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Seeking a Sensible Transcendental: An Amorous Exchange

In The Way of Love, Luce Irigaray suggests that we (Westerners), trained in rigid and coded meanings and senses, forget the requirement of the carnal in our communications. We let pass the opportunity to be “surprised, touched, wonderstruck, called beyond ... what we already [are]” (2002, viii). By writing a philosophy that seeks to transform ethical and sexuate relations, Irigaray privileges a mode of becoming that is both creative and unpredictable. Becoming divine is not a staged and regulated process, offering a fixed and knowable ideal; rather, it is a revelation. A dialectic of divinity is therefore an impossibility; instead, a meditation on becoming opens up the possibilities for an amorous exchange with Luce Irigaray’s writings.

Irigaray first uses the term ‘amorous exchange’ in ‘The Bodily Encounter with the Mother’, when she seeks a corporeal way of communicating (1991b, 44). An amorous exchange is an invitation to, and a dialogue with, a desiring other in multiple texts and voices. It is also the performance of an intersubjective model of being (at least) two in language and philosophy. Reading and writing in this sense becomes an affective and intimate process of exchange or touch between authors, readers and texts. With this in mind, this work is written in multiple voices. One, a critical and theoretical voice, establishes the contexts within which writers have read and responded to Irigaray’s philosophy of becoming divine, and frames my ideas in relation to these. Another voice presents moments of becoming — or points of saturation — from my own life to demonstrate the pleasures and possibilities of Irigaray’s texts. In this way, I am following Irigaray’s call in the introductory section “Becoming Divine as Two” in Key Writings, to discover and cultivate a language of my own, and to locate this in my body. The words of another are not sufficient for my becoming (2004, 145-6). Entering an amorous or ‘touchful’ exchange with Irigaray’s writing — and the multiple voices which speak in and around it — is a process of ‘becoming’ which forms the basis of a sensible and carnal transcendental, or an inscription of divinity on the flesh (1993b, 147).

In Sydney, the summer I am twelve years old is extremely hot, over 35°C on many days. There are two girls, younger than I, living around the corner — and they have a swimming pool. To prompt an invitation, I reveal my ability to become a mermaid. I imagine a painless and spectacular shift: my legs fusing together to create an incandescent tail; my fingers growing more webbed (they have always been part-sea); my hair floating seaweed-like around me; but, most of all, the cool, clear embrace of the water. Later, I have to explain that chlorine impedes my powers. That same summer, I keep a diary. On the front cover: a painting of a mermaid, upright, looking directly at me, naked, her pubic hair transforming into scales. She is the most carnal woman I have ever seen. On the back cover: a young girl, naked, her legs apart, and her arms around a younger boy, staring into the sea — ‘it’s like giving birth,’ is the caption.

This summer, I am becoming carnal. My nipples emerge in small pink triangles; my hips are bruised from interactions with furniture and walls; my vulva tingles. I am aware of my body. In the bath I try to touch every part of myself — the backs of my knees, my tongue, my shoulder blades, between my toes. I yearn for the fluidity of the mermaid — that floating signifier — the freedom of water, the
limitless, liminal possibilities of being beyond borders, boundaries and fixed definitions. I am seeking ways to negotiate what Tamsin Lorraine calls the slippery aspects of embodied existence. I wear a Ken Done patterned bikini of brightly coloured triangles and string. A family friend tells me not to wear it near her thirteen-year-old son. On New Year’s Eve, he and I are floating together in the shadows of the pool while the adults prepare fireworks and food. He slips his chlorine-scented arms around me and presses his wet lips against mine. I am in a state of flux.

Writing ‘Belief Itself,’ Luce Irigaray prepares her audience for a work that is associational and dreamy “like a children’s story” (1993b, 25). Here, she finds traces and remains of the ‘dark’ questions to which we seek answers — among them, perhaps, those that haunted me as I imagined a mermaid-like body that summer: ‘what is happening to me?’ and ‘who am I becoming?’ These questions, Irigaray writes in ‘Divine Women,’ “are often laid down ... as mysteries, those stories of birth, intuition, love, war, death, and passion” (1993b, 58). The mermaids in stories — partial incarnations, monstrously composite women, stages in becoming — may offer clues to these coded affections. They represent desires, for elemental bodies, spaces and identities, and allow us to imagine a shifting corporeality. We are all partial incarnations and stages in becoming. Stories demonstrate the meeting place of the poetic and the carnal, and offer a starting point for an amorous exchange and a sensible or material transcendent.

What roles did the stories of mermaids play in my becoming woman? Reading Irigaray, I begin to find answers to this question. Did I hold the association of the mermaid and becoming woman in the back of my mind, in a ‘poste restante’ (1993b, 25)? Hans Christian Andersen’s ‘The Little Mermaid’ and Disney’s animated Little Mermaid were texts I was absorbed in at the age of twelve, dipping into them again and again. Rereading ‘The Little Mermaid’ Irigaray discovers a reason she has written about the elements in Marine Lover, Elemental Passions and The Forgetting of Air, as though she has held these answers in a poste restante until they are revealed to her through a story. This series of associations, occurring after the writing of some of her elemental texts, demonstrates the multiplicity of voices and figures in the spaces between reading and writing. For Irigaray, the ‘poste restante’ of ‘The Little Mermaid’ is the role of the elements in our transitions and transformations. For me, ‘The Little Mermaid’ represents a desire for carnality. In ‘Divine Women’, Irigaray refers to becoming divine as “entering further into womanhood” (1993b, 60).

By evoking the mermaid and my own becoming in response to Irigaray’s writing, I am accepting her invitation in the preface to The Way of Love to enter into dialogue with the text. Irigaray describes the book as written in at least four voices (her own, the translators Heidi Bostic and Stephen Pluháček, and Martin Heidegger, with whom she converses), and invites the reader to the encounter. She writes: “I ask the reader of the text to accept the invitation to listen-to in the present, to enter into dialogue with a thought, with a way of speaking, and to give up appropriating only a content of discourse in order to integrate it among knowledge already gained” (2002a, x).

In Everyday Prayers, Irigaray offers the daily practice of her poetry for such a listening — a listening-to in the present — where we “find other perceptions, other gestures, other words to say, and to speak between us, the relations to nature, to ourselves, to the other.” She continues: “We have to listen and to keep listening in ourselves in order to situate ourselves differently with respect to the
world, to the self, to the other” (2004b, 33). In The Pleasure of the Text, Roland Barthes writes of such a ‘listening differently’ when he refers to a jouissant text as “the text that discomforts [and] ... unsettles the reader’s historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relationship with language” (1975, 14). This is a part of Irigaray’s philosophical project: to write in a new voice that evokes a ‘being two’ that does not yet exist. This is simultaneously unsettling and exciting. She is offering what may be termed an erotics of reading that locates carnality in philosophy.

How is it possible for reading to be an amorous exchange? In Michael Cunningham’s The Hours, Laura Brown delays the day to read Virginia Woolf’s Mrs Dalloway:

One more page, she decides; just one more ... She is taken by a wave of feeling, a sea-swell, that rises from under her breast and buoys her, floats her gently, as if she were a sea creature thrown back from the sand where it had beached itself — as if she had been returned from a realm of crushing gravity to her true medium, the suck and swell of saltwater, that weightless brilliance (1999, 40).

When I read Irigaray, a similar transformation occurs. In Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche, Irigaray evokes the rapture of the sea in the swelling and the falling rhythm of her writing: “And the sea can shed shimmering scales indefinitely. Her depths peel off into innumerable thin, shining layers. And each one is the equal of the other as it catches a reflection and lets it go. As it preserves and blurs. As it captures the glinting play of light. As it sustains mirages. Multiple and far too numerous for the pleasure of the eye, which is lost in the host of sparkling surfaces. And with no end in sight ...” (1991, 46-7).

I hear Luce Irigaray as a siren, calling in the voice of the other, the ‘marine lover’. Fergus Kerr, in Immortal Longings, hears her writing as “a kind of chant,” provoking epiphanies (1997, 111). The siren is a creature of elsewhere, occupying the spaces between circumscribed, solid land and the uncontained, formless sea and air. This is a space of risk that challenges and confuses. It is the borderline where Irigaray situates her work, operating between the known and mapped masculine philosophies, and the shape-shifting sea of a new philosophy of sexual difference. By tradition, the siren’s song is finely tuned to a masculine ear. It is something of a mimic, presenting to him precisely the voice he wishes to hear, echoing his ideals back to him. Her mimesis is a trap. He risks being consumed. Irigaray “play[s] with mimesis” echoing the voices of male philosophies and beliefs, but she is “elsewhere” outside of the logic within which the original fantasy is constructed (1985a, 76). For example, in ‘The Redemption of Women’, Mary’s virginity becomes her interiority and her faithfulness to her own becoming as a woman (2004, 152). Rather than simply echoing the words of the past, Irigaray’s mimesis knows another pleasure. She brings “new nourishment” to the performance of divinity (1985a, 76).

The voice of the siren is a composite and monstrous voice of a creature caught in the stages of becoming: bird, woman, fish. It is a voice that is disruptive, which beckons and cajoles, promising new ways of living in the world, transforming ethical and sexuate relations, suggesting unknown ideas and places. Irigaray’s project, Grosz writes, “is to announce the birth of a new epoch, a new type of exchange and coexistence” (1993, 213). I hear Irigaray, to borrow Hélène Cixous and
Catherine Clément’s term, as the ‘newly born woman.’ She is “a voice crying in the wilderness ... the voice of a body dancing, laughing, shrieking, crying. Whose is it? It is ... the voice of a woman, newborn and yet archaic, a voice of milk and blood, a voice silenced but savage” (1986, ix). To live through Luce Irigaray’s call, rather than drowning or stopping my ears, to listen to her song — which is “only in riddles, allusions, hints, parables ... until the ear tunes to another music” (Burke 1994, 251) — and remain afloat, I try to listen with an/other ear.

This is where Barthes locates the pleasure of a text, when he writes: “it produces, in me, the best pleasure if it manages to make itself heard indirectly; if, reading it, I am led to look up often, to listen to something else” (1975, 24). I make sense of my reading, and of myself, through my absences from the text, the moments when I occupy an elsewhere or, at least, a ‘not-here’, when I am listening ‘differently’. I may be looking into the distances towards an unseen sea. My head may be tilted slightly to the side, as if hearing the distant drumming of a shell. In this type of a reading, the text has texture or viscosity. It has breath. You can feel it on the pages and hear it through your fingertips. It invites touch and promises transformation. As well as material or sensible objects, texts are transcendent objects because of what and how they allow us to feel, to imagine and to write.

Why only one text at a time? In an idle moment, I google ‘Luce Irigaray.’ I am at one remove from what is known as the “ego search” — the googling of the self. The search locates works with which I am already familiar. I skip forward the hundreds of thousands of references, known and meaningful in some way: bibliographies, sketchy biographical details, key quotations, conceptual lists, French feminisms. I excavate the nooks and crannies of a postmodern archaeology, searching for — what? And, then, something unexpected, and no doubt unintended: a five-year-old email exchange, consisting of eight pages of close-packed text, existing in awkward black-and-white and dated fonts like ghosts. Names have lost their context — Simone, ‘michael’, ‘thanks Noelle’, ‘Dear Ruth’ ‘Cheers! Paul’ ‘Must run, Catherine’ — and float free outside the limits of titles and affiliations. It is as if I overhear a conversation, a crossed-line, and tentatively make sense of it as “talking about Irigaray.” Phrases are bulleted over and over, original authors lost, dashes and repetitive ‘re: re: re’-s take over half a page. Multiple phrases are encased in “scare quotes” demonstrating ironic knowingness (or is it laziness?) I can almost hear those disembodied fingers hooking the air. This is discussion coded in ‘Irigarayan’ and ‘Deleuzian’ and ‘Merleau-Pontian’, those wonderful and arcane languages of mimicry. Overhanging us are economies of arboresence, a physis and a phuhen, and a full academy of name-dropping: Heidegger’s ereignis, the “legacy” of Saussure, Hegel “needs restating as a problematic”, “Derrida’s glance at Heidegger’s apparent omission of sexuality and sexual difference in his fundamental ontology project” and Deleuze “leveled by genitally over-determined feminists.”

There are moments of cohesion and comprehension — Irigaray’s work containing the “residue” of other writers, the potential claustrophobia of reading Irigaray, her recoding of Lacan’s jouissance, libidinal economies, the “cleavage” of sexual difference, the “smell” of heterosexism, the dissolution of temporality (sexual difference = to come), the complexity of mucous as simultaneous flow and unity. One writer (is it Paul?) comments: “I think we’d have to develop the transcendental element of the sensible a bit more as a means of determining how I can both be pulled out of my narcissistic economy while maintaining a certain degree of sameness.” Oh, I could tell him something of this contest — I feel like Alice. And, as if my confusion has conjured her on the page, she appears in the text of a reply: “Which way, which way! cried Alice, knowing it was both at the same time” And a
counter-reply (or is it a question?): “Of course, Alice ontologically ‘is not’ which is why she is such a great ‘friend’ for Zarathustra.” Quick, find Deleuze!

In the midst of this unraveling, I grab hold of any body I can reach. Someone — identities are mucous-like flows here — writes: “I think the meek still inherent the earth in irigaray — we could not imagine her spitting and she lacks a firedog. Excessive heat ... [is] usually written in the masculine ... There are, for example, few alimentary economies in her writing — bluntly put, one could be forgiven for thinking that irigaray doesn’t possess an anus or any urethral fluids.” Imagine her spitting? When she is responding to Lacan, there are flecks of spittle at the corner of her mouth. A particularly vehement point lets fly a gob of spit that lands in the eye of the sardine can. Lacks a firedog? Have the fires been lost in the emphasis on water and air? Does irigaray now need to position her anus in her writing (not just her lips)? Is the writer suggesting that irigaray’s body-in-the-text remains clean and proper? I cannot agree, but reluctantly find myself scanning irigaray’s work for evidence that she has an asshole and that she pisses as regularly as the rest of us. There is shit and pleasure here aplenty in the exchange between readers and writers.

Where were we? Reading Luce Irigaray, and finding joy in listening with an ‘other’ ear. Through such a reading, the reader enters into a dialogue with the text. I am reminded of the way Richard Howard introduces Roland Barthes’ The Pleasure of the Text, as “a writer’s aphrodisiac” (1975, vii): this is the beginning of an amorous exchange. Judith Still borrows from irigaray the evocative phrase ‘poetic nuptials’ to describe the bodily exchange which can take place between authors, readers, translators, and within and between texts. She writes: “Poetic nuptials are an alternative to ways of reading such as critique which demand a particular distance between what become subject and object” (2002, 7). They allow an intersubjective relation of being two (or more). Within this exchange, Still suggests, the text becomes active, searching for or seeking readers who will respond to its gift (2002, 8).

Here we can locate divinity: in the words that are its vehicle. Irigaray suggests that there are two tasks required for becoming divine: “to assure incarnation between word(s) and body [and] to practise love towards the other(s)” (2004, 145). Divinity is therefore both a process of language and poetry and an act of love. A sensible transcendental locates divinity and carnality together in exchanges with the other. Irigaray’s model of the transcendental emphasises the primacy of the body, and a relation with the natural world through the senses. Irigaray finds the poetic vocabulary to discuss becoming divine through the passion or carnality of bodies in response to nature and the elements, which provide a fleshy medium for thinking through bodies, life, language and the environment. In Key Writings, she writes: “Articulation between nature or life and transcendence becomes a new task incumbent on us. A transcendence which now remains alive, sensible and even carnal” (2004, 148). Grosz argues that Irigaray’s elemental or natural language provides “a corporeal model of sexual difference” and a terminology “to describe the powerful relations that constitute love, exchange and social organisation” (1986, 10). This corresponds with irigaray’s project of becoming divine: a loving exchange between body and language. In this context, Grosz refers to the elements as a “textual strategy”, while Whitford uses the phrase “discursive strategy” (1991, 61). Both terms highlight Irigaray’s practice of rewriting philosophy at a corporeal or carnal level that is specific to a feminine becoming.
An amorous exchange. Poetic nuptials. An erotics of reading and writing. A dialogue ‘between two’ and towards becoming. In my writing, I want to visit the ‘points of saturation’ or moments of becoming that inform my reading of Luce Irigaray’s philosophy, in order to rise to the challenges that this dialogue generates. In The Hours, Virginia Woolf is beginning to write Mrs Dalloway: “At this moment there are infinite possibilities … She can feel it inside her, an all but indescribable second self, or rather a parallel, purer self. If she were religious, she would call it the soul” (1999, 35). Like the writing woman of Hélène Cixous, she finds herself overflowing: “Time and again I, too, have felt so full of luminous torrents that I could burst” (1981, 246). Let’s swim together.

References


Agnes Bosanquet is currently completing a PhD in the Critical and Cultural Studies Department of Macquarie University, in Sydney, Australia. Her thesis takes the form of a critical dialogue with the philosophy of Luce Irigaray. In May 2004, Agnes attended a six-day seminar with Luce Irigaray, and six other PhD students, at the University of Nottingham, UK. The exchanges at this seminar – described by Luce Irigaray as taking place “in a friendly and joyful atmosphere” – were inspirational and have been directly incorporated into the thesis. The following paper, extracted from the first chapter, was presented at the inspirational conference ‘Women and the Divine’, which ran from 17th to 19th June 2005, at Liverpool University and Liverpool Hope College, UK, and at which Luce Irigaray was a keynote speaker. agnes.bosanquet@mq.edu.au