



# Self-Mimetic Curved Silvering

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## Dancing with Irigaray

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One of Luce Irigaray's many important contributions to philosophy consists in invoking dance more frequently than any other canonical Western philosopher. Unfortunately, however, her treatment of dance has rarely been treated substantively in the secondary literature, especially in regard to her most influential commentators, including Judith Butler, Elizabeth Grosz, and Margaret Whitford. Accordingly, I will begin my first section by situating the theme of dance in Irigaray's work in the context of that of the latter three philosophers. I will attempt to show, moving from Butler to Grosz to Whitford, an increasing tolerance for, and ultimately even celebration of, ambivalence in the form and content of Irigaray's work. I will then conclude my first section by considering Elend Summers-Bremner's "Reading Irigaray, Dancing" in tandem with Gerald Jonas' *Dancing: The Power, Pleasure and Art of Movement*. My suggestion here will be that a certain Irigaray-informed approach to social dance could be seen as foreshadowing Irigaray's later work on a new, more positive, kind of heterosexual relationship. Overall, then, this first section provides the justification for my thematic focus on dance.

With the dance floor thus prepared, and since most of Irigaray's treatment of dance is found in her book on Nietzsche, my second section will then offer a close reading of that book. Though typically translated as *Marine Lover*, I will translate it here as *Sea-Lover*.<sup>1</sup> Dance appears on the surface of *Sea-Lover* very pejoratively, as a privileged figure for the subject's manipulation of the other into a kind of counterbalance, always at arm's length, to compulsive self-fetishizing. I will suggest, however, that Irigaray's attitude toward dance in *Sea-Lover* is instead self-consciously ambivalent, and that this merely apparent pejorative-ness derives from descriptions of dance that minimize its resonance with her concept of positive mimesis. This second section thus offers an example of the transformative (figurative) social dance suggested in my first section, namely Irigaray's dance with Nietzsche.

To get clearer on how such dance functions as a positive mimesis, my final section will then turn to the two dialogical sections of *This Sex...* (along with a few passages from *Speculum*). Here Irigaray presents her conceptions of mimesis most clearly, along with what I will term “self-mimesis,” and the curvature and silvering of mirrors as mimetic objects. My suggestion here will be that it is precisely at the intersection of these four phenomena that dance (and especially a certain approach to social dance) could function as a form of positive mimesis—facilitating revolutionary social justice by an imitation thereof, and thereby constituting a transitional move from the patriarchy of today to a more egalitarian tomorrow.

The upshot of my essay, then, is that dance functions in Irigaray’s work in the following three ways: as (1) a symbol of a more positive comportment for heterosexual relationships; (2) an indication that the ambivalence in Irigaray’s work is self-consciously strategic; and (3) an example that teases apart the concepts of negative and positive mimesis, specifically by fleshing out the latter. More concisely, dance constitutes a figure of positive ambivalence (whether between heterosexual lovers, participants in a philosophical dialogue, or aspects of a concept) as self-mimetic, curved silvering in the pursuit of social justice.

## A Pre-Dance Warm-Up

I begin my review of the secondary literature with Butler, in part because she has had the greatest influence on my own thinking. Butler’s most important analyses of Irigaray can be found in *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies that Matter*. In the former, Butler first mentions Irigaray in the context of a discussion of the following question: “To what degree does the body *come into being* in and through the mark(s) of gender?”<sup>2</sup> Prior to Irigaray, Butler writes, the “social scientists...refer to gender as a ‘factor’ or a ‘dimension’ of an analysis” and “‘a mark’ of biological, linguistic, or cultural difference,” while for Beauvoir and her adherents “only the feminine gender is marked” (13). Irigaray, however, according to Butler’s dancing rhetoric, makes a new “move,” which “complicates the discussion further” (13, 14).

Women, in Irigaray’s new move, “constitute a paradox, if not a contradiction, within the discourse of identity itself,” as “the *unrepresentable*” of that discourse (14). Put differently, women are neither represented as “the subject” nor as “the Other” of the subject (or its “lack”), but are instead excluded altogether, which also “excludes an entirely different economy of signification” (14). And this economy, for Irigaray, “provides a point of departure for a criticism of hegemonic Western representation and of the metaphysics of substance that structures the very notion of the subject” (14). Given the way this subject has been constructed, then, Butler explains, “the feminine could never be the *mark of a subject*,” nor could it be “theorized in terms of a determine *relation* between the masculine and feminine within

any discourse," since all discourses "constitute so many modalities of phallogocentric language" (15). Butler objects, however, to what she terms the "globalizing reach" of Irigaray's move, which raises the question for her as to whether "the failure to acknowledge the specific cultural operations of gender oppression" might ultimately be "itself a kind of epistemological imperialism" (18).

Later in *Gender Trouble*, however, Butler contradicts her own previous claim (that the feminine is not a "lack" for Irigaray) by attributing to "Irigaray's post-Lacanian reformulation of Freud" the claim that "the feminine is the signification of a lack" (36, 37). And in another, similar reversal, Butler's next paragraph attributes to Irigaray's "opposition to the phallogocentrism of Lacan" an attempt to "theorize the feminine" as "the unrepresentable absence effected by (masculine) denial that grounds the signifying economy through exclusion" (37). Appropriately, therefore, Butler later in *Gender Trouble* acknowledges some uncertainty regarding Irigaray, specifically regarding "whether sexuality is culturally constructed, or whether it is only culturally constructed within the terms of the phallus" (40). And this makes all the difference in how one understands Irigaray's project.

By the time of *Bodies that Matter*, Butler seems more affirming of Irigaray. Her analysis begins with *Speculum's* "Une Mère de Glace," including several subtle affirmations of Irigaray's mimetic method. For one thing, although it mimes "the grandiosity of the philosophical errors she underscores," Butler insists that it is "of course, tactical."<sup>3</sup> For another thing, regarding the metaphorical site of the "the voice of the philosophical father," Butler concludes that Irigaray's miming occupies "no place between 'his' language and 'hers,' but is, instead, only a disruptive *movement* which unsettles the topographical claim" as to where the voice is found (36). And insofar as she *does* occupy that site, Butler continues, Irigaray does so only "to show that it is *occupiable*, to raise the question of the cost and movement of that assumption" (36).

Regarding the details of Irigaray's mimesis, Butler writes that "the feminine appears for Irigaray only in *catachresis*, that is, in those figures that function improperly," which "explains in part the radical citational practice of Irigaray, the catachrestic usurpation of the 'proper' for fully improper purposes" (37). Put briefly, Irigaray "mimes philosophy," and in so doing, "takes on a language that effectively cannot belong to her, only to call into question the exclusionary roles of proprietariness that govern the use of that discourse" (38). For Butler, this miming reveals the following:

Disavowed, the remnant of the feminine survives as the *inscriptional space* of that phallogocentrism, the specular surface which receives the marks of a masculine signifying act only to give

back a (false) reflection and guarantee of phallogocentric self-sufficiency, without making a contribution of its own" (39).

In this way, Butler explains, something that is somehow related to the feminine "makes its appearance in Plato's *Timaeus* as the receptacle (*hypodochē*), which is also described as the *chora*" (39). I say "somehow related" to the feminine (rather than "equal to") here because Butler insists that Plato's figures for the *chora* (including nurse, mother and womb) are specular figures which displace the feminine at the moment they purport to represent the feminine" (41). In other words, "the feminine exceeds its figuration, just as the receptacle does," and "this unthematizability constitutes the feminine as the impossible yet necessary foundation of what can be thematized and figured" (41).

Irigaray's mimicry of this "feminine" in Plato, Butler claims, can be described as citation in the form of "an insubordination," and an insubordination that thereby "calls into question the power of origination that Plato appears to claim for himself" (45). That is, where Plato displaces "maternal origin," there Irigaray "mimes that very act of displacement" (45). The significance of this reading, Butler explains, is that "the feminine as maternal does not offer itself as an alternate origin," and thus "one might reconsider the conventional characterization of Irigaray as an uncritical maternalist" (46). Instead, Irigaray "appears to enact the very spectre of a penetration in reverse—or a penetration elsewhere—that Plato's economy seeks to foreclose," a "crossing back" that "constitutes an eroticism that critically mimes the phallus" (46). The conceptual tool for this mimicry, Butler writes, is "a matter that exceeds matter," or "an ungrounded figure, worrisomely speculative and catachrestic, that marks for her the possible linguistic site of a critical mime" (47). Following Whitford (to whom I will return below), Butler claims that this hyper-matter is connected to "the linguistic operation of metonymy" (48). And the excess of this metonymy "in every mime," finally, functions "to disrupt the seamless repetition of the phallogocentric norm" (48).

For Butler, however, the problem in Irigaray's account is that this hyper-material metonymic move also works to "consolidate the place of the feminine in and as the disruptive *chora*" (48). But there are "good reasons," Butler counters, to "reject the notion that the feminine monopolizes the sphere of the excluded here," namely because others of Plato's "Others" include "slaves, children, and animals" (48). Not only, Butler elaborates, will this "set of reverse-mimes" not be "the same as each other," but "the preservation of the outside" per se is also "of equal importance," because "to bring in every marginal and excluded position within a given discourse is to claim that a singular discourse meets its limits nowhere, that it can and will domesticate all signs of difference" (53). Thus, by the end of *Bodies that Matter* Butler leaves Irigaray somewhere similar to where she left her at the

end of *Gender Trouble*—suspicious of the imperialistic dangers in a potentially-overweening mimesis.

A similar, albeit more trusting, uncertainty pervades Elizabeth Grosz's approach to Irigaray. This is suggested already on the second page of her two chapters on Irigaray in *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists*, which terms Irigaray's writing "a 'poetry' which is necessarily innovative."<sup>4</sup> Grosz is sensitive, moreover, to the ways in which (a) Irigaray's writings "reproduce the rhythms of spoken French," and (b) Irigaray's grammar and syntax "resonate with ambiguities that proliferate rather than diminish meanings," complete with "irreverence," "playful mockery" and a "sense of outrageousness" (101). At the same time, however, Grosz insists that Irigaray also possesses "rigor" and a "serious" aspect (101, 102). In other words, Grosz not only accepts Irigaray's slippery polyvalence (as Butler also does), but even goes so far as to embrace it.

Irigaray's style also characterizes her relationship with psychoanalysis, Grosz claims, which Irigaray "does not abandon" even in her "most recent texts," although she treats it as "a *symptom* of a broader, underlying cultural and intellectual misogyny" as well (103, 105). Regarding the latter point, Grosz notes that Irigaray considers Freud's system "phallogentric," which Grosz parses as "representational *assimilation*" (105). While Irigaray locates a "close resemblance between the unconscious in its relation to consciousness and women in relation to patriarchal social relations," within the representational scheme of phallogentrism, this positioning also represents a potential strategy for resistance, with women figured as the "repressed" that may yet make their "return" (107). The net result, for Grosz, is thus that Freud is critically important as a textual source for Irigaray's "deconstruction of psychoanalysis" (109).

Before describing the details of this deconstruction, Grosz repeatedly insists that Irigaray's work aims not at "a *true* description of women or femininity," but rather "a strategic and combative understanding" (110). Thus, the "*isomorphism*" Irigaray finds "between male sexuality and patriarchal language" is for Grosz "not a product of nature, anatomy, a 'male essence' or a neutral, transparent, reflective or 'objective' language," as evidenced by the fact that "Irigaray carefully refers to the *morphology* and not to the anatomy of the body" (111). In other words, Grosz thinks that social representations produce and construct material bodies (rather than vice versa) for Irigaray, and thus her analysis privileges signifiers over signified.

Given this privileging of representation over "reality," it seems fitting that Grosz's take on Irigaray's take on Lacan's mirror stage emphasizes Irigaray's "attraction to Alice" of Wonderland (130). For Grosz, the character of Alice "acts as metaphor for the woman who, like Irigaray (herself an A-Luce), steps beyond her role as the reflective other for man" (131). How, though, can one voluntarily stop being a metaphorical mirror while still

under patriarchy, or control whether at least some listeners hear one's speech as representative of other (or even all) women? Grosz's answer: going "through the looking-glass" with Alice, Irigaray "refused to speculate on what a feminine form of language would be (this involves speaking for other women and thus engaging in a phallogocentric politics of representation)" (131). The implication, again, is that representation is phallogocentric per se, as opposed to being a genre of which phallogocentric representation might be just one pejorative species. But is it really, strictly impossible for there to be a non-phallogocentric representation, as for example in Susan B. Anthony's demands for women's suffrage? For Grosz, the positive alternative to representation appears to be speaking "as" rather than speaking "for," which "means to evoke rather than designate, to overflow and exceed all boundaries and oppositions" (132). In the example of Anthony, then, what is meritorious and effective in Anthony's speech is her exemplarity itself, rather than that she speaks with the voice of something like "all womankind."

Moving from the mirror stage to mimesis, Grosz contextualizes mimesis in Freud's account of women's "frigidity," which Grosz describes as the "refusal of a specifically *genital* and orgasmic sexual pleasure," making the "frigid woman" someone "whose pleasures do not fit neatly into the male-defined structure of sexual pleasure" (133). Grosz then locates frigidity, more precisely, as "probably closest in form to hysteria, the feminine neurosis *par excellence*," which for Grosz, like frigidity, "can be seen as the woman's rebellion against and rejection of the requirements of femininity" (134). In her "corporeal discourse," Grosz elaborates, a hysteric's "symptoms commonly *imitate* organic disorders," because in their "excessive" behavior, hysterics "*mimic* the disorders of others" (135, emphasis original). For Grosz, finally, this makes the hysteric a "proto-feminist," whose "overcompliance" with patriarchy is a "defiant" "parody of the expected" (135).

Because this hysterical position, according to Grosz, remains today "one of the few possible positions that women may occupy," Irigaray thus strategically "acts as a hysteric," with mimicry that mimes not only (a) "philosophical and psychoanalytic texts," but also (b) "the hysteric's mimicry," and even (c) "mime itself" (136). In other words, Irigaray mimics (a) the texts which articulate and theoretically justify patriarchy, as well as (b) the women who defy patriarchy, and even (c) the very process of imitation on which those women rely. "Like the hysteric," moreover, Irigaray's "techniques and procedures are pre-eminently *seductive*" for Grosz, including "amorous flirtation with phallogocentric texts" that are ultimately "hysterical prick-teasing, phallo-deflation" (137). And it is here that Grosz finds the reason and justification for Irigaray's style, which Grosz characterizes as "feminine in the extreme" (137). In the end, then, "Irigaray's

strategy is not to use the rules to win (the game is in any case rigged) but to disrupt the old game in order to initiate new ones" (139).

Of particular relevance to the present essay, Grosz also connects her analyses of the mirror stage and mimesis to *Sea-Lover*. More specifically, Grosz characterizes the goddesses Athena, Persephone and Ariadne as "three of the 'masques'" Irigaray adopts as her own in her interrogation of Nietzsche in order to 'seduce' him...making clear Nietzsche's own forms of containment of women" (163). The scene is thus set for a kind of masquerade ball, an elaborate evening of dance in which Irigaray will pull Nietzsche, three times, onto the floor as his three different dance partners.

Athena, first, seduces Nietzsche by veiling her femininity and corporeality in order to redeploy "the mother's/woman's passion" in "the service of the father" (164). Athena thus "epitomizes a femininity formed in man's image," symbolizing "science and knowledge"—as, of course, a mirror (164). This, then, is the seduction of Nietzsche's narcissism, his opportunity to dance with another who is (or seems) himself. Second, Persephone is also a kind of mirror, but in her case "a frozen being (ice/mirror = *glace*)" (165). Unlike Athena, therefore, Persephone is "only partially captured by patriarchy" thanks to the "compromises with death" of her mother, Ceres (165). Put simply, ice occasionally melts, as the seasons change, and thus Nietzsche's second partner seduces by intermittently slipping fluidly from his embrace. Third and finally, Ariadne is "Zarathustra's ideal woman," whom Nietzsche tries "to contain as an answer to *his* mysteries and his questions" (167). With this dance, the two partners come closest to fulfillment, since "Irigaray suggests that each sex could have been the labyrinth for the other, both the maze (mirror-maze?) and the way out," if only Nietzsche had been willing to "'go on a fling' (Irigaray, 1980:80) with her as an amorous partner" (167).

This rhetoric of "partners" in Grosz, in addition to evoking social dance, is also a helpful transition to Margaret Whitford's even more dance-like engagement with Irigaray, in *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine*.<sup>5</sup> Early on, Whitford observes the same ambivalence in the secondary literature on Irigaray that I have traced here, which Whitford terms "a simultaneous attraction and rejection" (4). For her part, Whitford considers this ambivalence as inherently good, because it is "inherent in her theory" that Irigaray "needs her readers and her interpreters" (5). In other words, without attraction and rejection, push and pull, and the ambivalence of intimacy (rather than fusion), without a dance with its others, Irigaray's work cannot achieve its goals. Whitford concedes, though, that these "interpretations can either immobilize or energize," and advocates "the dynamic interpretation," with which "to engage with Irigaray in order to go beyond her" (6). Here, then, a new tension arises, as one partner (Whitford) suggests using the dance to leave the other (Irigaray) behind.



Related, Whitford insists that “the psychoanalytic dimension of Irigaray’s work,” including her practice as an analyst, is “essential to understanding” it (10). That is, another movement beyond, in this case beyond both the analyst and the analyzed, is essential to the practice of analysis. Psychoanalytic theory, too, is important for Whitford, who claims that it is “possible that some of the range of views ascribed to [Irigaray] are largely preoccupations of the ascribers; the opacity of her texts elicits a considerable degree of projection and imaginary identification, or aggressive rejection” (11). In other words, Irigaray psychoanalytically seduces her readers into unconsciously dancing with her work, and the quality of those dances accordingly reveals more about the (analysand) reader than Irigaray as the (analyst) author.

Even more resonant with dance is Whitford’s subsequent discussion of Irigaray and feminist politics, beginning with a distinction between two kinds of utopian vision, “the kind that sees utopia as a moment of static perfection, in which any change can only be for the worse, and the other kind which is a utopia of process” (19). Irigaray’s version, for Whitford, is of the latter, dynamic type, and related to the static type as are Shoshana Felman’s “two aspects of psychoanalysis: interpretation and transference” (23). In “interpretation” (or “male reading”), Whitford explains, “the critic or reader ‘interprets’ or ‘masters’ the text” on the assumption that there is coherence to be found or at least established” (23). By contrast, “transference” (or “female reading”), “recognizes that the presumption of coherence is an illusion produced by the transference,” specifically the transference of both writer and reader (23). Thus, any transference-reading of Irigaray, for Whitford, is “at least partly a product of a creative dialogue between reader and text” (23).

Whitford freely admits that this “transference” is “not a strategy without risks,” because for “a change to occur, you have to put yourself into play, you cannot stand back at a safe distance,” much, I would add, like partner dance (24). This risk, according to Whitford, is one that Irigaray takes consciously, “in that she wishes to occupy the positions of both analyst and analysand” to both “persuade her readers,” but also “allow for the possibility of something new emerging from the dialogue” (24). As for her own reading of Irigaray, Whitford sees it as “a double reading” which she locates “between the two reading possibilities,” with which to argue “for *engagement* with Irigaray” (25). Or, in Whitford’s even more dance-resonant description, “the ‘male’ and ‘female’ readings should be linked ‘both at once’ in a kind of creative and fertile partnership, which would correspond to an amorous exchange” (25). While Whitford admittedly stops just short of saying “dance” here, the final scholar from my brief survey does not (as I will relate below).

To conclude with Whitford, she also maps these static/dynamic, male/female and interpretative/transferential distinctions onto her

discussion of mimesis. Connecting her analysis to Naomi Schor's three levels of mimesis, Whitford links Schor's most positive level to Irigaray's dynamic "utopian vision" (205). Her privileged tool for interpreting Irigaray's mimicry, though, is psychoanalysis. In essence, she reads Irigaray's method as "initiating a process of change at the level of the social unconscious (or imaginary), by offering interpretations of the 'material' offered by society in its philosophical or metaphysical discourse" (72). That is, much like the analyst interprets the speech of the analyst specifically in order to "verbalize the unconscious phantasy and begin the process of lifting the repression," Irigaray interprets philosophers as representatives of the collective unconscious of the West. Thus, where Butler sees a subversively hyperbolic occupation of the philosopher's speaking position, and where Grosz sees a satiric meta-imitation of frigid hysteric imitation, Whitford sees the analyst's therapeutic facilitation of transference. In other words, where both Butler and Grosz describe Irigaray as engaged in a virtuosic more-or-less solo dance, Whitford stages something that is unquestionably a duet.

Turning from Whitford's metaphorical "dance" of analyst and analysand to literal dancing, I will now briefly consider Summers-Bremer's "Reading Irigaray, Dancing." The central concept in this essay is the "sensible transcendental," which she links (intension-ally) to both "the divine," "god," "gods" and "the angel" and (extensionally) to "the middle ground between masculine and feminine," "mucous membranes" and dance. The connection to dance in particular, according to Summer-Bremer,<sup>6</sup> is facilitated by the mediation of

the two selves [that] the classically-trained dancer learns to hold in tension: the self she sees from a distance in the studio mirror—body as passive instrument, as object of her labors—which would be the "woman" in the traditional binary, and the self she is while dancing, from which the impulse to dance itself arises, equivalent to "man," the "active" part of the event (93, 94).

By "classical" here, Summers-Bremer means her own dance tradition, ballet, in which the "relationship between the two selves is tyrannous," and in which, "like man and woman, each exists only by repressing elements of the other" (95). Most of her essay, in fact, consists of a detailed analysis of ballet, especially the ballerina's desire (which is unfortunately beyond the scope of my essay).

The one relevant moment here, though, is her characterization of "the sensible transcendental as threshold" (104). Although Summers-Bremer does not explore this point further, it is worth mentioning that "threshold" derives from "thrash" (via "thresh"), an Old Germanic word which the OED defines as follows: "to tramp or stamp heavily with the feet," and links to "the Old French *trescher* to dance"). One could thus describe a threshold as a doorway, the solid basis of which also serves for the threshing of "the grains

of any cereal from the husks and straw; esp. by beating with a flail." And this rambunctiously noisy threshing activity, in turn, constitutes a kind of dance. To relate this etymological analysis back to Summers-Bremer's own analysis of ballet, one could understand the female ballerina (qua subject of ballet's discipline) as the human "object" of the threshold dance's violent thrashing. Or, one could transpose the two figurative "selves" that Summers-Bremer locates *within* the female ballet dancer onto a relationship *between* the two literal selves of a partner dance. (In fact, Summers-Bremer herself makes this move in regard to the postmodern dance form called Contact Improvisation).<sup>7</sup>

Consider, for example, the harvest festival known as a "threshing bee," in which the violent tension between the ballerina's selves are transformed into the productive tension between dance partners, thus symbolizing a broader transformation of women's masochism under patriarchy into a kind of coordinated force for revolution—which Emma Goldman famously describes as not worth having without "beautiful radiant" dance.<sup>8</sup> Along just such lines, Gerald Jonas claims, in *Dancing: The Pleasure, Power and Art of Movement*,<sup>9</sup> that in the Western world, "couple dancing has not only reflected society's changing attitudes toward relations between the sexes, it has sometimes foreshadowed them" (120). For example, Jonas notes that the evolution of male-female touching in Western medieval dance was "strongly influenced by the Crusades," a kind of Dionysian easterly breeze bringing in then-revolutionary gender relations.<sup>10</sup>

For another example, Jonas also discusses the egalitarian and democratic effects of the waltz, which first became popular early in the nineteenth century. This effect derived, Jonas explains, from the waltz's original version, in which neither partner "led because no one had to; the steps followed a predetermined pattern, the dancers always turned in a predetermined direction (clockwise) while circling around the floor with all the other couples in a predetermined direction (counterclockwise)" (123). The democratic effect, by contrast, happened later. To start with,

fewer and fewer men had the leisure or inclination to take lessons from a dancing instructor, by midcentury it had become necessary to simplify the steps; at the same time each waltzing couple was set free to move around as they wished without reference to the rest of the dancers (126).

With this new freedom, though, came "new problems," such as how the partners could "synchronize their movements with each other" without the group's nested clockwise-within-counterclockwise circling (126). The patriarchal solution to this, finally, was to make the male partner the presumptive leader. Jonas, however, suggests an alternative solution, in which both partners could "take turns leading or flip a coin before each dance to see who leads" (126).

Fortunately, something like this alternative is already gaining ground in partner dancing today. One evening in 2009, I visited a Latin dance club in the Castro district of San Francisco where the protocol was as follows: when approaching a potential partner, one first asked whether s/he preferred to “lead” or “follow”; in response, both decided whether to join the dance. There was a huge crowd that day, with people of every imaginable gender permutation leading and following in every imaginable gendered combination, but I still remember my favorite dance. I, a young white male in jeans and a traditional button-down shirt, was dancing with a middle-aged woman of Afro-Cuban descent in a stylish men’s pinstripe suit. At first, she led and I followed, then we transitioned into a kind of simultaneous leading, centered on solo moves (or “shines,” in the vocabulary of salsa).

Overall, our dance that day, like many others I have enjoyed over the years, was not at all dissimilar to a jazz jam session. Although I am aware that this comparison has become tiresomely repetitive (and perhaps even clichéd) in contemporary aesthetics, it is particularly appropriate in the case of salsa, since it originated as a Latinized version of the jazz genre known as swing dance (through the work of the legendary saxophonist “Dizzy” Gillespie). Salsa is thus literally a jazz dance, and the best experiences with salsa are powerfully reminiscent of the revolutionary power that thinkers such as Ralph Ellison have attributed to jazz and other syncopated and improvisatory Africana music.<sup>11</sup>

To conclude, perhaps one could locate certain forms of dance (such as progressive social dance) at a crossroads like the one I found in San Francisco. Neither the ultimate destination, where men and women come together in perfect egalitarian embrace, nor a patriarchal theater of the damned, but rather a transitional site of coalitions toward a revolutionary break with the dominant Western gender politics. One reason this might be a good strategy is that such partner dance is arguably prophetic of the direction that Irigaray’s more recent work has taken in exploring positive new possibilities for heterosexual love relationship (as, for example, in *I Love to You*).<sup>12</sup> Perhaps social dance offers the hope of a literal analogue to Irigaray’s figurative dances with past male philosophers such as Nietzsche.

Relating this back to my overall thesis, this first section has attempted to show how dance offers a powerful symbol of a more positive compartment for heterosexual relationships, thereby illustrating one of my three examples in Irigaray’s work of positive ambivalence: ambivalence between heterosexual lovers. With the dancers and their parts thus chosen, I now turn in my second section to a close reading of Irigaray’s textual engagements with dance.

## Damnably Transcendent Dances

*Sea-Lover* is divided into three primary sections. The first, “Speaking of Immemorial Waters,” is a monologue by a female lover connected to the sea. The second, “Veiled Lips,” links Nietzsche’s explicit references to women to both Freudian psychoanalysis and Ancient Greek myth. And the third, “When the Gods are Born,” is a poetic reflection on the relationships among the specific gods Dionysius, Apollo and Jesus Christ, which also illuminates Nietzsche’s complicities therewith.

The identities of both the lover and the person being addressed are complicated and uncertain. Possibilities for the speaker’s identity include (a) Irigaray herself, or (b) a representative woman under patriarchy, or (c) a woman in a romantic relationship with the addressee. Possibilities for the addressee’s identity, in turn, include (a) Nietzsche, or (b) a Nietzschean philosopher, or (c) a representative man under patriarchy. To keep all of these possibilities in play, I will continue to refer to these two persons/personas as “speaker” (to privilege the poetic aspect) and “addressee.”

In this vein, it is also important to keep in mind the above discussion of Irigaray’s method of mimesis, which here takes the form of a dance with Nietzsche—including with his own “dance” with dance. Thus, any apparently negative value judgments regarding dance here cannot be automatically attributed to Irigaray. Other apparent possibilities for the source of this negativity, at least at the outset, are (a) Nietzsche’s own thought and (b) the figurate dance between him and Irigaray. To get clearer on the former possibility, it will be helpful to consider briefly Kimerer LaMothe’s analysis in her recent book, *Nietzsche’s Dancers*.<sup>13</sup>

“More of than not,” according to LaMothe, “Nietzsche uses dance strategically,” specifically “in the process of revaluing Christian values” (2). The core of this revaluating method is found early on in LaMothe’s chronological reading of Nietzsche’s corpus (stretching from *The Birth of Tragedy* to his 1888 writings). Beginning with the former, she writes that Nietzsche interprets Attic tragedy as “a performance art” in which dance is central (25). “In so far as the elemental rhythms of the singing and dancing spark a *visceral identification* of spectator with chorus,” LaMothe claims, “the spectator is drawn to see herself in the image of a satyr and thus see herself in relation to the dramatic narrative on stage as the agent through which the characters of that narrative come to life” (25). As she elaborates later, the spectator both moves involuntarily and also imagines moving during the chorus’ dance, which causes the spectator to identify at the muscular level with the dancers dressed as gods—and thus the spectators feel/see themselves as gods.

Moving forward to *Human, All too Human*, LaMothe distinguishes two levels in Nietzsche’s conception of metaphor. The primary level consists of

gestural symbols in which the body's meaning-making power is evident, and the derivative level consists of verbal language, whose characteristic feature is deluding us into thinking that meaning comes from language rather than the body. And the historical shift from the first to the second level, a combination of "desensualization" and "oversensitized emotions," is for LaMothe the true meaning of "decadence" for Nietzsche (37). Appropriately, then, the embodiment-affirming art of dance helps resist decadence, specifically by valorizing the senses (contra desensualization), which in turn restores emotional stability (contra these over sensitized emotions). Against this background, LaMothe then defines Nietzsche's "free spirit" as "one whose relationship to his bodily being is transformed such that he is able to experience his own pain and suffering—not just suffering in general—as a stimulant" (38). Harkening back to her analysis of *The Birth of Tragedy*, LaMothe claims that, just as Attic tragedy for Nietzsche oscillates between the Apollonian and the Dionysian, so the dancing free spirit can "move between the illusion of science's truth and the truth of art's illusion," and thereby "we reclaim our relationship to our bodies as rhythms that produce ideas" (42).

Through her readings of *The Gay Science* and *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, finally, LaMothe generates her original concept of "theopraxis," the activity—symbolized and/or enacted in a privileged way by dance—by which humans create and asymptotically embody our gods, "a complementary process for creating and becoming our highest ideals of self" (48). Again recalling her account of Attic tragedy, LaMothe claims that Zarathustra's love "for humanity" is enacted via "a visceral identification between reader and Zarathustra such that readers come to hear Nietzsche's rhythms of poetry and song *through their bodies*" and thereby "feel compelled to imitate Zarathustra's gestures" of dance (57). And in his dance, finally, Zarathustra "has a double experience of himself akin to that occasioned by Attic tragedy and characteristic of the dramatic, dancing art that Nietzsche describes in [*The Gay Science*]" (63).<sup>14</sup>

An evaluation of LaMothe's intriguing claims here is unfortunately beyond the scope of the present essay. Her narrative is helpful, though, in summarizing the major moments in which dance figures in Nietzsche's work. In LaMothe's own concise formulation, "*Dancing* is (1) a discipline for self-knowledge in which a person (2) strengthens the instincts; (3) educates the senses, and (4) invigorates the energy needed to embrace metaphor-making as a creative, bodily process" (91).

Returning, then, from LaMothe to Irigaray, the first section of *Sea-Lover* is further divided into eighteen subsections. In the first of these subsections, the speaker links dance metonymically to an indefinitely repeated, solitary circling in the void. "For round and round," the speaker remarks to the addressee, "you keep on turning" (4). This trope of solipsistic circling, moreover, is one that recurs throughout Irigaray's book.

The second subsection turns explicitly to dance in its first paragraph, with the dance of the “higher men” from Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.<sup>15</sup> If, the speaker asks, “the unique question of a master,” alluding to the death of God, “brings about such a change,” namely from nihilism to life-affirmation, “then if the dance is yours, oh higher men, or the dance of the ass, what does it matter!” (8) Here the pejorative connotation attached to dance seems to derive not from dance per se, but rather from the context in which it is practiced. The only evaluative possibility that this claim rules out, therefore, is that dance might be so intrinsically good that it could transform an inherently bad context into something positive (which Nietzsche himself frequently suggests).

Irigaray’s later mention of dance in this subsection is similarly ambivalent, this time in reference to Nietzsche’s *übermensch*, “who has already given up the use of his legs and the dances of a man in favor of wings” and who “hears another toll of the bell.”<sup>16</sup> The implication is that dance is positive at least compared with flight, presumably because dance is more closely tethered to the earth, and thus also to the sea. Interestingly on this note, the Olympic sport currently known as “synchronized swimming” was originally called “water ballet,” in virtue of its bodily discipline and grace; other similar examples, moreover, include diving and ice dancing, all of which suggests that dance is not inherently anti-water. Irigaray, however, repeatedly presents dancing and swimming as mutually exclusive, for example in dance’s next appearance, in the third subsection. “Are you fish or eagle,” the speaker asks, “swimmer or dancer, when you announce the decline of man”? The speaker then rebukes the addressee-as-Nietzsche as follows: “you never choose a sea creature for your companion”; instead, he always wishes “for legs, or wings,” rather than “gills” (13). Consequently, according to the speaker, it “is always hot, dry, and hard in your world” (13). Irigaray returns to this point again in the ninth section, where the speaker exhorts the addressee to “swim, as you once danced on dry land” (37). Whether or not this alternative is ultimately false, however, dance for Irigaray is not intrinsically negative.

In contrast to this emerging pattern of contextual critique, however, the fourth subsection includes two more essentialist critiques of dance, one negative and one positive. First, the speaker criticizes the addressee for (his) vague “crimes,” including making “tragedies merely into an occasional floor to dance on” (22). Although the context here remains important, it is nevertheless true that all dancing is to some degree an exploitative covering-over of the tragic dimension of human life (insofar, that is, as all dancers are vulnerable embodied beings that must transvalue suffering in order to engage joyfully in dance). Two pages later, however, the speaker exclaims, “If I didn’t have to bear your ills, how I should dance!” (24). In light of this remark, the previous criticisms could perhaps be reinterpreted as springing

from a justifiable resentment toward a practice that has been restricted to her (male) other and facilitated by his continued exploitation of her.

Although all the preceding discussions of dance are admittedly brief, a few subsections later the following, lengthier meditation on dance introduces a new level into Irigaray's discussion:

It is your fortune that life and death are forever entwined, that the one and the other together move you. And that, no sooner do you run after the one, than the other seizes your will. Eternally an infernal dance is danced within you. But it is your own! And ever the same and identical it begins once again (40).

This new level is thus a kind of figurative dance within the addressee's dancing self.

Dance achieves even greater prominence in Irigaray's eleventh subsection, "Dance of the Abyss", which includes the following, even lengthier reflection:

And your nostalgia for women means that, outside of women, you never complete your first step. Before establishing its completion, you stop. Before any boundaries can be marked, before any first distance away from women can be established to distinguish your shapes, you cease walking. Between the time your first step steps off and arrives, you start to dance. Between the one and the other, on a tightrope that holds you up, you jump... But it is within the one step that the soaring of your rhythm is lost... At the center you dance, upon a nothing in common... Turning endlessly in the abyss, and finding in that movement a fragile equilibrium (44, 45).

To paraphrase this passage, and thereby the entire first section of *Sea-Lover*, the addressee's fault lies in his (a) allowing insufficient separation between self and other to allow the other to *be* in her difference, and (b) having instead begun a solipsistic dance, which (c) stretches out and tortures an (umbilical) elastic cord connecting him to her, and all in order to (d) achieve an endlessly repeated circular dance which he then (e) misperceives as flight.

Dance here is thus reduced to the masturbatory "coping mechanism" of a male who cannot achieve full independence from his mother, without which any egalitarian relationship between him and any woman remains impossible. Though the speaker concedes that this dancer is, in a way, beautiful, his dance remains parasitic on an endless series of women whom he reduces to the stage for his dancing blows.

Having considered Irigaray's use of dance in the first section of *Sea-Lover*, I will now, for reasons of space, briefly summarize its use in the book's third major section, "When the Gods Are Born." Its first subsection is



devoted to Dionysius in particular. The most important thing here for my purposes is that it contains problematic accounts of—and problematic linkages of dance to—the bacchantes, miracles, trances, heaven and hell, artificiality, “savagery,” and a kind of pathological reservedness. This latter term is particularly significant, because it strikes me as Irigaray’s most important implied criticism of dance. The reason for this is that, if Irigaray is right about dance’s reserved-ness, then dance might indeed be constitutively problematic, amounting, in effect, to an almost-sex/intimacy that stops just before membranes’ fluid encounter. If she is wrong, however, then that wrongness might constitute another reason to think that at least certain forms of dance might provide another strategic resource in regard to Irigaray’s alleged naturalistic essentialism.<sup>17</sup>

Returning to this series of seven terms as a whole (bacchantes, miracles, trances, heaven/hell, artificiality, savagery, and pathological reservedness), one might wonder what something would have to be in order to constitute a node in this web of phenomena. Is it even possible for an entity to bind all these characteristics into the integrity of a fixed identity? One candidate might be something like a divinely-intoxicated hunter, ever-swiftly fleeing the torment of exile, lashing out in mad, convulsive gestures that nevertheless have miraculous results. And if so, a more specific candidate might then be the ballerina onstage. In sympathy with the mysterious being, born from the aforementioned series of terms, the ballerina could be described aptly as temporarily exiled from “real life” to the stage, intoxicated with the ecstasy of her performance, and perpetually torn asunder by pain and exhaustion, and all in pursuit of the elusive goal of perfect appearance, achieved through swift, repeated convulsions that are nevertheless, at their best, almost miraculously beautiful.

Regarding these tortured female dancers, Irigaray asks, “Does the god already love them so that he can make them into a work of art?” Her suggestion seems to be that Dionysius uses the female dancers to create a new form of manipulation, “the lure of women whom mortals may not touch,” nor “enfold in carnal embrace” (141). This lure, in turn, constitutes the birth of the momentarily important “eternal feminine” itself, in which, Irigaray writes, women “enter into mime when the man-god is at hand” (141). “Forgetting their own desire,” she continues, “in the paroxysmic exaltation of his. Is this not women’s nature? After the creation of the world by a God” (141).

The dancer, Irigaray concludes, is “touched by celestial love, perfected into an immortal image,” and tempted, along with her sister-dancers, “to become visible from a great distance. To shine with a brilliance that halts the gesture. Remaining, in some celestial configuration, untouched and untouchable” (142). Here, the dancer is the perfect mime of the addressee, Ariadne to Nietzsche’s *übermensch*—he the object of masochistic pain, and she, the object of its sadistic counterbalance. (*La*) dancer-mime of (*le*) dancer-

mime. Even granting this conclusion, however, can this really all there is for Irigaray to dance?

I would suggest, on the contrary, that dance is revealed here as centrally important, not merely as a negative force, but rather as an abject-ed material support for Irigaray's entire philosophy. A "support" because she reconceives Dionysius here—specifically through dance—as the creator of her centrally-important concept of mimicry. And "abject-ed," because no mention is made here of mimesis' good side. To put it in the terms of *This Sex...*, there are "two *mimeses*"; one, "as production," lies "more in the realm of music," while the other "would be already caught up in a process of *imitation, specularization, adequation, and reproduction*" (131, emphasis original). The former constitutes the site of women's bondage under patriarchy, while the other constitutes Irigaray's own revolutionary philosophical methodology. That dance could be a part of this latter mimesis is suggested by its intimacy with music, both in general and for the Ancient Greeks in particular.

With this section, then, I have tried to show that the ambivalence in Irigaray's philosophy (in this case, regarding dance in *Sea Lover*) is self-consciously strategic, thereby illustrating the second of my three examples in Irigaray's work of positive ambivalence: ambivalence between participants in a philosophical dialogue. With the broader choreographic formations of this dialogical ambivalence in place, I will now refocus on the individual dancers' technique: the conceptual ambivalence within mimesis.

## Subversively Mimetic Dances

Although I will discuss both *This Sex Which Is Not One* and *Speculum of the Other Woman*,<sup>18</sup> I will focus on the former because of its conversational sections (which strike me as more appropriate for dance) and its particularly clear discussions of mimesis. Specifically, I will explore the following four figures: (1) mimesis/mimicry in general, (2) reflexive mimicry or self-mimicry, and the potential (3) curvature and (4) silvering of mirrors as mimetic objects. These correspond to the origin/materials for mimesis, the novel application of those materials, the primary obstacle to that novel application, and the means of overcoming that obstacle, respectively. In other words, I will offer a novel interpretation of Irigaray's conception of mimesis by breaking it down into its three constituent aspects, which constitute a Nietzschean genealogy of positive mimesis.

In approaching the first of these figures, it is worth noting that dance's sole appearance in *This Sex* comes at a crucial moment, in the middle of the first chapter (an adaptation of director Michael Soutter's film, *The Surveyors*). "The looking glass dissolves," Irigaray writes, "already broken. Where are we? How far along? Everything is whirling. Everyone is dancing" (15). The

meaning and importance of this appearance, however, only become clear later. After declaring that “what is most strictly forbidden to women today is that they should attempt to express their own pleasure,” Irigaray adds that such pleasure “can only be found at the price of *crossing back through the mirror that subtends all speculation*” (77, emphasis original).

This important passage comes at the end of an even more important passage, the entirety of which is applicable to mimesis in general, as it constitutes an elaboration on “crossing back through the mirror.” First, Irigaray explains that, in regard to the feminist movement’s struggle to overcome the phallogocentric order, there is “in an initial phase, perhaps only one ‘path,’ the one historically assigned to the feminine: that of *mimicry*” (76). At the literal level (Irigaray’s privileged figure for which is the mirror) this “crossing back through” would amount to breaking the mirror and getting bloodied in the process. (And this is exactly what Irigaray describes as happening to Alice in this chapter). Irigaray is more concerned, however, with the metaphorical level. Her privileged figure for this is “woman” under patriarchy shaped into a figurative mirror, the primary purpose of which is to reflect male subjectivity. At this metaphorical level, then, “crossing back” might be described as the similarly-painful destruction of the cultural construct “woman.”

Irigaray elaborates on this process in the next few sentences. “One must assume the feminine role deliberately. Which already means to convert a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus to begin to thwart it. To play with mimesis,” Irigaray continues, “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” (76). In other words, a mirror that is overdoing its job as a mirror, trying to mirror too much, or at the wrong time, already problematizes its status as mirror, and perhaps even the act of mirroring per se. This means, Irigaray explains in her very next sentence

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 (76).

Put differently, rather than merely serving passively as a mirror to the masculine ego, the hyperbolically-mirroring woman instead pretends to play patriarchal discourse’s game, by actively requesting that her status as mirror be repeatedly taken up in discourse. And in so doing, she creates the possibility that the male subject will begin to realize just how unnecessary and counterintuitive women’s role under patriarchy is.

To play with mimesis “also means,” Irigaray continues, “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*: another case of the persistence of ‘matter,’ but also of ‘sexual pleasure’” (76). Put differently, the consummate mime can mime a large number of phenomena, which implies a more expansive ability outstripping the mimicking of any one phenomenon. Thus, one can never witness directly the full range of the expert mime’s powers—even though this range is the very condition for the possibility of any given performance.

One example of this, which draws on women as both literal and figurative mirrors, is the famous scene from the “I Love Lucy Show” in which Lucille Ball, disguised as Harpo Marx and standing opposite the real Harpo in a doorway, begins to mimic his actions so expertly that it almost looks like he is standing in front of a mirror. One could interpret this scene (and by extension both the character of “Lucy” and Lucille Ball’s career) as exactly the kind of subversive, self-affirming parody that Irigaray is describing. More specifically, by pretending to be his literal reflection, “Lucy” shows Harpo (and Ball shows the audience) how good she is at miming anyone or anything (including, and perhaps especially, a stereotypically ambitious, narcissistic Western man). In that demonstration, moreover, the viewer already begins to appreciate how far “Lucy’s” (and Ball’s) abilities exceed the restrictions of stereotypical femininity. (And indeed, Lucille Ball’s brilliant career has been instrumental in re-signifying womanhood in the United States and beyond).

To recap this discussion of the first figure (*mimesis per se*), I will now summarize the relationship of this concept to dance with four observations. First, there is a well-known historical overlap between dance and mime/pantomime, which famously reached its zenith in Ancient Greece and Rome.<sup>19</sup> Second, my example of “Lucy” (without any premeditation on my part) concerns a woman who was herself an actor and dancer, thereby calling to mind the even larger historical overlap between dance and acting.<sup>20</sup> Third (as I have described at length elsewhere), dancers experience a powerful and singular relationship to mirrors due to the format of traditional dance instruction, which resonates (albeit to a much lesser degree) with the embodied experiences of disempowered persons in Western culture (such as women and people of color).<sup>21</sup> Finally, dancing too requires the ability, only partially transparent in any given performance, to produce an indefinitely large repertoire of distinct movements.

What happens, though, when two mimes meet? How might one imagine an alternate version of the Lucy-and-Harpo scene in which a second, similarly talented mimic tries to replicate Lucy’s movements? In short, insofar as women are mirrors, what happens when a woman stands before another literal or figurative mirror? The answer to this question is the second of my four figures, “self-mimicry,” as elaborated in the chapter of *This Sex...* entitled “*Così Fan Tutti*.” Literally translated “Thus do all women,” the title is an allusion to Mozart’s opera of the same name, the

subject of which opera is a wager regarding women's sexual fidelity, the (familiar) conclusion of which is that women are inherently inconstant. The thesis of Irigaray's chapter, however, is that women are determined by psychoanalysis as constitutively incapable of self-understanding, and that this self-understanding is (in the modified words of the title) what, allegedly, "all women [can't] do."

Importantly, this second chapter is a deconstructive reading of Jacques Lacan's work, and in particular of his aforementioned concept of "the mirror stage" of human development. The most direct exposition of this concept in Lacan's own writings can be found in his 1949 speech at the Sixteenth International Congress of Psychoanalysis, entitled "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience."<sup>22</sup> The speech introduces the "mirror stage" as a definite mark of Lacan's rejection of the Cartesian cogito, and then turns to the following scientific basis: "the human child, at an age in when he is for a short while, but for a while nevertheless, outdone by the chimpanzee in instrumental intelligence, can already recognize his image as such in a mirror" (94). What is at stake in this stage is the (grammatically) male subject's restoration to dominant singularity after his previous humiliations at the hands of Freud and Darwin. That is, though "he" has lost much instrumental control over the world, "man" remains, for Lacan, the only being that can recognize his own image as such.

Lacan's name for the evidence for this mirror phase is "illuminative mimicry," through which the subject "playfully experiences" his relationship to his image. It is essentially, Lacan adds, "an identification" — defined as "the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes [*assume*] an image" (94). And the overall function of this mirror stage is "to establish a relationship between an organism and its reality" (96). One necessary part or aspect of this reality, however, has been minimized almost to invisibility in Lacan's account, namely the mirror itself—along with the "prop, human or artificial" which holds the "little man" steady, when too young to stand, long enough to see his image (94). And it is here where Irigaray's reading intervenes.

Women can increase men's understanding, Irigaray observes in regards to Lacan's narrative, by reflecting truths to the men like mirrors. In other words, women on this account remain ever the vehicle, never the "Subject," of reflection, especially in regard to women's pleasure, "a state about which," Irigaray writes, "women know nothing, from which they do not—therefore—truly derive pleasure" (96). As she puts it on the next page, women under patriarchy "don't have a soul; they serve as a guarantee for man's" (97). And since the soul too is a kind of mirror, Irigaray describes women as mirrors lacking their own internal mirrors (101). If present, such internal mirrors would enable women to reflect their own internality back to themselves, thus facilitating the self-knowledge women allegedly lack.

Or, as Irigaray explains in the key paragraph in this chapter for dance, the “Other,” or woman-as-mirror, “would be subject to inscription without its knowledge” (101). Revisiting her famous analysis of Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave” from *Speculum*, Irigaray observes that

The receptacle can reproduce everything, ‘mime’ everything, except itself: it is the womb of mimicry. The receptacle would thus in some way know everything—since it receives everything—without knowing anything about it, and especially without knowing itself (101).

The word “receptacle” here refers to Irigaray’s interpretation of Plato’s cave (and especially the wall of shadows) as a figure for the womb. I would add, moreover, that this this receptacle is also linked to Plato’s concept of the *chora*, which can be independently linked to the *choreo*-graphy of dance.<sup>23</sup> In light of these connections between the cave, womb, *chora* and dance, one could argue that dance could function on Irigaray’s terms as a special type of receptacle that goes beyond the limitations of Plato’s cave. Put simply, dance is a receptacle that (in certain forms and contexts) can and does mime itself. In dance, then, women as mirrors meet—thus responding to Irigaray’s remark, that “Women lack a mirror for becoming women.”<sup>24</sup>

In other words, dance is, among other things, a practice wherein women and men can imitate the mimesis into which phallogocry forces women (as illustrated by the work of many of the most prominent choreographers of the twentieth century, such as George Balanchine and Merce Cunningham). Additionally, this self-mimetic power might be even stronger in social partner dances, with the partners understood as doubling this self-imitating movement, imitating each other’s imitations. One example of the latter phenomenon is the early Argentine tango, self-consciously structured to pantomime the entire course of a seduction (including the initial encounter, flirtation, resistance, jealousy, obsession, and consummation).

As the example of dance suggests, however, self-mimicry requires more than just two figurative mirrors merely standing immobile. It also requires a literal or figurative instance of the third of these four figures, “curvature.” Irigaray presents curvature most clearly in the second dialogical chapter of *This Sex* in answer to her dissertation committee’s final question, “What are the conclusions of your work?” (153). In condensed form, her three-part answer is as follows: (1) Freud failed to explicitly account for “the role of sexualization in discourse itself”; (2) successfully doing so, in his footsteps, might “open up the possibility of a different relation to the transcendental” (which would amount to constructing it, for the first time, as the “*copula*,” or “copulative operation between the sexes in language”); and (3) this in turn would require that “the feminine” be “granted its own ‘specificity’ in language” (153).

Irigaray explains that her method for achieving this three-part conclusion in her dissertation (that is, *Speculum*) was to go “back through the process of specula(riza)tion that subtends our social and cultural organization” – or, one might also say, “to go back through the looking glass” – “to discover what it may have kept suspended in the blaze of its brilliance, what it may have congealed in its decisive cut, what it may have frozen of the ‘other’s’ flowing, and vice versa” (154). In order to thus go “back through,” finally, Irigaray claims,

it was necessary to put into place a mode of specularization that allows for the relation of woman to “herself” and her like. Which presupposed a *curved* mirror, but also one that is *folded back on itself*, with its impossible reappropriation “on the inside” of the mind, of thought, of subjectivity. Whence the *intervention of the speculum and of the concave mirror*, which disturb the staging of representation according to too-exclusively masculine parameters (154-155).

To explore what this new “specularization” might “look” like, I would like to propose a necessarily inadequate example, namely a female dancer curving her arms before a wall of mirrors. On Irigaray’s terms, this phenomenon could be described as a literally-curved figurative mirror being reflected by a non-curved literal mirror. Or, better, imagine two female dancers doing this same arm-curving move, perhaps simultaneously critiquing each other’s technique. This modified example, for Irigaray, would then constitute two literally-curved figurative mirrors reflecting each other. Or, better still, imagine that both of these female dancers are feminists (perhaps of the Irigarayan variety). This, for Irigaray, would amount to the mutual reflection of two figurative mirrors, both literally and figuratively curved. Or, best of all, imagine again the first, solitary dancer, curving her body over on itself, both interpreting that literal curvature and also reflecting to herself about its reflecting the metaphorical curvature effected by her feminist philosophy. In fact, this result is not hypothetical at all, since it is an apt interpretation of what takes place in Summers-Bremer’s aforementioned “Reading Irigaray, Dancing.”<sup>25</sup>

Irigaray also discusses curvature briefly in several moments in *Speculum*, beginning with the first subsection of the second section, “*Korē: Young Virgin, Pupil of the Eye.*” Here Irigaray observes that “in a concave mirror with a vertical generatrix, man may be reflected *upside down*” (149). Moreover, the concave mirror also possesses the “potential for setting things afire” (149). The curvature of concavity enacts not only qualitative changes (such as distortions or inflections), but also dichotomous flipping or reversals (suggesting perhaps a Nietzschean revaluation of values), and even conflagrations or combustions (suggesting perhaps the pure destruction of the Nietzschean “laughing lion”). Similarly, dance too is often described as (for better or worse) both inspiring social upheaval and also “setting fire” to spectators’ desires.

The next curvature discussion in *Speculum* is found in the seventh subsection of this section, wherein Irigaray notes, with reference to the (male) analyst, that “*the curved nature*” of woman’s “lines” will not

drive him away from an art of *geo-metry* in which he excels, applying it with arrogant confidence in the more and more *twisted* spaces that had hitherto been out of reach of mathematical prospection, given over to the imaginative fancies of man” (186).

The point seems to be that curvature in itself is no adequate defense against phallocracy, as evidenced by the ingenuity of psychoanalysis, which has supplied both sides in the “gender wars” with newer, more sophisticated weapons. For yet another reason, therefore, dance is not necessarily positive or liberating for Irigaray either, as she suggests by finishing the following paraphrase of this same point with a technical ballet term: when the male analyst takes account of “those curves,” everything “has to be rethought in terms of curl(s), helix(es), diagonal(s), spiral(s), roll(s), twirl(s), revolution(s), pirouette(s)” (238). Put differently, dance is not the exclusive privilege of women or feminists; on the contrary, patriarchal institutions too have learned to “dance” in order to maximize their exploitation of their “dancing” female “objects.”

There is a particular danger in dance, moreover, as a feminist symbol and practice, namely seeing dance as the privileged purview of women or the feminine. Fortunately, a formidable defense against this danger—which emphasizes the constructed-ness of mirrors, and thereby implies that men too are equally capable of becoming mirrors—is found in the fourth of my figures, “silvering.” In technical terms, silvering, also known as “silver backing” (as Irigaray explains in the aforementioned second section of *Speculum*) is the metallic coating added to one side of a piece of glass in order to render it reflective, thus transforming mere glass into a mirror.

With regard to the male psyche, Irigaray remarks that the “notion that, like a mirror, he might be *passed through* and have a *silver backing*, that he might reflect and be reflected in different ways, is in some sense denied” by psychoanalysis (and Western thought in general).<sup>26</sup> In other words, men too for Irigaray can be metaphorical mirrors—albeit in virtue of possessing an (at least grammatically) feminine attribute or aspect (the feminine *la psyché*)—and thus also can be, like Alice’s famous looking glass, “crossed back through.” (Perhaps, moreover, given the mirror/mimesis/dance connection, this is especially true of the man who is a dancer)?<sup>27</sup>

In conclusion, Irigaray observes that mirrors exhibit a kind of violent excess, an overflowing mimetic power which they are forced to channel into the egos of those who make them mirrors, put them into place, and stand imperiously before them. No matter how much control the male subject desires and exerts, however, the fact that the mirror is (necessarily) capable of mimicking infinitely more than his own particular image remains as an



implicit threat to his power. Although there is one apparent limit to the mirror's power (that it cannot seem to mirror itself), even this can be ultimately overcome by the co-presence of two mirrors (such as the two "figurative" mirrors constituted by two dancers). That is, although a woman cannot see her own singular self in another mirror, she *can* see her own mirroring power (into which her self is pigeonholed by patriarchy) as amplified in the mirroring power of the other. And this facilitates her active shaping of herself as a mirror, or taking ownership and control of her own mimicry for her own ends. At the same time, though, the example of dancing also illustrates that the mere co-presence of mirrors is insufficient for this happy result, and instead requires the torsioning transformation of curvature. And on this note, the silver lining of mimesis, since mirrors (like women for Beauvoir) are not born, but rather made (by silvering), men too, properly silvered by the right approach to social dance (among other things), can participate in this self-overcoming mimicry toward social justice.

This final section, then, has attempted to clarify the difference between negative and positive mimesis in Irigaray's thought by fleshing out the latter, thereby illustrating the last of my three examples in Irigaray's work of positive ambivalence: ambivalence between two or more aspects of a single concept. Along with dance's other two functions (as a symbol of a better comportment between heterosexual lovers, and an image of a strategic ambivalence manifested in dialogues between Irigaray and her readers), this reveals the importance of dance in Irigaray's philosophy — as a figure of self-mimetic, curved silvering in pursuit of social justice.

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<sup>1</sup> I made this choice because "marine" to the contemporary U.S. American ear connotes less the aquatic sphere and more the military branch. Also, native English speakers typically experience Germanic English words as more viscerally resonant and Latinate English words as more detached and abstract. Luce Irigaray, *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche*, trans. Gillian Gill (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

<sup>2</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 13.

<sup>3</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 36.

<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists* (New South Wales: Allen & Unwin, 1989), 101.

<sup>5</sup> Margaret Whitford, *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

<sup>6</sup> Eluned Summers-Bremner, "Reading Irigaray, Dancing," *Hypatia* 15, no. 1 (2000): 90-124.

<sup>7</sup> For several theoretical accounts of Contact Improvisation, see *Taken By Surprise: A Dance Improvisation Reader*, ed. Ann Cooper Albright and David Gere (Middleton, Wesleyan, 2003).

- <sup>8</sup> Alix Kates Shulman, "Emma Goldman's Feminism: A Reappraisal," in *Red Emma Speaks*, 3rd Ed., ed. Alix Kates Shulman (Amherst: Humanity, 1996), 15.
- <sup>9</sup> Gerald Jonas, *Dancing: The Pleasure, Power, and Art of Movement* (New York: Abrams, 1998).
- <sup>10</sup> See, 121. Such touching, which was previously unthinkable in Western formal society, was largely inspired, according to Jonas, by the Crusaders' exposure to Muslim songs and poetry. Jonas describes these works, "addressed by distant admirers to the women of another man's harem," as artworks that "extolled a love that was considered 'pure' because it could never be satisfied in the flesh" (121). This theme, in turn, was taken up by the troubadours (in whose lyrical poetic honor Nietzsche subtitled one of his books *The Gay Science*) for whom "the walls of the harem were replaced by the more abstract barriers of female 'virtue'" (121). And this, finally, resulted in the troubadours' famous "conceit of courtly love," thus encouraging "a new way of looking at the role of women in Christendom" (121).
- <sup>11</sup> For an extended discussion of this issue in Ellison, see Joshua M. Hall, "Syncopated Communities: Dancing with Ellison," *Southern Literary Journal* 45, no. 2 (2013): 57-71.
- <sup>12</sup> Luce Irigaray, *I Love to You: Sketch of Possible Felicity in History*, trans. Alison Martin (New York: Routledge, 1995).
- <sup>13</sup> Kimerer LaMothe, *Nietzsche's Dancers: Isadora Duncan, Martha Graham, and the Revaluation of Christian Values* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).
- <sup>14</sup> The most insightful moment in LaMothe's book for me, incidentally, is her observation that "in German, tightrope walker is 'rope dancer'" (59). Zarathustra, she argues, teaches this "rope dancer" to "appreciate his own *dance*...as the vocation of one who creates himself," and thus Zarathustra learns that *his* own vocation is "to teach men like this rope dancer" (60). LaMothe then helpfully summarizes the rest of the book as Zarathustra's various efforts in this vein,
- <sup>15</sup> See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Adrian Del Caro (Cambridge, 2006), for example, "The Ass Festival," 255-258.
- <sup>16</sup> Irigaray, *Marine Lover*, 10.
- <sup>17</sup> For an extended discussion of this controversy, see Ping Xu, "Irigaray's Mimicry and the Problem of Essentialism," *Hypatia* 10(4): 1995, 76-89.
- <sup>18</sup> Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is not One*, trans. Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke (New York: Cornell, 1985).
- <sup>19</sup> For a fascinating account of this connection, see Etienne Bonnot de Condillac, *Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge*, trans. Hans Aarsleff (Cambridge, 2001). And the classic text in this regard, and a foundational text of dance studies generally, is eighteenth-century dancing master Jean Georges Noverre's *Letters on Dancing and Ballets*, trans. Cyril W. Beaumont (Princeton, 2004).
- <sup>20</sup> Including, importantly for philosophy, in such canonical figures as Plato and Aristotle. See, for example, Plato's *Laws* and Aristotle's *Poetics*.
- <sup>21</sup> See Joshua M. Hall, "Revalorized Black Embodiment: Dancing with Fanon," *Journal of Black Studies* 43, no. 3 (2012): 274-288. Summers-Bremer also discusses the dancer-mirror relationship at length in "Reading Irigaray, Dancing."

- <sup>22</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 1996). Following convention, the page numbers given here refer to those of the original French edition.
- <sup>23</sup> For more, see Joshua M. Hall, "Choreographing the Borderline: Dancing with Kristeva," *Philosophy Today* 56, no. 1 (2012): 49-58.
- <sup>24</sup> Quoted in Whitford, *Luce Irigaray*, 136.
- <sup>25</sup> This final form of the example would also resonate, in a kind of naturalistic (and perhaps even essentialist) move, with Irigaray's call for a "concave mirror," insofar as the plane formed by two back-to-back concave mirrors is what is known as the stereotypically feminine "hourglass" figure. An affirmation of this body type, moreover, has become a notable locus of feminist struggle in contemporary U.S. culture, as evidenced by the prominence of this trope in feminist art and popular culture. (See, for example, Patricia Cardoso's explicitly feminist film *Real Women Have Curves* [2002]).
- <sup>26</sup> 149. As already noted, Irigaray also explicitly compares the soul itself to a mirror, and the word in French for "psyche" also means "cheval-glass," which the OED defines as "a mirror swung on a frame, and of sufficient length to reflect the whole figure." And its etymology means "horse" or "support," reminiscent of Irigaray's insistence on patriarchy's animal/woman linkage and the mirror as (material) support for the (male) subject.
- <sup>27</sup> There are also several other moments in *Speculum* that are relevant to the first two of my four terms. In the first such moment, Irigaray early on discusses little girls' playing with dolls in relation to mimesis. The most important two points in this context are that (a) it is not mimesis per se here that is negative for Irigaray, (because it is not mimesis per se, but certain forms of it, that are legislated for the little girl), and (b) the figure of mimesis is a doll, which has been a pervasive metaphor for the dancer in the West since (at least) Ancient Greece (as seen in Plato's *Laws*). In another such moment, Irigaray claims that women's desire can find expression only in dreams, hysterical "dreams" in which we are supposed to see "the caricature of a work of art," as Freud puts it in *Totem and Taboo*. Woman's special form of neurosis would be to "mimic" a work of art, to be a *bad (copy of a) work of art*" (125). Dance too has often been regarded as a mimetic, bad and even pseudo-art, which merely appears, like a forgery, to be the real thing. Moreover, dance also appears again in Irigaray's text shortly thereafter (via her memorable phrase, "dream choreography") to describe what Freud calls the dream work (138).