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Luce Irigaray's *Sensible Transcendental*: Becoming Divine in the Body

By Agnes Bosanquet

Luce Irigaray's sensible transcendental locates divinity and carnality together, so that the divine comes to represent the accomplishment of the flesh. This is a project of becoming that is simultaneously conceptual and corporeal. In *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, Irigaray asks: "Why do we assume that God must always remain an inaccessible transcendence rather than a realisation—here and now—through the body?" (148). The sensible transcendental is a phrase that emphasises the primacy of the body, and its relation to the elements through the senses, in considering questions of transcendence and incarnation. It encompasses both physical sensation and the recognition of a beyond, with an emphasis on becoming and growing, rather than being, in everyday life. In this paper, I consider alternative theoretical approaches to this relation, including Romain Rolland's oceanic feeling and Catherine Clement's syncope. These concepts have in common a concern with questions of the interiority and exteriority of the subject in relation to the world. The subject, to use the imagery of Merleau-Ponty, exists as a hinge or a fold, an articulation between the other, the world and the self.

In her most recent work, *The Way of Love and Key Writings*, Irigaray imagines this becoming divine as operating within the framework of our relations with others, in the realm of intersubjectivity. This is a model of "being two" that is illustrated in her rewriting of the everyday phrase "I love you" as "I love to you." She explains that the *to* "means I maintain a relation of indirection to you. I do not subjugate you or consume you. . . . The 'to' is the guarantor of indirection. The 'to' prevents the relation of transitivity, bereft of the other's irreducibility and potential reciprocity" (*I Love to You* 109). The inclusion of 'to' ensures that I recognise the subjectivity of the other. At the very least, it disrupts the easy discourse of our relationship, forcing me to consider my words to you and the place of 'you' in my words.

Even within the complexities of this ethical relation, the sensible transcendental is amongst the most difficult and provoking of Irigaray's concepts. This is evident when she writes that "to become means fulfilling the wholeness of what we are capable of being" (*Sexes and Genealogies* 61), an idea which causes trepidation for many of her readers and critics. Judith Butler acknowledges that "the largeness and speculative character of Luce Irigaray's claims have always put me a bit on edge" (149). Penelope Deutscher writes of the pleasure in getting immersed in Irigaray's concepts, but finds divine fulfillment "jarring": "Butler is right that Irigaray's tone and style leave the reader on edge, left with a kind of 'Irigaray anxiety'" (6-7). I believe that it is precisely through the vastness and "otherness" of Irigaray's critical texts that the reader encounters the transformative possibilities of the sensible transcendental. Irigaray's writing is confounding. Sentences are frequently left "unfinished, half-said, as they might occur in conversation" (Grosz, *Sexual Subversions* 101); grammar, syntax and references do not follow the ready-made grids one has come to expect; ideas

are fragmentary, elliptical, playful; and her styles are various, multiple, and changeable, seemingly shifting in mid-sentence. To illustrate this within her own writing in *This Sex Which is Not One*:

Hers are contradictory words, somewhat mad from the standpoint of reason, inaudible for whoever listens to them with ready-made grids, with a fully elaborated code in hand. . . . One would have to listen with another ear, as if hearing an "other meaning" always in the process of weaving itself, of embracing itself with words, but also of getting rid of words in order not to become fixed, congealed in them (29).

It is precisely these shameless contradictions that arouse my pleasure as a reader and signal the approach of the sensible transcendental. A text of pleasure is, Barthes writes, "the text that . . . unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relationship with language" (14). This is Irigaray's project: to disrupt our relationship with language itself and bring our (reading) bodies into crisis. Luce Irigaray is writing in a new voice: "her writing, her 'styles', involve new forms of discourse, new ways of speaking, a 'poetry' which is necessarily innovative and evocative of new conceptions of women and femininity" (Grosz, *Sexual Subversions* 101). She is offering what may be termed "an *erotics of reading*" (Howard in Barthes 1975, viii), or *poetic nuptials*, which Judith Still refers to as "an exchange of gifts . . . rolling words around your tongue, letting them fall from your lips to have them reverberate in another's labyrinthine inner ear echoes your hopes for further passionate encounters between the text and other readers" (20-1).

The textual pleasure of the sensible transcendental is evoked in Michael Cunningham's *The Hours*, when 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. (40)

In *Civilisation and Its Discontents*, Freud describes a similar affective response shared with him by Romain Rolland:

It consists in a particular feeling, which never leaves him personally, which he finds shared by many others, and which he may suppose millions more also experience. It is a feeling which he would like to call a sensation of "eternity," a feeling of something limitless, unbounded, something "oceanic". (8)

In a letter to Freud, Rolland explained that oceanic feeling is a subjective experience and, although it may be channeled through religion, implies no specific belief. It is however, he believes, the source of religious sentiment. One may, he thinks, "rightly call oneself religious on the grounds of this oceanic feeling alone, even if one rejects every belief and every illusion" (8). In this way, it is similar to Irigaray's divine, which involves a rethinking of the notion of God. In "Divine Women," Irigaray argues that men already have access to a divinity—father, son, spirit—but that Western "theological tradition presents some difficulty as far as God in the feminine gender is concerned. There is no woman God, no female trinity" (*Sexes and Genealogies* 62). Women are therefore lacking a horizon,

a reference to the infinite that offers a path to becoming. God becomes simply a term by which we can experience a sensible transcendental:

Love of God has nothing moral in and of itself. It merely shows the way. It is the incentive for a more perfect becoming. . . . God forces us to do nothing more except *become*. The only task, the only obligation laid upon us is to become divine men and women, to become perfectly, to refuse to allow parts of ourselves to shrivel and die that have the potential for growth and fulfilment. (68-9)

Freud explains that oceanic feeling puts him in a difficult position, much like the anxiety that Irigaray's divine generates: "I cannot discover this 'oceanic' feeling in myself" (8). Without experiencing it, Freud describes "a feeling of indissoluble connection, of belonging inseparably to the external world as a whole" (8-9). In his letter, Rolland describes it as "*the feeling of the 'eternal'* (which can very well not be eternal, but simply without perceptible limits, and oceanic, as it were)." He goes on to explain that this sensation has never failed him: "I have always found in it a source of vital renewal." He experiences it "like a sheet of water which I feel flushing under the bark," and adds that, for him, it has nothing to do with yearning, "but the sentiment I experience is imposed on me as a fact. It is *contact*" (qtd. in Parsons 16-17).

In an illustration of oceanic feeling, champion free diver Tanya Streeter holds her breath for three minutes and 38 seconds, descends 122 metres underwater to the ocean floor, and returns immediately to the surface. In that single breath, "her heart rate slow[s] to 15 beats a minute, her lungs compress to the size of scrunched-up plastic bags and her blood cease[s] circulation around her extremities" (Brooks). In an interview published in *The Guardian* newspaper earlier this year, she describes her relationship with the sea: "I have a strong emotional response to the water. I find it overwhelming and I don't think I've ever properly articulated it. I feel very much protected when I'm underwater. . . . I feel as though the sea is on my side." The author, Libby Brooks, describes Streeter as "blonde, with a bikini-friendly body." In the photograph that accompanies the story, however, she is masked, clad in a wetsuit, and wearing giant flippers, almost the length of her legs. She describes her experience of free diving: "I have an incredible sense of inner peace throughout a dive. It's very introspective because you are forced to look within to understand how your body is responding to the experience, and to adjust accordingly. It's very quiet."

Australian free diver Sebastien "the Sub" Murat and his trainer Paul Murray describe their experiences in an interview in *The Sydney Morning Herald*. In the accompanying photo, they are in the water. Paul stands upright, hands on his hips; Sebastien is curled up, floating suspended in the water; as Paul describes him, he is "almost aquatic" (Van Tiggelen). Sebastien can hold his breath for up to eight minutes, and holds the world record for the longest underwater swim, at 193 metres. He aims to dive unaided to a depth of 200 metres—"the abyss," the point at which "your body collapses." Paul describes Sebastien's "samba" during one record attempt: "A samba's a flop-around in the water, a loss of motor control from lack of oxygen. It's no big deal. . . . I mean, we train on no air." The relationship between the two men is all-important: "There is no 'I' here. It is a 'we' thing." Sebastien explains that, without Paul, there would be no return: "There's no way I could swim back from that depth. Going down's not a problem. The problem is coming back up." He describes freediving as another world: "Normal life . . . doesn't mean much to us, in this world."

Catherine Clément describes oceanic feeling as "a flood; a torrent of waves; a delicious immersion; a feeling of drowning; arriving in a liquid that rolls, shakes, exhausts and draw one up" (201). It is, she

writes, a "mystical syncope." Syncope offers a range of meanings. It is open and ambiguous: "a fainting or a swooning and other kinds of loss or absence of consciousness; an irregularity in the heartbeat; a grammatical or other elision" (xix). The samba in the water—the loss of consciousness—operates as a syncope.

This experience is visualised in Luc Besson's *The Big Blue*. Jacques Mayol is the world champion free diver; like Tanya Streeter and Sebastien Murat, the sea is on his side. In "a phenomenon that has only been observed in whales and dolphins, until now," he stops his breath, slows his heartbeat, and dives. His pregnant partner, Johanna Baker, is warned: "Don't think of Jacques as a human being. He is from another world." Towards the end of the film, immediately after Johanna's pregnancy is confirmed to her, we enter this other world. Jacques is lying, seemingly asleep, with sunlight through the blinds casting striped shadows over him. We hear the tinkling of bells and a soft moan – the call of the sea. From beside him, we watch as Jacques opens his eyes, and gazes upward. The ceiling shimmers and blurs. At first, it seems to be the watery reflection of the sea outside; then, with a roar, it turns dark blue and begins to descend towards the bed. Jacques raises his arm, and is immersed. The world tilts sideways, and up becomes down. Families of dolphins swim into view: playfully nosing and rolling to an uplifting tune. Johanna returns home, to share her news, and finds the house dark, and Jacques outstretched on the bed, blank, staring at the ceiling, with blood dripping from his nose. Without speaking, he rushes to the water and prepares to dive.

I am reminded of the comments made by Sebastien Murat and Paul Murray. Paul says, "Freediving is our life. . . . Seb may have other pursuits, but I don't have time for that, basically. If he decides . . . he wants to rear children and whatever else, that's his decision, but we both know what it's taken to get to this point, and it is not something to be thrown away lightly." Sebastien responds: "At the moment, I am like a chameleon. I have another normal life with my girlfriend in Cairns. At present my two worlds needn't interfere too much with each other."

In Luc Besson's *The Big Blue*, Jacques is forced to make a choice. With Johanna watching, he straps on his flippers, and splashes his face: "I have got to go and see." He seems only peripherally aware of Johanna's response: "See what? There's nothing to see, Jacques. It's dark down there. It's cold. You'll be alone." As she cries, "Jacques, I'm pregnant," he reaches out his hand, and lowers himself into the water. She lets go: "Go and see, my love." We are in the dark; the music swells; we trace the light and bubbles of his descent. We are far away from the normal world; we are in another place. And, listening with another ear, we hear the far-off haunting call of the sea. A dolphin swims into view, and beckons; Jacques stretches out, one arm on the diving bar, but the creature stays just beyond reach. He lets go of the connection with the land above, and moves into the darkness.

Freud suggests a number of possibilities to explain oceanic feeling, which he interprets as the temporary collapse of the ego into the other or into the world. This sensation evokes the becoming of the infant, who learns to separate self and mother: "In this way, then, the ego detaches itself from the external world. Or, to put it more correctly, originally the ego includes everything, later it separates off an external world from itself" (13). One example of this intersubjective experience is love—and this is a topic that Irigaray has privileged in her writing, as an opportunity to rethink our relationships. Freud writes, "At the height of being in love the boundary between the ego and the object threatens to melt away. Against all the evidence of his senses, a man who is in love declares that 'I' and 'You' are one, and is prepared to behave as if it were a fact" (9). At times in Irigaray's

writing, this collapse between subject and object occurs. In "When Our Lips Speak Together," she writes: "I love you: body shared, undivided. . . . I'm touching you, that's quite enough to let me know that you are my body." She continues, "I love you who are neither mother (forgive me, mother, I prefer a woman) nor sister. . . . I love you, your body, here and now. I/you touch you/me, that's quite enough for us to feel alive" (*This Sex Which is Not One* 209).

This is a fusion of the subject and the object, much like Paul Murray's comment on freediving: "There is no 'I' here. It is a 'we' thing." Maurice Merleau-Ponty's notion of intersubjectivity theorises this encounter between subject and object, and provides a way of rethinking Freud's comments on oceanic feeling. Merleau-Ponty emphasises that we are not self-contained subjects, but simultaneously "I" and "you." Intersubjectivity, like the experience of oceanic feeling, offers an indissoluble connection with the other. Irigaray explains the third phase of her work as "trying to define a new model of possible relations between man and woman, without the submission of either one to the other . . . the construction of an intersubjectivity respecting sexual difference. This is something, a task, that no one has yet done, I think, something that is completely new" (*I Love You* 3).

In oceanic feeling, in syncope, the self dissolves into rapture. The sea, Irigaray writes, calls "to still-unheard-of truths. A siren song drawing them away from any shore." (*Marine Lover* 46) . She asks "is there any greater rapture than the sea? . . . Endless rapture awaits whoever trusts the sea" (13). In *Marine Lover*, a water-saturated analysis of and response to Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Irigaray assumes the position of Nietzsche's feminine other, and evokes the rapture of the sea:

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. . . . And whoever looks upon her from the overhanging bank finds there a call somewhere further than the farthest far. Toward an other ever more other. Beyond any anchorage yet imaginable (46-7).

Tamsin Lorraine evocatively describes the marine lover as "lost in becoming": "She is the sea, the moving flux of waves, the tendrils of seaweed dancing at the bottom of the ocean, the cyclic ebb and flow of the tides on the shore. . . . She simply responds and pursues her pleasure. She goes where her desire leads her, as it leads her" (50). As I read, a transformation occurs. The experience of reading reproduces the scenario of syncope: "a surprise, a delay of life, a violent anticipation, and a slow return to what one calls the 'self.' I look up, blinking—where am I? Where was I? It's raining. The streetlights have come on. That oceanic feeling; I am changed: "when you fall into syncope, you never know in what shape you might return: with wolf's paws, the tail of a serpent, a bark at your lips, a pelt or fur. . . . One never knows" (Clément 212). I may find myself a mermaid, with the tail of a fish, or the wings of a bird, with a shadow of the transformations that I have read. It is here—"the horizon found, and the infinite movement of waves rolling in and pulling away"—that I locate the sensible transcendental. Clément calls it "the sexual drive of the universe" (203). This is an amorous exchange. Experienced through reading, it is an invitation to textual pleasure, poetic nuptials, an erotics of reading. It is when the text, Judith Sill suggests, becomes active, searching for or seeking out "readers who will respond to [its] gift" (8).

In my reading, I hear Luce Irigaray as a siren, calling in the voice of the other, the "marine lover." The siren is a creature "of the *borderline* between land—a solid body, circumscribed—and the sea, which is uncircumscribed, formless" that inhabits "the in-between" and "invite[s] confusion" (Chion 114). This "borderline" or in-between is where Luce Irigaray situates her work, which operates between the solid, circumscribed masculine philosophies, and the formless and uncircumscribed sea of a new philosophy of being two.

Traditionally, the siren's song is finely tuned to a masculine ear. It is a composite and monstrous voice of a creature caught in the stages of becoming: bird, woman, fish. Yet, it is also a voice that is disruptive, which beckons and cajoles, promising new ways of living in the world, different pleasures, suggesting unknown ideas and spaces. I hear Luce Irigaray, to borrow H  l  ne Cixous and Catherine Cl  ment's term, as the "newly born woman." I hear her as "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" (Gilbert 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 251)—and remain afloat, I try to listen with an/other ear. This is where we can locate the pleasure of a text: "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" (Barthes 24).

Her writing is a *jouissant* text, marked by spontaneity, abundance and overflow. Reading Luce Irigaray, the relationship between reader and text breaks down. She writes: "Was it your tongue in my mouth which forced me into speech? Was it that blade between my lips which draw forth floods of words to speak of you?" (*Elemental Passions* 9). The borders and boundaries of these textual bodies disintegrate. The markers of gender—the writing as (a) woman—are remarkably ambiguous. "I" and "you" are no longer distinct bodies, genders, identities: "I/you touch you/me, that's quite enough for us to feel alive. . . . We - you/I - are neither open nor closed. . . . Between our lips, yours and mine, several voices, several ways of speaking resound endlessly, back and forth" (*This Sex Which is Not One* 209).

This blurring of voices is an active rewriting of text. Irigaray calls in a new voice, invites new ways of speaking and writing that are gendered in the body. This new voice is needed to propose a new philosophy: "If we keep on speaking the same language together, we're going to reproduce the same history. Begin the same old stories all over again. Don't you think so? Listen: all around us, men and women sound just the same" (205).

One response to this challenge is to meet it through dialogue with Luce Irigaray, *to write with who "I" am* and risk annihilation. It is necessary, Whitford suggests, "to put yourself into play, you cannot stand back at a safe distance" (24). In *God Between Their Lips*, Stockton takes up the challenge of "writing the personal" which she suggests offers, at its best, "the otherwise unacknowledged points of saturation in a life." This is most effective in her postlude, where she writes:

In the night . . . in my most private chamber, I touch my lover's arm, and at the surface of her skin, where our burning takes place, I touch many bodies . . . your mother lay by your elbow, your father at your ear; I touched your cheek and saw a secretary there with a man. . . . So many bodies upon and around you, I can never touch you without them. Folded between us and into our love they are "God" between our lips. (251)

An amorous exchange. Poetic nuptials. An erotics of reading and writing. A dialogue "between two" and more. This is the encounter I want to enter into, visiting the "points of saturation" or moments of becoming that inform my reading of 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" (Cunningham 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" (246).

Agnes Bosanquet is currently in the final stages of a PhD in the Critical and Cultural Studies Department of Macquarie University, in Sydney, Australia. Her thesis, *To Wish for Fins or Wings: Seeking the Sensible Transcendental*, 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, England. 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 her writing.

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