

Luce Irigaray

The way of love

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Reviewed by Karen MacKendrick

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Silence as Irigaray understands it also holds a lovely and exciting promise of a real reconciliation of philosophy with theology: the divine, too, is proximate, offering a new sense of divinity within, not far away; manifest as the impulse to say, as breathing rather than things said. In an interesting twist upon Heidegger, we construct, and we dwell-in, our gods as well as each other.

We all know not to judge books by their covers; luscious texts come in homely packages and dreadful writing beautifully bound. Luce Irigaray's *The Way of Love*, however, is among this rule's exceptions. The cover shows a human heart, in pale pink on a black background, and on the heart a darker-pink tracery that is undoubtedly that of veins and arteries but which also strongly resembles the branches of winter trees against an empty sky. It is an image at once conventionally lovely—a heart in pink, after all, with such a lacy pattern—and unsettling. It's a heart, and it's pretty, and the tree-like tracery of the veins places our hearts into continuity with the loveliness of the natural world. But there it is unnaturally isolated against the black background, its disembodiment reminding us of the bodiliness, the corporeality, of the heart. This heart, at once beautiful and disturbing, natural and abstract, continuous with nature and yet somehow alone, nicely represents the way of love.

Appropriately for a work on love, which must in some way be relational, this text is written in dialogue with others. Clearest among these, and almost alone in being specified, is Heidegger (there are some brief references to Nietzsche as well). Others remain unnamed; there are echoes of Derrida and of Nancy; the discussion of conversation echoes Blanchot—all, like Irigaray, in conversation with Heidegger's still-troubling voice.

The work “proposes ways to approach the other, to prepare a place of proximity: with the other in ourselves and between us” (ix). It is thus interested not in the speaking subject who names (denominates and thus, Irigaray argues, dominates) objects, but in speaking *between* subjects, as a means not to assimilation or appropriation but to proximity. Conversation is always approach and even transformation rather than informative declaration, and approach always holds open the potential of love. Speech does not pre-exist speaking but unfolds between-two, called by the other's speaking and by silent spaces.

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Seemingly distant from divinity, the body too belongs to the way of love—although body shares with proximity an extraordinary difficulty, perhaps an impossibility, when it comes to being-said. Like love, the body is understood here as neither purely natural nor wholly constructed.

Much of the text unfolds the complex relationality of love. Love arises as a third between two, a third often too quickly assimilated, Irigaray says, to the generation of a child. But the third is not merely one more in a series, and the return to self—an act creative in the spaces within that self and beyond—is vital to intimacy. What is properly human, she argues, is not *simply* Heideggerian dwelling in language, but willingness to open one's dwelling to otherness and newness. Openness to the other also opens me to the strangeness of my own "identity": the self to which I return from my approach to the other is no more static than the speaking unfolded between us (the "selfsame" subject—the wholly denominable—is identified by her as 'masculine,' a masculine fiction, presumably).

The question along this way becomes how to keep ourselves open to others without losing the ability to return to those selves. Because of this return, the way of love is not, at least not entirely, a way of self-expenditure. There are traces of Levinasian response-ability here, but Levinas's claim that I am fully responsible for and to the other, while the other's responsibility is not my concern, seems to leave me without reserve. Irigaray emphasizes, on the contrary, how important this reserve is—not by making my well-being the other's concern, but by making it my own, essential to love for any other.

Implicit here is an ethical obligation to respect and to preserve alterity, safeguarding mystery in "a poetic way of dwelling." The act of approach demands recognition of difference. Sheltering the other is an unfolding process involving memory and time—a remembering of a living being who is still becoming. It demands silence: "The beloved is sheltered in the silence of the heart, in the mystery of thinking, in the restraint of the gesture, its inward gathering, and a self-touching guaranteeing a possible safeguarding of the other and of the world" (153). Nearness requires the invisible (here I found myself reminded of Merleau-Ponty); love, in an elegant rethinking of a commonplace notion, requires mystery. The task of love is to transform instinctive attraction to the other so that it is made a gift, preserving a distance even in drawing near so that desire can unfold.

The approach to the other is touch, not seizure, respectful of otherness and mystery. Encounter and the preparation for it involve not making-the-other-familiar but touching alterity. Thus is formed an alliance, not a submission; proximity to the other is unlike the proximity to things.

The first other is the mother; the "law of the father" glosses over Being's being born-of and thus being-in-relation. And so the human ground is difference that always holds on, not to sameness, but to with-ness. Letting-become, exemplified by the mother, is not just passive but participatory. The opposition between letting-be and making may inappropriately divide nature and culture. The "most human task" is "to lead the relation with the other from nature to culture without abolishing the duality of subjectivity" (124).

Bringing-into-relation goes beyond the between of humans to theology again. God represents a sort of ultimate alterity, keeping freedom and distance. The call to the divine and to the human

other alike is approach, not making-appear. If the god thus approached is creator, then gratitude toward the engendering feminine (130) must decidedly change our image of the divine.

Human Being, dwelling un-simply in language and flesh, is not one but two, not grounded in a single *causa sui* but in difference too. As originary, this difference is perhaps the unthinkable, difference itself. It does not take place within an already constituted whole (a perspective she calls “a rather masculine model”); being-with is not a controversy resolvable into a single truth, but a recognition of difference.

In general, I find this text extraordinarily rich and appealing. Like some other readers, though, I have long been a bit uneasy with Irigaray’s sense of sexual difference as *the* fundamental human difference. Certainly this sense has some real value; it allows us to perceive the deep importance of such difference without resorting to *essences* of female and male, nor even of masculine and feminine. However, this singular sense of difference is troubling when the way of love is centered there; when she argues that “the most paradigmatic and universal [difference is] sexual difference” (xvii)—and then argues for “the crucial importance of sexual difference in the putting into practice of a wisdom of love” (xviii).

I don’t wish to be disingenuous here, to insist absurdly either that that we do not think of gender, ever, in binary terms nor that gender is irrelevant to eros. But this duality is not exhaustive of gender or genders, and to name a single kind of difference as primary, particularly in insisting upon the centrality of difference to attraction and approach, may be to ignore the astonishing (whether delightful or disturbing) range of human erotic divergence, to ignore not only same-sex attraction but attraction based on differences that are not so clearly gender-based at all. I don’t think Irigaray makes these options impossible, but she does make them, for me uncomfortably, marginal.

Relatedly troubling in a work for which conversation is central is a sometimes-reductive sense of how men’s and women’s conversations function; the insistence, for example, that men’s reflexive verbs make dialogue difficult (61) has a bit of a “men are from Mars” air to it. Lovely though it is to see the establishing of non-instrumental relationality as “the foremost task of humanity,” it is troubling to go on to read, “it cannot be subordinated to any task on pain of fragmenting human being itself, its lone non-reductive partition being: woman and man.” (79).

Despite these issues, the work is overall a great pleasure. Its most intriguing elements may lie in the ways in which Irigaray amends ideas from the philosophical tradition, particularly those of Heidegger in Nietzsche, in ways at once subtle and dramatic. Where Heidegger, for all the importance of being-with, insists as Derrida has emphasized upon a death that is always one’s own, Irigaray calls for a fidelity to *life* instead, as always one’s own even though shared; it’s in life that we approach and welcome one another. Consciousness and flesh both come to presence, which grows from life rather than being at our disposal.

This fidelity to life is an interestingly altered echo of Nietzsche, who insists that the aim of philosophy should not be, as so many before him insisted, an acceptance of death but, if anything, a stronger rebellion against it. Also echoing Nietzsche is the idea of self-creation, but

for Irigaray self-construction occurs in a shared space. We shape ourselves, but while attending to the whole; the act of making is always interior and exterior at once.

Similarly, her rethinking of the proximate divine echoes, without simply mirroring, other theological traditions—though these seldom have her awareness of the feminine. Her rethinking of language shares its emphasis on the communal with Blanchot and with Nancy, but again with a feminist, or as she might prefer, a feminine, slant.

The work is, despite its brevity, rich and complex. The way of love is at once familiar to us—language analysis, questions of human dwelling, considerations of maternity—and yet, coming from a ground of difference and relation, of propriety and breach, it all looks new.

Karmen MacKendrick combines philosophy with theology, cultural studies, and literary theory to pursue her fascinations with language and all things somatic. She is the author of *Divine Enticement: Theological Seductions* (Fordham UP, 2012), *Fragmentation and Memory* (Fordham UP, 2008), *Word Made Skin* (Fordham UP, 2004), *Immemorial Silence* (SUNY Press, 2001), *counterpleasures* (SUNY Press, 1999), and (with Virginai Burrus and Mark D. Jordan) *Seducing Augustine* (Fordham UP, 2010), along with various articles on related subjects. She teaches core classes (PHL 101, 201, and 409), philosophy electives, and Honors courses. Karmen was awarded the Joseph C. Georg Endowed Professorship for 2009-2012.