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**Luce Irigaray**

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**Philosophy in the Feminine**

**Margaret Whitford**



**London and New York**

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First published 1991  
by Routledge  
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada  
by Routledge  
270 Madison Ave, New York NY 10016

Reprinted 1995

Transferred to Digital Printing 2006

© 1991 Margaret Whitford

Typeset in 10/12pt Baskerville by Selectmove Ltd, London

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*British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

*Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the Library of Congress

ISBN 0-415-05968-2 (hbk)

ISBN 0-415-05969-0 (pbk)

for models of *parler-femme* would be, I think, to miss the point which is that she is initiating a possible dialogue between herself and her readers. I suggest that she is proposing her work as a sort of intermediary between women, as that indispensable third party in any symbolic relationship (which is therefore precisely *not* a dual imaginary relationship), as an object of exchange, especially between women, which we can use in order to avoid one of the common impasses of the attempts at a women's sociality: unmediated (because unsymbolized) affects. In Irigarayan terms, it might create the *espacement* or the 'space between' that is difficult to women who are required to constitute space for men (see Chapter 7). Her work is offered as an object, a discourse, for women to exchange *among themselves*, a sort of commodity, so that women themselves do not have to function as the commodity, or as the *sacrifice* on which sociality is built. Instructions for use of Irigaray would include the message: Do not consume or devour. For symbolic exchange only.

## Rationality and the imaginary

[L'homme] ne se souvient même plus du fait que son corps est le seuil, le portique de la construction de son, ses univers. (*Ethique de la différence sexuelle*)

Man no longer even remembers that his body is the threshold, the porch of the construction of his universe(s).

Irigaray's critique of rationality is not a prescription for female irrationality; to say that rationality is male is to argue that it has a certain structure, that the subject of enunciation which subtends the rational discourse is constructed in a certain way, through repression of the feminine. What I shall suggest in the following two chapters is that Irigaray is proposing, not the abolition of rationality – she is after all adept herself in the manipulation of rational argument – but the *restructuring of the construction of the rational subject*. To understand Irigaray's critique of rationality it is necessary to understand the notion of the imaginary, and in particular to see the ways in which Irigaray has attempted to reclaim the imaginary from its most well-known recent conceptualization in Lacan. For the Lacanian conceptual system offers scant possibility for radical social change; Lacanian discourse implies a deep social conservatism as far as the situation of women is concerned.<sup>1</sup>

One of the points Irigaray makes in her critique of psychoanalysis is that psychoanalysis is 'a possible enclave of philosophic discourse' (TS: 160; CS: 155), and thus that the conceptualization of the unconscious has a history (PN: 254). The unconscious is not *literally* an undiscovered continent and cannot so readily be mapped. To see the function of woman in the theory, one needs first to begin from *different* presuppositions. This point is clearly exemplified in Irigaray's deployment of the term 'imaginary', a term with multiple conceptual resonances. The briefest working definition of the 'imaginary' is that it is equivalent to unconscious phantasy (see pp.65–6), but to limit its function to this definition would be to deprive it of all its associative richness. I will begin with a brief account of the recent history of the term, before going on to elucidate its function in Irigaray's critique of western rationality. Even a brief survey of its range will serve as a caution

against the too rapid reinterpretation of Irigaray's language in terms of the Lacanian framework. For although Irigaray clearly does have some debt to Lacan, she also demarcates herself sharply from his conceptualizations, and redefines the imaginary for her own purposes.

One source of the term 'imaginary' is phenomenology. (One should keep in mind that Irigaray can be situated at least partly in the phenomenological tradition, and indeed sometimes situates herself there.)<sup>2</sup> Sartre, in his book *L'Imaginaire* (1940) [*The Psychology of the Imagination*] made a sharp distinction between the perceiving and imagining functions of the mind, and held (a) that the imagining consciousness was intentional and (b) that it could not be confused with the perceiving consciousness. According to Sartre's definition, the imaginary is the intentional object of the *imagining* consciousness, whether it is an object in the mind (fantasies, daydreams, evocations of absent persons, and so on) or external objects which are products of the imagination (such as novels or paintings). Without retaining Sartre's theory of intentionality, Irigaray does appeal to a phenomenological definition when she looks to myth and poetry for images of the material of which our passions are constructed (see SP: 69 ff.). Unlike Sartre, however, she conflates in a single term the phenomenological definition of the imaginary (the conscious, imagining, and imaging, mind) with the psychoanalytic definition (the unconscious, phantasying mind), and can move fluidly between one and the other. She has never shown any particular interest in Sartre's work; on the other hand, she has written sympathetically on Merleau-Ponty, whose two terms *invisible* and *visible* (Merleau-Ponty 1964) can perhaps be serviceable here. Thus we could say that sometimes the imaginary is an unconscious (invisible) structure and sometimes a structure of the symbolic which can be viewed in its external and visible manifestations in myth, or works of the imagination. Like Merleau-Ponty, Irigaray is interested in pre-discursive experience (E: 143) and how conceptualization of experience brings with it certain ontological commitments: designation of objects in the world, allocation of subjects and objects and so on. However, she criticizes Merleau-Ponty for a kind of solipsism, for failing to take into account the sexual other (E: 148). She goes further than previous phenomenologists in that she conceptualizes the imaginary in terms of sex, either male or female: the imaginary either bears the morphological marks of the male body, whose cultural products are characterized by unity, teleology, linearity, self-identity, and so on or it bears the morphological marks of the female body, characterized by plurality, non-linearity, fluid identity and so on. In this sense, her use of the term imaginary, linking the imaginary with the products of the imagination – art, mythology, poetry, writing – does bring her momentarily close to other so-called proponents of *écriture féminine*. The following remark by Hélène Cixous shows the way in which the phenomenological and psychoanalytic versions of the imaginary may be conflated:

Things are starting to be written, things that will constitute a feminine Imaginary, the site, that is, of identifications of an ego no longer given over to an image defined by the masculine . . . , but rather inventing forms for women on the march, or as I prefer to fantasize, 'in flight', so that instead of lying down, women will go forward by leaps in search of themselves. (Cixous 1981: 52)

It is important to note that the (unconscious, invisible) identifications require external sites (such as writing), *visible* products of the imagination. One can see Irigaray's own 'poetic' writing as attempts to mobilize a possible other (female) imaginary.

Another source of 'the imaginary' is Bachelard. Although Irigaray never, as far as I know, mentions Bachelard, within the French intellectual context the resonances of the term imaginary are clearly Bachelardian. In addition, Irigaray's use of the four elements seems to echo Bachelard's, below. The imaginary, for Bachelard, as for Sartre, is a function of the imagination. It is that faculty of the mind which alters the images provided by perception and *distorts* them. This distortion may be creative in the case of the literary imagination, but it contaminates the effort to acquire scientific knowledge. A sharp distinction is therefore made, as in Sartre, between two functions of the mind which either cannot (Sartre) or should not (Bachelard) be confused. Knowledge has to purify itself of the images supplied so readily by the imagination in order to achieve genuine objectivity. The image offers apparent and seductive solutions to problems of knowledge which must be resisted if real knowledge is to be won. In a number of works, Bachelard classes these images in terms of the four elements: earth, air, fire, and water, and argues that these are primitive and basic categories of the imagining mind. Irigaray makes a similar argument:

When I wrote *Amante marine, Passions élémentaires, L'Oubli de l'air*, I intended to make a study of our relations to the elements: water, earth, fire, air. I wanted to return to those natural materials which constitute the origin of our body, our life, our environment, the flesh of our passions. . . . Our daily life still takes place in a universe which is composed of and can be described in terms of four natural elements: air, water, fire, earth. We are built of them and we dwell in them. They determine, more or less freely, our attractions, our affects, our passions, our limits, our aspirations. (SP: 69)<sup>3</sup>

Bachelard suggests that creative writers have a preference for one element over another, and that there is usually one in which they feel most at home. For example he devotes a whole chapter of *L'Air et les songes* (1943) [*Air and Dreams*] to Nietzsche's 'dynamics of ascension' (air), whereas Irigaray, in her book on Nietzsche, looks rather for what is absent (the repressed mother/woman) and takes Nietzsche's work as a point of departure for a meditation on the flight from water and from the unacknowledged nurturant element. Here the

Bachelardian analysis of a dominant element is linked to her aim to 'go back through the masculine imaginary, to interpret the way it has reduced us to silence' (TS: 164; CS: 159). For, whereas for Bachelard there is a disjunction between knowledge and imagination, with knowledge having to be separated off sharply from the imagination which would otherwise distort it, Irigaray argues that the disjunction from the imaginary cannot finally be made, that knowledge always bears the marks of the imaginary, and that what we take to be universal and objective is in fact male, so that the four elements in their turn are subtended by a more basic schema than Bachelard's, namely the male/female division. Bachelard's attempted disjunction depends on the male splitting off from the female and then claiming universality (knowledge); the female remains repressed and mute, excluded from knowledge and universality. There can thus be no question of purification by getting rid of the sexual imaginary; knowledge is irrevocably marked by its imaginary (male) morphology. The belief that knowledge can purify itself in this way is itself an imaginary belief.<sup>4</sup>

A third source of the 'imaginary' is the confluence of political and psychoanalytic discourses in the work of Althusser and Castoriadis, particularly the latter. Castoriadis is known both as a critic of classical Marxism and a critic of Lacanian psychoanalysis. He is, or was, a member of a psychoanalytic group, *Le Quatrième Groupe* [The Fourth Group] formed in 1969 after disagreements with Lacan (Marini 1986: 22), and he has since become one of Lacan's most outspoken critics (Castoriadis 1978). In particular, Castoriadis attacks Lacan's definition of the imaginary for its conservatism. In *L'Institution imaginaire de la société* (1975), he proposes a definition of the imaginary which (a) argues that there is an imaginary more primordial than that conceptualized by Lacan, an imaginary of which the mirror stage imaginary would be but a secondary derivation, and (b) deploys the concept of the imaginary in an explicit attempt to understand the persistence of social formations and the possibility of changing them. One of the names he gives to this primordial creative source is 'magma' (1975: 253), a term which is also used by Irigaray. Castoriadis's theorization of the imaginary, which uses the same term to cover both the imaginary as a primordial creative source or magma, and the imaginary as a social formation, is probably the closest to Irigaray's imaginary but does not coincide with it. Castoriadis does not discuss sex as a dimension of the imaginary. From Irigaray's point of view, while she admits that Marxism, for example, was a precondition of her own thought, she does not believe that the current political (and non-feminist) discourses offer any place for thinking sexual difference.<sup>5</sup>

Whenever we find the term 'imaginary' in Irigaray's work, then, we have not only to look for the network of associations *within* her work that give the term its meaning, but also to bear in mind the network of associations circulating in the intellectual context within which she is writing and being read. In summary, the imaginary is a term which has a connotative range in

recent French thought that has no equivalent in English. English-speaking readers tend to be familiar with the imaginary primarily via Lacan who gives the Imaginary a major role in his theory. My view is that Anglo-American feminists have tended to assimilate and then dismiss Irigaray's work too quickly, in part because the concept of the imaginary (and its corollary, morphology)<sup>6</sup> has not been closely examined. Either the imaginary has been ignored altogether, in which case Irigaray is mistakenly described as a biological essentialist, or else it has been interpreted as purely and simply a Lacanian concept, in which case the conclusion is that Irigaray has misunderstood or misread Lacan, and has not taken on board the implications of his theory (see Mitchell and Rose 1982: 54–6; Rose 1986: 136, 140; Ragland-Sullivan 1986: 273–80). In either case, the critique of Lacan has not been noticed or taken seriously, and the challenge to the western conception of rationality has largely been ignored.

In the first section, I will begin with a description of the difference between the male and female imaginary as characterized by Irigaray, without at this point trying to say exactly what the imaginary is, or to explain or account for the elements in the description. In the second section I will examine the evolution of the concept of the imaginary in Irigaray's work, and its origins in psychoanalytic theory. This section will clarify the initial description of the imaginary and show what is meant by the claim that rationality is imaginary. In the third section I will return to the categories of male and female as applied to the imaginary, and argue that Irigaray does not see them primarily as empirical descriptions which can be 'read off' the world, but as reconceptualizations which might help us change and transform our society in a direction which is less inimical to women. Although Irigaray eschews the domain of politics as commonly thought of, her reconceptualizations can be seen as a contribution to feminism as a political and social movement in which what is at stake is not simply philosophy but the lives and futures of women (and men).<sup>7</sup>

### The symbolism of male and female

There have been a number of discussions recently, which I shall not attempt to summarize here, about whether it makes sense to talk of the 'maleness' of philosophy (see Harding and Hintikka 1983; Lloyd 1984; Grimshaw 1986, ch.2). Very briefly, the argument concerns what it would mean to describe philosophy, or rationality, as male. Lloyd, for example, argues that 'our ideals of Reason have historically incorporated an exclusion of the feminine, and . . . femininity itself has been partly constituted through such processes of exclusion' (1984: x). Grimshaw suggests that conceptions of masculinity are built into certain philosophical theories, arguing, for example, that Kant defines moral worth in such a way that women – as described by him elsewhere – are incapable of it (1986: 42–5). From the point of view that

concerns me here, the problem is that conceptions of rationality seem to have been based on exclusion models. Male/female symbolism has been used 'to express subordination relations between elements of a divided human nature' (Lloyd 1984: 28) and reason, conceptualized as transcendence, in practice came to mean transcendence of the feminine, because of the symbolism used, despite the fact that 'it can of course be pointed out that mere bodily difference surely makes the female no more appropriate than the male to the symbolic representation of "lesser" intellectual functions' (Lloyd 1984: 32).

Irigaray's work constitutes an attack upon such exclusion models, drawing for its symbolism on psychoanalysis. There is a view in psychoanalytic theory, based on clinical evidence, that psychic health may be conceived of, unconsciously, as a state in which both parents, i.e. both the male and the female elements, are felt to be in creative intercourse within the psyche. Along these lines, then, Irigaray argues that for rationality to be fertile and creative, rather than infertile and sterile, it must not be conceived of as transcending or *exclusive of* the female element. The model is that of a creative (sexual) relationship in which the two elements in intercourse bring forth offspring, rather than a domination/subordination model in which one part of the self is repressing another part (as reason may be said to dominate the passions, for example). For Irigaray, the conceptualization of rationality is inseparable from the conceptualization of sexual difference; thus the imbalance in the symbolization of sexual difference is a clue to other forms of imbalance that have far-reaching consequences: sexual difference is 'a problematic which might enable us to put in check the manifold forms of destruction of the world. . . . Sexual difference could constitute the horizon of worlds of a fertility which we have not yet experienced' (E: 13). The critique of rationality is couched, at least partly, in the vocabulary of fertility/sterility, creation/destruction, health/sickness; rationality as we know it is implicated in a whole cultural pathology.

Although the terms 'male' and 'female' are sometimes used to refer to biological males and females, it is much more common to find the pair being used as a kind of basic and fundamental symbolism (of which Genevieve Lloyd gives many examples in the history of philosophy and Alice Jardine (1985) in contemporary French thought). Irigaray would argue that rationality in the western tradition has always been conceptualized or symbolized as male. She adds a psychoanalytic dimension to this – which I will explain further in the next section – by making a connection between the morphology of the body and the morphology of different kinds of thought processes. It must not be assumed here that the body here is the empirical body; symbolism (or representation) is selective;<sup>6</sup> and it is clear from *Speculum* that Irigaray is talking about an 'ideal morphology' (SE: 320; SF: 400), in which the relationship to anatomy is metaphorical,

somewhat schematic, a 'symbolic interpretation of . . . anatomy' (Gallop 1983: 79). Anticipating, one might say that it is an imaginary anatomy. So she can say that in the phallic sexual metaphoricity (SE: 47; SF: 53–4) of western rationality, there is 'no change in morphology, no detumescence ever' (SE: 303; SF: 378). The imaginary morphology of western rationality is characterized by: the principle of identity (also expressed in terms of quantity or ownership); the principle of non-contradiction (in which ambiguity, ambivalence, or multivalence have been reduced to a minimum); and binarism (e.g. nature/reason, subject/object, matter/energy, inertia/movement) – as though everything had to be either one thing or another (PN: 313). All these principles are based upon the possibility of individuating, or distinguishing one thing from another, upon the belief in the necessity of stable forms.<sup>9</sup> An equation is made between the (symbolic) phallus, stable form, identity, and individuation. Irigaray explains in *This Sex* that the logic of identity is male because it is phallic:

The *one* of form, of the individual, of the (male) sexual organ, of the proper name, of the proper meaning . . . supplants, while separating and dividing, that contact of *at least two* (lips) which keeps woman in touch with herself. (TS: 26; CS: 26)

For the female imaginary, there is no 'possibility of distinguishing what is touching from what is touched' (TS: 26; CS: 26). The possibility of individuating is absent; woman '*is neither one nor two*' (ibid.):

Perhaps it is time to return to that repressed entity, the female imaginary. So woman does not have a sex organ? She has at least two of them, but they are not identifiable as ones. Indeed she has many more. Her sexuality, always at least double, goes even further: it is *plural*. (TS: 28; CS: 27)

But if the female imaginary were to deploy itself, if it could bring itself into play otherwise than as scraps, uncollected debris, would it represent itself, even so, in the form of *one* universe? (TS: 30; CS: 29)

It is not that the female is unidentifiable, but that there is 'an excess of all identification to/of self' (SE: 230; SF: 285). The principle of non-contradiction does not apply. The female imaginary is mobile and fluid: 'a proper(ty) that is never fixed in the possible identity-to-self of some form or other. It is always fluid' (TS: 79; CS: 76). In *Ethique*, the undifferentiated maternal-feminine is described as that which underlies 'all possibility of determining identity' (E: 98). Like the womb, it is the 'formless, "amorphous" origin of all morphology' (SE: 265; SF: 330; trans. adapted).

The reader will note the correspondence between the descriptions of the male and female imaginary, and the Pythagorean table of opposites, described by Aristotle in the *Metaphysics* (986a). About this table, Genevieve Lloyd comments:

In the Pythagorean table of opposites, formulated in the sixth century BC, femaleness was explicitly linked with the unbounded – the vague, the indeterminate – as against the bounded – the precise and clearly determined. The Pythagoreans saw the world as a mixture of principles associated with determinate form, seen as good, and others associated with formlessness – the unlimited, irregular or disorderly – which were seen as bad or inferior. There were ten such contrasts in the table: limit/unlimited, odd/even, one/many, right/left, male/female, rest/motion, straight/curved, light/dark, good/bad, square/oblong. Thus 'male' and 'female', like the other contrasted terms, did not here function as straightforwardly descriptive classifications. 'Male', like the other terms on its side of the table, was construed as superior to its opposite; and the basis for this superiority was its association with the primary Pythagorean contrast between form and formlessness. (Lloyd 1984: 3)

This correspondence between Irigaray's description of the imaginary, and the ontological categories of the pre-Socratics, is not, of course, accidental. I interpret the description of the female imaginary, for example, not as an essentialist description of what women are really like, but as a description of the female as she appears in, and is symbolized by, the western cultural imaginary. The implications of this apparent ahistoricism are not entirely clear. (I say 'apparent' because almost all of Irigaray's analyses are of specific texts; they are not wildly unsubstantiated universalist claims.) It may be that, as Joanna Hodge interestingly suggests, for Irigaray, *women have no history*;<sup>10</sup> or it may be that the philosophical imaginary has no history.<sup>11</sup> My own (provisional) interpretation is that Irigaray is displaying what she regards as *patriarchy's* view of women: that they are 'natural' and therefore outside history. In short, the imaginary is open to some of the same objections as the concept of patriarchy;<sup>12</sup> it is an extremely useful concept, but also a controversial one.

Although the theoretical constructions of the symbolic may be highly sophisticated and abstract, the underlying imaginary is much more simplified; it deals with the primitive material of experience: life and death, kin relationships, and the body (either the body surface or speculations about what might be inside). It is also passionate through and through; none of these figures is affectively neutral (dreams are often the nearest we can usually come to the experience of these basic feelings and thoughts). Irigaray seems to be positing that to rethink the cultural imaginary it may be necessary to bypass the sophistication of theoretical constructions, whose imaginary is so well and so deeply concealed, and to return to the elemental, 'those natural materials which constitute the origin of our body, our life, our environment, the flesh of our passions' (SP: 69). The exploration of the elemental, then, belongs to

a more constructive aspect of Irigaray's work, and not simply to its critical moment.<sup>13</sup>

I said earlier that the coincidence between the conceptualization of the imaginary and the ontological categories of the pre-Socratics was not accidental; it is part of her attempt to 'go back through the masculine imaginary'. Without implying a return to the pre-Socratic world-view, the elemental offers also a number of strategies for bypassing the sophisticated defensive structures of theory. In the first place, it provides a vocabulary for talking in the most basic terms about the material of passionate life, about opposition and conflict, or love and exchange, about fertility and creativity, or sterility and death, a vocabulary which is more immediate and direct in its language than the abstractions of conceptualization, yet without the immobilizing tendencies of the concept. It is a discursive strategy which allows for fluidity. Elizabeth Grosz explains:

Empedocles' representation of the four elements provides a startling yet apposite metaphor of the meeting of different substances, a perilous meeting which, through Love, can bring productivity and unexpected creation, and through Strife can break down apparent unities and stable forms of co-existence. It is thus a rich metaphor for contemplating the possibilities of autonomy and interaction between the two sexes. (Grosz 1989: 169)

The texts which draw on the elemental vocabulary – *Amante Marine, L'Oubli de l'air, Passions élémentaires*, but also others such as *L'Une ne bouge pas sans l'autre* [And the One Doesn't Stir Without the Other], 'When Our Lips Speak Together' in *This Sex*, 'Fecundity of the Caress' in *Ethique* and 'Femmes Divines' [Divine Women] in *Sexes et parentés* – explore the realization or failure of love, whether the creative love between the sexes that I mentioned earlier, or the love between those of the same sex (which will be discussed further in subsequent chapters). For 'love should not have to be abandoned in order to become wise or learned' (E: 27). The same point is made in both the more theoretical and the more poetic texts. This is how Irigaray describes love in *Passions élémentaires*:

Love may be the becoming which appropriates the other for itself by consuming it, introjecting it into itself, until the other disappears. Or love may be the motor of becoming which allows each its own growth. For the latter, each one must keep its body autonomous. Neither should be the source of the other. Two lives should embrace and fertilize each other, without the other being a preconceived goal for either. (PE: 32–3)

There is a sense in which this love can be said to be divine;<sup>14</sup> it has the features of the sensible transcendental: it is embodied and it allows for growth and becoming, not immobilizing either lover in his/her own growth. This is the ideal towards which Irigaray's critique of the western cultural imaginary tends; its precondition is the possibility of a specific female imaginary which

would not simply be the scraps or debris of the masculine. This creative and loving imaginary relationship is the new (as yet non-existent) base which Irigaray proposes for the renewal of thought and rationality.

In the second place, I suggest, the recourse to the elemental provides a vocabulary for talking about the passions, including the erotic passions, without depending on the erotic vocabulary currently available. Discourse about the bodies of women is inevitably recaptured by the dominant sexual economy. Elizabeth Grosz again (she is talking about religion, but I think her remark applies equally to the erotic): 'it is not possible to position female-oriented images in place of male ones where the underlying structure accords no specificity to the female' (Grosz 1986c: 6).

The elements allow Irigaray to speak of the female body, of its morphology, and of the erotic, while avoiding the dominant sexual metaphoricity which is scopical and organized around the male gaze; she can speak of it instead in terms of space and thresholds and fluids, fire and water, air and earth, without objectifying, hypostatizing, or essentializing it. These terms are not so easily reduced to the body of one sex or the other. They are more pliable, accessible to the imagination of others and available for their private mental landscapes. They have both an individual and a collective dimension. The advantage too of the vocabulary of the elements is that one is less likely to confuse the imaginary with real objects in the world (such as the body).

Third, there may be a political as well as a theoretical rationale. In the traditional repartition of roles, women *represent* the body for men. The resulting split between intelligible and sensible then becomes difficult to shift, because it appears to be the basis of all thought. This is why, I think, Irigaray does not want to oppose yet another theory, but tries instead to reach the imaginary more directly. I hypothesize that the elements, in their simplicity, may have an access to the imaginary of others that more theoretical accounts lack. (In addition, the vocabulary of the elements, as building materials of art, writing, and poetry, is accessible to all, and not just to the theoretically sophisticated.) The role Irigaray attributes to poetry in this respect is significant. Poets, like psychoanalysts (or lovers) may speak the liberating word. The elements, then, can represent an unstructured and fluid psychic space, less constrained by the dominant imaginary, more open to other possibilities. It is the poet who takes the risk of exploring these spaces, and who can then presumably offer glimpses of previously undreamt-of horizons.

However we interpret the strategies involved, I think there is no doubt that the exploration of the imaginary and the vocabulary of the elements are linked, and are related to the project of *thinking sexual difference*.

### The imaginary

In this section I shall trace briefly the development of the imaginary in Irigaray's work. It seems to me that between *Speculum* and the work

which follows it Irigaray becomes more confident; the initial fairly cautious appropriation of the term in a relatively uncontroversial way is succeeded by a bolder and more extensive deployment with much more far-reaching connotations. The points to which I want to draw particular attention in this section are:

- the importance of the imaginary body in philosophy;
- the introduction of the notion that the imaginary may be male or female;
- the description of rationality as imaginary.

As most readers of French theory know by now, the imaginary is a psychoanalytic concept developed by Lacan in his reading of Freud. The concept, if not the term, is introduced by Lacan in his article entitled 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience' (Lacan, 1977: 1-7). The imaginary is a moment in the formation of the Ego or 'I': the baby, whose experience of its body until then had been fragmented and incoherent, is enabled, by means of a mirror (or an image of itself mirrored from a parental figure or figures) to see a reflection of itself as a whole body or unity, with which it can then identify 'in anticipation' (1977: 4). However, it must be stressed that Lacan's imaginary has its origins in Freud's theories of the Ego and of narcissism,<sup>15</sup> and for my purposes here, it is the Freudian corpus which is initially more pertinent.

Freud does not use the term Ego entirely consistently (see the editorial comments in SE XIX: 7-8), but it is possible to pick out three strands which shed light on Irigaray's concept of the imaginary. First, the Ego is something which develops: 'a unity comparable to the ego cannot exist in the individual from the start; the ego has to be developed' (SE XIV: 77). Freud describes it as 'a coherent organization of mental processes' (SE XIX: 17). Thus the unity of personal identity is constructed out of a preceding state of lack of organization of mental processes, which is described variously by psychoanalysts as undifferentiation, fragmentation and so on. (Lacan describes identity as illusory.) What is important is that it is not given from the beginning of life, but is developed in the context of the profound and literally life-giving relationship with the parental figure(s), and is thus completely suffused with affect. Since it is something which develops, it is therefore capable of modification under certain conditions in later life (such as psychoanalysis).

Second, the Ego is not equivalent to consciousness; part of the Ego is unconscious (SE XIV: 192-3); SE XVIII: 19; SE XIX: 17-18). Third, the Ego is a bodily Ego. This third point needs explaining in some detail. Freud's comment that 'the ego is first and foremost a bodily ego' (SE XIX: 26) is expanded by a later footnote as follows:

I.e. the ego is ultimately derived from bodily sensations, chiefly from those springing from the surface of the body. It may thus be regarded as



a mental projection of the surface of the body, besides . . . representing the superficialities of the mental apparatus. (SE XIX: 26)

Freud describes at several points how in phantasy, the ego represents its activities (mental and physical) to itself as equivalents of bodily activities. Probably the most well-known example of this is the identification whereby gifts or money (gold) or babies are equated with faeces (see SE VII: 186, 196; SE IX: 173–4, 219–20; SE XVII: 128 ff., 130–3). These equations or identifications may be shifting and provisional, or they may stabilize during the course of a person's development into a particular set of characteristics, as Freud describes in his paper 'Character and Anal Erotism' (SE IX: 167–75).<sup>16</sup>

A more pertinent example of phantasy here is Freud's essay on 'Negation' in which the intellectual faculty of judgement (such as the capacity to assign truth or falsity to an assertion) is traced to this very primitive type of thinking in which everything is perceived/conceived on the model of the body:

The function of judgement is concerned in the main with two sorts of decisions. It affirms or disaffirms the possession by a thing of a particular attribute; and it asserts or disputes that a presentation has an existence in reality. The attribute to be decided about may originally have been good or bad, useful or harmful. Expressed in the language of the oldest – the oral – instinctual impulses, the judgement is: 'I should like to eat this', or 'I should like to spit it out'; and, put more generally: 'I should like to take this into myself and to keep that out.' That is to say: 'It shall be inside me' or 'it shall be outside me'. (SE XIX: 236–7)

To judge that something is true is, in phantasy, to swallow it or to incorporate it; to judge that something is false is to spit it out or to expel it. Freud comments on the way in which a repressed thought may return in the form of a negative assertion: 'That is not what I was thinking', which is a kind of phantasy expulsion of the forbidden or repressed thought.

This is not a reductive account; to show the origins of conceptual thought in bodily phantasy does not entail any judgement about the truth or falsity of that thought, but is to do with the unconscious affect or emotion attached to it. Phantasy is neither true nor false, and truth and falsity are judgements which belong to a different order, and are governed by different rules. Further, as Freud shows in his paper on the sexual theories of children (SE IX: 205–26), phantasmatic representations are not necessarily accurate representations of biological or social processes, but *interpretations* of them. These unconscious (mis)representations can coexist in the mind with the knowledge acquired at a later stage, providing an affective substratum which determines a person's feelings (often unconscious) towards that later knowledge. (I will return to this point in the final section.)

The Freudian account of the (bodily) ego and its relation to more intellectual activities in (unconscious) phantasy is explicitly assumed by Lacan under the explanatory concept of the imaginary: 'the symbolic equation [e.g.

money = faeces] . . . arises from an alternating mechanism of expulsion and introjection, or projection and absorption, that is to say, from an imaginary game' (Lacan 1975a: 96, trans. Rose 1986: 174–5).<sup>17</sup> What pre-Lacanian psychoanalysis describes as unconscious phantasy, Lacan describes as imaginary (though he then goes on to build a much more complicated edifice on the imaginary and its relation with the symbolic and the real).

Let us return now to Irigaray. In *Speculum*, she takes the Lacanian term imaginary, and applies it to what psychoanalysis had previously called unconscious phantasy. This can be seen clearly in that she attributes anachronistically the imaginary to Freud himself, referring to Freud's 'imaginary economy' (SE: 101; SF: 125); at another point, she comments: 'elsewhere, Freud insists that in the childish imaginary the production of a child is equated with the production of feces' (SE: 36; SF: 39). In this section on Freud, she does not discuss Lacan head-on. However, when, throughout *Speculum*, she examines the idea of the mirror, she is clearly addressing Lacan's theory of the imaginary and the role of the mirror in the construction of subjectivity. But rather than giving an alternative account of women's psychosexual development (although that element is there by implication), she is offering a critique, or a deconstruction, of a dominant conceptualization or representation of sexual difference. Taking Lacan's mirror as an image of representation, she asks why he used a flat mirror, 'in that the flat mirror reflects the greater part of women's sexual organs only as a hole' (SE: 89 note; SF: 109 note). The body which is reflected in this flat mirror, and thus the imaginary body subtending subjectivity, is either a male body (with male sexual organs) or else a defective male body (a male body without sexual organs, hence 'castrated'). The flat mirror does not reflect the sexual organs and the sexual specificity of the woman. For the exploration of woman's sexual specificity, a different sort of mirror (literal or symbolic) would be needed – a speculum for example. Elsewhere she suggests that women cannot appear reflected in this flat mirror; they are the components of which the mirror is made, the tain of the mirror (TS: 151; CS: 147).

This is a point about conceptualization, rather than directly about women. What Irigaray is doing in the first section of *Speculum* is psychoanalysing the psychoanalysts, analysing *their* imaginary, the unconscious phantasies underlying the Freudian or Lacanian explanatory systems. Her interpretation is that Freud's account of sexuality is anal, and that in the Freudian phantasy, the stage in which children are believed to be born through the anus (see e.g. SE IX: 205–26) continues to underlie his theorization.<sup>18</sup> Freud's model of sexuality is male, according to Irigaray. And since his phantasy is anal, a phantasy in which the role of women in childbirth is not recognized, women inevitably appear in this scenario as defective males.

The point is also that an anatomical difference is perceived in the light of the conceptual frameworks already available. Freud's phantasy is not an

idiosyncrasy peculiar to him, it is the imaginary of the ruling symbolic. In an important transition (and incidentally using Lacanian conceptualization against itself) Irigaray goes on to argue that this is not an example of the individual phantasy of any particular philosopher or psychoanalyst, but that speculation itself in the west is dominated by anality (what she refers to elsewhere as a kind of 'ontology of the anal' – E: 100); sexuality and thinking, in an imaginary operation, have become equated both with each other and with one and the same bodily activity. The diagnosis of an anal imaginary, then, moves at this point out of the domain of the technically psychoanalytic into the domain of social explanation, and becomes a social imaginary signification which, as Castoriadis explains, has almost unlimited extension:

Compared with individual imaginary significations, [social imaginary significations] are infinitely vaster than a phantasy (the underlying schema of what is referred to as the Jewish, Greek, or Western 'world-picture' has no bounds) and they have no precisely located existence (if that is to say one can ascribe to the individual unconscious a precisely located existence). (Castoriadis 1975: 200–1)<sup>19</sup>

By appropriating the term imaginary for his particular version of Freudian theory, Lacan was colonizing a term which was already in current use in aesthetics and literary criticism (though not, as far as I know, in psychoanalysis), and changing or extending its meaning radically. Irigaray, in a similar fashion, wrests Lacan's concept out of its Lacanian context in order to extend its significance; the imaginary emerges from its relatively subordinate<sup>20</sup> position in *Speculum* to become, in *This Sex* and *Ethique*, one of the key notions of an ambitious social critique.

To put it as succinctly as possible, the problem as defined by Irigaray is that the female has a particular function in symbolic processes: to subtend them, to represent that which is outside discourse. Using the language of bodily phantasy and of the representations of the female body, one could say that: 'She functions as a *hole* . . . in the elaboration of imaginary and symbolic processes' (SE: 71; SF: 85).<sup>21</sup> Any organization of the world, whether it be linguistic, social, or individual, is an organization which carves out of an undifferentiated continuum a set of categories which enable the world to be grasped. But it is impossible to organize the world in this way without residue. The emergence of distinctions, determinate identities, or social organizations always implies something else, that original state of non-differentiation from which they have emerged, such as a pre-social nature<sup>22</sup> or the unconscious<sup>23</sup> or Castoriadis's magma.<sup>24</sup> This outside, which is non-graspable in-itself, since it is by definition outside the categories which allow one to posit its existence, is traditionally conceptualized as female (the unlimited or the formless of the pre-Socratics). Within this sexual symbolism, the determinate, that which has form or identity, belongs to the other half of the pair, and is therefore male.

Within this schema, rationality falls on the determinate and male side.

Referring to this traditional conceptualization, then, Irigaray describes women as a 'residue' (TS: 114; CS: 112; AM: 98), or as a 'sort of magma . . . from which men, humanity, draw nourishment, shelter, the resources to live or survive for free' (E: 102). In *Speculum*, she had already described this 'outside' of discourse as the womb (*le matriciel*) and by extension the maternal body: 'formless, "amorphous" origin of all morphology' (SE: 265; SF: 330); in *Ethique*, she adds that the undifferentiated maternal-feminine underlies 'all possibility of determining identity' (E: 98). Or women are described as resembling/being the unconscious: 'thus we might wonder whether certain properties attributed to the unconscious may not, in part, be ascribed to the female sex, which is censured by the logic of consciousness' (TS: 73; CS: 71).

The unconscious is a realm in which the laws of identity and non-contradiction do not apply. So when Irigaray writes that for the female imaginary too, the laws of identity and non-contradiction (A is A, A is not B) do not apply either, it may sound like a dangerously irrationalist description of women that merely reinforces a traditional denigration. The practical value of these principles, without which rationality would be inconceivable, is so evident that it appears unquestionable. The logic of identity is the prerequisite of any language or society at all. However, the point is that there will always be a residue which exceeds the categories, and this excess is conceptualized as female:

In other words, the issue is not one of elaborating a new theory of which woman would be the *subject* or the *object*, but of jamming the theoretical machinery itself, of suspending its pretension to the production of a truth and of a meaning that are excessively univocal. Which presupposes that women . . . do not claim to be rivalling men in constructing a logic of the feminine that would still take onto-theo-logic as its model, but that they are rather attempting to wrest this question away from the economy of the logos. They should not put it then, in the form 'What is woman?' but rather, repeating/interpreting the way in which, within discourse, the feminine finds itself defined as lack, deficiency, or as imitation and negative image of the subject, they should signify that with respect to this logic a *disruptive excess* is possible on the feminine side. (TS: 78; CS: 75–6)

From Irigaray's point of view, she is not *prescribing* what the female should be, but *describing* how it functions within western imaginary and symbolic operations, in order to show how what is taken to be the unalterable order of reality (discursive or otherwise) is in fact *imaginary* and therefore susceptible to change. In the following chapter we shall see how the female imaginary can be understood in more than one sense: there is the position of the female in the male imaginary; there are the scraps or debris of what might be an alternative imaginary (a fragmented female imaginary); there is the anticipation of a more

fully deployed female imaginary which might exist in creative intercourse with the male.

For the moment, I want to look briefly at her critique of Lacan. There is some disagreement about Lacan's potential value for feminist politics. Some critics argue that Lacan's 'symbolic determinism' offers no possibility of any theory of change, particularly in the situation of women (see Macey 1988 ch. 6; Leland 1989), while others are more optimistic.<sup>25</sup> For Irigaray, what Lacan's work does is to take up once again, and renew, the familiar theme of the female as support or substratum of the male subject. So she comments on Lacan that: 'The topology of the subject as it is defined by certain theoreticians of psychoanalysis (cf. the *Ecrits* of Jacques Lacan . . .) . . . would use the symbolisation of the feminine as a basis or basement for the (masculine) subject' (E: 103).

Any particular organization is taken to be reality in an imaginary operation, since the world cannot be grasped without the framework of a set of categories. However, if one takes the imaginary to be equivalent to reality, and implies for example that reality is coextensive with the categories of discourse, then of course the only possibilities for change will be permutations within the same set of categories; no totally different reorganization would be possible. (This is the objection that Castoriadis makes to Lacan.) Irigaray's objection, then, is the way in which Lacan takes a particular discursive organization to be unchangeable: 'What poses problems in reality turns out to be justified by a logic that has already ordered reality as such. Nothing escapes the circularity of this law' (TS: 88; CS: 87).

This *ahistorical* (TS: 100, 125; CS: 97, 124) conflation of the present categories of western discourse with reality, thus eliding the question of social change, indicates the presence of Lacan's *imaginary* (TS: 99; CS: 96),<sup>26</sup> which is also the imaginary of western metaphysics. For,

we note that the 'real' may well include, and in large measure, a *physical reality* that continues to resist adequate symbolization and/or that signifies the powerlessness of logic to incorporate in its writing all the characters of nature. (TS: 106-7; CS: 105; trans. adapted)

Her particular argument against Lacan is that he excludes in advance the possibility of any real social change, because he does not ask the question about the relationship between real women and women in the symbolic. For the problem for those people who are designated women by the symbolic is that although they may be symbolized as the outside of discourse, they are not *in fact* outside the society they live in and its symbolic structures.

Lacan argues that 'there is no pre-discursive reality' (1975b: 33) but this is a statement which is more ambiguous than it might appear. If it is interpreted as a statement about the necessity of symbolic castration (as in Silverman 1988: 7-8),<sup>27</sup> then there is probably no real disagreement between Irigaray and Lacan here, for symbolic castration is a condition of sanity (see Brennan

1989: 2-6). When Irigaray is criticized for locating woman in the imaginary, outside the symbolic order, it is because the critic takes her to be rejecting symbolic castration. If symbolic castration is taken, as it standardly is, as a condition of sanity, then any suspicion that Irigaray is rejecting it would feed the charge of irrationalism. (But note that the conceptualization of sanity in terms of symbolic 'castration' may still remain problematic, because the *representation* still takes the male body as norm.)<sup>28</sup> I shall discuss this charge further in the next chapter.

But Lacan's statement can also be interpreted, as Castoriadis interprets it, as a conservative thesis, about the high-impossibility of symbolic change, since in order to accede to subjectivity we have to insert ourselves into an already existing and preceding symbolic order, which we cannot then reject except by falling into meaninglessness or insanity. Or it can be interpreted, as Dews interprets it, as a conflation of symbolic with social which evades the issue of the possibility that the symbolic could mask or conceal relations of force (Dews 1987: 105), which are then presumably thrust out into the Lacanian 'real' or left unsymbolized. In these interpretations, it becomes impossible to understand the emergence of a social organization that did not previously exist. Such a new social organization is not a question of an (impossible) return to a pre-discursive reality, but a question of the possibilities for change provided by the symbolic order itself (see Castoriadis 1975, *passim*).

When Irigaray states her interest in pre-discursive experience (E: 143), she is positing that what has been excluded by the symbolic as its residue or waste (woman) could in fact be symbolized differently, that the categories in terms of which we apprehend the world could be different (see Chapter 4). She is also positing that to understand the symbolic we need to understand its *imaginary*. The coherence of a conceptual system does not imply its *truth*, but may be the coherence of its phantasy. We need to look at the phantasies underlying the propositional statements of psychoanalysts and philosophers.

In summary, then, Irigaray begins with an analysis of the imaginary of western philosophical and psychoanalytic discourse (*Speculum*), aiming to show that the conceptualization of sexual difference in this discourse is governed by an imaginary which is anal, that is to say, which interprets sexual difference as though there were only one sex, and that sex were male (women are defective men). For our culture, identity, logic, and rationality are symbolically male, and the female is either the outside, the hole, or the unsymbolizable residue. At most, she may occupy the maternal function. In *This Sex* and *Ethique*, Irigaray goes on to suggest that the imaginary is not confined to philosophers and psychoanalysts, but is a social imaginary which is taken to be reality, with damaging consequences for women who, unlike men, find themselves 'homeless' in the symbolic order. Unlike Lacan, she does not believe this imaginary to be irreducible; like Castoriadis, she is arguing that radical transformations in the social imaginary *could* take place, and that a new and previously unimaginable configuration could take shape.

In 1966, in an early paper on the imaginary, Irigaray referred to 'the impossible return to the body' (PN: 15). In *Ethique*, she deplors the modern neglect of the body, and emphasizes the fact that 'man's body is the threshold, the porch, of the construction of his universe(s)' (E: 99). Is there a contradiction here? Not if one remembers that the relation to the body is always an imaginary or symbolic one. The importance of the imaginary body is that it underlies western metaphysics; the imaginary body of the subject is male. Thought is still, as it were, in the anal stage; sexual difference does not yet exist in the social imaginary of the west;<sup>29</sup> the female body has not acceded to the symbolic, except in residual, fragmentary form. 'But this fault, this deficiency, this "hole", inevitably affords woman too few figurations, images or representations by which to represent herself' (SE: 71; SF: 85).

There might be another problem here. Since Lacan describes identity as imaginary, and if identity, according to Irigaray, is male (as described in the first section): either the idea of a female imaginary is self-contradictory, or the female imaginary, in so far as it attributes identity to the female, would still fall within the parameters of male thought. I think Irigaray's answer to that would be that first what we need to analyse is the unconscious of western male thought (the female imaginary in the first sense – see p.67). Not until this repressed has been more adequately symbolized, will we be able to articulate the relation between male and female elements in a different way. And at that point we might be able to consider the female imaginary in a different light, because identity might no longer mean exactly the same thing. This leads on to the question of strategy and the final section.

### The politics of male–female symbolism

In the previous section I argued that Irigaray's imaginary, although a concept which derives from psychoanalysis, cannot be understood in purely psychoanalytic terms, but also has an irreducible social dimension; its anatomical reference is also a symbolic and cultural one. Irigaray is not referring to a direct and unmediated relation to the body, but to an imaginary and symbolic representation of the body, an 'ideal morphology' which, as she puts it, leaves residues that are unsymbolized (or in which the female body may be symbolized as residue). I now want to conclude by discussing briefly the implications of using male–female symbolism to describe rationality as male and the female as unconscious/magma/residue in what might appear to be a symbolically retrograde move. Is it not politically dangerous to regard women as the irrational, or as the unconscious of culture?

The problem is that one cannot alter symbolic meanings by *fiat*;<sup>30</sup> one cannot simply step outside phallogocentrism, simply reverse the symbolism or just make strident or repetitive claims that women are in fact rational. For this reason, Irigaray adopts the strategy of mimicry or mimesis:

One must assume the feminine role deliberately. Which means already to convert a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus begin to thwart it. . . . To play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to locate the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it. It means to resubmit herself – inasmuch as she is on the side of the 'perceptible', of 'matter' – to 'ideas', in particular to ideas about herself that are elaborated in/by a masculine logic, but so as to make 'visible' by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible: recovering a possible operation of the feminine in language. (TS: 76; CS: 73–4; trans. adapted)

Several things need to be said about this strategy. In the first place, since metaphoricity itself, according to Irigaray, is male, there are problems about using metaphors of the female. Readers do not hesitate to use the term 'metaphor' when they discuss Irigaray's work; some, but not all, realize that there is a problem here.<sup>31</sup> The difficulty Irigaray faces was indicated with great clarity by Elizabeth Berg as far back as 1982:

For Irigaray, if woman is given an image – if she is represented – this representation must necessarily take place within the context of a phallogocentric system of representation in which the woman is reduced to mirroring the man. On the other hand, the presence of the woman as blank space – as refusal of representation – only serves to provide a backdrop or support for masculine projections. Thus the feminist theorist is caught in a double bind; whether she presents an image of woman or not, she continues the effacement of woman as Other. Irigaray attempts to steer a third course between these two alternatives by fixing her gaze on the support itself: focusing resolutely on the blank spaces of masculine representation, and revealing their disruptive power. At the same time, however, she is obliged to advance some image of woman if only to hold open this blank space. The images she proposes – of fluids, caves, etc. – are empty ones. . . . (Berg 1982: 17)

It is this deliberate mimetic assumption of male metaphors, male images of the feminine which has led to accusations of essentialism and logocentrism. *But as Rosi Braidotti insists, for Irigaray the route back through essentialism cannot be avoided: 'The apparent mimesis is tactical and it aims at producing difference' (Braidotti 1989: 99).*

Another way to approach the same issue is through the link which Irigaray makes between mimesis and hysteria (see for example SE: 71–2; SF: 85–6). In hysteria, the subject of enunciation whose discourse is always directed towards the 'you' for validation is willing to produce symptoms, if that will obtain the desired result (love). The tactic of mimesis can be seen as a kind of deliberate hysteria, designed to illuminate the *interests* which are at stake in metaphors:

Either let Truth carry the day against deceitful appearances, or else, claiming once more to reverse optics, let us give exclusive

privilege to the fake, the mask, the fantasy because, at least at times, they mark the nostalgia we feel for something even more true.

We will continue to waver indecisively before this dilemma unless we interpret the *interest*, and the *interests*, involved here. Who or what profits by the credits invested in the effectiveness of such a system of metaphor . . . ? (SE: 269–70; SF: 335)

Given that there is no other language in which to talk about representations of women except the essentialist language of metaphysics, Irigaray is proposing that we might be able to turn this to our advantage by assuming it deliberately.<sup>32</sup>

We might note also that of the terms Irigaray uses: *mimésis*, *mimétisme*, *masque*, etc., one of them, *mimétisme*, usually translated mimeticism, comes from the domain of animal ethology and means 'camouflage' or 'protective colouring'. I think this may be relevant too. Irigaray may be arguing, I think, that women also need to protect themselves against (re)assimilation and destruction by the masculine economy.

However, the aspect of mimesis that I want to emphasize in this chapter is the psychoanalytic interpretation of it. So I refer back again to the psychoanalytic model. In the individual psyche, unconscious phantasy is determining to the extent that it remains unconscious. When in the psychoanalytic process, it achieves an access to consciousness via language (what Irigaray refers to as symbolization or 'the operations of sublimation'), it becomes possible to effect a shift or change in the phantasy which enables the analysand to change and brings about real transformations in the personality in the direction of greater flexibility and creativity, and less rigidity or repression.<sup>33</sup> I would suggest that one way to read Irigaray is to see her as conceiving of her work as initiating a process of change at the level of the social unconscious (or imaginary), by offering interpretations of the 'material' offered by society in its philosophical or metaphysical discourse:

This process of interpretive rereading has always been a *psychoanalytic undertaking* as well. That is why we need to pay attention to the way the unconscious works in each philosophy, and perhaps in philosophy in general. We need to listen (psycho)analytically to its procedures of repression, to the structuration of language that shores up its representations, separating the true from the false, the meaningful from the meaningless, and so forth. (TS: 75; CS: 73)

These interpretations would verbalize the unconscious phantasy and begin the process of lifting the repression, a process which, on the model of psychoanalysis, might lead to change. On this reading of Irigaray, what is described as the female imaginary is not the essential feminine, common to all women, but a place in the symbolic structures.

In the first section, discussing the development of the Ego and its phantasies, I pointed out that the individual Ego, in psychoanalytic theory, is said to take shape in the context of a relationship with parental figures. Putting this another way, one might say that the acquisition of one's knowledge of the world is passionately motivated. Later, epistemology loses touch with its sources. This is precisely Irigaray's diagnosis of what has gone wrong with the rationality of the west. In *Ethique*, she suggests:

contrary to the usual methods of dialectic, love should not have to be abandoned in order to become wise or learned. It is love which leads to knowledge [science]. . . . It is love which leads the way, and is the path, both. (E: 27–8)

As I indicated earlier, for Irigaray the conceptualization of rationality is inseparable from the conceptualization of sexual difference. The scission of epistemology from its sources is linked to a model of rationality (symbolized as male) in which the symbolic female is dominated or repressed, and 'transcended'. Irigaray suggests that this has led to the apotheosis of rationality – modern technology – and to apparently unstoppable processes of destruction.

To describe rationality as male is not to restrict rationality to men. Rather, it is to argue against exclusion models of rationality as Irigaray states more or less explicitly:

What has been needed, in effect, is a discourse in which sexuality itself is at stake so that what has been serving as a condition of possibility of philosophical discourse, or rationality in general, can make itself heard. (TS: 168; CS: 162)

Exclusion is a process governed by the male imaginary (i.e. identity, or A is A, involves exclusion: A is not B); another way of putting it is to say that it is the way the male imaginary deals with sexual difference. What is important is that rationality is categorized by Irigaray as male, not in order to oppose it, which would be self-defeating, but in order to suggest a more adequate conceptualization, in which, in psychoanalytic terms, the male does not repress or split off the female/unconscious, but acknowledges or integrates it. For the psychoanalytic model, the relation between the different parts of the person, however they are named: reason/passion, body/mind, superego/ego/id, consciousness/unconscious, need not be a clear-cut one; the boundaries may fluctuate, there may be a possibility of intercommunication which is not necessarily experienced as threatening or overwhelming. In Irigaray's terms, the sexual relationship (i.e. the relationship between the imaginary or symbolic male and female) should ideally be like a chiasma, in which each could offer a home (*lieu* or *sol*) to the other (E: 16), in 'exchanges without identifiable terms, without accounts, without end' (TS: 197; CS: 193).

The condition of the advent of woman-as-subject – as subject of philosophy, subject of culture, even subject of science – is creative intercourse within the cultural imaginary. But for that to take place, the monosexual cultural imaginary would have to open up to another sex, to make a space for the female sex; it would have to recognize the Other. It is to that issue that we now turn.

## Chapter 4

### Maternal genealogy and the symbolic

toute notre culture occidentale repose sur le meurtre de la mère. (*Le Corps-à-corps avec la mère*)  
the whole of our culture in the west depends upon the murder of the mother.

Several issues were touched on in the previous chapter, which raised a number of theoretical problems, in particular the relation between the imaginary and the symbolic, the meaning of symbolic castration, and the critique that Irigaray is locating woman in the imaginary *outside* the symbolic order. Although apparently tangential to the central theme I am concerned with, it is nevertheless essential to clarify them in relation to Irigaray's thought, if we are to understand her project to effect change in the symbolic order. The sophisticated theoretical constructions of philosophers, according to Irigaray, all depend upon an unacknowledged foundation, the unsymbolized maternal-feminine. Since woman is not recognized by the cultural imaginary, theory, no matter how far-reaching and innovative, goes on perpetuating the founding obliteration. The absence of creative intercourse in the imaginary leads, eventually, to an impasse in thought; thought is condemned to go on repeating over and over again the same gesture of silencing and repression.

Given Irigaray's stress on the imaginary, some of her critics have concluded that the space which she is reclaiming for the feminine is located in the pre-Oedipal and outside the symbolic order. Take the following remarks:

The tendency in the very important work of Nancy Chodorow, Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous, for example, has been to concentrate on the importance of the pre-Oedipal phase of psycho-sexual development – that time before femininity or masculinity when the infant is in a symbiotic relationship with her mother . . . for Irigaray . . . it is the point at which femininity has not yet been repressed by patriarchy and women have not yet become man-made [. . .] There is no space for resistance within the terms of the symbolic order, and women who do not wish to repress their true femaleness can have no access to it. (Weedon 1987: 56, 65)

23. *Verbe* in French can mean 'verb'. It can also mean the word of God addressed to men, or God himself as the second person of the Trinity, as in the phrase: 'the Word made flesh'. It can also mean language (*langue* or *langage*). The *Robert* dictionary gives this example from Victor Hugo: 'Car le mot c'est le Verbe, et le Verbe c'est Dieu' [For the word is the Word and the Word is God].
24. The theorization of woman as predicate can also be found in the work of de Lauretis; see especially 1984, Ch. 5, and 1987, Ch. 2.
25. Cf. an early reference to the conditions of women's access to subjectivity in *This Sex*, which appears to equate women's 'auto-affection' with their 'god':
- That 'elsewhere' of feminine pleasure can be found only at the price of *crossing back through the mirror that subtends all speculation*. . . . A playful crossing and an unsettling one, which would allow woman to rediscover the place of her 'self-affection'. Of her 'god', we might say. A god to which one can obviously not have recourse – unless its *duality* is granted – without leading the feminine right back into the phallographic economy (TS: 77–8; CS: 75).
- This confirms my reading that 'auto-affection' should be taken as a *symbolic* process (or at least *requiring symbolization*) (see Chapter 4).
26. See Burke (1987). See also Gallop's reading of Irigaray (Gallop 1982).
27. In *Nietzsche aujourd'hui?* (1973: 299). One wonders what he *actually* said, since this is supposed to be a transcript. How did he put in the parenthesis?
28. In Jardine and Menke (forthcoming).
29. This idea of the optative mood, the 'as if', was first put forward by Burke (1981), about 'When our lips speak together'.

### Chapter 3 Rationality and the imaginary

I should like to acknowledge my debt in this chapter to the work of Marion Milner.

1. See Macey (1988), Ch. 6. Dews also comments on Lacan's social conservatism, e.g. 'Lacan does not believe . . . in the possibility of new forms of community' (1987: 238).
2. '*Speculum* . . . begins to elaborate a phenomenological description by a woman: Luce Irigaray, whose name is on the book, of the auto-affection and auto-representation of her body.' Irigaray, in Jardine and Menke (forthcoming).
3. See also: 'Originally I wanted to do a kind of tetralogy which would have tackled the problem of the four elements: water, air, fire, earth, applied to philosophers nearer our own time, and also to put into question the philosophical tradition, particularly from the point of view of the feminine' (CAC: 43). In the same interview (p.44) Irigaray adds that she was planning a book on Marx and fire, which has never appeared.
4. Another woman philosopher whose work can be related to that of Bachelard is Le Doeuff (see Grosz, 1989: xviii–xix, for a brief definition of the difference between Lacan's imaginary and that of Le Doeuff). Interestingly, Le Doeuff partly assumes Bachelard's definition of the imaginary as thinking-in-images, and partly contests it; whereas Bachelard is concerned to purify scientific knowledge of all trace of the distorting imagination, Le Doeuff sees in the image, particularly in the philosophical text, the place where what has been excluded by the project of philosophy (which defines itself by exclusion, with reference to what it is not) returns to haunt the philosopher who refuses to acknowledge dependence on the image. (One can see why Grosz thinks that Le Doeuff might have been influenced by Irigaray.)
5. See for example the discussion in the interview with Clément (1975) about the relation of her thought to Marxism.

6. The importance of morphology is discussed in Grosz (1989), pp.111, 113 ff.
7. It is interesting to compare her on this point with Kristeva. Although there are many points of convergence between them, partly because they both depend on the vocabulary and concepts of psychoanalysis, Kristeva appears to be politically rather pessimistic. See the critique of her in Moi (1985) and Leland (1989). See also Grosz (1989): 63 ff., 93 ff. for a discussion of Kristeva's rather equivocal stance vis-à-vis feminism.
8. Cf. Freud's account of hysterical symptoms, which do not correspond to neuro-physiological pathways but to symbolic or phantasmatic patterns: '*hysteria behaves as though anatomy did not exist or as though it had no knowledge of it*' (SE I: 169). See Gallop's remarkable article (1983) on Irigaray's poetics of the body and the referential illusion.
9. '*The object of desire itself, and for psychoanalysis, would be the transformation of fluid to solid? Which seals – this is well worth repeating – the triumph of rationality. Solid mechanics and rationality have maintained a relationship of very long standing, one against which fluids have never stopped arguing*' (TS: 113; CS: 111). See also '*Le sujet de la science, est-il sexué?*' (PN: 307–21) (translated under the title 'Is the subject of science sexed?', in *Cultural Critique* 1, Fall 1985 and in *Hypatia* 2, Fall 1987) and '*Ethique de la différence sexuelle*' (E: 113–24), for an account of the 'maleness' of the human and physical sciences.
10. Hodge writes:

As far as Irigaray is concerned, for women it makes no difference whether you talk about Freud or Lacan, Socrates or Plato; if you start in the twentieth century and tell history backwards, or start in the fifth century before the common era and talk about Socrates; it makes no difference if you talk about Freud and Socrates, and their emphasis on speech and talking, or if you write about Plato and Lacan and their written appropriations of the speech of psychoanalysis and of philosophical diagnosis. For Irigaray in *Speculum*, for women, there is no temporal direction, underpinned by a conception of progress, in which the project of modernity takes up the ideals of antiquity, and seeks to develop them, since those ideals are misogynist, and since the project of modernity has not been constructed to include women. History for women is a process from which women have been elided; it is not a process in which women, too, have been permitted to take up and develop the achievements of past generations. Thus with a gesture characteristic of philosophy, of radical feminism and of postmodernism . . . Irigaray denies the significance of temporal and historical difference. (1989: 109–10)

One might relate this point to Irigaray's concern to install a maternal genealogy (see Section II, *passim*). In more general terms, I think Hodge is offering a Hegelian reading of Irigaray: if 'woman' is not internally self-contradictory (see Chapter 6), then woman's self-consciousness (or woman-as-subject) has no history.

11. In *Feminist Utopias* Bartkowski suggests that '[u]topian practice decenters questions of time and history, the angle of long-standing criticism from the Left' (1989: 12). A study of the question of time in Irigaray's work (historical, linear time, women's time etc.) has not, as far as I know, been undertaken, but would clearly shed light on a lot of issues.
12. There has been considerable debate about the concept of patriarchy since Kate Millet relaunches it in 1969 in *Sexual Politics* as an explanatory concept. Coward (1983), providing a conceptual history of the term, looks at some of its limitations and suggests that it should be treated with caution. Others, particularly Marxist feminists, find it has ahistorical, universalizing, biologically deterministic

- implications which make it unsuited to feminist use. A brief account of the debates can be found in Ramazanoglu (1989). Ramazanoglu points out however that: 'It was the crude universality of the radical feminist conception of patriarchy which forced marxist feminists to rethink their marxism' (1989: 38). I tend towards the side of those who would retain it (see e.g. Mies, 1986, for whom it is a 'struggle concept' or Walby, 1986, 1990, who gives a useful account of its trajectory in Marxist feminist thinking and makes a persuasive case for putting it to use.) Since concepts have a history they can bring with them unacceptable implications; this is the danger of which Coward and others warn. But they can also be redefined and put to work analytically in different ways. I think this is what Irigaray has done with the imaginary – she has turned it into a 'struggle concept'. It is only to be expected that the sources of the concept make it a double-edged weapon, with risks to the user. I wonder if the male imaginary does not replace the concept of patriarchy in certain of its functions (particularly since, as I will show later, it has come to have social and not merely individual application). In particular what it would do is to suggest a different alternative. The alternative to *patriarchy* might present itself as *matriarchy* (which is how feminism is often interpreted, in terms of a simple desire for reversal of power, an interpretation Irigaray is anxious to steer clear of). The alternative to the *male imaginary* is conceptualized as a sexual partner, in an amorous relationship. This presents a completely different picture which does, however, leave unexplained the dimension of power and force (as Irigaray's critics have pointed out).
13. When I first wrote on Irigaray in 1986, I noted the connection between the imaginary and the elements, but at that time was unable to take it further. In the mean time, I have been able to benefit from work by Burke (1987) and Grosz (1986c, 1989), and this section is indebted to their insights.
  14. Grosz (1989) discusses together Irigaray's work on the divine, on the cosmic, on space and time, on the elements, and on Greek mythology. I think she is right to treat these aspects all together, under the heading of Irigaray's attempts to create alterity. Since the discussion in the present book has been organized along different lines, I have allocated these issues to different chapters, but this does not imply that I disagree with the links that Grosz makes.
  15. See Rose (1986: 166–97); Benvenuto and Kennedy (1986: Ch. 2). See also Dews (1987: 55–60) on the differences between Freud's theory of the Ego and Lacan's. He argues that Freud's concept of the Ego is at variance with Lacan's principally in that Lacan's account is of an alienating Ego. For Irigaray, the alienation is primarily for the woman; she does not seem to see the imaginary *per se* as inherently alienating, perhaps because she is engaged in the process of *unbinding* the rigid masculine Ego and (re)binding the fragmentary feminine. Laplanche (1989) is helpful on this:
 

day-to-day psychoanalytic experience reveals that [psychic conflict] is a conflict between binding and unbinding processes. This does not mean that we have to promote binding, or that we have to conclude that binding always works to the advantage of biological life or even psychical life; extreme binding means extreme immobilization. In that sense, Lacan's denunciations of the ego as an agency of fascination and immobilization, outrageous though they may be, are still valid. The psyche will certainly die if it disintegrates or comes under the sway of the death drive, but it can also die if it becomes too rigidly synthetic. The ego too can be a source of death. (1989: 148)
- These comments also help us to understand the tension between the global and the specific in Irigaray's analysis (see Chapter 1). On the death drive, see Chapters 4 to 7.
16. For a moving and almost entirely non-technical account of the operations of unconscious phantasy and their possible effects on the personality and activities of adult life, see Milner (1969).
  17. Lacan's 'imaginary' is, of course, a much more far-reaching notion than this remark indicates. It should be pointed out that, as various commentators have indicated, Lacan's terms and concepts are not completely stable (Bowie 1987: 105; Benvenuto and Kennedy 1986: 102; Macey 1988: 201); they are mutually self-defining and their implications alter in different contexts.
  18. This point was first noted by Gallop (1982: 68–9).
  19. My translation. Castoriadis gives as examples of social imaginary significations: religious belief; reification (in slavery or under capitalism); the modern bureaucratic universe and its pseudo-rationality. To call institutions like slavery or capitalism 'imaginary' might give the misleading impression that they are 'all in the mind'. Castoriadis stresses that 'the social imaginary, as we understand it, is more real than the "real"' (p.197). The problem is rather that 'society lives its relation with institutions in the form of the imaginary; . . . it does not recognise the institutional imaginary as its own product' (p.184).
  20. I say 'relatively subordinate', because I think it is in fact essential to the understanding of *Speculum*. But the term is not used a lot, and the dimension of the imaginary has often passed unnoticed in accounts of Irigaray.
  21. Compare this with Lacan's statement that: 'Strictly speaking . . . there can be no symbolisation of the female sex [sexe] . . . the female sex [sexe] has the character of an absence, a void or a hole' (Lacan 1981: 198–9). (*Sexe* in French usually refers to the sexual organs; it is unusual for it to signify what English usually means by sex, although Foucault sometimes seems to be using it in that way, and it can refer to women: the 'fair sex'.) But whereas Lacan appears to leave the issue at that, implying that nothing can be done about it, Irigaray is attempting to *shift* the structure of the imaginary.
  22. Cf. Brown and Adams 1979: 37:
 

In any case, the attempt to find an existent state of nature cannot, in principle, succeed. This is not a problem of the limitations of our existing knowledge (the possibility of an as-yet undiscovered people living in a purely natural state). The reason why it cannot succeed is . . . that the term 'nature' is in the end defined only by reference to the social, as that which is the non-social.
  23. See Castoriadis (1975) pp.372 ff. for a discussion of the essential heterogeneity of the unconscious on the one hand, and the logic of identity on the other.
  24. Castoriadis defines the magma as follows:
 

A magma is that from which one can extract (or in which one can construct) an indefinite number of ensemblist organisations, but which can never be reconstituted (ideally) by an ensemblist composition (finite or infinite) of these organisations. . . . We assert that everything that can be effectively given – representations, nature, signification – exists in the mode of a *magma*; that the social-historical institutions of the world, things, and individuals, insofar as it is the institution of the *Legein* and the *Teukhein*, is always also the institution of identity logic and thus the imposition of an ensemblist organisation on a first stratum of givenness which lends itself interminably to this operation. But also, that it is never and can never be *only* that – that it is also always and necessarily the institution of a magma of imaginary social significations. And finally, that the relation between the *Legein* and the *Teukhein* and the magma of imaginary social significations is not thinkable within the identity-ensemblist frame of reference – no more than are the relations between the *Legein* and representation, *Legein* and nature, or between



- representation and signification; representation and world, or 'consciousness' and 'unconscious'. (Castoriadis 1975: 461–3, trans. in Howard 1977: 297) Howard provides a useful introduction to Castoriadis's ideas.
25. See Mitchell and Rose (1982). See Hamon (1977) and Mitchell and Rose (1982) for a Lacanian critique of Irigaray. Cf. also Bannet (1989). Bannet, while finding Lacan himself limited in this respect, thinks that he has a creative effect on his readers: 'Lacan's emphasis on the dominance of the symbolic order and on the inevitability of repetition preclude him from really understanding creativity' (1989: 40). However, 'Lacan's work and Lacan's impact on the often innovative work of others demonstrates that it is still possible for subjects to transform what they have received. . . . This contradiction in Lacan has been no less fruitful than anything else in his system' (p.48). The oscillation between the positive and negative approaches to Lacan's work is nicely illustrated by MacCannell, who begins by thinking that 'Lacan's discovery of the phallogocentric roots of our subjectivity . . . has the effect of perpetuating it, and not . . . of overthrowing it to renew it in a more perfect condition' (1982: 49), but then later changes her mind and thinks that a lot of his critics have been unfair to Lacan: 'The tendency . . . of his readers has been to over-identify Lacan's analysis of the culture of the signifier with Lacan, with his own stance on that culture' (1986: 19). She accuses herself of the same mistake (ibid.: 15–16, notes 2 and 4).
26. Macey also makes a diagnosis of Lacan's imaginary; he suggests (1988: 201, 206) that Lacan is a fetishist.
27. Silverman (1988: Ch. 1) provides a clear and helpful discussion of the meaning of the term 'symbolic castration' and its relation to the claim that 'there is no pre-discursive reality' (see especially pp.7–8). Subjectivity in language is constituted by the loss of the object:
- When we say that language takes the place of the real, we mean that it takes the place of the real for the subject – that the child identifies with a signifier through which it is inserted into a closed field of signification. Within that field of signification, all elements – including the first-person pronoun which seems transparently to designate the subject – are defined exclusively through the play of codified differences. Not one of these elements is capable of reaching beyond itself to reestablish contact with the real. The door thus closes as finally upon the subject's being as upon the object. Lacan conveys the extremity of the opposition between language and the phenomenal realm when he describes it as a choice between meaning and life. (p.8).
- This process has come to be referred to as symbolic castration.
28. For two conceptualizations which indicate that the rigidity of Oedipal formulations might be giving way slightly, see Silverman (1988) and Adams (1989). Silverman suggests the possible symbolic adequacy of the negative Oedipus complex (1988: 136). What she means by this is that the Oedipal mother could occupy the third symbolic term which breaks up the imaginary dyad of mother and daughter; it is not necessary for the father to intervene. This would enable the activation of the negative Oedipus complex (the girl's love for the parent of the same sex), identification with the parent of the same sex, and at the same time open up the distance necessary to desire. Adams theorizes lesbian sadomasochism as a practice which has detached itself from the phallic referent and organizes sexuality outside the phallic field, thereby divorcing sexuality from gender.
29. This is Irigaray's interpretation of Lacan's view that there is no relation between the sexes since 'woman does not exist' (see Mitchell and Rose 1982: 137–71). Irigaray's discussion is in 'Così fan Tutti' in *This Sex*.

30. The traps of the symbolism that one inherits are usefully discussed in Lloyd (1984: Ch. 7). See also Gatens (forthcoming).
31. Stanton (1986), though indicating, correctly I think, the echoes of Rimbaud in Irigaray and other women writers, does not problematize Irigaray's use of metaphor: 'the three exponents of difference, who are the subject of this study [Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva], have privileged metaphor, the trope upheld from classical to modernist times as the optimal tool for transporting meaning beyond the known' (1986: 157–8). Fuss (1989) recognizes the problem, though she concludes that:

One wonders to what extent it is truly possible to think of the 'two lips' as something other than a metaphor. I would argue that, despite Irigaray's protestations to the contrary, the figure of the 'two lips' never stops functioning metaphorically. . . . But, what is important about Irigaray's conception of this particular figure is that the 'two lips' operate as a metaphor for *metonymy*; through this collapse of boundaries, Irigaray gestures towards the deconstruction of the classic metaphor/metonymy binarism. In fact, her work persistently attempts to effect a historical displacement of metaphor's dominance over metonymy. (1989: 72)

This seems to me an astute and perceptive comment. For further discussion of metaphor, metonymy, and the 'two lips', see Chapter 8, p.177ff.

32. Schor (1989) indicates that Irigaray distinguishes in *This Sex* between two different kinds of mimesis (TS: 131; CS: 129–30) and relates this to (1) the old mimesis (parrotting), and (2) a second level, in which parrotting becomes parody, a masquerade. Schor then suggests that one can also see a third level (3) mimesis, signifying difference as possibility. I would relate (1) to the 'other of the same', and (3) to the 'other of the other', discussed further in Section II; (2) and (3) would then correspond to the two moments of Irigaray's work, the strategic and the utopian.
33. In the technical language of Freud's metapsychology, this point is expressed as follows:
- the conscious presentation comprises the presentation of the thing plus the presentation of the word belonging to it, while the unconscious presentation is the presentation of the thing alone. The system *Ucs.* contains the thing-cathexes of the objects, the first and true object-cathexis; the system *Pcs.* comes about by this thing-presentation being hypercathexed through being linked with the word-presentations corresponding to it. It is these hypercathexes, we may suppose, that bring about a higher psychical organisation and make it possible for the primary process to be succeeded by the secondary process which is dominant in the *Pcs.* . . . A presentation which is not put into words, or a psychical act which is not hypercathexed, remains thereafter in the *Ucs.* in a state of repression. (SE XIV: 200–1)

#### Chapter 4 Maternal genealogy and the symbolic

1. For a clear theoretical account of the difference, see Laplanche (1989: 54 ff.).
2. According to Derrida, *dérivktion* is sometimes used in French to translate Heidegger's *Geworfenheit* (1986a: 427). Irigaray also defines it as the original state of loss and separation constituted by being born (E: 122–3), losing one's original home. But her main point is that the symbolic provides alternative homes for men, while women lack an adequate symbolization to house them.