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Speculum of Being Two. Politics and Theory After All These Years

Abstract - Nearly thirty years after the first edition of *Speculum*, Irigaray's present work can be read from a different position. According to it, the main political and civil concerns of the author are examined in their relation to a theory of sexual difference. A new insight can emerge, as one realizes that her own position is also made by Irigaray's work. This produces new configurations between politics and theory, embodied experiences and relations and their formalization, in a move that is both a rooting in and a departure from Irigaray's work.

We can assume that any theory of the 'subject' has always been appropriated by the 'masculine'. When she submits to (such a) theory, a woman fails to realize that she is renouncing the specificity of her own relationship to the imaginary (Irigaray, 1985:133)

Women generally privilege: (...) the concrete environment (Irigaray, 1994a:133-134)

I start from these statements of Irigaray, belonging to two different moments of her work, in order to reflect upon sexual difference, both in its political and philosophical aspects; that is, upon its role in the transformation and conception of society as well as in philosophical and theoretical discourse.

Compared with other texts such as *Speculum*, Irigaray's most recent works - from *I Love to You* (1996) to *Being Two* (1994b) - are focused increasingly on the civil and political relations between sexes, while the theoretical aspect of her work remains in the background. Nevertheless, it is precisely the theoretical 'cut' performed earlier that permits one to understand the relevance of the author's present proposals: while reading *Speculum* one has to take into account that nearly thirty years have passed and that this can make a difference in the reader's position towards such an event. Therefore, I can develop further reflections on sexual difference, theory and politics, provided that I take a position, that I make the gesture of 'starting from oneself', in the double sense of a rooting and a leaving (Muraro, 1996). Today, this start combines, as I will demonstrate, my own position with the authoritative work of a woman. This will be both a rooting in and a departure from Irigaray's work.

Positions

My position is shaped by the Italian version of sexual difference thought. This version, inspired by Irigaray, is mainly characterized by its stress upon the practical and political aspects of sexual difference, upon the relations between and among women, and by its¹ distancing itself from the logic of the institutions ruling civil life¹. It is also called 'politics of the symbolic' as it does not consider sexual difference to be simply a question of theory, but considers it primarily a matter of experience which needs the creation of political practices in order to name it, in a necessary intertwining of embodied subjects and language.

¹ See Muraro (1991), Diotima (1987, 1990, 1992, 1995, 1996), Dominianni (1995), *Critica marxista* (1994), *Voce e silenzio* (1993).

In this respect, I will firstly approach *Speculum* – whose appeal and greatness still lies in the elegance and effectiveness with which it opened a new space in the rarefied domain of concepts – analyzing the political forms Irigaray and others created in the Seventies and the possibility to repeat and/or modify them today.

Return to Speculum: War and Love or Theory and Politics

A first structural element of my position is thus represented by my relation to the ‘cut’ enacted by *Speculum*. By cut I refer to the position taken towards the western tradition, including, but not limited to philosophy, without inheriting it in a passive way. *Speculum*’s radicalism is peculiar: ‘destruction with nuptial tools’, ‘ludic mimetism’ are oxymorons that point out the strange position of the text. For it is a text that defies the enemy on its own territory, while that territory is redefined by the challenge itself. A cut is a declaration of war- a symbolic war enacted by the authoritative use of theoretical discourses and their mechanisms. Irigaray’s symbolic declaration received very concrete responses, including her suspension from her academic post.

This act of war makes the greatness of *Speculum* and at the same time indicates that something that plays an important part in it remains unexpressed. In fact, we are confronted with a paradox: Irigaray repeats several times that the/a woman, within the symbolic order ruling western thought, is destined to mutism; she is unable to produce a thought suited to her concrete and embodied experience. Nevertheless, Irigaray herself, a woman who denounces this destiny, declares war on it with a sharpness and a skill her text demonstrates so well while avoiding the traditional forms of theoretical discourse. In order to make this paradox more intuitive one can imagine a different book: *Speculum* could have been a mere denunciation of women’s oppression – as many other texts of that period were (Burke, 1978) - not only a material but a fully symbolic one. In fact, the chapter on Plotinus’s work could be read as a performance of that kind of oppression. It is composed of passages from Plotinus’s work where the presence of Irigaray is expressed ‘only’ by the selection of those extracts and ellipses she inserts. Thus the chapter permits the reader to perceive the effective position of a speechless woman. Had *Speculum* been a mere denunciation, this technique would have been a particularly dramatic performance of it but not the work that engendered a new theoretical horizon and simultaneously empowered the political action of so many women.

Yet another aspect of the paradox can be appreciated when Irigaray defines the war she has declared as a deliberate assumption of feminine disorder in the symbolic order. ‘But how is this to be done?...Turn everything upside down, inside out, back to front. *Rack it with radical convulsions*, carry back, reimport, those crises that her “body” suffers in her impotence to say what disturbs her’ (Irigaray, 1985: 142). Irigaray identifies this disorder as ‘the hysteric’ with her symptoms, her parodic repetitions, her excess. There is a strong objection to counter, though. If woman *is* disorder, how can she declare war? *Speculum* is the great example in feminist thought of discord deployed with deep precision, in which the mastery of what must be said, plays an important role. In fact, Irigaray states: ‘This disconcerting of language, though anarchic in its deeds of title, nonetheless demands patient exactitude’. (Irigaray, 1985: 143).

The fact is that Irigaray’s work is not shapeless at all; rather, the precision of her writing denies that pretended disorder. Shall we attribute this skill to a complicity with the masculine symbolic order, the only owner of word, language and its rules? To the contrary, the fecundity of this text is due to the fact that the mechanisms of exclusion and of forced identification which rule western thought are denied within the text itself. The trap Irigaray describes is a trap from which *she already freed herself*. In what sense?

My re-reading of *Speculum* allows me to single out some textual effects that go beyond the text itself and to point to the effective position of the author. Irigaray is already free owing to the political relations she had experienced prior to 1970, and which she was to re-initiate several times after that. Thus the text is engendered neither from within theory and its mechanisms, nor from a solitary act of courage. The ludic mimetism, the repetition in difference, are made possible by the

authoritative dialogue with theory, but the text's premises lie in the real, practical relations she had experienced with other women, who were also formulating thought beyond the mere description of a state of oppression². The greatness of *Speculum* resides in the tension between the war it declares and an element that made that war possible. I refer to 'element' and not 'condition' because the text cannot be conceived as an emanation of women's political relations: not all the women involved in the feminist politics of those years have written such a text.

But in *Speculum* those relations remain unexpressed: the text presents itself as a *corps-à-corps* between a woman and the masculine tradition and thus makes impossible to understand the role of those relations in the economy of Irigaray's discourse. Although I cannot fully agree with A. Fouque - 'I remember the presentation on each copy of *Speculum*: "The MLF receives its first theoretical justifications". Such an humiliation. Did we really need justifications? Regarding theory, we didn't stop producing it within action, for six years' (Fouque, 1999: 156) – her words make me think to a sort of asynchronicity between politics and theory in those years.

I assume that the 'unexpressed' element is due to the temporal dimension running through the theoretical work and the political experience, in this case political relations with other women. There is no immediacy; rather in the present there is a non contemporary tension: *Speculum* is both early and late with respect to what was happening among women in those years. It is late because – in the representation of that *corps-à-corps* of the/a woman with no possible mediation with the patriarchal symbolic order – it cannot account for what was already happening among women. Thus Fouque's humiliation. It is early, because *Speculum* has been a necessary component in the development of a different symbolic economy for women. Thus there is a double and unclosed relation: on the one hand, theory in *Speculum* is neither a conceptual moulding of a shapeless reality, nor a thought independent from its material and political conditions; on the other, political relations are the material primer of that thought, but they do not cause or exhaust it.

Finally, it must be said that the act of war was possible because those political relations showed the beginning of women's love for one another and for themselves. That is to say, only by experiencing the 'recognition of another woman' (Lonzi, 1978), is it possible to experience love for oneself and thus eject the war from oneself, to become the subject and not the ground of an act of war. In this respect love can be conceived as a source of discernment, of targeting one's revolt, knowing at the same time what one wants and doesn't want. Love of the other and of oneself makes possible the declaration of a symbolic war.

Thus this symbolic war concerns the relation of one woman to herself. Declaring war must take into account singularity and its irreducibility. It is a game played between order and disorder, this time in the most intimate way, so that those two forces do not stiffen into either an all external or all internal dimension. In *Speculum* there is another element, this time it is a matter of style, that shows to me how Irigaray was able to take advantage from this love in the relation to herself and to her work. The frequent locution 'This doesn't mean that...' means to me her skill in avoiding a deathly coherence with what has been said or written, the lightness of a game played within herself, depriving the other of the monopoly of denial. It is the gesture of a pitiful discernment allowing one to receive and show what happened in one's own discourse beyond one's will.

Could Speculum be Written Today?

This return to *Speculum* singled out a few elements that re-emerge in Irigaray's later work (from *An Ethics of sexual difference* to *I Love to You*): sexual difference enacted as a declaration of symbolic war, as a cut within theory and its tradition; this theoretical cut has its premisses in the political relations, that is in the real practice of relations with other women; the temporal asynchronicity between theory and politics; and the intertwining of war and love in a woman's life.

² My reading differs from others. Cavarero (1987) conceives the starting point of a sexual theory in the precise gesture of saying her own estrangement. Butler (1990) has stressed the practical value of the mimetism and its deconstructive effects on forced identities, but this leads the author to the loss of a political subject.

Now, I think that nothing similar to *Speculum* can be written today by a contemporary woman, the elements I singled out cannot combine in that way anymore. No longer can the differences between sexes be totally represented as a *corps-à-corps* between a subject who owns the symbolic rules and a mute object, and this mainly because of the existence of texts such as *Speculum*, and of the event that produced them. No longer is the game played by two; it now engages three or four. The first three are the tradition, Irigaray's work and my position. The fourth, the temporal element, is created as a consequence of my sharing a 'non-contemporary present'³ with Irigaray. The relation between theory and politics has changed too: today a woman can rely upon other women's authoritative work, while relations among women seem in need of new forms that re-enact or re-elaborate what happened in the Seventies. Asynchronicity is thus not only a tension within the present situation, but concerns the relation to such a past, that is still present in its effects, though. Finally, the intertwining of war and love has to be rethought of, as love among women and of a woman for herself cannot be repeated in that way. Today, although relations among women are a sort of common sense (*DWF*, 1998), it appears that the political art of loving oneself has been lost. And this loss is not mitigated by the existence of authoritative theoretical works. A new art is needed then, one which will also address the weight of that mediation.

Sexual Difference and the Sliding Tile Puzzle

Starting from this temporal asymmetry in the present shared with Irigaray's work, I will present a new definition of sexual difference and of its double role in politics and theory. Irigaray (1987) has defined it as 'universal as mediation', meaning by this an impossible final synthesis on all levels, theoretical, civil and political, while avoiding the conception of sexual difference in a pluralistic way that would neutralize it in many serial differences. *I Love to You* and *Being Two* are other names of this impossible synthesis.

However, I will refer to another definition of the relation between the sexes, that is: transcendence. In *Einander Transzendente* (Irigaray, 1997b), sexual difference is presented both as an irreducible relation between two subjects having a 'double intentionality (...) I-me and I-you' (104) and as the negative that an identity has to accept for its construction (90). Irigaray is again presenting her idea of a four-terms dialectic concerning not only the relation between the sexes but also the relation within the same sex (Irigaray, 1984; 1996). While conceiving this transcendent relation Irigaray produces a double movement that is less promising than the premises. On the one hand, using the expression 'sexed identities' Irigaray draws attention to a feminine objectivity; that is, 'women generally privilege: intersubjectivity, the relation to the other gender, the concrete environment, the present time or the future...' (Irigaray, 1994a: 133-134). This seems to contradict the non-identitarian attitude of *Speculum* and other early works. On the other hand, the relation between her thought and concrete experience, expressed in her proposals and examples, often seems normative and less persuasive than the general horizon that produced them.

In the first case, my objection does not relate to the debate on essentialism. As many authors have brilliantly shown (de Lauretis, 1989; Whitford, 1991 and 1994; Battersby, 1998) essence or identity can be understood in several ways and does not necessarily imply a timeless or unhistorical feminine nature. My objection deals with a different problem. When Irigaray singles out some specificities of feminine identity, she inhibits a full exploration and re-appropriation of the many forms which a woman's subjectivity can take and therefore risks missing the potential of the relation between politics and theory, between action and reflection.

I take, for example, her claim of a feminine preference for intersubjectivity, which she opposes to the masculine one for the subject-object relation. According to this, a woman could never fully understand any experience of loneliness, including the one I mentioned above, the one that allowed Irigaray's singularity to create *Speculum*. What is needed instead - and here I come to the second

³ The expression is used, in a different context, by Boella (1993).

part of the objection – is a thought that maintains its experiential source, a thought that is not normative towards reality, but on the contrary testifies how much it owes to what happens among women, inside a single woman, among men and women, following the different positions they have.

I therefore return to the idea of sexual difference as transcendence, as the interval of the ‘to’, in order to conceive it not as the prescription of static properties, but as a dynamic thought produced by the concrete, material, embodied movement of different positions, through the figuration of a game, ‘The Sliding Tile Puzzle’: in a small frame containing fifteen sliding tiles, the sixteenth is missing in order to move the others and recombine them in new shapes and orders. Sexual difference would then be that empty space that allows us to bracket the socio-cultural codifications of experience and reality in order to achieve free re-configurations and a new discourse on them⁴.

How does this empty space come into being? The answer has both historical and political components, at the very least. The first possibility concerns the position of a woman who can now rely upon what has been done, enacted and written by other women before her. That empty space has thus an historical dimension. I do not suggest that the difference between sexes was not operative before feminism and the twentieth century, but that the ‘emptiness’ was full of forced and partial significations denying the ‘free expression of sexual difference’ (Diotima, 1987). The space was emptied by the cut that texts such as *Speculum* have enacted, along with their theoretical and political effects. On a political level, the empty space, the sixteenth missing tile is both the cause and the result of political action; for only in the real and concrete life, in the present, of the subjects’ experience it can be observed and named both in its single elements and in all its possible re-configurations.

Starting from Irigaray, as both a rooting and a departure, sexual difference can be conceived not as being two – implying the identification of the one and the other – but rather in stressing the relevance of what Irigaray herself called ‘in between’. This leads to a re-configuration of theory and politics: the latter represents political action as a source for the observation of new experiences engendered by the empty space, while the former regains its dignity as the moment in which the empty space and its borders are strictly formalized. In other words, sexual difference is neither confined to the concrete dimension of existence nor to the traditional theoretical question ‘What is a woman? What is a man?’. It is rather a political and theoretical dynamic that allows to take experiences into account and to formalize them.

Re-configurations I: She-I-you

I shall now describe how the elements produced by the return to *Speculum* can be recombined when one conceives of sexual difference as an empty space.

It is an historical commonplace by now that ‘you’ is not so obviously a masculine ‘you’. On the one hand, relations among women are no longer a scandal or an impossibility in our society (*DWF*, 1998), and on the other hand, feminine authority, which has been worked out politically and theoretically by the Italian version of sexual difference, is one of the unpredicted re-configurations opened up by the empty space: a woman can play her relation with another, not only in a horizontal and egalitarian way, but also in a vertical one, recognizing in her “something more” [“un di più”] that gives measure and empowers her own desire on reality (Diotima, 1992). It is the result of the ‘work of freeing the place of the Other’ (Muraro, 1990: 63).

My relation to Irigaray’s work is one of that kind: in her writings my position in the world finds a measure and a source for naming experience. But not only, this relation is necessary in order to identify my position, as her work is the condition of my difference with her – an historical, temporal

⁴ The function of the structuralist ‘case vide’ (Deleuze, 1973: 315-324) is not entirely the same. Sexual difference is ‘distributing the difference all over the structure’ (Deleuze, 1973: 318) but it is also the result of embodied subjects and their practices. ‘Sexual difference is real and universal at the same time’ (Irigaray, 1996: 84). It is not an object, it is not a principle, it could be called an ‘embodied dynamic’.

difference. In other words, my position cannot exist without that cut, is dependent upon Irigaray's shaping of the symbolic order; further, it must rely upon it, in order to have a theoretical mediation with the symbolic order. Her work is a necessary element of my speech; cancelling it would be like sawing the branch on which one is sitting⁵. This relation is engendered in the present we share but it is also marked by the asymmetry of our access to the present reality: I am "coming after" what she has done. Nevertheless, restricting her work to a place only in the past would result in rendering it ineffective for use in the present and future. Insisting on the present dimension allows me to avoid the game of the *ysteron-proteron*, the relation between past and present, which would end in placing the other woman in the position of the *chora* and thus making her fall into oblivion.

Concerning theory and politics, there is a new re-configuration that follows from this and has to do with the play of presence and absence in the relation. Nowadays it happens that a woman gets in touch with "feminism" through books rather than through feminist groups or in political situations and very often her contribution results as a theoretical one. This is an aspect of the above mentioned temporal difference. How does this recombine the relation between theory and politics? I think that the claim 'feminist theory is politics' is too fast and fictive a solution. In fact, there is a problem. Feminism risks to become a mere matter of theory and it has to be reconceived as a set of formalizations of experience. This is my idea: today a woman can refer to the authoritative work of another and can take profit from it in order to put a distance between herself and the identifications required by the existing social order. In other words, this relation in absence, or through the peculiar presence of writing, could be a way to re-enact the cut, but this time as a move aimed at taking place in the world with a high range of ambitions and critical attitude.

I take an example from the university where I work: women sharing my historical position are today confronted with explicit and implicit rules of public behaviour – competition, for instance – to which they participate in a more direct (emancipated) way. Competition among women is still wild, wilder because more recent, than among men. I think that the relation to the knowledge some women produced before us can be a good point of reference in order to suspend the pressure of academic requests, thus being able to go back and listen to one's own intimate movements. That is, taking a distance in order to distinguish the single elements that constitute the experience of competition – hierarchy, desire, admiration, a certain way of considering recognition, and so on – in order to name and recombine them anew.

Nevertheless, there is a problem: very often the reference to "women who came before" (DWF 2001: 7) and their work turns into a repetition of what has been already said. My position is thus a privileged one – as it can rely upon that previous event and its effects – but a disadvantaged one too – as referring to oneself, to one's intimacy and single experience has become more difficult, sometimes irrelevant.

Re-configurations II: I-me

Since *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* Irigaray has considered the necessity for a woman to refer to herself.

It is difficult for her to mark the stages of her travel! She especially misses *putting around herself the house she is*. Not to wear dresses for man, or for any other, but something that expresses her enjoyment, her gendered body, dressing herself up, protecting her, *from the outside*, with that house she is *in the inside* (Irigaray, 1993:55)

Discovering thus that I can live autonomously, that none, he or she, is indispensable to me, that I am not compelled to invent mothers or fathers in order to subsist (...) Being born to a kind of cultural naiveness (Irigaray 1997a: 10).

Compared with the first feminism a woman in my position has less immediacy or even a disappearance of the knowledge of intimacy and of the body. By body I refer to the complex feminist notion of a corporeal dimension composed of passions, drives, affects, and symptoms, and include the possibility that this notion can be relevant to politics (Giardini, 2000). This loss is evident also in some Angloamerican theories, as a discursive proliferation on the body as a topic but not as a subject. Today younger women, liberated from the body as a biological destiny, may end up enacting a body without knowing it; fantasising it as an isomorphic extension of the will (the technological body is not only the cyborg but also the body of pregnancies planned as a job, among others) or cancelling it by its theoretical resumption (how many women think that speaking of a

⁵ These considerations are made possible by the reference to the Italian thought on sexual difference. On the contrary, matricide recurs in the dispute between Gubar (1997) and Wiegman (1998). See also the final text by Heilbrun (1999) explicitly referring to Italian feminism.

gendered subject is 'bodily' enough?). In other words, the body in one's own intimacy has lost its potentiality in formalisation.

Thus a return to the body, as a listening to it and its non-verbal communications, is essential. This implies distancing oneself from already existing codifications and the authoritative word of the other woman in order to return to an observation of the elemental, of one's own affects, of one's own states of pleasure and pain (Giardini, 1998).

Again, I seek an example from the familiar, the examinations administered in Italian universities. These exams are represented as an anonymous (and hence unbiased) selection that verifies whether the candidates possess an infinite and undetermined knowledge. The truth is that the selection is based upon a hidden co-optation. Women's bodies more than men's suffer from this: some will thin down in order to escape from what she feels as a trap, but cannot fight back, others will sink in a depressive-aggressive state, isolated and unrelated to any shared meaning and thus a victim of the dominant mechanisms, in this case the competitive ones.

If this pain is not suitably expressed, women in my position will go back to the sacrifice of their bodies. But by a new re-configuration, this suffering can make sense. This time the matter is a pain due to the internal presence of a woman in the institutions and it could be read as a lesser rapidity in conforming oneself to the power requests. It is the embodied signal of a discrepancy – which had no symbolic resolution – between the reality, the intimacy it implies, and its representation. Alternative solutions in evaluating one's work are to be found in order to answer to that signal. These solutions should avoid, on the one hand, the abolition of a measure given to one's work, and on the other, the paranoiac vision of it as an exclusion that has to be redeemed by civil rights. Thus sexual difference as empty space returns. It does not produce primarily norms, but rather clues for action and reflection rooted in experiences a woman has.

Re-configurations III: I-he

I have stated that *Speculum* could not be written today; for the symbolic order and the place of a woman in it has changed. Were the cut to be performed in the same way, the premisses of my own present position would be ruled out. How can we deal with this new situation? Does the fact that I can rely upon other women produce a less radical attitude towards the present and the world we share with the other sex(es)? I shall analyse these relations according to two topics – tradition and institution – which share a common ground.

“Men and women have different positions in respect to genealogy” (Irigaray, 1996: 69).

Neither by 'destruction with nuptial tools' nor by a *corps-à-corps* played in a ludic repetition is the relation to the masculine tradition of thought accessible to me by the mediation of a woman's work. Now the game is played by three plus the temporal difference my position introduces. This has practical and political implications. In fact, if one considers the masculine tradition and the recent but existing feminist position on the same symmetric level, a woman's authority will be lost. For starting from the recognition of a woman introduces an immediate asymmetry. This implies that if in a man's work there is 'a little truth', it will become visible because of the empty space of sexual difference, because of the cut, the distance produced by women's thought. The game played by three interrupts the identification, but if this is only enacted and not named, this mediation and its practical relevance become invisible and apolitical, neutralizing as it does the difference between the sexes in the history of philosophy as well as in the history of academic knowledge.

The second issue concerns the relation to institutions as produced by the masculine tradition. It is difficult today to think of women as either estranged or equal in respect to society. Irigaray's position is mixed. In *La democrazia comincia a due* (1994a) there is a strong stress on the necessity of rights for women as an institutional measure for the civil relations of the two sexes. According to Irigaray it is necessary to 'resort to the right to civil identity: a positive right, an affirmative right which every single person enjoys, any sex, race or age she has [nevertheless] this kind of right

doesn't imply the imposition of an abstract and neutral identity' (Irigaray, 1994a: 56). The dialectics between cultural institutionalisation and concreteness is thus expressed by making the characteristics of juridical subjects closer to real living subjects. Irigaray chooses here the way of a sexualisation of existing institutions and of representative political mechanisms. In Italy the research on sexual difference and rights follows the line of concreteness and experience, while avoiding the logic of representation (Dominijanni, 1995). Sexual difference, as Irigaray herself affirms, is totally embodied and yet impersonal and can thus be inscribed in rights not as new identities but as a new economy. By shifting sexual difference from 'being two' to the 'empty space', gendered rights could be considered as the formalization of the dynamics that occur among subjects rather than a description of identities.

Then theory and politics recombine once more and engender new problems. In Italy women's studies have yet to assume an institutional form, though a debate is under way. Two political interpretations of the difference between the sexes are proposed. On the one hand, the agency for 'equal opportunities' aims to completely integrate women in institutions. On the other hand, other women (footnote 1) continue to pose the challenge that sexual difference can represent for the logic of institutions themselves (Muraro, 1999). According to the second position the creation of Women's studies departments would lead to the demise of the conflictual dimension that sexual difference maintains towards the whole range of the production of knowledge. In fact, from a theoretical point of view, the existence of authoritative feminine works fosters institutional inclusion, but from a political point of view the creation of Women's Studies departments – according to already existing models, which are also considered in decline (de Lauretis, 1998: 81-118) - would result in the loss of the demand of sexual difference which requires men to make a move beyond their passive acceptance of women's existence for pluralistic or egalitarian reasons.

Starting from the re-configurations I mentioned, one can conceive the situation in different terms. Women's works are in women's hands, women who are able to re-enact the dynamic I have articulated here. Practically speaking, a chair of Political philosophy, for example, has to take into account not only the fact that some women authors are to be added, as a supplement, to the already existing tradition, but also has to recognise that such work has produced a cut, which will allow the re-evaluation of men's work as well, in order to evaluate what they still have to offer to a woman.

Thus from my position the contradiction between institutional and anti-institutional logic no longer corresponds with reality: neither when it claims rights for a better inclusion of women in institutions, nor when it claims a radical estrangement from them. Antigone (Irigaray, 1985: 204-214) sacrificing herself because of her refusal to submit to the laws of the *polis* has been an important figuration for sexual difference. Today one must go further but not only in the direction of feminine inclusion. Estrangement, following Irigaray, can be newly conceived as transcendence. In fact it is still necessary – a political and theoretical necessity - to show woman's asymmetry with tradition and to institutions; hence it is necessary to maintain space to manoeuvre through the maze of implicit and explicit rules. In other words, it is essential to have participation without identification, in order to go back to experience in order to name it, or as Weil put it, in order to have enough time, and space, to reflect upon one's own actions (Weil, 1983). This asymmetry, which could be identified with weakness, provides essential room to manoeuvre making claims more refined and of a higher quality. In times of 'the end of patriarchy' (Libreria delle donne di Milano, 1996) this too can produce a woman's authority, her skill in providing analyses of institutional and relational dynamics that are closer to reality than the old ones.

A Political Desire for Theory: Can I Write the Way I Cook?

Any theory of the "subject" is always appropriated to the "masculine". The woman submitting herself to it renounces, unwittingly, to the specificity of her own relation to the imaginary (Irigaray, 1985: 134)

Women generally privilege: (...) the concrete environment (Irigaray, 1994a:133-134)

From this new position is it still possible to attribute the desire for theory as essentially masculine, thus condemning feminine writing to rhapsodic impressions, to mere contingency, or to renounce a strict formalization, because of its preference for concreteness? My thesis is, again, that sexual difference as empty space does not oppose but rearticulates the relation between concreteness and formalization.

Returning to *Speculum*: I was fascinated by this text which gave me back the passion for form and accuracy in details. That writing was altogether a challenge and a patient strictness. Wondering whether it is possible to re-enact or modify that style of thinking, I look for a figuration suiting to the present situation. Can I write the way I cook? Cooking is made by a semiautomatic lightness: first, the repetition in preparing the basic ingredients, peeling vegetables, repeated and precise gestures. Then, a floating attention, where precision is fundamental: a dish can be spoiled by leaving out or putting in too much of an ingredient or for not having done things in the right order or having dealt with the ingredients in the right way. Last but not least, one learns how to cook watching someone else, cooking cannot be learned just from reading recipe books.

Thus the entwining of politics and theory I wish: precision and imagination, a skill learned by watching and listening to the words and the body of the other – that body entwined with action – which engenders a renewed ability in observing reality and in action even in her absence. Observation and elegance in producing an embodied culture.

How does this connect to the examples I made? There is a need for theory, for discursive coherence, but in a new way, in a form leaving room for contradictions and for the negative – when these are the signals of a relation to reality. I think there is a way to maintain the political challenge of theory as long as it is conceived in its tight relation to experience. Theory is making theory, it is a production of knowledge implying subjects and their relations in a space with its own rules. Theory is an action, expressing itself through present and absent relations, in physical spaces that can respect more or less our needs, in situations that respond more or less to our bodies. It is time, I think, to produce theory with the desire of describing the re-configurations made possible by the empty space other women created before us.

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