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Rewriting Difference: Irigaray and “The Greeks”. Edited by ELENA TZELEPIS and ATHENA ATHANASIOU. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010.

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With regard to Greek culture ... I think that we are trying to find the crossroads at which we have taken the wrong path.—Luce Irigaray, “The Return”

The crossroads—the place of fate, encounter, event, decision, and opportunity—is an apt figure for this important new volume on the work of Luce Irigaray. In one breath the collection announces a desire for a return to a certain origin, but before that breath is done we are clear that difference, impropriety, catachresis, and the impossibility of return are figured into that very desire. In tracing these impulses the many essays that make up the text undertake a certain, and very necessary, *working through*. What then, of the “right path” alluded to by Irigaray? We might recall the crossroads where Oedipus committed that originary and fateful parricide so determinative for the patriarchal Symbolic, a three-way crossroads that according to Greek lore was ruled by the chthonic goddess Hecate, she of the three ways. If a wrong path was indeed taken there or elsewhere in “Greek culture,” this volume reminds us that the thought of a right or correct “feminine” path is itself plural and not straightforward.

The question of a return to origins, indeed the question of the possibility of such a return and the possibility of origin itself, are questions that themselves arise at a very particular crossroads in twentieth-century thought, namely that between Freudian psychoanalysis and Heideggerian phenomenology—the very meeting point where Irigaray’s thinking of sexual difference flowers, and where her feminist engagements with the myths, tragedies, and philosophical texts of ancient Greece have taken place. Heidegger uniquely raised the question of the

retrieval of the Greek philosophical inception in the *Beiträge*, on which Claudia Baracchi has recently commented, “It is in glimpsing that which the first beginning never consciously saw but only blindly enacted, that which the first beginning could not remember but only obliviously thrived on, that the other beginning becomes possible and (perhaps) necessary” (Baracchi 2007, 31). And it is only in light of the work of Freud that it becomes possible to perceive that unconscious “other beginning” in terms of the irreducible and fundamental significance of sexual difference. It is at just this crossroads of *logos* and *mythos*, where the conscious discourse of philosophy (its aspiration to perfect vision of course riven with blindnesses) meets the unconscious unfoldings of myth (rife, too, with illumination), that Irigaray performs her provocative investigations. And certainly, a great part of the value of a return to antiquity lies in its circumvention of the sway and reign of the modern egological Subject, opening up precisely the hope and possibility of errancies, of the indeterminacies of the unconscious, and of other paths of thinking and being. For Irigaray, the question of Greek origins thus resonates on at least two levels: that of the prehistory of the (sexuate) individual, where we find the figures of Oedipus, Eros, Thanatos, and the pre-Oedipal archaic mother; and at the epochal level of (patriarchal) metaphysics and fundamental ontology, where the question of Being is (in this relentlessly Western narrative) first spoken and set on its monological trajectory on the basis of the reduction of sexual difference to the mirror image, the other of the same.

As Eleni Varikas points out in a key essay, “Who Cares about the Greeks?” philosophical engagement with Greek myth and tragedy of course has its own history, especially in nineteenth-century German idealism and romanticism.¹ Tracing Irigaray’s continuity with this irreducibly nationalist German tradition, and her concomitant failure to engage with the more radical French School of classical studies led by Jean-Pierre Vernant, Varikas usefully contrasts Irigaray’s relentlessly binary analyses of sexual difference with the work of Nicole Loraux, who instead emphasized the more malleable, flexible, multivalent, and fragmentary nature of sexual difference in the Greek world. It is thus with great felicity that editors Elena Tzelepis and Athena Athanasiou enclose “the Greeks” of their title in quotation marks. As they explain in their insightful introduction: “As it designates the limits of referentiality and implies the catachresis of the proper name, the problem of quotation marks ultimately involves the question of what and who is rendered unintelligible in this male economy and imaginary of origination, what configurations of the feminine, racialized Others, and other unspeakable modes of humanness are produced as sites of constitutive impropriety and exclusion” (2). There can indeed be no return *as such* to the truth of antiquity or the fact of origin. To whom or what, then, is this “return,” and why do we or should we as feminists make it? What are the stakes of such a return? What might we hope to find, and what may we find ourselves finding, refinding, learning, obscuring, or transforming when we look? And what is missed, or in

turn displaced, when the unicity so characteristic of philosophy's history is supplanted by a duality of sexual difference?

The various essays in this book thus look to Irigaray's many engagements with "the Greeks" throughout her corpus, from the early analyses in *Speculum of the Other Woman* to later works such as *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche* and *To Be Two*, offering multiple perspectives on the specificity of the stakes and meaning of a return to or retrieval of a "Western tradition" for a contemporary feminist analysis of sexual difference.² The essays mostly started life as presentations at the 2004 conference, "Luce Irigaray and 'the Greeks': Genealogies of Re-writing," held at Columbia University, and as one might expect from a conference volume, the pieces are short, digestible, fragmentary, and somewhat uneven. This should not, however, be taken as a weakness. Though there is no thematic organization and the topics vary widely, there are nonetheless key juxtapositions and a discernible narrative that makes a sequential reading rewarding and worthwhile. A short foreword by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak usefully throws the project's inherently Western-centric thrust off balance, and the volume's first essay, by Elizabeth Weed, helps to situate Irigaray within Lacanian psychoanalysis and in relation to classical myth. The problem of mimesis dominates the pieces that follow: Dorothea Olkowski's oneiric mythographic meditation entwines the story of Kore, virgin and the pupil of the eye, with the specular and mimetic strategies of Plato's *Timaeus*, and reads well against Dianne Chisholm's examination of Kathy Acker's mimetic engagement with Eurydice as well as Anne-Emmanuelle Berger's skillful treatment of Irigaray's key figure of the veil. The next three essays (by Gail Schwab, Mary Beth Mader, and the editors, Athanasiou and Tzelepis) evoke Antigone as a central figure, and especially in the latter two papers Irigaray is less the focus than the occasion for some deeply original insights on the play's themes of genealogy and the politics of mourning, respectively. Next, Lynn Huffer draws attention to Irigaray's notable absence from queer theory, giving a clear and incisive account of how an Irigarayan ethics of self-cultivation and auto-affection might be brought into dialogue with Foucault's engagements with ethos in classical antiquity in *The Care of the Self*. Ancient metaphysics, however, takes center stage only later in the volume, in the instructive juxtaposition of Claire Colebrook's and Gayle Salamon's Irigarayan engagements with Aristotle. Colebrook's Deleuzian Irigaray, developed in relation to Agamben's thinking of potentiality, emphasizes the non-relationality of sexual difference that must interrupt a teleology of becoming. She writes: "Sexual *difference* could only occur outside a sexual *relation*, where the masculine is not the proper form that brings matter into presence, and where the feminine is not potential awaiting spirit and actuality" (184). Salamon, by contrast, argues—convincingly, to my mind—that Aristotelianhylomorphism actually persists in Irigaray as a teleology of heteronormativity, and pushes the analysis further through a remarkable original reading of Aristotle in which she claims "[t]he

question of place [in Aristotle] is from the outset already a question of relation, of mobility, of replacement, of bodies" (193). Salamon effectively throws into question Irigaray's notion that bodily morphology can be determinative with respect to sexual difference, showing that sexual difference is always already at play in various configurations of sexual style, gesture, positioning, relationality, bodily assumptions, and identifications that far exceed a regime of two.

The chapters toward the close of the book aptly begin to thematize the ways that Irigaray's philosophy of sexual difference obliterates other kinds of difference: race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, differently gendered subjects, and so on. Ewa Plonowska Ziarek and Tina Chanter's pieces deal less with antiquity than with the question of symbolic economies of exchange in Irigaray's engagement with Marx, with merely a nod to Irigaray's suggestive-but-questionable analogy between the use-value-exchange-value distinction and Aristotle's matter-form distinction as the Greek hook. Eleni Varikas (professor of Political Science and Gender Studies at the University of Paris VIII) situates the traditional thrust of Irigaray's Greek authorizations in relation to the definitively conservative role her work has played in recent political debates around the PACS (civil partnership legislation), immigration, minorities, and citizenship in France. Importantly, she explains how Irigaray's work has functioned in these discourses not only to elevate the heterosexual couple to a universal norm but also to actively exclude the claims of other kinds of different and minority subjects to political and civic rights. Finally, turning away from *Realpolitik* and back to theory, Penelope Deutscher's contribution evokes the Derridean figure of the *arrivant* incipient in the thought of Irigaray, harbinger of a non-determinative, constantly-ahead-of-us sexual difference that has not yet congealed into the sclerosis of a new hegemony. The unspoken message here is that the register of philosophy, in which we might analyze the *specificity* of sexual difference while holding other kinds of difference in abeyance, is not, after all, equivalent to that of politics, where such prioritization works necessarily to occlude and re-oppress other axes of difference.

The volume closes with Irigaray's signal contribution "The Return," previously published in the *Teaching* volume but written originally for the "Greeks" conference. Here, Irigaray engages the problematic of the return as itself inceptual in Greek thought, structuring as it does the *Odyssey* of Homer, one of the West's earliest texts. And this piece is also in certain respects a return to Irigaray's earlier, speculative focus on the symbolic dimensions of language in its attention to certain features of the Greek language: the middle voice between and beyond passive and active, the dual number alongside singular and plural, the original horizontal meaning of *genos* as kind rather than signifying birth, and *heteros*, meaning the other *one*, the other of two—a singular rather than a generalized other. The discussion of the middle voice, that distinctive Greek voice that is neither active nor passive, is central to her later themes of self-affection and

cultivation of autonomy for both men and women. Indeterminately immanent and transcendent, middle-voice activity stems both from within *and* outside, characterizing the one who is always partly open to the horizontal and sexual other rather than *acting* or *acted-upon* in the vertical relationships of parent and child, agent and passive recipient. This linguistic emphasis returns us again to that Irigarayan crossroads of the psychoanalytic and the phenomenological: we might recall the distinctive middle-voicedness of *phainesthai* in Heidegger's famous definition of phenomenology in the Introduction to *Being and Time* the "phenomenon" is consequently understood as "that which shows itself in itself" (Heidegger 1962, 51). The nostalgia for Greece should in turn be understood, says Irigaray, as a nostalgia for a return to our own selves in this mode of the middle voice — a ground from which to enter into a genuine relation with the sexually other, and a resource through which to go beyond the masculine subject's disavowal of the mother and the *déréliction* of the feminine. The later and more problematic Irigaray is in evidence too, when she, for example, issues an imperative for "woman" to not only cultivate her own self-affection so that she might return to herself, but to "[help] man in the discovery of his own self-affection" (267). Here the re-establishment of a teleology of helpmeet heterosexual leaves a bitter taste.

There are elements in the text that will irk scholars of antiquity: a lack of typological attention to the Greek script (missing accents, breathing marks, font errors) and inconsistent or faulty Roman transcriptions are endemic, and highly distracting. Readings of ancient texts are sometimes careless (the editors' reference to Plato's form-matter distinction; Olkowski's use of a contemporary fictionalized mythography [Calasso's *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmon*] as if it were a classical source; certain questionable etymologies). But arguably the value of this text is not to be found in the minutiae of its classical scholarship. Rather, this important collection invites us to struggle with a certain nostalgia for origin through a feminist hermeneutic that is far from a perfect circle. Instead, we have a fragmented, desultory, irruptive, and provocative series of glimpses: flashes of a Greek past that illuminate and conceal, weave and unweave, console and disturb, send us backwards to what is long buried, forward to what is yet to come, and swerve us away again. Tzelepis and Athanasiou's volume is a momentous contribution to that great work of *working through* that is possibly the most vital and necessary aspect of the vast, difficult, phenomenologico-psychoanalytic feminist project bequeathed to us by Luce Irigaray.

NOTES

1. Irigaray's relationship to this tradition is also traced at some length in Stone 2006.

2. This focus distinguishes the volume from a burgeoning secondary literature on Irigaray that includes such key volumes as Burke et al. 1994; Cimitile and Miller 2007; Irigaray and Green 2008; and classic monographs such as Whitford 1991; Deutscher 2002 (which engages with the more philosophically and politically problematic later work); Stone 2006; and most recently Jones 2011.

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