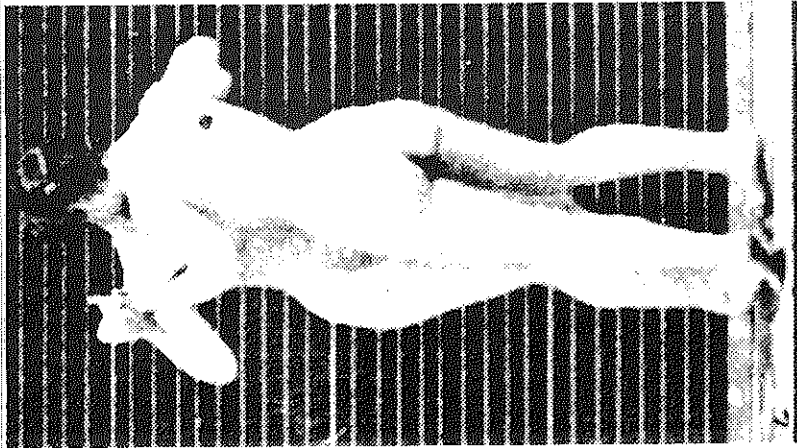


## L U C E I R I G A R A Y

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 clenched 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 Christl Verduyn, who was interested enough in what Irigaray had to say and generous enough to transcribe the interview.



## L A N G U A G E

**border/lines:** In your work a concern with language, influenced by anthropology, psychoanalysis and semiology, 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 Valery. After I came to France I studied psychology, psychopathology and psychoanalysis. Then, to enter the Recherche Scientifique Francaise (Centre Nationale 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 RSF as well. That means I've never been in psychoanalysis full-time. I've always done both.

## 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 neuter, even, for example, pathological languages. We knew about the difference between the hysteric 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 schizophrenics 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 (*sexuée*) 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 only partially published, to affirm the things I affirmed. Many women — and men sometimes too — have since begun to say that language is sexed. 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 *Speculum* 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.

## T H E W O M E N ' S M O V E M E N T

**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 to me is thought above all, freedom to think and ethical freedom. I can go from one group to another — unless they throw me out — 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 (*enjeu/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 "phallogocentric 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 locus 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 a 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 relation a focus for study?

Because it is 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 relation 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 hurled into 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 deified 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 Croyance Mème (The Same Belief)* the mother gives her daughter ice (*la glace*) to eat...

What I said in the first sentence of that text is that there is a kind of immediacy of feeding/child-raising (*nourrisage*) 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 glace*). 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

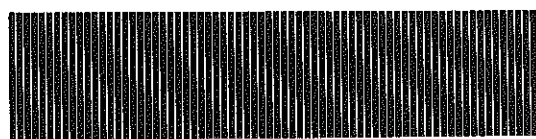
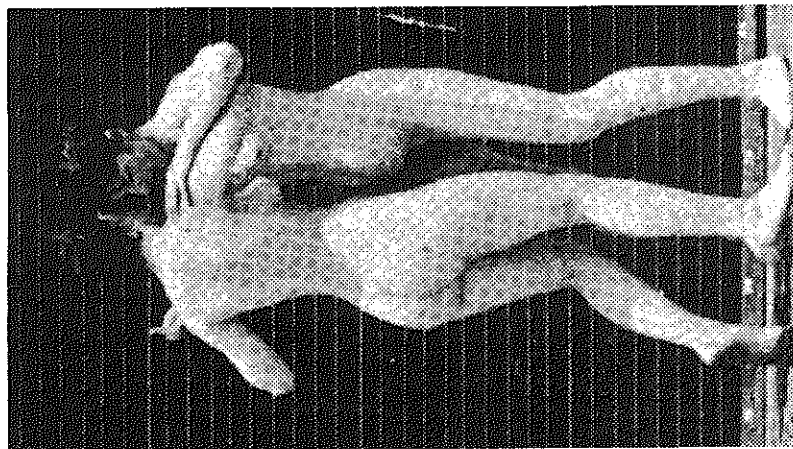
*I think, contrary to the implications of Marxism, that in order to change the economic structure, it is necessary to change the structure of language.*

sibility to be a subject, was not true at the time of Demeter and Persephone.

Having said that, this text was written for a film about a mother-daughter relationship where the daughter was paralyzed and did not eat meat. But I thought that there were enough general truths in this text to publish it. Probably without the film I would never have written this text. It is not exactly like the film, for in the film the daughter never opens her mouth and I make the daughter talk.

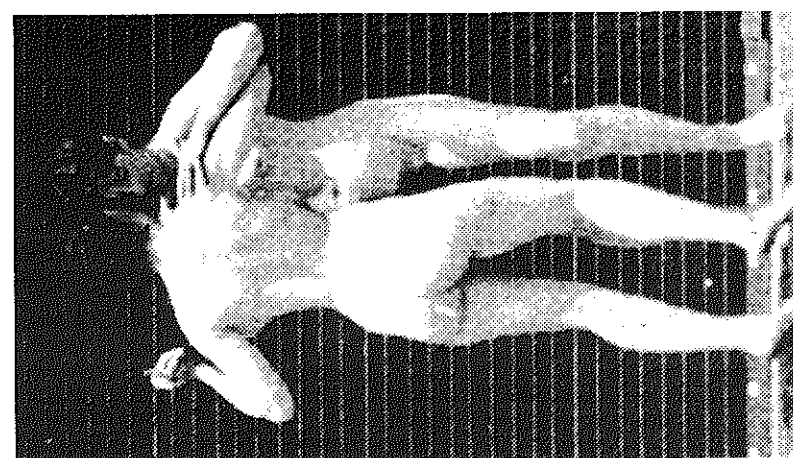
Have you any plans to make another film?

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 meant. 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).



## T H E S O C I E T Y O F S A C R I F I C E

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 is really a question of thought. But it's very general.

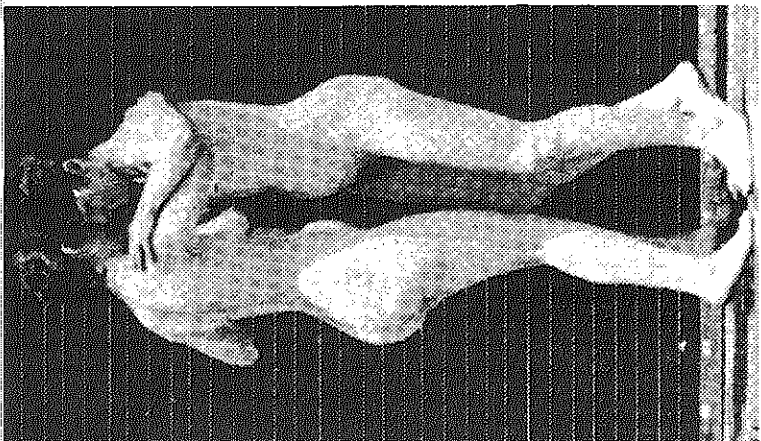
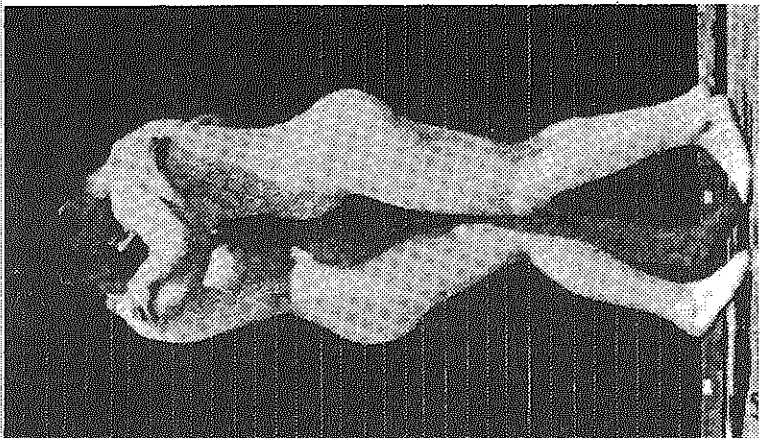




Several North American feminist writers, like Nancy Chodorow, Mary O'Brien and Dorothy Dinnerstein have recently begun exploring the implications of what they see as distinct forms of consciousness that are related to mothering and that women share. They suggest that this relation is a potential source 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'ethique de la difference sexuelle", that each sex relate to its Same (*son même*). That's to say that there's a good relation between the mother and the daughter, among women themselves; that there is a good relation between the father and the son and among men themselves. Love of the Same is necessary for there to be love of the Different. And from this point of view, it is true that the mother-daughter relation is the most complex and much more potential, productive...

I recently heard something that hurt me very much. A friend said, "Oh, she's talking about the mother-daughter relationship 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. Because 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 come 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 decided 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 want to be a kind of devouring/persecuting thing; no, I wanted

to be paid. And it was also a way of getting out of the traditional mother-daughter relationship. 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 militants" — 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 between us, to put a new language of exchange in place between us, let's put money there. We cannot do better, so put the money down. And there is a terrible resistance. It's a very effective way of making some things apparent.

Have you been able to establish such new relationships 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 belong to the women's movement, but with some.

*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.*

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 initial emergence of the women's movement is, as you know, in regression — in my opinion 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 complete scientists, whole-hearted technocrats. They forget that there are values, relationships, 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-aware (*sensible*). And that too is something I think that only women who are ready can do. Practically no one has perceived what a sentient transcendence would be. New research in physics comes close to this kind of absolute reality. It's enthralling. But everything is done so that it isn't a *woman* who says it. If it were a *woman* even other women who are the least bit scientific would say, "Oh la la, why are you bothering us?" Obviously, they have a little university position and they defend their position in the university. Do you see what I mean?



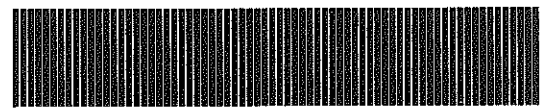
## SCIENCE

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 ideology.

But you have to go further. Although this is already good because it is a critique of imperialism, I think that it is possible 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 published 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 entropy, 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 conception of space, time and the sacrificial acceleration of time seem to me to be much more interesting. Today we're living through a speed-up of time which no longer corresponds 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 metaphors of science.

That's it exactly. After Bologna I'm going to amuse myself by analyzing the discourse of contemporary French scientists. It's 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. Certainly there is atomic disintegration, but they present the solar system to us as disintegration, 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 analyzed 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?



Heather Jon Maroney teaches sociology at Trent University. She is a long-time activist in the women's movement who has written on feminist theory and contemporary Quebec feminism. At present she is completing a book with Meg Luxton on the political economy of women in Canada, to be published by Methuen.