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This Essentialism Which Is Not One: Coming To Grips With Irigaray

As Jacques Derrida pointed out several years ago, in the institutional model of the university elaborated in Germany at the beginning of the nineteenth century no provision was made, no space allocated for the discipline of women's studies: "There was no place foreseen in the structure of the classical model of Berlin for women's studies" ("Women" 190).[1] Women's studies, a field barely twenty years old today, is a belated add-on, an afterthought to the Berlin model which was taken over by American institutions of higher learning. For Derrida the question then becomes: what is the status of this new wing? does it function merely as an addition, or rather as a supplement, simultaneously within and without the main building: "with women's studies, is it a question of simply filling a lack in a structure already in place, filling a gap (190)?" If the answer to this question were yes, then in the very success of women's studies would lie also its failure. "As much as women's studies has not put back into question the very principles of the structure of the former model of the university, it risks being just another cell in the university beehive" ("Women" 191). The question in other words is: is women's studies, as it has from the outset claimed to be, in some essential manner *different* from the other disciplines accomodated within the traditional Germanic institutional model of the university or is it in fact more of the same, different perhaps in its object of study, but fundamentally alike in its relationship to the institution and the social values it exists to enshrine and transmit. What difference, asks Derrida, does women's studies make in the university: "what is the difference, if there is one, between a university institution of research and teaching called 'women's studies' and any other institution of learning and teaching around it in the university or in society as a whole?" ("Women" 190). Derrida goes on to strongly suggest that in the accumulation of empirical research on women, in the tenuring of feminist scholars, in the

seemingly spectacular success of women's studies, the feminist critique of the institution has been scanted. In the eyes of deconstruction women's studies *is* perilously close to becoming "just another cell in the academic beehive."

Derrida's account of the relationship of women's studies to the institution is perhaps not entirely fair, not sufficiently informed: women's studies – if one can generalize about such a vast and heterogeneous field – has been neither as successful nor as easily coopted as Derrida makes it out to be, no more or less so than deconstruction with which, as he points out, it is often linked by their common enemies. My concern, however, lies elsewhere: what I continue to find perplexing about Derrida's remarks, remarks that were made at a seminar given at Brown University's Pembroke Center for Teaching and Research on Women, is his failure to articulate the grounds on which women's studies would found its difference. My perplexity grows when I read in the published transcription of the seminar, which I both attended and participated in, the following:

> *This is a question of the Law: are those involved in women's studies – teachers, students, researchers – the guardians of the Law, or not? You will remember that in the parable of the Law of Kafka, between the guardian of the Law and the man from the country there is no* essential difference, *they are in oppositional but symmetric positions. We are all, as members of a university, guardians of the Law. . . . Does that situation repeat itself for women's studies or not? Is there in the abstract or even topical idea of women's studies, something which potentially has the force, if it is possible, to deconstruct the fundamental institutional structure of the university, of the Law of the university? ("Women" 191-92; emphasis added)*

Is what Derrida is calling for then, that potentially deconstructive *something*, on the order of an essential difference? Is what he is calling for a women's studies that would be *essentially different* from its brother and sister disciplines? How, given the anti-essentialism of deconstruction, about which more in a moment, to found an essential difference between feminine and masculine guardians of the law? How can women's studies be essentially different from other disciplines in a philosophical system that constantly works to subvert all essential differences, all essentializing of differences?

These questions are of special concern to me because the conflict *within* the faculty of women's studies has from its inception been to a large extent a conflict – and a very violent one – over essentialism, and it is to this conflict that I want to turn in what follows. I will first consider the critiques of

essentialism that have been advanced in recent years, then compare briefly Simone de Beauvoir and Luce Irigaray, the two major French feminist theoreticians, who are generally held to exemplify respectively anti-essentialist and essentialist positions. Finally, in the space I hope to have opened up for a new look at Irigaray, I will examine her troping of essentialism.

I. This Essentialism Which Is Not One

What revisionism, not to say essentialism, was to Marxism-Leninism, essentialism is to feminism: the prime idiom of intellectual terrorism and the privileged instrument of political orthodoxy. Borrowed from the time-honored vocabulary of philosophy, the word essentialism has been endowed within the context of feminism with the power to reduce to silence, to excommunicate, to consign to oblivion. Essentialism in modern day feminism is anathema. There are, however, signs, encouraging signs in the form of projected books, ongoing dissertations, private conversations, not so much of a return of or to essentialism, as of a recognition of the excesses perpetrated in the name of anti-essentialism, of the urgency of rethinking the very terms of a conflict which all parties would agree has ceased to be productive.[2]

What then is meant by essentialism in the context of feminism and what are the chief arguments marshalled against it by its critics? According to a standard definition drawn from the *Dictionary of Philosophy and Religion*, essentialism is "the belief that things have essences." What then is an essence? Again from the same dictionary: "that which makes a thing what it is," and further, "that which is necessary and unchanging about a concept or a thing" (Reese 81, 80). Essentialism in the specific context of feminism consists in the belief that woman has an essence, that woman can be specified by one or a number of inborn attributes which define across cultures and throughout history her unchanging being and in the absence of which she ceases to be categorized as a woman. In less abstract, more practical terms, an essentialist in the context of feminism, is one who instead of carefully holding apart the poles of sex and gender maps the feminine onto femaleness, one for whom the body, the female body that is, remains, in however complex and problematic a way the rock of feminism.

But, by defining essentialism as I just have have I not in turn essentialized it, since definitions are by definition, as it were, essentialist? Anti-essentialism operates precisely in this manner, that is by essentializing essentialism, by proceeding as though there were one essentialism, an essence of essentialism. If we are to move beyond the increasingly sterile conflict over essentialism, we must begin by deessentializing essentialism, for no

more than deconstruction *essentialism is not one.*[3] The multiplicity of essentialisms – one might, for example, want to distinguish French essentialism from the native variety, naive essentialism from strategic essentialism, heterosexual from homosexual – is revealed by the multiplicity of its critiques. Now most often these critiques are imbricated, so tightly interwoven in the space of an article or a book that they appear to form one internally consistent argument directed against one immutable monolithic position. And yet if one takes the trouble for purely heuristic purposes to disentangle the various strands of these critiques – I will distinguish four such critiques – it becomes apparent that they serve diverse, even conflicting interests and draw on distinct, often incompatible conceptual frameworks. However much in practice these critiques may overlap and intersect, when separated out they turn out to correspond to some of the major trends in feminist theory from Beauvoir to the present.

1. *The Liberationist Critique*: this is the critique of essentialism first articulated by Beauvoir and closely identified with the radical feminist journal, *Questions féministes*, which she helped found. "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman," Beauvoir famously declared in *The Second Sex* (249). This is the guiding maxim of the culturalist or constructionist critique of essentialism which holds that femininity is a cultural construct in the service of the oppressive powers of patriarchy. By promoting an essential difference of woman grounded in the body, the argument runs, essentialism plays straight into the hands of the patriarchal order, which has traditionally invoked anatomical and physiological differences to legitimate the socio-political disempowerment of women. If women are to achieve equality, to become fully enfranchised persons, the manifold forms of exploitation and oppression to which they are subject, be they economic or political, must be carefully analyzed and tirelessly interrogated. Essentialist arguments which fail to take into account the role of the socius in producing women are brakes on the wheel of progress.

2. *The Linguistic Critique*: this is the critique derived from the writings and seminars of Lacan and promoted with particular force by Anglo-American film critics and theoreticians, writing in such journals as *Screen*, *m/f*, and *Camera Obscura*. What the socius is to Beauvoir and her followers, language is to Lacan and Lacanians. The essentialist, in this perspective, is a naive realist who refuses to recognize that the loss of the referent is the condition of man's entry into language. Within the symbolic order centered on the phallus there can be no immediate access to the body: the fine mesh of language screens off the body from any apprehension that is not already enculturated. Essentialism is then in Lacanian terms an effect of the imaginary and it is no

accident that some of the most powerfully seductive evocations of the feminine, notably those of Irigaray and Cixous, resonate with the presence and plenitude of the pre-discursive pre-Oedipal. In the symbolic order ruled by the phallus, "there is no such thing as The Woman" as Lacan gnomically remarks (144). What we have instead are subjects whose sexual inscription is determined solely by the positions they occupy in regard to the phallus, and these positions are at least in theory subject to change. The proper task of feminist theory is, however, not to contribute to changing the status of women in society – for the Law of the symbolic is posited as eternal – rather to expose and denaturalize the mechanisms whereby females are positioned as women.

3. *The Philosophical Critique*: the reference here is to the critique elaborated by Derrida and disseminated by feminist Derrideans ranging from Irigaray and Cixous to some of the major transatlantic feminist critics and theoreticians. Essentialism, in this view, is complicitous with Western metaphysics. To subscribe to the binary opposition man/woman is to remain a prisoner of the metaphysical with its illusions of presence, Being, stable meanings and identities. The essentialist in this scheme of things is not, as for Lacan, one who refuses to accept the phallocentric ordering of the symbolic, rather one who fails to acknowledge the play of difference in language and the difference it makes. Beyond the prisonhouse of the binary, multiple differences play indifferently across degendered bodies. As a strategic position adopted to achieve specific political goals, feminist essentialism has, however, its place in deconstruction.

4. *The Feminist Critique*: I have deliberately reserved this rubric for the only critique of essentialism to have emerged from *within* the women's movement. No proper name, masculine or feminine, can be attached to this critique as its legitimating source; it arises from the plurivocal discourses of black, Chicana, lesbian, first and third world feminist thinkers and activists. The recent work of Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't*, and the edited volume of conference proceedings, *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies*, might, however, be cited as exemplifying this trend. Essentialism, according to this critique, is a form of "false universalism" that threatens the vitality of the newly born women of feminism. By its majestic singularity Woman conspires in the denial of the very real lived differences – sexual, ethnic, racial, national, cultural, economic, generational – that divide women from each other and from themselves. Feminist anti-essentialism shares with deconstruction the conviction that essentialism inheres in binary opposition, hence its displacement of woman-as-different-from-man by the notion of internally differentiated and historically instantiated women.[4]

Unlike deconstruction and all the other critiques of essentialism I have reviewed all too briefly here, the feminist is uniquely committed to constructing specifically female subjectivities, and it is for this reason that I find this critique the most compelling. It is precisely around the issues of the *differences* among as well as within women that the impasse between essentialism and anti-essentialism is at last beginning to yield: for just as the pressing issues of race and ethnicity are forcing certain anti-essentialists to suspend their critiques in the name of political realities, they are forcing certain essentialists to question their assertion of a female essence that is widely perceived and rightly denounced by minority women as exclusionary.[5]

II. Beauvoir and Irigaray: Two Exemplary Positions

The access of women to subjectivity is the central concern of the two major French feminist theoreticians of the twentieth century: Simone de Beauvoir and Luce Irigaray. Indeed, despite their dramatically opposed positions, both share a fundamental grounding conviction: under the social arrangement known as patriarchy the subject is exclusively male: masculinity and subjectivity are co-extensive notions. Consider these two celebrated assertions, the first drawn from Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, the second, from Irigaray's *Speculum*: "He is the subject, he is the Absolute" (xvi); "any theory of the 'subject' has always been appropriated by the 'masculine' " (*Speculum* 133). Almost immediately the suspicion arises that though both are centrally concerned with the appropriation of subjectivity by men, Beauvoir and Irigaray are not in fact speaking about the same subject. Subjectivity, like essentialism, like deconstruction, is not one. There is a world of difference between Beauvoir's subject, with its impressive capitalized S, reinforced by the capitalization of Absolute, its homologue, and Irigaray's subject, with its lower case s and the relativizing quotation marks that enclose both subject and masculine.

Beauvoir's subject is the familiar Hegelian subject of existentialist ethics, a heroic figure locked in a life and death struggle with the not-self, chiefly the environment and the Other:

> *Every subject plays his part as such specifically through exploits or projects that serve as a mode of transcendence; he achieves liberty only through a continual reaching out toward other liberties. There is no justification for present existence other than its expansion into an indefinitely open future. Every time transcendence falls back into immanence, stagnation, there is a degradation of existence onto the "en-soi" – the brutish life of subjection to given conditions*

> *– and of liberty into constraint and contingence. This downfall represents a moral fault if the subject consents to it; if it is inflicted upon him, it spells frustration and oppression. In both cases it is an absolute evil. (xxviii)*

Subjectivity is for Beauvoir activity, a restless projection into the future, a glorious surpassing of the iterativity of everyday life. The dreadful fall from transcendence into immanence is woman's estate. Consigned by the masterful male subject to passivity and repetition, woman in patriarchy is a prisoner of immanence. Beauvoir's theory of subjectivity, thus, as has been often observed, dismally reinscribes the most traditional alignments of Western metaphysics: positivity lines up with activity, while passivity and with it femininity are slotted as negative. At the same time, however, Beauvoir's exemplary anti-essentialism works to break the alignment of the transcendent and the male; by leaving behind the unredeemed and unredeemable domestic sphere of contingency for the public sphere of economic activity women too can achieve transcendence. Liberation for women in Beauvoir's liberationist macro-narrative consists in emerging from the dark cave of immanence "into the light of transcendence" (675).

Deeply implicated in the radical reconceptualization of the (male) subject that characterizes post-Sartrean French thought, Irigaray's subject is a diminished subject that bears little resemblance to the sovereign and purposeful subject of existentialist philosophy. For Irigaray – and this displacement is crucial – the main attribute of the subject is not activity but language. The *homo faber* that serves as Beauvoir's model gives way to *homo parlans*. Thus Irigaray's subject is for all practical purposes a speaking subject, a pronoun, the first person singular I. And that pronoun has under current social arrangements been pre-empted by men: "The I thus remains predominant among men" ("L'Ordre" 83). The much touted death of the subject – which can only be the male subject (Miller 102-20) – leaves Irigaray singularly unmoved:

> *And the fact that you no longer assert yourself as absolute subject does not change a thing. The breath that animates you, the law or the duty that lead you, are they not the quintessence of your subjectivity? You no longer cling to [ne tiens pas à] your "I"? But your "I" clings to you [te tient] . . .* (Passions *101)*

For women to accede to subjectivity clearly means becoming speaking subjects in their own right. It is precisely at this juncture that the major difference between Beauvoir and Irigaray begins to assert itself, and once again I take them as representative of what Anthony Appiah has called

the "classic dialectic": whereas for Beauvoir the goal is for women to share fully in the privileges of the transcendent subject, for Irigaray the goal is for women to achieve subjectivity without merging tracelessly into the putative indifference of the shifter. What is at stake in these two equally powerful and problematic feminist discourses is not the status of difference, rather that of the universal, and universalism may well be one of the most divisive and least discussed issues in feminism today. When Irigaray projects women as speaking a sexually marked language, a "parler femme," she is, I believe, ultimately less concerned with theorizing feminine specificity than with debunking the oppressive fiction of an universal subject. To speak woman is above all *not* to "speak 'universal' " (*Parler* 9); "No more subject which is indifferent, substitutable, universal" (*Corps* 62-64); "I have no desire to take their speech as they have taken ours, nor to speak 'universal.' "[5] For Beauvoir, on the other hand, it is precisely because women have been prevented from speaking universal, indeed because they have "no sense of the universal" that they have made so few significant contributions to the great humanist tradition. Mediocrity is the lot of those creators who do not feel "responsible for the universe" (671).

My task here is not to adjudicate between these two exemplary positions I am outlining, but to try to understand how starting from the same assumptions about women's exile from subjectivity, Beauvoir and Irigaray arrive at such radically different conclusions, and further to show that Irigaray's work cannot be understood without situating it in relationship to Beauvoir's. In order to do so Beauvoir's and Irigaray's theories of subjectivity must be reinserted in the framework of their broader enterprises. Beauvoir's project throughout *The Second Sex* is to lay bare the mechanisms of what we might call, borrowing the term from Mary Louise Pratt, "othering" (139): the means by which patriarchy fixed women in the place of the absolute Other, projecting onto women a femininity constituted of the refuse of masculine transcendence. Otherness in Beauvoir's scheme of things is utter negativity; it is the realm of what Kristeva has called the abject. Irigaray's project is diametrically opposed to Beauvoir's but must be viewed as its necessary corollary. Just as Beauvoir lays bare the mechanisms of othering, Irigaray exposes those of what we might call by analogy, "saming." If othering involves attributing to the objectified other a difference that serves to legitimate her oppression, saming denies the objectified other the right to her difference, submitting the other to the laws of phallic specularity. If othering assumes that the other is knowable, saming precludes any knowledge of the other in her otherness. If exposing the logic of othering – whether it be of women, Jews, or any other victims of demeaning stereotyping – is a necessary step in achieving equality,

exposing the logic of saming is a necessary step in toppling the universal from his/(her) pedestal.

Since othering and saming conspire in the oppression of women, the workings of *both* processes need to be exposed. And yet to date the articulation of these two projects has proved an elusive, indeed insuperable task for feminist theoreticians, for just as Beauvoir's analysis precludes theorizing difference, or rather – and the distinction is crucial – difference as positivity, Irigaray's proves incapable of not theorizing difference, that is difference as positivity. One of the more awkward moments in Beauvoir comes in the closing pages of *The Second Sex* when she seeks to persuade the reader that women's liberation will not signify a total loss of difference between men and women, for the entire weight of what precedes militates against theorizing a positive difference, indeed against grounding difference since both the body and the social have both been disqualified as sites of any meaningful sexual difference. Beauvoir gives herself away in these final pages when speaking of women's failure to achieve greatness in the world of intellect: "She can become an excellent theoretician, can acquire real competence, but she will be forced to repudiate whatever she has in her that is 'different' " (667). Similarly, by relentlessly exposing the mechanisms of saming, the economy of what she calls the "echonomy" of patriarchy, Irigaray exposes herself to adopting a logic of othering, precisely what has been called, her protestations notwithstanding, her essentialism.[6] What I am suggesting here is that each position has its own inescapable logic, and that that inescapability is the law of the same/other. If all difference is attributed to othering then one risks saming, and conversely: if all denial of difference is viewed as resulting in saming then one risks othering. In other words, it is as disingenuous to reproach Beauvoir with promoting the loss of difference between men and women as it is to criticize Irigaray for promoting, indeed theorizing that difference. And yet the logic I am trying to draw out of these two exemplary feminist discourses seems to have escaped Irigaray's most incisive critics who have repeatedly sought to sever her brilliant exposure of the specular logic of phallocentrism from her theorization of a specifically feminine difference. Toril Moi's formulation is in this regard typical:

> *... having shown that so far femininity has been produced exclusively in relation to the logic of the same, she falls for the temptation to produce her own positive theory of femininity. But, as we have seen, to define 'woman' is necessarily to essentialize her. (139)*

My argument is *a contrario*: that Irigaray's production of a positive theory of femininity is not an aberration, a sin (to extend the theological

metaphor), rather the logical extension of her deconstruction of the specular logic of saming. What is problematic about Irigaray's theorization of the feminine – which, it should be pointed out, is in fact only one aspect or moment of her work – is indicated by Moi's use of the word "positive." For finally the question posed by Irigaray's attempts to theorize feminine specificity – which is not to be confused with "defining" woman, a task she writes is better left to men – is the question of the difference *within* difference. Irigaray's wager is that difference can be reinvented, that the bogus difference of misogyny can be reclaimed to become a radical new difference that would present the first serious historical threat to the hegemony of the male sex. Irigaray's wager is that there is a (*la/une femme*) woman *in* femininity: "Beneath all these/her appearances, beneath all these/her borrowings and artifices, this other still sub-sists. Beyond all these/her forms of life or of death, still alive" (*Amante* 126). Mimesis is the term Irigaray appropriates from the vocabulary of philosophy to describe her strategy, transforming woman's masquerade, her so-called femininity into a means of reappropriating the feminine:

> *One must assume the feminine role deliberately. Which means already to convert a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus to begin to thwart it . . . To play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover 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: the cover-up of a possible operation of the feminine in language. It also means to "unveil" the fact that, if women are such good mimics, it is because they are not simply resorbed in this function.* They also remain elsewhere. (This Sex *76*)

Mimesis (*mimétisme*) in Irigaray has been widely and correctly interpreted as describing a parodic mode of discourse designed to deconstruct the discourse of misogyny through effects of amplification and rearticulation that work, in Mary Ann Doane's words, to "enact a defamiliarized version of femininity" (182). But there is yet another aspect of mimesis – a notoriously polysemic term[7] – which has been largely misread, and even repressed, because it involves a far more controversial and riskier operation, a transvaluation, rather than a repudiation of the discourse of misogyny, an effort to hold onto the baby while draining out the bathwater. For example, in *Le corps-à-corps avec la mère*, Irigaray writes:

> *We are historically the guardians of the corporeal, we must not abandon this charge but identify it as ours, by inviting men not to make of us their body, a guarantee of their body.* (29)

Irigaray's use of the word mimesis mimes her strategy, bodies forth her wager, which might be described as an instance of what Derrida has termed paleonymy: "the occasional maintenance of an *old name* in order to launch a new concept" (*Positions* 71). In the specific context of feminism the old mimesis, sometimes referred to as masquerade, names women's alleged talents at parrotting the master's discourse, including the discourse of misogyny. At a second level, parrotting becomes parody, and mimesis signifies not a deluded masquerade, but a canny mimicry. And, finally, in the third meaning of mimesis I am attempting to tease out of Irigaray's writings, mimesis comes to signify difference as positivity, a joyful reappropriation of the attributes of the other that is not in any way to be confused with a mere reversal of the existing phallocentric distribution of power. For Irigaray, as for other new French anti-feminists, reversal – the coming into power of women which they view as the ultimate goal of American style feminists – leaves the specular economy she would shatter in place. The mimesis that lies beyond masquerade and mimicry – a more essential mimesis, as it were, a mimesis that recalls the original Platonic mimesis – does not signify a reversal of misogyny but an emergence of the feminine and the feminine can only emerge from within or beneath – to extend Irigaray's archeological metaphor – femininity, within which it lies buried. The difference within mimesis *is* the difference within difference.

III. Coming to Grips With Irigaray

Est-ce qu'il n'y a pas une fluidité
quelque déluge, qui pourrait ébranler
cet ordre social?
(Irigaray, Corps *81)*
Où sont, au présent, les fluides?
(Irigaray, L'oubli *35)*

Few claims Irigaray has made for feminine specificity have aroused more virulent accusations of essentialism than her "outrageous" claim that woman enjoys a special relationship with the fluid. One of the earliest such assertions occurs in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, where in the heyday of "écriture féminine" Irigaray characterizes both women's writing and speech as fluid.

> *And yet that woman-thing speaks. But not 'like,' not 'the* same,' *not 'identical with itself' nor to any x, etc. . . . It speaks 'fluid.'* (This Sex *111)*

So uncomfortable has this assertion made certain feminist theoreticians that they have rushed to ascribe it to Irigarayan mimicry as ironic distancing, rather than to the positive form of mimesis I have delineated above:

> *Her association of femininity with what she refers to as the "real properties of fluids" – internal frictions, pressures, movement, a specific dynamics which makes a fluid nonidentical to itself – is, of course,* merely *an extension and a mimicking of a patriarchal construction of femininity. (Doane 104; emphasis added)*

And yet as Irigaray's linking up of feminine fluidity with flux, non-identity, proximity, etc. indicates, the fluid is highly valorized in her elemental philosophy: "Why is setting oneself up as a solid more worthwhile than flowing as a liquid from between the two [lips]" (*Passions* 18); "My life is nothing but the mobile flexibility, tenderness, uncertainty of the fluid" (28).

Where then does this notion of the fluidity of the feminine, when not the femininity of the fluid, come from? Undeniably it is appropriated from the repertory of misogyny: "Historically the properties of fluids have been abandoned to the feminine" (*This Sex* 116). What is worse for the anti-essentialists, it appears to emanate from an unproblematized reading out of the female body in its hormonal instanciation. It is, indeed, triply determined by female physiology:

> *The anal stage is already given over to the pleasure of the 'solid.' Yet it seems to me that the pleasure of the fluid subsists, in women, far beyond the so-called oral stage: the pleasure of 'what's flowing' within her, outside of her, and indeed among women.* (This Sex *140)*

> *The marine element is thus both the amniotic waters . . . and it is also, it seems to me, something which figures quite well feminine jouissance* (Corps *49)*

The ontological primacy of woman and the fluid are for her one of the represseds of patriarchal metaphysics; the forgetting of fluids participates in the matricide that according to Irigaray's myth of origins founds Western culture: "He begins to be in and thanks to fluids" (*L'oubli* 36).

Unquestionably then Irigaray's linking up of the fluid and the feminine rests on a reference to the female body.[8] The anti-essentialist would stop here, dismiss Irigaray's claims as misguided and turn away – and few of Irigaray's sharpest critics have bothered with the work published after 1977, which is to say the bulk of her writing.[9] In so doing they miss another and equally troublesome, but ultimately more interesting aspect of her work. And that is her reliance on the universe of science, notably physics (but also chemistry to the extent that the borders between them cannot always be clearly drawn) which enjoys a strange and largely unexamined privilege in Irigaray's conceptual universe.[10] Indeed, in her writings on the repressed feminine element of water the referential reality that Irigaray most ardently invokes to ground her assertions is not so much physiological as physical; it is on the rock of materialism and not of essentialism that Irigaray seeks to establish the truth of her claim. Thus, in an essay entitled, "The Language of Man" she writes: "But still today this woma(e)n's language [langage de(s) femme(s)] is censured, repressed, ignored ... even as the science of the dynamic of fluids already provides a partial interpretation of it" (*Parler* 290-91; see also 289). The real in Irigaray is neither impossible, nor unknowable: it is the fluid. Thus, further in the same essay, Irigaray insistently associates the fluid and the real, speaking of "the real of the dynamic of fluids" and "an economy of *real fluids*" (291).

Two remarks are in order here: first, given all that I have said before this new criticism of Irigaray may appear curious. But my desire in this paper is neither to "defend" Irigaray nor promote essentialism, but rather to de-hystericize the debate, to show how the obsessive focus on what is so loosely termed the *biological* has worked to impoverish the reading of as challenging and ambitious a thinker as is Irigaray. Second: there is, on the other hand, nothing particularly surprising from the perspective of anti-essentialism about the complicity of essentialism and scientism, in that both imply at least at some level a fundamental materialism. But because of the red flag (when it is not a red herring) of essentialism, the question of Irigaray's *mater*-ialism is never really addressed. It is as though certain feminists were more comfortable evacuating the body from the precincts of high theory – thereby, of course, reinforcing the very hierarchies they would dismantle – than carefully separating out what belongs to the body and what to the world of matter.

To say that science enjoys a special status in Irigaray's writings is not to say that science, the master discourse of our age, has escaped Irigaray's feminist critique. It has not. Laughter and anger are Irigaray's reactions to the supposed neutrality of scientific language, a form of writing which like all

writing is inflected by gender but which more so than any other disclaims subjectivity. Science's failure to acknowledge the gendering of language results in its failures to adequately theorize that which it aligns with the feminine, notably the elements, notably the liquid. Thus, in "The 'Mechanics' of Fluids" Irigaray takes "science" to task for its failure to elaborate a "theory of fluids." And yet, in some of her more recent writings, while remaining highly critical of the ideology of science, she constantly invokes scientific theories as models, analogons for female sexuality. For example: rejecting as more adequate to male than to female sexuality the thermodynamic principles that underlie Freud's theory of libido, Irigaray writes:

> *Feminine sexuality could perhaps better be brought into harmony* – if one must evoke a scientific model – *with what Prigogine calls "dissipating" structures that operate via the exchange with the external world, structures that proceed through levels of energy. The organizational principle of these structures has nothing to do with the search for equilibrium but rather with the crossing of thresholds. This would correspond to a surpassing of disorder or entropy without discharge.*[11] *("Subject" 81; emphasis added)*

Similarly, later in the same essay, Irigaray suggests that recent work in physics, as well as in linguistics, might shed light on the specificities of women's relationship to enunciation: "Some recent studies in discourse theory, *but in physics as well,* seem to shed light upon the locus from which one could or could not situate oneself as a subject of language production" (86; emphasis added). Whatever her questions to the scientists, and some of them – as in "Is the Subject of Science Sexed?" – are impertinent, Irigaray repeatedly attempts to anchor the truth of her theories in the latest scientific knowledge. She knows that scientific discourse is not neutral, but nevertheless she looks to it as the ultimate source of legitimation. Science is Irigaray's fetish.

Why then is science and especially physics privileged in Irigaray's writings? The answer emerges from a consideration of the pivotal role of Descartes in Irigaray's writings. As Moi has noted, the Descartes chapter in *Speculum* is located at the "exact center of the 'Speculum' section (and of the whole book) . . . Descartes sinks into the innermost cavity of the book" (131). This chapter is, as Moi further remarks, traditional at least in its presentation of the subject of the Cogito: the "I" of the Cogito is self-engendered, constituted through a radical denial both of the other and of man's corporeal origins: "The 'I' thinks, therefore this thing, this body that is also nature, that is still the *mother*, becomes an extension at the 'I' 's disposal for analytical investigations, scientific projections, the regulated exercise of the imaginary,

the utilitarian practice of technique" (*Speculum* 186). What is at stake here is the constitution of an ontology that excludes all considerations having to do with the physical world: "The same thing applies to the discussions of woman and women. Gynecology, dioptrics, are no longer by right a part of metaphysics – *that supposedly unsexed anthropos-logos whose actual sex is admitted only by its omission and exclusion from consciousness*, and by what is said in its margins" (*Speculum* 183). How surprising then to discover in *Ethique de la différence sexuelle* another Descartes, a Descartes whose treatise on the passions of the soul contains the concept of admiration which fully realizes Irigaray's most cherished desire, the (re)connection of the body and the soul, the physical and the metaphysical: "One must reread Descartes a bit and recall or learn how it is with movement in passions. One must meditate also on the fact that all philosophers – except for the most recent ones? why? – have always been physicists, have always rested their metaphysical research on or accompanied it with the cosmological. . . . This cleavage between the physical sciences and thought doubtless represents that which threatens thought itself" (*Ethique* 75).

It is then in Descartes' treatise that Irigaray finds the alliance of the physical and the metaphysical, the material and the transcendental which represents for her the philosophical ideal. Little matter that in elaborating his notion of admiration Descartes does not have sexual difference in mind: "Sexual difference could be situated here. But Descartes doesn't think of it. He simply asserts that what is different attracts" (*Ethique* 81); "He does not differentiate the passions according to sexual difference. . . . On the other hand he places admiration first among the passions. Passion forgotten by Freud? Passion which holds open a path between physics and metaphysics, corporeal impressions and movements toward an object be it empirical or transcendental" (*Ethique* 84). Thus in Irigaray, Descartes functions both as the philosopher who irrevocably sunders body from soul and the one who most brilliantly reunites them. Physics is here placed in service of Irigaray's radical materialism, her desire to return to a Presocratic (but also post-Nietzschean and -Bachelardian) apprehension of the four generic elements as foundational, which is – I repeat – not the same thing as essentialism.

But there is more: Irigaray's ultimate goal is not, so to speak, to put the physics back in metaphysics, but rather the ruining of the metaphysics of being through the substitution of a physics of the liquid for a physics of the solid. Heidegger names that moment in the history of philosophy when a possible questioning of the primacy of the solid remains earthbound, grounded in the very soil of metaphysics. The ruining of metaphysics is bound up with an anamnesis, a remembering of the forgotten elements:

> *Metaphysics always supposes, somehow, a solid earth-crust, from which a construction may be raised. Thus a physics which privileges or at least has constituted the solid plane. . . . So long as Heidegger does not leave the earth, he does not leave metaphysics. Metaphysics does not inscribe itself either on/in water, on/in air, on/in fire. . . . And its abysses, both above and below, doubtless find their interpretation in the forgetting of the elements which don't have the same density. The end of metaphysics would be prescribed by their reinvention in contemporary physics?* (L'Oubli *10)*

Finally, calling into question Irigaray's relationship to science returns us to the question of the institution, for what emerges from a reading of *Parler n'est jamais neutre* is that her interventions cannot be read without taking into account their institutional context. It is altogether striking in this regard to consider the difference between two of the most powerful essays in the volume, "The Misery of Psychoanalysis" and "Is the Subject of Science Sexed?" In the first of these essays, where Irigaray's addressees are the male guardians of the (Lacanian) psychoanalytic institution, her tone is from the outset self-assured, truculent, outraged. How different is the tone of her speech to the scientists. Addressing the members of the "Seminar on the history and sociology of scientific ideas and facts" of the University of Provence, Marseilles, Irigaray confesses to a rare attack of stage fright: "For a long time I have not experienced such difficulties with the notion of speaking in public," (74) she tells her audience. The problem is a problem of address: whereas the text to the analysts begins with a peremptory, "Messieurs les analystes," the speech to the scientists begins by interrogating the very act of address: "How does one talk to scientists?" (73)

Standing before the scientists Irigaray stands like a woman from the country before the law: "Anxiety in the face of an absolute power floating in the air, of an authoritative judgment: everywhere, yet imperceptible, of a tribunal, which in its extreme case has neither judge, nor prosecutor, nor accused. But the judicial system is in place. There is a truth there to which one must submit without appeal, against which one can commit violations . . . unwillingly or unknowingly. The supreme instance which is exercised against your will" (74-75).

According to Derrida's reading of Kafka's parable there is no essential difference between the man from the country and the guardians of the law. Their positions in regard to the law are opposite but symmetrical: "The two protagonists are both attendant to the law but opposing one another" ("Devant" 139), writes Derrida. But what if the man from the country is re-

placed by a woman? Is there no essential difference between the woman from the country, here the feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray, and the guardians of the law, in this instance the scientists whose faculty is to a very large extent hegemonic in our universities today?[12] If the man from the country is replaced by a woman, can one so easily speak of positions that are opposite and *symmetrical* without risking relapsing into a logic of saming, precisely what Irigaray has called an "old dream of symmetry"?

There can be no easy answers to these questions which are immensely complicated by the very powerful interpretation Derrida has advanced of the law in Kafka's parable. If, however, Irigaray can be taken here as exemplifying the feminist intervention in the institution, then one can, however tentatively, discern the difference that women's studies can make: for instead of simply addressing the guardians of the law – if indeed any address is ever simple – Irigaray transforms the very conditions of the law's production and enforcement. In raising the question of the gender of the producers of knowledge, women's studies always involves a radical questioning of the conditions of the production and dissemination of knowledge, of the constitution of the disciplines, of the hierarchical ordering of the faculties within the institution. Further, by allying herself with the most radical elements in science, Irigaray points the way to what, paraphrasing Prigogine – who borrows the phrase from Jacques Monod – we might call a "new alliance" between women's studies and the law, one which would go beyond mere opposition. In other words, it is finally by insisting on the *dissymmetry* of the positions occupied by the guardians and the woman from the country in regard to the law, that women's studies, at least in its "utopian horizon," can never be "just another cell in the academic beehive."

What precedes is the revised text of a paper I delivered at a conference held at the University of Alabama, at Tuscaloosa, entitled, "Our Academic Contract: The Conflict of the Faculties in America." This conference has since achieved footnote status in the history of post-structuralism because it was on the occasion of this gathering that the scandal of Paul de Man's wartime journalism broke in the United States. I wish to thank Richard Rand for having invited me to participate in this event and Jacques Derrida for his response to my remarks, as well as for all his other gifts.

I also wish to thank the members of my feminist reading group – Christina Crosby, Mary Ann Doane, Coppélia Kahn, Karen Newman, Ellen Rooney – as well as Elizabeth Weed, Nancy K. Miller, and Kaja Silverman for their various forms of support and criticism.

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Notes

1 When it was originally published in the Brown student journal, *subjects/objects*, in keeping with Derrida's wishes, the transcript of the seminar was prefaced by a cautionary disclaimer (reprinted in *Men in Feminism*) which I want to echo emphasizing the text's undecidable status, "somewhere between speech and writing," "authorized but authorless" (189). All references will be to the reprinted version of the text.

2 I refer here in turn to *New Directions in Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, ed. Teresa Brennan (forthcoming) and Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking* (New York: Routledge, 1989), which started out as a dissertation at Brown University. The keynote to this new deal for essentialism was perhaps sounded in the footnote to a paper given at a recent feminist conference by Mary Russo who writes: "The dangers of essentialism in posing the female body, whether in relation to representation or to 'women's history' have been well stated, so well stated, in fact, that *anti-essentialism may well be the greatest inhibition to work in cultural theory and politics at the moment, and must be displaced*" (De Lauretis, *Feminist* 228; emphasis added).

3 Repeatedly in the course of an interview with James Creech, Peggy Kamuf, and Jane Todd, Derrida insists on the plural of deconstruction: "I don't think that there is something like *one* deconstruction"; "... it is difficult to define the *one* deconstruction [*la* déconstruction].... Personally I would even say that its best interests are served by keeping that heterogeneity...." ("Deconstruction" 4, 6). Finally, he concludes it is more accurate to speak of deconstructions than a singular deconstruction.

4 There is an extreme form of anti-essentialism, a candidate for a fifth critique, that argues that the replacement of woman by women does not solve but merely displaces the problem of essentialism. This is the position represented by Denise Riley who suggests in a chapter entitled, "Does Sex Have a History?": "... not only 'woman' but also 'women' is troublesome ... we can't bracket off either 'Woman,' whose capital letter alerts us to her dangers, or the more modest lower-case 'woman,' while leaving unexamined the ordinary, innocent-sounding 'women' "(1). Cf. Donna Haraway who in her "A Manifesto for Cyborgs" remarks: "It is no accident that woman *disintegrates* into women in our time" (79; emphasis added). This is perhaps the place to comment on a critique whose conspicuous absence will surely surprise some: a *modern* Marxist critique of essentialism. I emphasize the word modern because of course Beauvoir's critique of essentialism in *The Second Sex* is heavily indebted to the Marxism she then espoused. Though the writings of Louis Althusser and Pierre Macherey, to cite the major Marxist theoreticians contemporaneous with Lacan and Derrida, inform some pioneering studies of female-authored fictions, they have not to my knowledge generated a critique of essentialism

distinct from the critiques already outlined. This seeming absence or failure of a strong recent Marxist critique of essentialism is all the more surprising as clearly the critique of essentialism was at the outset appropriated by Beauvoir (and others) from Marxism. If Riley's book and Haraway's articles are at this point in time the only articulation we have of a post-modernist Marxist critique of essentialism then it might be said that for them the essentialist is one who has not read history.

5 Ironically, in rejecting the ideal of a universal subject in favor of a subject marked by the feminine, Irigaray has, like other bourgeois white feminists, only managed to relocate universality, to institute a new hegemony. The question that arises is: how to theorize a subjectivity that does not reinscribe the universal, that does not constitute itself by simultaneously excluding and incorporating others?

6 Irigaray's most explicit rejection of essentialism occurs in the "Veiled Lips" section of *Amante marine*, where she writes: "She does not for all that constitute herself as *one*. She does not shut herself in [se referme sur ou dans] a truth or an essence. The essence of a truth remains foreign to her. She neither has nor is a being" (92). Irigaray's best defense against essentialism is the defiant plurality of the feminine; there can be no essence in a conceptual system that is by definition anti-unitary.

7 See Paul Ricoeur, "Mimesis and Representation," in *Annals of Scholarship*. Irigaray gives this polysemy full play, reminding us for example in a passage of *This Sex* that in Plato mimesis is double: "there is *mimesis* as production, which would lie more in the realm of music, and there is the *mimesis* that would be already caught up in a process of *initiation, specularization, adequation* and *reproduction*. It is the second form that is privileged throughout the history of philosophy. . . . The first form seems always to have been repressed. . . . Yet it is doubtless in the direction of, and on the basis of, that first *mimesis* that the possibility of women's writing may come about" (131). The question is, to paraphrase Yeats: how can you tell mimesis from mimesis?

8 In a brilliantly turned defense of Irigaray against her anti-essentialist critics, Jane Gallop cautions us against "too literal a reading of Irigarayan anatomy" (94). For example, when Irigaray speaks of the plural lips of the female sex, the word she uses, "lèvres" is a catachresis, an obligatory metaphor that effectively short-circuits the referential reading of the text: "Irigaray embodies female sexuality in that which, at this moment in the history of the language, is always figurative, can never be simply taken as the thing itself" (98). As brilliant as are Gallop's arguments against a naively referential reading of the Irigarayan textual body, in the end she recognizes that "the gesture of a troubled but nonetheless insistent referentiality" is essential to Irigaray's project of constructing a "non-phallomorphic sexuality" (99).

9 It is no accident that one of the most thoughtful and balanced recent articles on Irigaray is one which is based on a reading of her complete works, and not as many (though not all) of the highly critical analyses merely on the works currently available in translation; see Whitford.

10 On this point I would want to qualify Whitford's assessment of the place of science in Irigaray's discourse: "Her account of Western culture runs something like this. Our society is dominated by a destructive

imaginary (whose apotheosis is the ideology of science elevated to the status of a privileged truth)"(5). My claim is that while condemning the imperialism of a neutered science, a science cut off from the life giving female body, and which threatens us with "multiple forms of destruction of the universe" (*Ethique* 13; cf. the pronounced ecological strain in "Equal to Whom?" elsewhere in this issue), Irigaray continues to look to science as a locus of "privileged truth."

11 The reference here is to the Nobel prize winning research by Ilya Prigogine on dissipative structures. For more on Prigogine's theories, whose influence on Irigaray has been significant, see Prigogine and Stengers. Shortly after I first presented this paper I received a letter from Katherine Hayles telling me that working out of the perspective of the relationship of modern literature and science she had been struck "by certain parallels between the new scientific paradigms and contemporary feminist theory," notably that of Irigaray. I am most grateful to her for this precious confirmation of my argument.

12 The question of gender is raised by Derrida in his reading, but not as regards the "two protagonists." For Derrida what is problematic is the gender of the law, in German *das Gesetz* (neutral), in French *la loi* (feminine) ("Devant" 142).

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