

**Reading Nietzsche with Irigaray**  
***Not your garden-variety philosophy***

By  
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*To be sure, I am a forest, and a night of dark trees: but he who is not  
afraid of my darkness, will find banks full of roses under my cypresses....*  
— Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (Z.II.32.32 The Dance-  
Song)

I first encountered Luce Irigaray's work in the mid-1980's when I was writing my dissertation on Nietzsche at Northwestern. Up to the mid-1970's, feminism was dominated by second wave notions of equality. And, philosophy still only reluctantly considered Simone de Beauvoir among its ranks (in spite of her own protestations to the contrary). Feminist philosophy was primarily aimed at criticizing masculinist ideas throughout the history of philosophy. While Irigaray's early work engaged the history of philosophy, in addition to criticizing male-dominated philosophy on its own terms, she "talked back," employing "double mimesis" or a reverse mimesis through which she would take up the position of the feminine allotted to women in the texts of Plato, Nietzsche, Freud, Lacan, Merleau-Ponty, Levinas, Heidegger, and others, by repeating their words back to them in the context of her own parodic and lyrical discourse. By so doing, she challenged the limited position assigned to woman as mere reflection of man, and opened up a space for another voice (see "And the One Does Not Stir Without the Other" 1981a). At the time, over thirty years ago, I'd never seen anything like it: so irreverent, clever, and passionate...and at times, wickedly funny.

While lately Irigaray has turned away from that early mimetic style in favor of a more direct approach, throughout her writings, she has been, and continues to be, concerned with developing an elemental philosophy born from earth, air, fire, and water, that includes all living beings embedded in their environments and the dense web of relationships that sustain them, particularly relations with vegetal life.

In her first book, *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1974) she railed against Plato and Freud for privileging vision over touch and disavowing the sensuousness of our embodied and sexuate experience. That book, which was her thesis at *Ecole Freudienne de Paris* (Freudian School of Paris) got her expelled and she lost her teaching post at the University of Vincennes (cf. 2016 TVB 12). She says she wrote that book, not in a library or at a desk, but in the woods or by the sea. In subsequent work, she criticized Heidegger for forgetting the density of air so essential for life in favor of the clearing, devoid of life (1983). And, in *Amante Marine* (1980), she challenged Nietzsche for forgetting the maternal waters out of which all humans are born in favor of great heights and the rarified air of mountaintops. The following year, she published *Elemental Passions*, an ode to the elements that sustain us, and through which we encounter each other as sexuate beings. And, in her latest work, *Through Vegetal Being*, published last year, (2016) and *A New Culture of Energy* forthcoming this year from Columbia, she continues to insist that Western philosophy, and Western thought in general, has not come to terms with what it means

to be sexuate beings living together on earth.

My short essay on Irigaray's relation to Nietzsche could be divided into the beginnings of six arguments: First, Nietzsche continues to hold a special place in Irigaray's thinking. Second, *Amante Marine* is an important part of Irigaray's elemental philosophy. Third, Irigaray's insistence on depth over surface in *Amante Marine* points to two different ways Nietzsche has been taken up in French Philosophy, which could be characterized as the difference between surface and depth. Fourth, Irigaray's *Amante Marine* anticipates the most recent direction in Nietzsche scholarship, which focuses on plants and the earth. Fifth, following Nietzsche, Irigaray suggests that we can learn lessons about sharing the earth from plants. And, finally, Irigaray's elemental philosophy resonates with my own conception of earth ethics as responsiveness to other earthlings and our environment, which I develop in my recent book *Earth and World*. Given the time limitations of the seminar, each of these sections is more suggestive than developed.

### **§ *The Place of Nietzsche in Irigaray's Thought***

In her search for philosophical companionship on her journey toward a new humanity that embraces sexuate being beyond mere sex or reproduction, and towards love and the exchange of energy, she suggests that Nietzsche is the most receptive philosopher to accompanying her on her path. Still lamenting his "mistake" of preferring mountains and ice over trees and forests, but setting him apart from the rest of the history of philosophy, she says in *Through Vegetal Being*:

"As for Nietzsche, he takes a great interest in feminine figures and characters, especially as representing life; he criticizes their failings with fierceness and affirms that only maternity can correct them; nevertheless, he acknowledges that he needed a feminine companion in order to be able to pursue his work...I am afraid that the philosophers who follow Nietzsche have not perceived the seriousness of his quest for a feminine companion...Nothing, thus, in the work of these philosophers answers the tragic appeal of Nietzsche to a feminine companion in order to become capable of crossing the bridge toward a new humanity" (Irigaray & Marder 2016 67).

Perhaps this is why, written thirty-seven years ago, Luce Irigaray's *Amante Marine* remains one of her most amorous works, which she describes as, "not a book on Nietzsche but with Nietzsche who is for me a partner in love" (1981 44). The first section is written as the final love-letter to end a bittersweet affair because the addressee, the male-lover, is incapable of marrying/merrying an-other; he loves always only himself. The feminine and the woman that he embraces so tightly (that he becomes confused about his own identity) is just a projection of himself. Nietzsche, and his characters--Dionysus, Apollo, Christ, and Zarathustra--all appropriate woman, the feminine, and, especially, the maternal. Irigaray suggests that man forgets his maternal origin, invents instead a masculine birth, usurps maternal creative powers, and embraces only the eternal return of the same, namely himself, in what she calls a "hommo-sexual" (with two m's as in *homme*) economy of the same (cf. *Speculum of the Other Woman*, 1974 103).

When Irigaray finally mentions Nietzsche by name in the penultimate section of *Marine Lover*, she suggests that his reenactment, or parody, of the Christian advent can result in his desired revaluation of values "only if he goes beyond the Father-son relationship. If he announces—beyond Christianity?—that only through difference can the incarnation unfold without murderous or suicidal passion. Rhythm and measure of a female other that endlessly,

undoes the autological circle of discourse, thwarts the eternal return of the same, opens up every horizon through the affirmation of another point of view whose fulfillment can never be predicted..." (188). Following Nietzsche, yet going beyond, Irigaray criticizes Christianity for forgetting the most important part of Christ's message, incarnation, and that in Christian mythology, Christ healed with touch and love. (181; see Oliver 1995).

### **§ Amante Marine and Irigaray's Elemental Philosophy**

In *Marine Lover*, Irigaray describes earth as the forgotten maternal soil that nourishes man even as Christianity turns her into a tomb out of which man rises to return to his father. Driven out of the garden that is the abundance of earth's flora and fauna, Christianity turns earth into "a great deportation camp, where men await celestial redemption" (174). And rather than go towards "the depths of the earth," they go "toward the abysses of Heaven," and "not through or for the mother's passion, but by identification with the Father's Word" (165).

If, as Nietzsche's Zarathustra proclaims, the *Übermensch* is the "meaning of the earth," (Zarathustra's Prologue:1) Irigaray's *Marine Lover* suggests that like the Christianity he criticizes, Nietzsche, too, has turned the earth (and the sea) into a tomb and mined its depths only to soar above it and leave it behind. She asks, "Is the reign of the superman at hand when the whole earth becomes sublime discourse, when all that remains of her is her praise in the memory of ghosts?" (18).

Sailing on the sea, but never exploring its depths, flying above the surface of the earth, but never exploring beneath it's crust, this is how Irigaray describes a masculinist philosophy that substitutes words for bodies and forgets our materiality. She takes Nietzsche to task for staying on the surface of both sea and earth and never going deeper. She says, "Deeper than the solid crust you must now descend to announce the meaning of the earth... a solid plane is never just a solid plane.. it rests on subterranean and submarine life, on capped fires and winds which yet stir ceaselessly beneath that shell" (20).

### **§ Surface and Depth in French Philosophy**

We might say that the juxtaposition between solid crust and the subterranean or submarine, points to a difference in the way Nietzsche has been taken up by contemporary French philosophy, namely the difference between privileging metaphors of surface or metaphors of depth. Arguably, Deleuze and Foucault, for example, are attracted to metaphors of surface--stretched membranes, plateaus, and rhizomes--emphasizing what we might call external or horizontal growth and mechanical repetition, whereas Kristeva, Irigaray, and, to some extent Derrida, prefer fleshier or juicer metaphors, for example, Kristeva's *psychic space*, Irigaray's *sap*, and Irigaray and Derrida's blood, and other bodily fluids metabolizing, or internal processes such as autoimmunity, emphasizing what we might call internal or vertical growth and biological repetition--although to be sure, Derrida, and Irigaray insist on essential relationality (rather than mere intersections or flipped-sides) between the horizontal and the vertical, surface and depth, external and internal processes. I don't have time to fully explore this distinction between surface and depth in French philosophy in this short essay.

Related to this question of surface and depth, in her early work, Irigaray develops the notion of the sensible-transcendental to point to the way in which fleshy existence not only goes beneath or below the surface but also beyond it via encounters (or in the interval) between living

beings.<sup>1</sup> In her most recent work, breathing is an essential connection between surface and depth, and inside and outside, that not only signals our dependence on our environment--particularly, air--but also our independence, since we take our first breath on our own only after we come into the world out of our mother's bodies. Indeed, speaking of breath, in *Through Vegetal Being*, Irigaray says, "Only some yogis, and the man of the mountains that Nietzsche was, still remember smelling as a path for spiritual becoming. Now our nose is certainly the privileged sense to pass, above all through breathing, from a natural to a spiritual life" (51). And this passage from natural to spiritual, so necessary for humanity's future, depends upon diving into the depths of the soil and the sea.

### § *Amante Marine Anticipates Recent Nietzsche Scholarship*

In this regard, Irigaray's elemental philosophy, and her engagement with Nietzsche's animals, plants, and the meaning of the earth, prefigure and anticipate some of the most exciting recent Nietzsche scholarship in English. For example, Vanessa Lemm's book *Nietzsche's Animal Philosophy*, and more recently, her articles on Nietzsche and plants, Gary Shapiro's new book *Nietzsche's Earth*, along with remarks in Michael Marder's *Plant-Thinking*, and of course, *Through Vegetal Being*, his dialogue with Irigaray.

Citing Nietzsche's frequent mentions of plants and cultivation, Lemm argues, "from the perspective of the totality of life human value creation is continuous with value creation in animals and plants." As Nietzsche suggests in *Human all too Human*, "to live means to judge, measure, evaluate" (Lemm 79; cf. Nietzsche *Human all too Human*, I 32) such that human value grows out of the "moral character of plants and animals," and from whom there is much we can learn.<sup>2</sup>

Shapiro calls Nietzsche's a "garden philosophy," quoting aphorisms such as "Gardener and Garden": "Woe to the thinker who is not the gardener but only the soil of the plants that grow in him" (Dawn 382), and "Don't forget the garden... And have people who are around you as a garden—or as music on the waters in the evening, when the day is turned to memories" from *Beyond Good and Evil* (25), or Zarathustra's "garden happiness" (Z III.10.2), and again from *Human all too Human*, the section entitled "Vegetation of Happiness" that describes "little gardens of happiness" "sprouting" in the volcanic ground of suffering that makes up life.<sup>3</sup> Finally, speaking of the surface and the depth of the earth as what we could call a body *with* organs, Zarathustra says that although humans constitute a disease on the skin or surface of the earth, "the heart of the earth is of gold" (Z II.19; see Shapiro 161).

Shapiro reads Nietzsche's notion of *Menchen-Erde*, Human-Earth, as an **anti-teleological, anti-theological**, "translation of the recently named geological era of the anthropocene... during which the earth begins to undergo transformation through human activity." (Shapiro 8) He reads Nietzsche's directive to be loyal to the earth as a call for vigilance to the terrible power of human engagement. In addition, we could interpret Nietzsche's directive to be loyal to the earth as a call for a new type of responsibility, beyond good and evil, beyond praise and blame, and beyond traditional humanist philosophies. Nietzsche suggests that we must cultivate ourselves as plants in nourishing soil, and become our own gardeners, to grow into a

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<sup>1</sup> See *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (1984).

<sup>2</sup> Nachlass 1885, 40[54], KSA 11.655; See Lemm "What we can learn from Plants about the Creation of Values," *Nietzsche-Studien*, 44:1, p. 79.

<sup>3</sup> *Human All too Human* 591; see Shapiro 163.

new form of humanity, more like plants in tuned with our environment (cf. Nachlass 1880, 7[30], KSA 9.324).

### **§ *Learning from Plants***

Following Nietzsche, Irigaray's writings are not only full of plant metaphors, but also recently propose that human beings can learn from dwelling with plants. Particularly by dwelling with trees in forests, we learn ethical lessons needed to nourish a new humanity based on love rather than hate, and sharing rather than hoarding or dominating. It is important to note, however, that both Nietzsche and Irigaray envision a unique place for a new humanity, not merely as human animals or human plants in the continuum of life, but also as responsible gardeners tending the garden that is our destiny, along with the garden earth and its related fate.

In her latest published work, Irigaray maintains that the energy of human sexual desire is neither vegetal sap nor animal instinct, and neither is it aimed at the Good nor designed for possessing objects, but rather "human desire has other possibilities that we must realize in order to accomplish our human destiny" (82). "We are working for us becoming ourselves," she says, "following the Nietzschean teaching 'Become who you are!'..." (76). Reminiscent of Nietzsche, too, in this latest work, she describes herself coming out of the garden or woods, or coming down from the mountain, in search of human companionship essential to our uniquely human life: "For various reasons, the state of bliss that I experienced in the garden or in the woods—not to yet tell of the mountains—could not last. The dusk will arrive at sundown: perhaps a shower of rain will force me to seek shelter, and obviously, we are not always at the beginning of spring or the heart of summer. Fortunately, the desire for a human companion helped me to endure mourning for the impossible permanence of bliss in nature" (55).

She goes on to describe the task of bringing the bliss of nature back into human relations through our sexual desire, which is always beyond mere sexual relations, and is our way of being in the world. And here is where Irigaray parts company with Nietzsche (see Deutscher "Animality and Descent"). "Cultivating this desire," Irigaray says, "asks us to remain two, which requires us to use and develop our natural forms in a human way... Such an evolution necessitates our respect for the elements composing the macrocosm and their appropriation to the microcosm that we are" (83). She is clear that by appropriation she does not mean assimilation or possession but rather a "transfiguration of our physical nature" into "our relational," "sexual" way of being. Sexual desire, "fertilized," as she says, by the elements, is "awakened by an other, especially another human being," but not exclusively other humans (82). In deed, awakening to the possibility of this awakening of desire in relation to other living beings, is necessary for what she imagines as the transfiguration of human beings into beings who not only acknowledge their sexual way of being in the world and on the earth, but also learn to love the earth and other earthlings through that sexual energy.

While Nietzsche embraces multiplicity, Irigaray insists on the two. Possibly against the grain of Irigaray's thought, I would argue that one way to read Irigaray's insistence on two is to realize that we can't have multiplicity until we have two. We need to move from one to two before we can move from one to many. And, as Irigaray provocatively claims in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, every age has its central problem that goes unthought, and sexual difference is the problem of our age.

### **§ *Irigaray and Earth Ethics***

Returning to Irigaray's engagement with Nietzsche after so many years away, I see the seeds of my own recent book *Earth and World*. There, engaging with Kant, Arendt, Heidegger and Derrida, I develop an ethics of earth grounded on the affirmation of the multiplicity and diversity of worlds that make the earth a living planet. This earth ethics emerges from the tension between the absolutely unique place of each one and the collectively shared bond to the earth, both of which necessarily constitute the life of the planet. It is not just that we share physical space, or proximity, on the surface of the earth, but more significantly, we share a special bond to the earth as our only home, whether home or habitat. None of us—no earthlings—can live elsewhere, at least not yet. This singular bond of all living beings to the earth and to other earthlings directly, and indirectly, gives rise to an ethical responsibility to the sustaining possibility by virtue of which we not only exist and survive, but also live and thrive. All earthlings belong to earth and earth belongs to us. If we see *belonging* not in terms of property, economy, or debt, but rather in terms of the longing and *companionship* of its archaic meanings, then our belonging to the earth is born from our singular bond to earth. Belonging as longing for companionship. *Eros* is the drive towards home that is grounded on love of the earth. In terms of earth ethics, this belonging requires an affirmation of the sort St. Augustine names when he says, "I want you to be." (Perhaps rather than Nietzsche's Zarathustra's "I am you" or "I am the forest").

As Irigaray's engagement with Nietzsche reminds us, elemental ethics begins in cohabitation become companionship, and affirmation become love. Earth ethics is grounded in the circulations of ecosystems, biospheres, and environments, rather than economies, exchange and debt. Earth ethics is not a system of moral rules or universal principles that we can know through reason or calculation. Earth ethics resonates with Irigaray's recent conclusion: "computational thinking no longer has anything to teach us, while the life and surviving of trees do," namely, "to build a human relational world capable of ensuring the coexistence between us without any domination or exclusion of other living beings" (2015 Marder & Irigaray).

Earth ethics, then, is responsiveness to others and the environment by virtue of which we not only survive but also thrive. This responsiveness is based on our earthly existence as embodied creatures sharing a planet even when we do not share a world. Rooted in the earth's unearthly strangeness, which can never been known or mastered, earth ethics necessarily takes us beyond calculation and recognition of the other, beyond assimilation or destruction of the other, beyond teleology or utility, and towards responsive dwelling by acknowledging our cohabitation and interdependence in order to become earthly companions. ... The meaning of the earth as compassionate response ability.

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