. Therefore,
while waiting to put new rituals in place be-
tween us, to put a new language of ex-
change in place between us, let's put money
t here. We cannot do better, so put the
money down. And there is a terrible resis-
tance. It's a very effective way of mak-
ing some things apparent.

Have you been able to establish such new relation-
ships with women?

In the women's movement? With some,
yes. I know that I have relationships with
some women that are part of a new ethic;
not with all women who say they believe in
the women's movement, but with some.

The women's move-
cent is the carrier of
certain ethical values
which no one has ever
thought about before.
And often even
women don't want to
think about them.

Some feminists believe that the women's movement
will be the source of new values, not just for itself,
but on a global scale, that it will carry these new
values.

It's very, very complicated because the in-
itial emergence of the woman's movement
is, as you know, in regression — in my opin-
ion because things were not thought
through deeply enough. But the women's
movement is the carrier of certain ethical
values which no one has ever thought about
before. And often even women don't want
to think about them. They want to be
faithful to the technological era, to be com-
plete, scientists, whole-hearted technocrats.
They forget that there are values, relation-
ships, of non-sacrifice, that they must
remember that they are all women whether
placed in "thought" or not. You don't have
to be stupid or naive for that. It's much
more serious, but I think that, yes I believe
there are some women who are placed so
that only they are going to think certain
things. They have the experience to think in
these ways and we think best on the basis of
experience. You don't have to rest only on
the empirical as women often do, alas, alas,
because they know the materials for new
theories of humanity. It is necessary to

learn to think at a higher level and I don't
see that women are incapable.

Then it becomes very original thought,
thought which relates to a transcendence
but a transcendence that is always self-
awakened. And that too is something.
And that too is I am thinking I think that only women who are ready can
do. Practically no one has perceived what a
sentimental transcendence would be. New re-
search in physics comes close to this kind of
absolute reality. It's enthralling. But every-
ting is done so is that it isn't a "woman who
says it. If it were a woman even other wo-
men who are the least bit scientific would
say, "Oh la la, why are you bothering us?"
Obviously, they have a little university
position or something. What position in the
university. Do you see what I mean?

S C I E N C E

There is the beginning of a feminist sociology of
science in North America that looks at the effect of
male dominance on scientific practices and ide-
ology.

But you have to go further. Although this is
already good because it is a critique of im-
perialism, I think that it is not enough to define
what science in the feminine is and what
science in the masculine is. I've just given a
talk on this issue which has not been pub-
lished yet which goes further. But in any
case, there is in physics an interest in another
model of energy, for example, which is not Freud's model of energy, but
rather a passage to a new level of energy
in our relation to the cosmos that Isabelle
Finger, among others, talks about. These
models which challenge a certain concep-
tion of space, time and the sacrificial ac-
celeration of time seem to me to be much more
interesting. Today we're living through a
speed-up of time which no longer corres-
ponds to biological time. So people live an
acceleration of time and are sick and take
drugs, almost the whole society is ill. All
these things are extremely important in my
view.

At the same time there is still such faith in science
and in the metaphor of science.

That's exactly. After Bologna I'm going to
amuse myself by analyzing the discourse
of contemporary French science. There is
always a discourse of catastrophe. I think
that it's very interesting that there is never a
discourse of construction but a vocabulary of
destruction and disintegration. Certain-
ly there is atomic disintegration, but they
present the solar system to us as disintegra-
tion, etc., etc. It's very, very heavy. I don't
want to present the model of science and
knowledge as a model of disintegration. In
fact, that links up with Freud's despair
about the triumph of death over life. Why?
And what has the exclusion of women from
theory to do with it? What is the complicity
of certain women today? The way they kill
animals in laboratories? The way they make
us take drugs because someone has ana-
yzed in a laboratory that they will be
good for a particular part of our bodies?
But where is our whole character in that?
Do you see what I mean?

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