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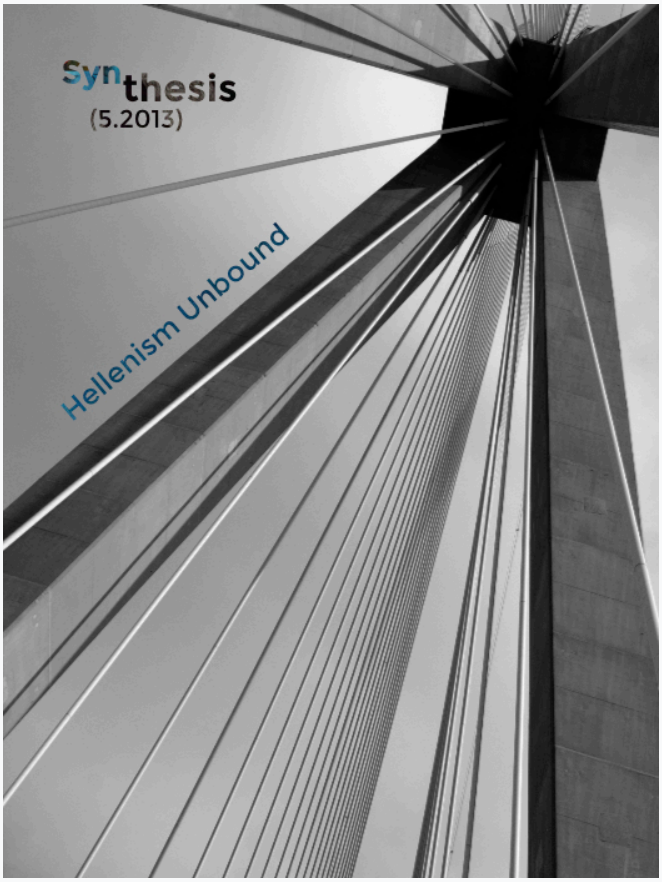

Tzelepis Elena & Athanasiou Athena (eds.), Rewriting Difference: Luce Irigaray and the Greeks.

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Elena Tzelepis and Athena Athanasiou, eds. *Rewriting Difference: Luce Irigaray and the Greeks*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2010. Pp. 289. £ 17.75 (Pb.)

Luce Irigaray has famously argued that sexual difference is "the major philosophical issue of our age" (192). For Irigaray, sexual difference does not describe something which already exists, because in the established, monosexual, symbolic order there is no place for a separate female subject position. Sexual difference, by enabling a new symbolic which is based on a non hierarchical intersubjective relationship, will be a revolution in thought and ethics, an entirely unthought-off interpretation of the relationship between subject, discourse and the world. Another issue—that of re-evaluating the significance of the classics—is also brought to the fore with an unprecedented urgency at the current historical moment, since the way we see the human and the humanities is rapidly changing. The ontological distinction between nature and culture seems insufficient to account for the complexity of the interactions between social and non-social forces, and contemporary theory struggles with a tradition of persisting humanism which not only seems irrelevant but places obstacles in the shift away from the classificatory paradigm of phallogocentrism and anthropocentrism. Under this light, the humanities' work on the canonical texts of the Greeks cannot simply be the work of interpretation, appreciation and preservation, but rather the work of asking anew, through them, the question of the human and its relation to the world.

What makes *Rewriting Difference* a constructive contribution is that it addresses these two most pressing questions of our time together—as parts of the same project. The essays in the volume are just as concerned about the "right" way to read Irigaray as they are about the different ways to relate to the Greeks. It is clear from the outset that they try to undo years of neglect and misunderstanding of Irigaray without, however, becoming blindly celebratory, and most of them seem to be deliberate *askeses* on reading Irigaray in ways that avoid the easy accusations of essentialism during the feminist debates on essentialism vs. constructivism in the '80s and '90s.

The book encompasses an invaluable collection of nineteen essays written by renowned scholars, whose questions have a political and philosophical relevance

that makes this volume a good summary of contemporary theory. It includes a diversity of disciplines, such as philosophy, philosophy of religion, classics, comparative literature, postcolonial theory, political science, women's studies, queer studies, and psychoanalysis, and brings together widely different readings of Irigaray. Common themes are, among others, the question of Irigaray's specific reading and writing style as a form of critique, the theme of the re-reading of the Western canon from a feminist perspective, the meaning of Irigaray's sexual difference and the more general question of non-appropriated otherness.

Gayatri Spivak's foreword sets the tone for the whole book. It attests to the importance of a volume on Irigaray and 'the Greeks' that reaches beyond the interest of a narrow field of specialists, and praises some of Irigaray's virtues that have been useful in Spivak's own teaching and writing: the attention Irigaray pays to rhetoricity, her view of philosophy and of psychoanalysis as efforts to acquire knowledge from 'below' and her dedication to a socialist ethics.

Athena Athanasiou and Elena Tzelepis's introductory chapter positions the book within the current historical, theoretical and political context. The editors explain what the book's focus is: Irigaray's twofold encounter with the Greeks, in the form of a deconstructive reading of canonical texts, exposing the exclusions in the foundations of Western metaphysics, and in the form of an appropriation of mythology in order to re-create the damaged bonds of female genealogies. Interestingly, this double encounter does not constitute a nostalgic return to origins in search for what has been lost, but on the contrary it questions the very discourse of return as it has developed in the humanities since the nineteenth century. Irigaray's reading and rewriting of the Greeks invokes the Derridean *différance*, for it exposes the originary as phantasmatic and Nietzsche's notion of historicity and eternal occurrence. Her reading is a performative one, which disrupts and changes what it reads.

A question which is a recurrent theme in the volume is asked in Elizabeth Weed's essay: the illegibility of the particular critique which Irigaray practices. For Weed, Irigaray belongs to the tradition of French poststructuralists who foreground the linguistic aspect of critique in their practice of reading and writing. Weed argues that Irigaray's critique is the most radical of all because it is a form of performative intervention, which requires readers to perform their own

deconstructive reading by opening up to the unthinkable within a register of the known.

Irigaray's relationship with poststructuralism is also investigated by Anne-Emmanuelle Berger, who reads in the philosopher's contradictory use of the veil an allegory for her relation to deconstruction, as well as her ambivalent stand towards metaphysics: the meaning of the veil in Irigaray's work changes mirroring her movement away from a first phase of critique into a more productive phase of creating the conditions for a new female subjectivity and a new relation between the sexes. For Berger, however, Irigaray's attempt to distinguish between veil as metaphor and veil as material reveals a contradiction inherent in her work: her metaphoric use of matter shows that her particular kind of materialism functions similarly to Plato's idealism.

An engagement with Irigaray's critique of the dependency of Greek metaphysics on an image of truth as hidden behind a series of veils/metaphors can be found in Claire Colebrook's essay as well. Colebrook, however, is more affirmative in her reading. She explains how Irigaray's reading of the Greeks differs from Heidegger and Agamben's idea of return as opening up of the presence: for Colebrook Irigaray's reading raises the question of sexual difference to expose not only the idea of a proper life but also "the very model of reading and retrieval that is presented both in the Greek text and its interpretative heritage" (182) as associated with the masculine.

Mary Beth Mader concentrates on Sophocles's *Antigone*'s enigmatic defence argument that she would not have violated Creon's edict for a child or husband of hers for it is only her brother who is irreplaceable. Irigaray has offered two incompatible readings of Sophocles's play: in the first reading Antigone's act is a form of allegiance to the maternal line, whereas in the second one she pays allegiance to a monosexual kinship system. Mader finds elements in both readings which can be useful in her own understanding of Antigone as retrospectively wishing to establish a kinship order that was missing in her incestuous family, claiming that the kind of relationship she had with her brother cannot be generated by her.

The figure of Antigone is the object of Athena Athanasiou's and Elena Tzelepis's essay, too. In Antigone's catachrestic mourning they find a practice similar to Irigaray's *parler-femme*, in the sense that with her "the sign of mourning turn[s]

from a pious and proper language-in-the-feminine into a threatening performative catachresis expelled by and actively opposed to the very intelligibility of the political." (110) Antigone cannot be seen as belonging either within the realm of politics or outside of it, but rather as being in the ambivalent position of the constitutive outside of the polis'spolitics. Coming from this position, her act requires a rearticulation of political normativity, but also entails the danger of mobilising anew the very law it intends to confront.

Dorothea Olkowski's essay makes use of Irigaray's reading of the myth of Kore and Demeter to argue for the necessity of a new notion of philosophy. This new philosophy, not depending on a metaphysics based on the separation between the visible and the invisible, but rather on an image of understanding as diffracted light, will be a transformation rather than an imitation of the material and the natural.

Kathy Acker's relationship with Irigaray is the focus of Dianne Chisholm. In the literary and non-fiction work of Acker, mostly in "Eurydice," Chisholm traces both kinds of Platonic mimesis which Irigaray mobilises in her steps towards a recovery of female subjectivity: Acker uses the 'mask' of woman as found in medical discourse to deconstruct enlightenment's basis on scientific knowledge, while at the same time her dead body, escaping reality, enacts a different embodied writing not appropriated by phallocentric logos.

In Stathis Gourgouris's chapter, the Irigarayan quest for the impossible and the Aristotelian paradox of the *archomenos archon* (the ruled ruler) are read together in an effort to propose Irigaray's sexual difference as an epistemic weapon "already grounded in a [Derridean] *différance*" (141). Sexual difference can enable an autonomy as constant self-alteration and a heterology which will not necessarily become heteronomy, both of which are impossible within a system of identary monism.

Reading Homer's *Odyssey*, Judith Still argues that Homeric hospitality is based on a specifically male subjectivity, which requires the rejection of women as subjects of hospitality. Women in the *Odyssey* are either dangerous hosts or hostesses who offer hospitality under protection of a male authority who is the real host. Based on Irigaray's notion of hospitality, Still proposes an ethics which, grounded on two kinds of subjectivities rather than one, will improve all kinds of relations of difference.

In her chapter, Laine M. Harrington makes use of Irigaray's deconstruction of the Greek origin of the Christian *Logos*as a sublimation of man—in a move of exclusion of the feminine from a hierarchical binary typical in the Greek philosophical tradition—in order to argue for a different kind of Word, and consequently, a different sense of God, as 'other.' Harrington points out the importance of a feminine style/discourse towards this process of rebuilding a theology of the other.

The focus of Gail M. Schwab is on the effacement of sexual difference under patriarchy. Schwab does an Irigarayan reading of tragedies featuring the houses of Atreides and Labdacides, looking for instances which testify to the severing of sororal and intergenerational relations between women. Observing that the myth of Demeter and Persephone is the only one in which the damage of the mother-daughter link remains explicit, she suggests that Irigaray's way of reading myths as a re-writing of what has been erased is a step towards a re-creation of this relationship.

Not all essays in the volume are celebratory of Irigaray. Still, faithful to the spirit of the book, Gayle Salamon's, Tina Chanter's and Penelope Deutscher's critiques of Irigaray are good examples of critique as affirmation: they look for the instances in Irigaray's texts where their very limitations point out a different way of relations (between people but also between texts) that surpass those limitations. Thus, in Irigaray's reading of Aristotle's engagement with place, Salamon finds that in the place of sexual difference there is no place for the sexually undecidable. However, it is in Irigaray's theory of relation that one can find the tools to displace the sexual border from relations between biologically 'male' and 'female' people to relations between people of the same gender or categorically undecidable people. Salamon takes it upon herself to affirm the generative power of Irigaray's sexual difference, relieved from what she identifies as the philosopher's heteronormative and biologistic presuppositions.

Similarly, Chanter's chapter tries to find in Irigaray the solution to a form of failure typical in the Western philosophical tradition, which also characterises the work of Irigaray herself: the inability to address difference without privileging one particular kind of difference at the expense of others. Irigaray prioritises sexual over racial or class differences. Yet, with her focus on this particular difference, on which the Western model of the subject is based, she exposes an instance of the

powerful monological thinking from which it is impossible to exit unless we challenge the Platonic hegemony of the one over the many.

Deutscher asks the question of the possibility of a non-appropriated alterity. She identifies one of the founding exclusions of Irigarayan sexual difference in the example of the occlusion of Jocasta from her reflection on Greek tragedy and, consequently, of unpredictability from her figuring of the mother-child relationship. She notes, however, that Irigaray's methodology "allows us to read it [her work] from the perspective of its own conditionality, and what 'it does not say.'" (257)

Lynne Huffer concentrates on the openness of the philosopher's work to be productively read along a different tradition. Beginning from a given view of queer theory and feminist theory as antagonistic, Huffer tries to bring together the ethical projects of Foucault and Irigaray as a way to bridge the "dissonance" (127) between feminists and queer theorists. Although Huffer makes it clear she does not agree with the image of the two theories as incommensurable, it is problematic that she upholds a view of Foucault as the foundational figure for queer theory and of Irigaray as virtually absent from queer theory, reinforcing a rather simplistic image of queer theory as not feminist enough.

Ewa Plonowska Ziarek in a surprising move juxtaposes Irigaray's reading of Aristotle's and Marx's theories of value—a reading which ignores the issue of slavery—to Hortense Spillers's work on slavery in America. Her objective is to ask whether a model of interpretation of pain suffered by bodies subjected to racism which transcends the essentialist/constructivist binary is possible. Indeed for Zwarek, the debate of essentialism vs. social construction is itself a symptom of commodification, typical of a culture of sexual indifference where difference is abstracted and erased. The answer to her question lies in a model based in a combined use of Spillers's reappropriation of the term "monstrosity" and Irigaray's paradoxical neologism "sensible transcendental."

Eleni Varikas's chapter, with its polemical critique of Irigaray's use of the Greek tradition, stands alone within the general atmosphere of the volume and is, for that, quite refreshing. According to Varikas, Irigaray in her late phase makes an "instrumental and conventional use of tradition" (232) in order to validate a vision of sexual difference which can be dystopian, especially when situated within the current political and social context. Varikas finds that Irigaray in her project of

configuring a positive sexual difference creates a new master narrative out of mythology, unlike Nicole Loraux's more "contrapuntal" (242) approach to it.

The theme of the return is the object of Luce Irigaray's own contribution to this volume. For Irigaray, it is one of the most important themes of Western culture, proof of which she finds in the *Odyssey*; for her this is the epic that announces the beginning of Western metaphysics. Man in our culture has not experienced the relationship with the mother as an intersubjective experience. At the same time, our culture at large is an attempt to escape the self in projecting ourselves onto the world, an appropriation of the outside through representations. These two facts make an actual return to the self seem both a necessity and an impossibility. The return to the Greeks is, for that reason, a return to the crossroad where "we have taken the wrong path" (262). Here Irigaray's relationship with the Greeks appears closer to Varikas's rather than to Colebrook's understanding of it: instead of being critical of the model of reading as retrieval, she seems to be looking in the classics to unearth some sort of authorisation for her philosophical vision. Thus, ancient Greek morphological forms which have eclipsed, like the middle voice, the term *eteros* and the original meaning of the word *genos*, are used to suggest that there was some sort of self-affection and a reciprocity between self and a different other, which have disappeared after the establishment of a man-centred *logos*. In order for self-affection—Irigaray's notion of a real return—to be achieved, man, with woman's help, must escape the prison of *logos*, the illusion of knowing the world through an unveiling which is in fact a series of projections.

In a nutshell, the reader will find the book a useful and compelling introduction into the basic concepts of Irigarayan scholarship from the perspective of her reading of the Greeks. It addresses a wide audience of readers, thanks to the diversity of contemporary political, literary and philosophical issues, as well as the variety of disciplines and theories that can be found in its pages. Overall, the volume celebrates Irigaray's invaluable contribution to philosophy. Most of the essays are appreciative of the possibilities her work enables, including her later work which has received the most criticism. Some are more critical: they interrogate the difficulty of her style or point out the lurking danger of reproducing the very structures she questions. Most chapters are well balanced, as those mostly affirmative do not fail to point out some limitations or problematic moments in her work, or the difficulty of understanding her in a non-essentialist way, and those

mostly critical still testify to the richness of Irigaray's work. The result is a constructive dialogue between essays which complement even if they occasionally disagree with each other.

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