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## **Disrupting the Reader: Irigaray and Deconstruction**

According to Luce Irigaray in her works *Speculum* and *This Sex Which Is Not One*, western thought is phallogentric. Based on what she calls the specularizing economy of the Same, western thought supports a system where all the subjects are only male and all the women exist only as not-male and as all that is excess or deficient. In recognizing this, it is Irigaray's intent to demonstrate how this phallogentric understanding has served as the underlying logic throughout the history of western philosophy. Drawing upon the deconstructive process (à la Derrida), Irigaray wishes to subvert and displace the phallogentric logic of western philosophy by reading between the lines of philosophy's primary texts to uncover and articulate those "syntactic laws or requirements, imaginary configurations, [and] metaphoric networks" that perpetuate and reinforce the dominant logic's position of mastery, the ability to "reduce all others to the economy of the Same." This paper will examine Irigaray's writing style: both her affinities with Derrida and deconstruction and her use of mimicry to displace and disrupt the reader, in order to further her critique of western thought, particularly its understandings of women and their sexual pleasure.

### **I. Irigaray and the Deconstructive Process**

Before embarking on a discussion of Irigaray's distinctive writing style, it is necessary to understand one of the chief methodologies she uses, deconstruction. Deconstruction, which serves as a critique of structuralism, is a unique type of methodology. Instead of offering a monolithic explanation of reality, such as structuralism and its description of universal structures, deconstruction involves a process of displacing and interrupting the logocentrism of Western epistemology through the careful reading of a particular text. This careful reading includes the double gesture of summarizing, that is, repeating the 'dominant explanation' through the guise of a commentary, and displacing, that is "within and through this repetition, leaving the order of commentary and opening a text up to the blind spots or ellipses within the dominant interpretation." What is important to note, is that this dual process always takes place within a text and is involved in providing that text with new meaning. It is not possible to step outside of the text, but is necessary to expose the contradictions from within. Additionally, because deconstruction is a process instead of a description, its power of critique requires that a reader do more than merely read the argument offered by a deconstructionist. Instead, the reader herself must become involved in the process of deconstruction. Ultimately, the deconstructionist wishes to place the reader in the center of the subversion and displacement so as not to merely tell her what is wrong with the text, but to show her.

Although Irigaray should not be labeled solely as a deconstructionist, her writings in *Speculum* and *This Sex* do involve the process of deconstruction. Her method of critique is not concerned with merely explaining the underlying phallogentric logic of western philosophy, but showing, through a rereading of philosophical texts, how and where this phallogentric logic exists. Moreover, Irigaray is not concerned with stepping outside of traditional philosophy, but with displacing the dominant logic from within. As she states it, “. . . the issue is not one of elaborating a new theory. . . but of jamming the theoretical machinery [emphasis mine] itself, of suspending its pretension to the production of a truth and of a meaning that are excessively univocal.”

Irigaray's own brand of deconstruction involves summarizing philosophical texts and fireading back into them the necessary silences that they require. In doing so, she wishes to “reopen” philosophical texts to “pry out of them what they have borrowed that is feminine.” Using psychoanalytic language, she suggests that philosophical texts must be mined for the procedures of repression and the unconscious elements involved. Fundamentally, she wishes to expose how the entire system of phallogentric logic is predicated on the repression of the feminine.

In order to do this, Irigaray promotes a process of mimicry which involves assuming the feminine role deliberately through a playful repetition of the dominant discourse. By repeating back the dominant discourse in a miming way, Irigaray suggests that one can begin to “make visible. . . what was supposed to remain invisible: the cover-up of a possible operation of the feminine in language.” In challenging the “feminist” way of asserting female subjectivity, Irigaray understands mimicry and playful repetition as the more effective method of critique. For her,

They [women] 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.

The key phrase in this assertion is disruptive excess. Indeed, for Irigaray the process of displacing and disrupting the text is critically important. The location of this disruption is made possible by the articulating of the silent utterances on which the dominant text is founded. Although Irigaray offers several examples of this disruption throughout *Speculum* and *This Sex*, one of her most compelling instances of it is through a discussion of sexual pleasure.

## **II. Irigaray and Sexual Pleasure**

According to Irigaray, Freud and Lacan both state that female sexual pleasure can only be defined in terms of the male and the Phallus. Independent of man, woman's pleasure, which is merely and only clitoris-sex, cannot compare to the “noble phallic organ.” As a result, woman's pleasure is only known as lack and her desire is only that

of penis envy. To quote Irigaray, "Woman lives her own desire only as the expectation that she may at least come to possess an equivalent of the male organ."

Irigaray challenges these assumptions about feminine sexuality by offering the assertion that women experience pleasure differently. In doing so, she proposes an alternative logic to the phallogocentric economy of the Same. Whereas the dominant logic is predicated on the Phallus and the visible sexuality of the penis, Irigaray's new form of logic bases itself on the tactile sexuality of women's two lips.

In the spirit of deconstruction and her own promotion of mimicry, Irigaray's critique of the dominant discourse on feminine sexuality does not involve merely telling her reader about the problems of psychoanalytic assumptions. Instead, Irigaray shows the reader where and how these assumptions exist. She does this through the deconstructive double gesture of miming/summarizing the dominant text and then repeating it back differently.

For example, in her discussion of Lacan, Irigaray begins by miming Lacan's own argument through a repetition of actual quotes by Lacan on the subject of feminine pleasure. According to him, women "don't know what they are saying," and "about this pleasure, woman knows nothing," and "There must be an internal reason for this [lack of feminine pleasure], connected with the structure of the pleasure mechanism." Having offered Lacan's own words about feminine sexual pleasure, Irigaray then reads between the lines of the text, to uncover the invisible assumptions that exist and to challenge the underlying logic that Lacan's statements reinforce. As she states it: The question whether, in his logic, they can articulate anything at all, whether they can be heard, is not even raised. For raising it would mean granting that there may be some other logic, and one that upsets his own. That is, a logic that challenges mastery.

In other words, the underlying assumption in Lacan's statements is that the dominant logic, one that promotes only male subjects and male desire, must be kept in place by excluding any and all possibilities of alternative logics that support female sexual pleasure and subjectivity.

In continuing with her deconstruction of the text, Irigaray offers another statement by Lacan. "Just go look at Bernini's statue in Rome, you'll see right away that St. Theresa is coming, there's no doubt about it." To this, Irigaray suggests that Lacan's offering of sexual pleasure to a statue is only to ensure that the logic of a feminine sexual pleasure "does not come up" to challenge the dominant logic. To the reader she asks, In Rome? So far away? To look? At a statue? Of a saint? Sculpted by a man? What pleasure are we talking about? Whose pleasure? . . . Hence the necessary silence concerning the pleasure of those statue-women, the only ones who are acceptable in the logic of his desire.

In all of her readings of Lacan, it is Irigaray's intent to demonstrate to the reader the underlying logic that grounds Lacan's (mis) understandings of feminine sexual

pleasure. She does this by reading back into Lacan's texts the unarticulated utterances that serve to question his theories.

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Engaged in the critical project of exposing the phallogentrism of western thought, Irigaray contends that the only way in which to challenge this dominant logic is from within. In recognizing this, Irigaray relies heavily on a deconstructive style of prose that enables her to stay within the texts she is critiquing while still displacing and subverting their phallogentric elements.