

## Luce Irigaray and the Advent of the Divine: From the Metaphysical to the Symbolic to the Eschatological

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**Abstract:** This article attempts to provide a theoretical context conducive to a fruitful encounter between Irigaray and Christian theology. It does so through the critique of metaphysics and the turn to the symbolic, leading finally to a recovery of the eschatological. Irigaray makes this transition through two related gestures. Through her concept of the *sensible transcendental* Irigaray seeks a re-enchantment of the world that is grounded in the symbolic. Through her notion of the *double syntax*, grounded in the incommensurability of women and men, Irigaray establishes the priority of both dialogue and the 'other' for the constitution of subjectivity. Finally, this leads Irigaray to challenge theology to rethink the importance of the eschatological dimension of the Christian kerygma.

THE ABIDING CONCERN OF THE FRENCH FEMINIST LUCE IRIGARAY for things theological has been noted by many, but has yet to produce a sustained dialogue between Irigaray and theology. Part of the problem is the theoretical context of Irigaray's work and her tendency to inhabit rather than simply interpret the texts with which she engages. This usually means that to engage with Irigaray is at the same time to engage with whom or whatever Irigaray is engaging. To the extent that her work comes out of a critique of the Western tradition as a whole and metaphysics in particular, it is in this context that the encounter with Irigaray needs to take place. The critique of metaphysics is at the same time a critique of theology's complicity with metaphysics. But in Irigaray's case this critique is motivated by a positive ethical vision that I believe to be entirely consistent with the properly Christian concern for what sustains and promotes life. It is Irigaray's constructive ethics that I feel to be of most interest to the extent that it establishes parameters by which to shape the emerging cultural milieu in which we find ourselves and to which theology must respond if it is to continue to speak and witness to culture. It will be my task in this article to place Irigaray's thought within a context conducive to a fruitful encounter between

Irigaray and Christian theology; within what the French sacramental theologian Louis-Marie Chauvet calls the transition “from the metaphysical to the symbolic”.<sup>1</sup>

To do this I will explore Irigaray’s concepts of the *double syntax* and the *sensible transcendental*. Irigaray uses these two interpretive principles as a corrective to the metaphysical principle of totalisation. This task is of vital concern to theology since the concept of God has been used, perhaps more than any other metaphysical principle, to exclude otherness. In order to recover a concept of God that makes room for otherness, Irigaray posits the alterity of the feminine and the possibility of a feminine language as a way of signalling another logic that is not reducible to the one. Consequently the concept of the feminine acts to limit the univocal and monological pretensions of metaphysics. This gesture looks to the “death of God” as an opportunity and an invitation to create a space in which dialogue can be re-established within language as the place where the subject comes to its truth.

It is consent to the mediation of the symbolic that opens us to the mediation of the divine. This means that theology must come to terms with the power of the symbol if it is to extract itself from its symbiotic relationship with a metaphysics that no longer seems tenable. I will then consider the psychoanalytic and semiotic inquiry into the symbolic to the extent that it further demonstrates the inadequacies of classical metaphysics by suggesting that language is intrinsically oriented towards the future. It is from this orientation towards fulfilment that the divine manifests itself in shaping human subjectivity. It is from this horizon that the ethical God emerges as trinity. Irigaray’s most significant theological intervention is to challenge theology to retrieve and rethink the eschatological dimension of the Christian kerygma in order to leave a space for the other. Finally, in a more speculative conclusion to this study, I make a tentative sketch of what theology after Irigaray might look like.

The relation between Irigaray’s critique of metaphysics and her constructive theological proposal could be summarised as follows: Man, in establishing himself as the universal subject, has diminished himself. In making the feminine the negative mirror of his identity, he has in fact – ironically – fashioned himself out of Eve’s rib while at the same time disavowing this dependence. But in his disavowal of the feminine and the material, man has obscured the divine image. It is in this context that Irigaray’s call for a feminine divine needs to be understood – as a necessary step towards the discovery of the divine incarnation in the couple as the condition for genuine life giving community.<sup>2</sup> The death

1. Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament: A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence* (Collegeville, MI: Liturgical Press, 1995).

2. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s contention that Irigaray’s notion of the divine “feeds into the consumerist self-help mentality and new age spirituality of individualistic fulfil-

of God, and the death of man as the universal subject that accompanies it, prepares, Irigaray argues, the way for a new epiphany; one in which sexual difference – as the symbol of difference *par excellence* – and the creativity that it engenders, becomes a possibility. This is for Irigaray an eschatological reality, a parousia of the other “that necessarily accompanies the coming of an ethical God”.<sup>3</sup>

The eschatological orientation of Irigaray’s thought is consistent with Margaret Whitford’s characterisation of Irigaray as a theorist of change.<sup>4</sup> God is an issue for all those who would concern themselves with the political, Irigaray argues, because any change in the political order is predicated upon change within the symbolic order, whose cornerstone is God. As a consequence, Irigaray could be seen to place theology at the heart of every political concern. It is in this manner that Irigaray challenges secular theorists to overcome their antireligious bias by insisting on the need to continually re-engage with our religious traditions.

Although she remains critical of religious institutions, Irigaray does not believe that “salvation” can be found without them.<sup>5</sup> “God”, she argues, “must be questioned and not simply neutered in the current pseudoliberal way”.<sup>6</sup> But it is in the area of feminist theology that Irigaray’s work holds particular promise. Serene Jones considers the location of Irigaray’s work at the “extreme margins of Christian discourse”, to be a distinct advantage to the extent that it “allows her to push questions and issues that theologians who feel the constraints of church commitments might miss”.<sup>7</sup>

The extent to which Irigaray’s work is able to be appropriated by theology remains open to question, but it is not a question that can be answered unless we genuinely engage with the questions she raises.

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ment and potential for growth that is presently in vogue” (Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “Struggle is a name for hope: a critical feminist interpretation for liberation”, *Pacifica* 10 [June 1997] 243) proves to be superficial and on closer analysis not sustainable. Though I suspect that Schüssler Fiorenza is correct when she considers some feminist theological appropriations of Irigaray to have been insufficiently critical.

3. Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993) 150.

4. Margaret Whitford, *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine* (London: Routledge, 1991) 15.

5. Irigaray, “Equal to Whom?”, in Naomi Schor and Elizabeth Weed (eds.), *The Essential Difference* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994) 76.

6. Luce Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993) v.

7. Serene Jones, “Divine Women: Irigaray and Feminist Theologies”, *Yale French Studies* 87 (1995) 45. Jones suggests that “feminist theologians may well have the unique advantage of providing Irigaray’s writings with the audience she desires but is institutionally unable to reach” in that they are better situated to be able to “test the practical force of Irigaray’s theological reflections”.

## IRIGARAY'S CREATIVE DISCOURSE

Irigaray's creative discourse has focused upon the establishment of two basic principles; what Irigaray calls the "*sensible transcendental*"<sup>8</sup> and the "*double syntax*".<sup>9</sup> In their own way these two principles evoke the two basic theological insights of Christianity: incarnation and trinity. Through her notion of the *sensible transcendental*, Irigaray seeks to break through the circle of radical immanence that the liberal modernist and secular agendas have forged, not through a return to a pre-modern transcendentalism, but from within the circle of immanence itself.<sup>10</sup> The situation that Irigaray addresses resonates with Rahner's description of the modern world as one that appears as "a closed system" in which "God has become more transcendent" and "the world has become less divine, and, by the same token, less important".<sup>11</sup> But whereas Rahner addresses the problem through the concept of mystery, Irigaray enlists the concept of wonder to the extent that it evokes the mystery of the other. "Wonder is a mourning for the self as an autarchic entity.... Wonder must be the advent or the event of the other."<sup>12</sup> The advent of the other, like Rahner's concept of mystery, is not only the condition of possibility of transcendence, but also the condition of what already is. The two are related through Irigaray's concept of the *sensible transcendental*.

It is through her concept of the *sensible transcendental*, that Irigaray seeks to establish the conditions for the possibility of the transcendence of the subject. It requires that transcendence arise from immanence, through the mediation of materiality. It is through the *sensible transcendental* that Irigaray seeks a basis for the re-enchantment of the world, but most specifically, of our relations with and within the world. The *sensible transcendental* requires above all that transcendence is not foreign to the constitution of subject. This is only possible to the extent that what is other to the subject is also in some manner constitutive of the subject. In order for this otherness to be safeguarded and, or, established Irigaray insists on the necessity of a "*double syntax*".

Irigaray's *double syntax* is the defining characteristic of what she calls "sexual difference". When Irigaray talks about sexual difference she is talking about the possibility of a different metaphysical order; one that is characterised by a *double syntax*.<sup>13</sup> This *double syntax* is grounded upon

8. See Irigaray, *Ethics*, 129.

9. See Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985) 132ff.

10. Graham Ward, "Introduction, or, A Guide to Theological Thinking in Cyberspace", *The Postmodern God: A Theological Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997) pp. xlff.

11. Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, Vol 4 (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1966) 36.

12. Irigaray, *Ethics*, 75.

13. Irigaray's first mention of the "double syntax" does not explicitly name sexual difference. Rather, it is sexual difference that is Freud's blindspot, and Irigaray wonders what Freud could have discovered if he did not insist on reducing everything to a single eco-

the incommensurability of men and women, of two nodes of subjectivity: two logics, two economies, metaphor and metonymy, paternal and maternal genealogies; each of which is given full recognition.<sup>14</sup> The *double syntax* is an attempt to find room for alterity within a metaphysical system that is founded upon the nostalgia for identity. According to David Klemm, this is also the challenge for contemporary theology. Klemm argues that “the challenge of understanding is no longer to reconstruct historical meanings or to address the crisis of history, but to uncover what is questionable in self and other, while opening self to other and allowing the other to remain other”.<sup>15</sup> However, the traditional metaphysical obsession with foundations and “myths of origin” has entailed the exclusion of otherness to the extent that it imagines a state of nature or pure essence that is uncontaminated by the other.

#### THE METAPHYSICAL PRINCIPLE OF TOTALISATION

The exclusion of otherness has emerged as the most consistent element of the critique of metaphysics associated with the names of Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida. Kevin Hart informs us that “For Derrida as for Heidegger, any discourse is metaphysical which seeks to ground speculation in an *archè*”,<sup>16</sup> and which uses that *archè* as a principle of totalization. It is this attempt at totalization made by metaphysical discourse that Derrida compares to the building of the tower of Babel.<sup>17</sup> Babel represents the dream of presence just as much as it represents a fall from presence. Hart explains: “Upon Derrida’s reckoning, the *archai* are in fact held to be moments of irreducible presence.... the fixed centre of the system, the governing principle of its structure and the sole element which escapes structurality.”<sup>18</sup> But the

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nomy. See Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985) 138.

14. I suspect that the current Australian debate over native title and the Prime Minister’s insistence on the need for certainty is really an inability to deal with a kind of double syntax where two legitimate claims can coexist without contradiction.

15. David Klemm, “Toward a Rhetoric of Post Modern Theology”, *American Academy of Religion* 55:3 (1987) 456.

16. Kevin Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction, Theology and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). 111. According to Heidegger the trajectory of metaphysics runs from Plato to Nietzsche, inclusive. Derrida, following Levinas traces the history of metaphysics from Parmenides and includes Heidegger. Will the next generation extend it even further? To my mind the term metaphysics is impossibly broad. Strictly speaking we never escape it. Rather, the type of metaphysics under discussion is a metaphysics haunted by a nostalgia for full presence.

17. According to Jacques Derrida, “the ‘tower of Babel’ does not figure merely the irreducible multiplicity of tongues; it exhibits an incompleteness, the impossibility of finishing, of totalizing, of saturating, of completing something on the order of edification, architectural construction, system and architectonics”. “Des Tours de Babel”, *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991) 243.

18. Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign*, 83.

*archè* is also the blind spot of the system. Believed to guarantee the identity of the system, the *archè* is not self-grounding but has its own foundation elsewhere. So while the "metaphysics of presence" concerns itself with identity, this identity is itself "undecidable" from within the system. This claim takes its justification from Gödel's incompleteness theorem, which states that any formal system will produce at least one proposition that must be considered true but which cannot be proved from within that system. The consequence of this is that no formal system can be considered to be both consistent and complete.<sup>19</sup> Since consistency is usually to be valued above completeness, no system will be complete. Derrida considers that this conclusion about formal systems also applies to philosophical systems.<sup>20</sup>

To locate the dominant *archè* of western thought we only need to examine the classical notion of divinity. Even when contradicted by the content of revelation, God's impassibility, immutability, simplicity, omnipotence and omniscience have been jealously guarded.<sup>21</sup> Elizabeth Johnson demonstrates that from the standpoint of feminist theology "self-containment and absence of relation are not necessarily the highest perfections but signify lack"<sup>22</sup> and that "the move to integrate suffering into the idea of God is happening on so many points along the spectrum that it is tantamount to the rise of a new orthodoxy".<sup>23</sup> This suggests that our *archai* as well as our notions of God are in transition. All these classical notions of God can be traced back to the principle of the unity of the divine essence. Catherine LaCugna argues that it was this privileging of the unity of divine essence that contributed to the defeat of the doctrine of the trinity. In her estimation, this made it "easy to bypass the radical philosophical and theological proposal contained in trinitarian doctrine and instead embrace the idea of a God-monarch".<sup>24</sup> LaCugna considers that "this effort to ascertain what something is 'in itself', is perhaps the ultimate projection of masculinity".<sup>25</sup> But to the extent that substance ontology is concerned with identity to the exclusion of alterity, it remains incongruent with revelation in Jesus.

19. Hao Wang, *A Logical Journey: From Gödel to Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996) 3. The totalised closed system is, in Gödel's view, radically flawed.

20. Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign*, 83, 154-5 and 173.

21. Impassibility and immutability safeguard God's self sufficiency. As pure act God is unmoved by any other. Simplicity safeguards the absence of relation. Omnipotence expresses God's absolute lordship and control. Omniscience expresses the transparency of Being to reason and consciousness.

22. Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992) 252.

23. Johnson citing Ronald Goetz. *She Who Is*, 251.

24. Catherine Mowry LaCugna, "God in Communion with Us", in Catherine Mowry LaCugna (ed.), *Freeing Theology: The Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1993) 93.

25. Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God For Us*, 398.

Irigaray locates the *arche* of the classical metaphysics that has shaped our culture within the trinitarian symbol itself.<sup>26</sup> But, like LaCugna, Irigaray also considers its redemptive content to have been coopted by classical metaphysics, beoming “captive to the lure of a (male) Same”. On Irigaray’s reading the trinity has been reduced to an emanationist schema that she calls the “Father-son” paradigm.<sup>27</sup> Why “dig it up?” she asks, when it represents “the dream of becoming the self without contradictions, of reabsorbing into the self all things opposed and different, of subsuming under the self the transcendent of oneself”.<sup>28</sup>

#### AN OTHER LANGUAGE

But Irigaray wants to suggest that there is more to the Christ symbol and to the divine relation that is the Trinity that has been covered over by the “Father-son paradigm”. And so, Irigaray urges that “if it is another love that [Christ] heralds, then deliver him from his masks of death, and set him once more in his flesh”.<sup>29</sup> That delivery, however, presumes our ability to receive him. This is where Irigaray goes further than, or can be seen to supplement, the work of most feminist theologians, in exploring the conditions of possibility that would enable us to truly receive him and not simply bury him once more. The condition of that reception is language. We could perhaps summarise Irigaray’s position on this point by stating that the Word was made flesh, not so that the flesh could be abandoned, but in order that the flesh might become word. Theology, therefore, must come to terms with the question of language because it is in language that we come to subjectivity and personhood. But this renders the feminist theological enterprise even more problematic. The issue is not merely one of bringing women back into language and making women visible, as is often argued by the advocates of inclusive language in translation and liturgy, since the very notion of inclusive language almost implies the forgetting of sexual difference. The avoidance of terms that “apparently” exclude women is a negative criteria that has yet to come to terms with the full power of language. Furthermore, what is the feminine that one seeks to find? Ellen Mortensen expresses her concern about scholars

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26. “The perfection of love between son and Father, with its completion in a Trinity, schematizes to an extreme degree the relationship underpinning the foundation and development of ontotheology.” Luce Irigaray, *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche* (New York: Columbia, 1991) 186.

27. Irigaray, *Marine Lover*, 187.

28. Irigaray, *Marine Lover*, 186-7. Below Irigaray suggest that “if that Idol means the whole of love, the love always amounts to a murder – the murder of the other.”

29. Irigaray, *Marine Lover*, 189.

who make use Irigaray's work as a methodology to "detect 'difference'". Irigaray's point is precisely that difference/*le féminin* is not present.<sup>30</sup>

This is not to disparage the work of those engaged in the very necessary work of language reform. As Ludwig Wittgenstein suggested, a meaning of a word is its use. The problem with so called political correctness is its idolatry of the letter, and forgetfulness of the spirit. Nonetheless, the spirit also needs the letter. Attention to exclusive androcentric language can and should increase our awareness of how language actually is used, enabling us to take further steps to shape our discourse as it shapes us. Inclusive language does constitute a first step towards changing the symbolic order, but to consider that we can master it so easily, that language is merely a tool that needs tuning, is surely naive. Similarly, as Dorothy Lee has remarked, there is much more that is of concern to women than that which explicitly names women.<sup>31</sup> The invisible is often the most insidious. Language, according to Irigaray, is always sexuate, so even if the inclusive language reformers do succeed in making women visible, they are only visible within a male economy. "For everyone claims neutrality without noticing that he is talking about *one* neuter, *his* neuter, and not an absolute neutrality."<sup>32</sup>

The possibility of a feminine language is, for Irigaray, a way of signalling and exploring the possibility of another logic, another economy. To this extent the feminine aligns itself with the repressed, what is other. Until the female *imaginary* is given expression, we are theologically working from within the realm of a God made in the image of men, a God that reflects only part of humanity, a monosexual and therefore stunted humanity. From a theological perspective the question of a feminine language arises from two interdependent principles; a jealousy for what is God's,<sup>33</sup> and equally a concern for the full humanity of men and women. Irigaray argues that only the admission of genuine sexual difference can "safeguard those human limitations that allow room for a notion of the divine not defined as a

30. Ellen Mortensen, *The Feminine and Nihilism: Luce Irigaray with Nietzsche and Heidegger* (Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1994) 22-3.

31. See Dorothy A. Lee, "Abiding in the Fourth Gospel: A Case-Study in Feminist Biblical Theology", *Pacifica* 10.2 (June 1997) 123-36.

32. Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies*, 117. As Jacques Derrida explains, "it is a classical ruse of man to neutralize the sexual mark. In philosophy we have such signs all the time; when we say that the ego, the 'I think', is neither man nor woman, we can in fact verify that it's already a man, and not a woman. It's always the case. So, to the extent which universalization implies neutralization, you can be sure that it's only a hidden way of confirming man in his power. That's why we have to be very cautious about neutrality and neutralization, and universality as neutralization." See Jacques Derrida, "Women in the Beehive", in Alice Jardine and Paul Smith (eds.), *Men in Feminism* (London: Methuen, 1987) 194.

33. Mary Collins has observed that "a self critical church might well ask whether it has ever been guilty of worshipping its own words". Mary Collins, "Naming God in Public Prayer", *Worship: Renewal to Practice* (Washington: The Pastoral Press, 1987) 223.

result of a narcissistic and imperialistic inflation of sameness".<sup>34</sup> When man is all, his god will be quite small. Irigaray suggests that it was this God, the god of the universal and monosexual subject, whose death Nietzsche proclaimed.<sup>35</sup>

#### THE DEATH OF GOD

The primary locus of the divine for us, remains the symbolic order itself, but not as its guarantor. That was the function of the metaphysical God. "Nietzsche used to say that we would continue to believe in God as long as we believed in grammar.... To say that discourse has a *sex*, especially in its syntax, is to question the last bastion of semantic order. It amounts to taking issue with the God of men in his most traditional form."<sup>36</sup> How uncovering the sex of language does this is by preparing the way for a *double syntax* within the social and cultural realm. Irigaray's *double syntax* expresses that we need more than one pole of enunciation, more than one logic, if our language is to be any more than a sterile monologue in which the efficacy of language is dependent upon a single transcendental signified.

If it belongs to the criteria of meaning that a discourse be open to correction from without,<sup>37</sup> then it would also belong to the meaningfulness of a discourse or logic that there is at least the possibility of another different discourse or logic. Truth according to Hegel requires the confrontation with an independent object that is not reducible to the parameters of the same. Anything less is mere subjective assurance.<sup>38</sup> It could be said that for Irigaray the ultimate goal of discourse is intercourse. But for such an event to take place we will need a metaphysics that differs from the one that has shaped our culture.

And so, for Irigaray, the death of God as the guarantor of the metaphysical order is an event to be celebrated in the hope of a new Easter.<sup>39</sup> As an event, the death of God is inseparable from the end of metaphysics, or at least a certain kind of metaphysics and a certain kind of theology. Robert R. Williams' observations about Hegel's discussion of the death of God could equally be applied to Irigaray in that hers "is a

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34. Irigaray, "Equal to Whom?", 79.

35. Irigaray, *Ethics*, 129.

36. Irigaray, *Ethics*, 112-3.

37. Wittgenstein's private language argument seems to suggest as much: see *Philosophical Investigations*, §§243 -6, 256-64. See also David. J. Krieger, *The New Universalism: Foundations for a Global Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991) 102-23.

38. G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977) 113.

39. Irigaray explains that, "the cries and words of the last philosophers, of Nietzsche and Heidegger, about the 'death of God' are a summons for the divine to return as festival, grace, love, thought. Contrary to the usual interpretation made of them, these philosophers are not talking about the disappearance of the gods but about the approach or the announcement of another parousia of the divine. Which involves the remoulding of the world, of discourse: another morning, a new era in history, in the universe." Irigaray, *Ethics*, 140.

critique of the onto-theological abstraction of classical metaphysics which conceived God as actual apart from relation, or as involved in relations that have no influence or effect on the divine".<sup>40</sup> Graham Ward argues that the significance of Nietzsche's proclamation of the death of God becomes clearer if we understand "God" as "a metonymy for 'absolute Truth,' 'absolute Goodness,' 'absolute Reality,' 'absolute Reason,' the origin and measure of all things".<sup>41</sup> Nietzsche situated truth within language itself arguing that "only through forgetfulness can man ever achieve the illusion of possessing a 'truth'".<sup>42</sup> Such "truths" eventually become taken for granted such that "all things that live long are gradually saturated with reason [so] that their origin in unreason becomes improbable."<sup>43</sup> The God that dies is the blind spot on our cultural horizon. It is a god that has ossified, and that no longer gives life.<sup>44</sup> This God is the keystone of a metaphysics that confines rather than liberates. God here, is a function of a metaphysical framework, to which we can neither pray, nor sing, nor dance.<sup>45</sup> It is therefore a certain concept of God that dies, but a concept that is nonetheless the cornerstone of an entire civilisation. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari have observed that "to criticize is only to establish that a concept vanishes when it is thrust into a new milieu."<sup>46</sup>

The nostalgic attempt to bolster and preserve such a concept when the milieu from which it arose no longer seems tenable amounts, in effect, to an act of violence and violation. But, the new milieu also constitutes an opportunity. What *Gaudium et Spes* calls the "signs of the times" can also be vehicles of revelation. In "scrutinising the signs of the times and of

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40. Robert R. Williams, *Recognition: Fichte and Hegel on the Other* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992) 234.

41. Graham Ward, "Introduction", *The Postmodern God: A Theological Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997) p. xxviii.

42. Friedrich Nietzsche, in Walter Kaufmann (ed.), *The Portable Nietzsche* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1954) 45.

43. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982) 9.

44. Heidegger argues that "the pronouncement 'God is dead' means: The suprasensory world is without effective power. It bestows no life. Metaphysics, i.e., for Nietzsche Western philosophy understood as Platonism, is at an end." See "The Word of Nietzsche: 'God is Dead,'" in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977) 61. Weaver Santaniello argues that, "the important issue for [Nietzsche] was not the truth or falsehood of a claim, but how that claim promoted or demoted from life". *Nietzsche, God, and the Jews: His Critique of Judeo-Christianity in Relation to the Nazi Myth* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994) 86. Consequently, she argues that Nietzsche's philosophical enterprise was an effort "designed to render sacred a desacralized world, and was deeply rooted in his response to Darwinism and to Christianity, which he believed both contributed to the earth's desacralization.... Christianity created a chasm between God and humans, God and nature, and humans and nature, which made it possible for Darwinism to flourish. Both resulted in the loss of divinity." (p. 88).

45. Martin Heidegger, *Identity and Difference* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969) 72.

46. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* (London: Verso, 1994) 28.

interpreting them in the light of the Gospel"<sup>47</sup> we also scrutinise and test our reading of the Gospel and in so doing we open ourselves to Gospel anew in a dialectical process that is the hallmark of catholicity.<sup>48</sup> It would seem, therefore, that the terms "end of metaphysics" and "death of God" are misleading in that what they describe is not so much a death as the possibility of rebirth. This at least is Irigaray's position. The death of God describes the inadequacy of a particular type of metaphysics and the need for a new metaphysics that does full justice to the richness and range of human experience. The death of God should therefore be read as a call to renewal for theology and not just dismissed as another, somewhat tired, nihilism. It is a properly theological call to renewal and a concern for what gives life. In a similar fashion the critique of metaphysics concerns itself with the possibility of doing metaphysics, and for the most part, finds it in language.

#### METAPHYSICS AND LANGUAGE

I have already noted that the consistent critique of classical metaphysics – what Martin Heidegger called *ontotheology*<sup>49</sup> and Jacques Derrida calls *logocentrism*<sup>50</sup> – has been that it suppressed otherness and difference in favour of identity and totality. Put another way, this critique of metaphysics reads the history of philosophy as the history of Platonism.<sup>51</sup> All philosophy is Platonism to the extent that it is motivated by the desire for grounds or foundations through a reduction to unity that is full, immediate, and transparent presence. Any form of mediation is therefore considered to be a fall down the great chain of Being. According to Heidegger's critique, the "metaphysics of presence" that derives from Plato, reduces entities to a common essence, forgetting what he calls the ontological difference between Being and beings, and forgetting that it has forgotten. This totalising reduction of the world has its corollary in the reduction of language to the status of an instrument, placing the representation of Being outside of language. Through its desire for foundations and mastery, the "metaphysics of presence" separates reality from the vicissitudes of discourse. From the perspective of this metaphysics it would appear that one is unable to

47. Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, §4.

48. Or as Hegel expresses it: "What is familiar is not understood precisely because it is familiar." Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, § 28.

49. Ontotheology is the conflation of ontology with theology that seeks the ultimate foundation of being in the *causa sui* of divine nature.

50. According to Hart, "Derrida takes any appeal to a natural order of reason, prior to all linguistic determination, to be logocentric. More controversial is Derrida's other claim that the valorisation of speech over writing is of a piece with these characteristics of metaphysics." *Trespass of the Sign*, 92.

51. This characterization of metaphysics as Platonism derives from Nietzsche. See Heidegger, "The Word of Nietzsche", 61. There is also, of course, the aphorism that considers the history of philosophy as merely footnotes to Plato.

change this fundamental reality. At best, one can only represent, describe or reflect the “really real” more or less adequately. The goal of the “metaphysics of presence” is the accurate correspondence of discourse and reality. To do this the metaphysician needs to slough off the contingent, the material, the derivative. Only then will “he” be able to achieve full transparent presence of the self and to the One, transcendental signified, first cause.

Through the course of late modernity, however, the linguistic turn and the emergence of a critical historical consciousness has presented us with a somewhat different picture of human reality; one that gives mediation a critical role in the construction of the world. The role of culture, language, the body and the processes of history have come to assume greater importance. It is through these insights that the critique of the “metaphysics of presence” has received its impetus and urgency. At the same time a new metaphysical milieu is emerging out of the critique; one that is grounded in a growing appreciation of the symbolic order as that which defines and constitutes human reality.

Irigaray’s critique of metaphysics draws upon the insights of Heidegger and Derrida outlined above, though her analysis focuses on the question of difference, the most tangible of which is sexual difference, which “could be our ‘salvation’ if we thought it through”.<sup>52</sup> Sexual difference is not so much a question of biology, but of the construction of meaning and the entire socio-symbolic order. The body, after all, is never simply given, but always already constructed as meaning. Sexual difference is for Irigaray the most potent symbol of a creative plurality, arising out of a relation that does not erase, but rather enhances, difference. Irigaray’s critique of metaphysics finds its clearest expression in an extended reading of Plato’s myth of the cave at the beginning of the seventh book of *The Republic*.<sup>53</sup> What Irigaray examines is the gradual elision of the mother in the originary myth of *onto-theo-logical* metaphysics. First, it is Socrates as midwife and male engenderer who initially appropriates the maternal function. But more insidious is the

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52. Irigaray, *Ethics*, 5. Elizabeth Johnson among others argues that “it is shortsighted to single out sexuality as always and everywhere more fundamental to concrete historical existence than any of the other constants”. *She Who Is* (New York: Crossroad, 1994) 155. It is true that other factors may be more crucial in the constitution of an identity. None the less, it remains the case that sexual difference is the most universal and irreducible of differences. It is for this reason that Irigaray consider sexual difference to be “the ultimate anchorage of real alterity”. See Irigaray, *I Love to You: Sketch of a Possible Felicity in History* (London: Routledge, 1996) 62. Regarding the notion that cross gender identification can make the differences inscribed in the body irrelevant, Irigaray argues that this is an illusion (p. 61). It is precisely the stability of the specificity of sexed bodies that enables gender fluidity. As Daniel Boyarin has suggested, “only a grouping which has some somatic referent can allow itself the possibility of reinventing its essence”. *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994) 239. This would suggest that sexual difference is not only irreducible but also undefinable.

53. Irigaray, “Plato’s Hysteria”, in *Speculum of the Other Woman*, 243- 364.

use of analogy which in successive stages finally obliterates all trace of material support, in which matter, mediation and the maternal are all removed from any relation with truth. The problem is not with analogy itself, which David Tracy describes as “a language of ordered relationships articulating similarity in difference”,<sup>54</sup> but with the forgetting of the dialectical sense within the analogy that produces “not a believable harmony”, but a “deadening univocity”.<sup>55</sup> Clearly our language cannot do without analogy but, Chauvet argues, we should not rely on it either.<sup>56</sup> At the heart of *onto-theo-logy* is a privileging of thought to language, that forgets that thought is always already language.<sup>57</sup> In its proclivity towards univocity, *onto-theo-logy* occludes the dynamic heart of the symbol.

With regards to the much debated question as to how theology can best overcome *onto-theo-logy*, there appear to be three basic proposals. The first is the position associated with Kevin Hart’s project in *The Trespass of the Sign*, in which negative theology is argued to escape the gravity of onto-theo-logical affirmations.<sup>58</sup> The second approach is to attempt to retrieve those elements of the tradition that lie outside of the conceptual field of Greek *onto-theo-logical* thought. This would include the attempt to retrieve a more biblical theology<sup>59</sup> as well as those elements of the theological tradition such as trinitarian theology that are seen to subvert the dominant *onto-theo-logical* paradigm. A third approach is taken by Chauvet, who argues that “the critical thrust for

54. David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1991) 408.

55. Tracy, *Analogical Imagination*, 413.

56. See Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 39-41, where he argues that, according to Aquinas, the validity of our analogies “is determined by the relation the creature maintains with God as its principle and its cause” (*Summa Theologica*, I, 13, a.5.). But before the act of judgement, which is the analogy, there is postulated a relation as the condition of the world. At the end of each of Thomas’ five proofs for the existence of God, Thomas has to add to his conclusion the clause “all call this God”. The equivalence between the final term and that which all call God lies outside of the demonstration and is simply presumed and unable to be questioned by Thomas’ worldview. It is the human inability to get outside of language, culture, and desire that is unable to be thought by Aquinas. This “ontological priority of thought to language” Jüngel considers to be the essential trait of onto-theo-logy. Chauvet continues that “it is precisely this oversight that has opened up for it the possibility and the necessity of the doctrine of analogy: before language, and thus beyond culture and desire, the existence of a relation between the creature and God as to its cause and principle must be postulated – a datum that cannot be open to question”. *Symbol and Sacrament*, 40.

57. Chauvet, citing E. Jüngel, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 40.

58. Kevin Hart in a recent article cites Derrida’s opinion on the matter. “In effect I believe that what is called ‘negative theology’ (a rich and very diverse corpus) does not let itself be easily assembled under the general category of ‘onto-theology-to-be-deconstructed’. Undoubtedly there is also the place of ‘positive’ theology, about which as much could be said.” Derrida, “Letter to John P. Leavey”, *Semeia* 23 (1982) 61. Cited by Hart, “Jacques Derrida: The God Effect”, in Phillip Blond (ed.), *Post-Secular Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1998) 264.

59. A good example of this approach is that taken by Brian D. Ingraffia, *Postmodern Theology and Biblical Theology* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995).

Christian theology does not consist in the apophatic purification of our concepts in order to express God but rather in the *use* that *we* make of these concepts, that is, in the *attitude*, idolatrous or not, they elicit from us".<sup>60</sup>

Irigaray's work has sympathies with all three approaches, but, as a linguist as well as a philosopher, her approach is more closely aligned with that of Chauvet in that her primary concern is with the power of language itself. What is at stake for the most recent critiques of metaphysics is the representation and understanding of human reality and our relation to the Real. A theological correlation of this approach would consider that the critique of metaphysics is at the same time a critique of idolatry. A theology that is grounded in an appreciation of the symbolic order will differ radically from one that is grounded in *onto-theo-logy*. While one can argue that theology has long had an appreciation of symbolic reality, that reality has for the most part been subsumed under the *onto-theo-logical* criterion of God as the one, simple and first Being, even though the Christian creeds express their faith in a God who is as plural as God is singular. Our understanding of the trinity has been skewed by the "metaphysics of presence". According to Catherine LaCugna's thesis in *God For Us*, this has led to the defeat of the doctrine of the trinity as an active force within Christian life.<sup>61</sup> If theology is to speak to our contemporary situation, it must find a language other than that of *onto-theo-logy*, with which to do so. That language must situate itself reflectively within the locus of language itself. It is by locating Irigaray's work within a metaphysics grounded in the symbolic order that the theological character of her thought is most clearly discerned, since it is in many respects both a critique of the God of metaphysics and an invocation of a God who manifests and becomes incarnate in the symbolic. Consent to mediation, Louis-Marie Chauvet argues, is the fundamental human task.<sup>62</sup> Such an approach understands the contingent mediation of a language, a culture and a history as the very place where the subject comes to its truth.

#### SYMBOL

Because I am arguing for a metaphysics and a theology that is rooted in an appreciation of the constitutive role of the symbolic order, it will be

60. Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 42. Chauvet clearly disagrees with Kevin Hart's thesis that negative theology is the only theological discourse that resists deconstruction. See also Ingraffia, *Postmodern Theory and Biblical Theology*, 225f.

61. Nonetheless, LaCugna also identifies some moments within the history of trinitarian thought that resist the general movement of the "metaphysics of presence". One of the most promising is the notion of perichoresis. "The model of perichoresis avoids the pitfalls of locating the divine unity either in the divine substance (Latin) or exclusively in the person of the Father (Greek), and locates unity instead in diversity, in a true communion of persons." Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God For Us* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991) 271.

62. Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 145.

worthwhile to examine the nature of the symbol itself. I will do so first with rather broad strokes and then, secondly, from the perspective of the Lacanian psychoanalysis which informs much of Irigaray's thought. From the Greek etymology *sym-ballein*, or "thrown together", symbols have an inherent polyvalency which distinguishes them from signs which are generally understood to have a single referent.<sup>63</sup> Symbols signify by referring not so much to a single referent, but to a whole symbolic network. One of the earliest notions of the symbol derives from the ancient Greek usage of the two halves of a coin, broken to seal symbolically a contract. Out of the ritual process for constructing social symbolic relationships, tokens that served an indexical purpose within the process themselves become invested as symbolic, demonstrating the power of symbolic action to transform all that is associated with it. It can be seen from the example of the broken coin that one part or aspect of the symbol infers both the whole and an absence. The dynamic sense of the symbol as a verb in the New Testament is especially illuminating. The most interesting example is in Luke 2:19, where the transitive form of the verb *sumbavllw* is used to describe Mary's reaction to the wondrous events surrounding the birth of her son. "She *pondered* them in her heart" is the usual translation. It is in the act of *pondering* that Mary enters into the world that the events proclaim. This fits well with Stephen Happel's working definition of a symbol as "a complex of gestures, sounds, images, and/or words that evoke, invite, and persuade participation in that to which they refer".<sup>64</sup> In a similar vein, Paul Ricoeur argues that the symbol assimilates us to the symbolised.<sup>65</sup> The symbol both invites participation, and participates itself in that to which it refers. In fact the symbolised is inseparable from the symbol, since it is precisely through the mediation of the symbol that the reality symbolised comes to be. Terrence Deacon suggests that the "symbolic capacity seems to have brought with it a predisposition to project itself into what it models". Consequently, "we are not just applying symbolic interpretations to human words and events, all the universe has become a symbol".<sup>66</sup>

Karl Rahner makes the transition from the metaphysical to the symbolic through his shift from efficient to formal causality. According to Rahner, "the symbol strictly speaking (symbolic reality) is the self-realisation of a being in the other, which is constitutive of its essence."<sup>67</sup>

63. In fact, linguistics – post Saussure – understands signs themselves to be symbolic in nature since each sign is defined, not by its relation to the signified, but by its difference and opposition to other signs in the signifying chain.

64. Stephen Happel, "Symbol", in Joseph A. Komonchak, Mary Collins and Dermot A. Lane (eds.), *The New Dictionary of Theology* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1990) 997.

65. Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970) 17.

66. Terrence Deacon, *The Symbolic Species: The Co-evolution of Language and the Human Brain* (London: Allen Lane, 1997) 435.

67. Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, Vol. 4, 234.

In other words, "a being comes to itself by means of 'expression', in so far as it comes to itself at all".<sup>68</sup> Consequently, the symbol not only invites and gathers into the world that it symbolises, but it is also ex-centric, in that in drawing us into that world, it draws us out of ourselves and directs us towards the other. We only know something by its expression. But this is not because we do not know the thing in itself, since the thing in itself only comes to itself through expression. Might not love itself be the exemplar of this symbolic reality, in that love comes to be precisely through its expression? Or, to put it negatively, does love that finds no expression continue to be love? The symbol, then, is not only expressive but also constitutive.

In this manner Rahner is led to say that the body is the symbol of man.<sup>69</sup> We are more than our bodies, but we only come to be in and through our bodies. In a similar manner, Irigaray will say that the "body is the threshold, the portal for the construction of...universes".<sup>70</sup> The body is the primordial place of every symbolic joining between myself and others, of the inside and the outside, nature and culture, the space in the middle where both identity and difference are symbolically connected. "The body is the arch-symbol of the whole symbolic order."<sup>71</sup> It provides the clearest example of the mutual interdependence of materiality and meaning. This interdependence is most clearly manifest in what could be called the technologies of the symbolic, be they arts or sciences, in which the enhancement of exteriority brings a parallel enrichment of interiority.

The symbol, then, is neither a merely objective entity "out there" in the world, nor is it a purely subjective entity in the mind. There is no symbol that is not in and for a subject, nor is there a symbol without some specific content claiming objectivity. Paul Ricoeur consistently argues that reflection cannot be immediate but must be mediated through the "ideas, action, works, institutions, and monuments that objectify it. It is in these objects that the Ego must lose and find itself."<sup>72</sup> In other words, self understanding and meaning require the mediation of symbols. Through symbols both the inner psychic landscape and the outer world infuse and interpenetrate each other, proclaiming "the reciprocity of the inner and the outer".<sup>73</sup> These symbols are rooted in

68. Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, Vol. 4, 230.

69. Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, Vol. 4, 245-52.

70. Irigaray, *Ethics*, 100.

71. Chauvet quoting D. Dubarle, "Pratique du symbole et connaissance de Dieu", *Le mythe et le symbole* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1977) 243.

72. Paul Ricoeur, "Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation", in L. S. Mudge (ed.), *Essays On Biblical Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980) 106.

73. Ricoeur, *Rule of Metaphor* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978) 246. Compare also with Derrida's claim that "the outside is the inside" in *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974) 44.

the *bios* as it is through the body that the world is mediated to us and through the body that we mediate ourselves to the world.

#### THE *IMAGINARY* AND THE SYMBOLIC

Our understanding of the symbol has far reaching consequences for our understanding of "man". From the perspective of the symbolic, man is dethroned. According to the "French Freud", Jacques Lacan:

Symbols in fact envelop man in a network so total that they join together, before he comes into the world, those who are going to engender him "by flesh and blood"; so total that they bring to his birth...the shape of his destiny; so total that they give the words that will make him faithful or renegade, the law of the acts that will follow him right to the very place where he *is* not yet and even beyond his death.<sup>74</sup>

Lacan's words would appear to invoke the apostle Paul's claim that it is in the logos of language that we live and move and have our being. Irigaray relates the Lacanian dictum that "the unconscious is structured like a language" to Heidegger's statement that: "Man acts as though he were the shaper and master of language, while in fact language remains the master of man."<sup>75</sup> This is because the entry into language structures the subject according to the laws of language. The child enters language within a language community which will inscribe the child within a social context. But before the child is able to become a part of the linguistic community it must establish a sense of self.

As a consequence of our species' premature birth the infant's initial experience of its self is of the fragmented body with no clear distinction or relation between the organism and its reality. According to Lacan it is the *mirror stage* that first establishes this relation.<sup>76</sup> In providing a visual *gestalt* that unifies the nascent subject's fragmentary experience through identification with the image, the *mirror stage* anticipates (self) mastery. This act of identification signals the moment of recognition of the distinction between self and other. The mirror stage does not require the physical object "mirror", but rather an external image of the self taken from the social and physical environment. It requires the introjection of the other into the same, establishing a concept of the self that is derived from the other. In that it also establishes the child's awareness of lack or

74. Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits: A Selection* (London: Norton, 1977) 68.

75. Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies*, 93, quoting Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971) 215.

76. "The mirror stage is a drama whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation – and which manufactures for the subject, caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality...and, lastly, to the assumption of the armour of an alienating identity, which will mark with its rigid structure the subject's entire mental development." Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits*, 4.

absence and the discrepancy between this ideal image of the self and the its own experience of a more disorganised reality, Lacan is therefore led to conclude that as soon as there is a self, there is alienation.

The mirror stage inaugurates what Lacan calls the *imaginary* which is the narcissistic domain of the ego, or *moi*, as opposed to the *je* of discourse. The *imaginary* is the totalising and stabilising domain of the ego, providing the necessary illusion of completeness and stability. The ego is an *imaginary* unity that deflects discourse away from its fragmentation. The interest of the ego is self-love, whose nature, Lacan insists, was already glimpsed by traditional moralist, but whose relation to the body image only psychoanalysis had succeeded in analysing. The narcissistic passion of the ego is so dependant upon its image and its desirability that it identifies the objects of desire "more closely to the desire of the other than to the desire that they arouse in me".<sup>77</sup> The ego is therefore split between self and other but can only represent the person as a whole in as far as it denies this split and conceives of itself as the source of its own origin and unity. Lacan goes on to conclude that "it is thus that the functions of mastery, which we incorrectly call the synthesizing functions of the ego, establish on the basis of a libidinal alienation the development that follows from it, namely what I once called the paranoiac principle of knowledge".<sup>78</sup>

It is with the entry into the symbolic order that the *imaginary* dualism and its inherent aggression is broken by the introduction of the "third term", represented by what Lacan calls the "name of the father". The third term establishes the principle of difference as well as allowing for abstract principles such as justice that go beyond the particularities of the "I-Thou". The third term, or law, establishes the social relation and imposes culture upon nature, replacing immediacy with mediation. The place of the father within Lacan's use of the oedipal structure designates the intervention between the mother and the child that forbids the immediacy of complete identification, merger and union with the mother. The child's initial foray into the symbolic as exemplified by the *Fort! Da!* game<sup>79</sup> is motivated by the desire for mastery in the face of loss. The desire to learn and master language becomes compensatory for castration-as-loss.<sup>80</sup> Hitherto *imaginary* identification had collapsed consciousness into its double without keeping its distance. Since the symbolic order is by its nature constituted by distance and mediation, the memory of pre-symbolic identification constitutes the symbolic as loss and lack. The human condition according to Lacan, therefore, I read

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77. Lacan, *Ecrits*, 137.

78. Lacan, *Ecrits*, 138.

79. Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (New York: Norton, 1961) 8-9.

80. Irigaray makes much of the fact that Freud describes the actions of a male child and that the gestures that accompany the act are usually ignored. See Irigaray, "Gesture in Psychoanalysis", *Sexes and Genealogies*, 91-104.

as characterised by nostalgia, but it is a nostalgia based on the *imaginary* illusion of wholeness and misrecognition. It is this nostalgia for immediacy and wholeness that can also be seen to characterise traditional metaphysics.

According to Irigaray's reading of the history of Western philosophy, these imaginary identifications lie at the base of our of much of Western thought. Since the *imaginary* is also closely related to "body image", Irigaray is arguing that the received symbolic order has been based upon the male *imaginary* within which the feminine is but a foil for the development of masculine subjectivity. To the extent that within this system there is no positive relation that does not threaten to consume one or the other, it remains caught within the lure of imaginary identifications. So although the symbolic in a structural sense transcends the imaginary, the imaginary remains operative, embedded within, and all too often coopts the symbolic. Practically, it would appear that to dwell completely in the symbolic is an unsustainable state of affairs, in a manner similar to Buber's observation with regards to the transience of the encounter with a "thou".<sup>81</sup> In part, this is due to the indispensable function of the ideology. Ideology is a function of the *imaginary*, or as Louis Althusser expressed it, "ideology is a 'representation' of the *imaginary* relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence".<sup>82</sup> Just as the *imaginary* plays an indispensable role in the structuring of the subject, ideology plays a preservation and integrative role within the social imagination. The question of pathology only arises when the totalising tendencies of the ego, *imaginary* and ideology are unchecked in their pretensions.

But to find ourselves in language we must first lose ourselves in language. Paul Ricoeur suggests that this means that we must internalise the Gospel injunction that to save one's life one must lose it. "Transposed into the realm of reflection this means, 'Whoever would posit himself as a constituting consciousness will miss his destiny'."<sup>83</sup> For Irigaray, Lacan's descriptions of the given may be astute, but it has not yet begun to address what *ought* to be. "The problem is that [the Lacanians] claim to make a law of this impotence itself, and continue to subject women to it."<sup>84</sup>

Irigaray's critique of Lacan, however, need not detain us here, as even for Irigaray the basic structure still holds. Even if we were to take a very different heuristic, such as the semiotic schema elaborated by C. S.

81. Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1970) 68.

82. Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses", in Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle (eds.), *Critical Theory Since 1965* (Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1986.) 241.

83. Paul Ricoeur, "Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation" in *Essays on Biblical Interpretation* (London: SPCK, 1981.) 115.

84. Irigaray, "Cosi Fan Tutti", *This Sex Which Is Not One*, 105.

Peirce, the inadequacy of traditional metaphysics is still manifest. Peirce distinguished three categories of reference: *icon*, *index* and *symbol*. The icon operates according to patterns of resemblance or similarity with the object to which it refers. Indices are mediated by some physical or temporal connection between the index and its object according to principles of contiguity or correlation. Symbols, on the other hand, are mediated by formal or conventional association irrespective of the particular characteristics of either the symbol or its object. Even though symbols may build upon simpler indexical referential processes, the syntactical and combinatory processes that regulate relations between symbols not only supplant the individual indexical references that are its support, but allow progressively more complex relationships to be established that enable novel combinations and rules to be discovered.<sup>85</sup> Using this schema, classical metaphysics as represented by Plato can be seen to rely heavily upon iconic resemblance and indexical correlation, or causality. Aquinas' doctrine of analogy likewise operates according to iconic and indexical understandings of language. But these two modes of representation are not uniquely human and consequently exhibit an inadequate appreciation of language. An animal for example knows that smoke is an index/ indication of fire. The symbolic, on the other hand, sets up a pattern of relationships, established by convention rather than by any innate relationship with the signified, that refer, not merely to the objects referred to, but to the symbolic system as a whole. The symbol is a function of its relation with other symbols. Whereas iconic and indexical associations can be private, the symbol by its nature is social. Iconic and indexical associations remain tied to natural characteristics with one to one correspondences. The symbol, on the other hand, is continually generating new and more complex associations. It can adjust and grow and generate new insights. A world cannot be constructed along the lines of simple correspondences. As the importance of metaphorical models in science demonstrates, simple causality or empirical observation is never enough. Only the act of mediation enabled by the symbol allows us to forge and discover new and complex relationships.<sup>86</sup>

#### ESCHATOLOGY AND SUBJECTIVITY

One of the most significant consequences of symbolic mediation for theology is that it constitutes subjectivity as oriented towards the future. This orientation is most clearly manifest in what Lacan calls "full speech", whose effect "is to reorder past contingencies by conferring on

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85. Deacon, *The Symbolic Species*, 99-100.

86. The neurobiologist Terrence Deacon demonstrates, in his discussion of the attempts of experimenters to try to train chimpanzees to use simple symbols, how symbolic understanding allows an exponential increase in our ability to communicate, organise and understand our world. See Deacon, *The Symbolic Species*.

them the sense of necessities to come".<sup>87</sup> Full speech is that which escapes imaginary identifications which are by their nature nostalgic. Full speech recognises the other pole of discourse, the other as more than the other of the same. It is a discourse that escapes and exceeds the monologue. Teresa Brennan states that "assuming this position means (among other things) that the subject seeks to know itself through the other, rather than reduce the other to itself, as does the *moi*".<sup>88</sup> Unlike the *moi* or *ego*, the identity of the subject in the symbolic arises from its dispersion, for while there is only one *moi*, there can be many subjects of discourse. It can be seen, therefore, that to become a subject of discourse involves the dispersion of the ego. According to Lacan,

I identify myself in language, but only by losing myself in it like an object. What is realized in my history is not the past definite of what was...but the future anterior of what I shall have been for what I am in the process of becoming.<sup>89</sup>

It is not reality but truth that is at stake, "for the function of language is not to inform but to evoke".<sup>90</sup> This evocative dimension of language enables us to envision a future that is not more of the same. Michele Le Doeuff suggests that, "the symbolic is the mode through which one makes present something which is not, is no longer or is not yet there. It is thus notably the medium of the future."<sup>91</sup> To the extent that the symbolic is the constitutive human dimension we are oriented towards the future. Edward Schillebeeckx, in elucidating his notion of the anthropological constants, insists that "we do not have a pre-existing definition of humanity – indeed for Christians it is not only a future, but an eschatological reality".<sup>92</sup>

In the book of Genesis, it is the evocative power of language that the Priestly author of the first creation story employs as an analogue for the creativity of God. Chauvet suggests that this locates from the outset the divine work in the symbolic order, "neither in the order of efficient causality proper to a finished product nor in the order of derivation of essences according to their degree of participation in the first principle.

87. Lacan, *Ecrits*, 48.

88. Brennan, *History after Lacan* (London: Routledge, 1993) 34.

89. Lacan, *Ecrits*, 86. Lacan states that "I cannot doubt that even if I lose myself in the process, I am in that process." *Ecrits*, 166.

90. *Ecrits*, 86. Lacan suggests that "it is with the appearance of language that the dimension of truth emerges" (*Ecrits*, 172). This description of language calls to mind Gerard Hall's description of the utopian function of both poetic and religious discourse in its potential to "break-through the monotony of the mundane and the pathology of evil that destroy the human capacity to be scandalized by the imaginative vision of a radically different future". Gerard Hall, *Raimon Panikkar's Hermeneutics of Religious Pluralism*. Ph.D. diss. (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 1993) 329.

91. Michele Le Doeuff, *Hipparchia's Choice: An Essay Concerning Women, Philosophy, etc.* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991) 295.

92. Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord* (London: SCM, 1980) 731.

Thus, such a modality opens the ontological through the symbolic: Being is marked with the stamp of the Other".<sup>93</sup> The same creation story also describes creation in term of differentiation, which finds its climax in the creation of humanity made in the image of God. "Male and female he created them." In her own solicitation of the text Irigaray suggests that "on the first day, the first days, the gods, God, make a world by separating the elements".<sup>94</sup> Irigaray puts this well, I think, in that she places a plurality at the heart of things. In talking about "the first day, first days, the gods, God" – she refuses a singularity at this point of origin. Difference is not something to be finally overcome in some eschatological happy ending, but constitutive of creativity itself. The second creation story reinforces the point. In the second account, creation through differentiation is reserved for the creation of the human person. *Ha\` a\da\m* is only fulfilled when he is differentiated into male and female, and only then are they truly human.<sup>95</sup> This approach is consistent with Irigaray's *sensible transcendental* according to which alterity is immanent to the constitution of the subject and activated through the symbolic. The first couple have their origins in and of each other, but it is Adam's words of recognition that mark finally sexually differentiated beings and *Ha\` a\da\m* becomes *;i[s]* and *;i[s]/a[*, man and woman.

In like manner, the first couple also reflects the divine trinitarian image. According to Rahner, "God in his absolute being is related to the created existent in the mode of formal causality, that is, that he does not originally cause and produce something different from himself in the creature, but rather that he communicates his own divine nature and makes it a constitutive element in the fulfilment of the creature."<sup>96</sup>

This focus on fulfilment rather than origin is important in the light of the predilection for nostalgia that is considered to be characteristic of traditional metaphysics, understood primarily as a "metaphysics of presence". It is a nostalgia that, according to Irigaray, prevents us "from meeting and living with the other" and which "blocks the threshold of the ethical world".<sup>97</sup> This is because, from a psychoanalytic perspective, the desire for origins is narcissistic. For theology, this raises the suspicion that onto-theology's predilection for originary models of the divine have perhaps only served to feed this nostalgia. Naturally, the originary model is valuable and perhaps indispensable, but to give such

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93. Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 549.

94. Irigaray, *Ethics*, 7.

95. See Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978) and Mieke Bal, *Lethal Love: Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

96. Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An introduction to the idea of Christianity* (New York: Crossroad, 1994) 121. Although Rahner is describing God's self-communication in the Son, I do think that the application to humanity can be justified.

97. Irigaray, *Ethics*, 142.

a view primacy, is primarily to warp our perception of both God and ourselves. This raises Irigaray's suspicion as to why those biblical texts that are oriented towards futurity, "which speak of the return or the coming of God, of the other, as phenomena of the incarnation which are still unknown to us", are considered to be "the least trustworthy?"<sup>98</sup>

It is precisely these biblical texts that are the most important for Irigaray to the extent that they point to something more. Ethics for Irigaray is not simply morality, but has a distinctively eschatological dimension. The basic momentum of Irigaray's thought concerns itself with the idea that subjectivity is not a given, but is achieved. Subjectivity is something that we achieve, something that we clearly already have achieved, but which we are yet to fully achieve and which can only be achieved when the difference of the other is given its due. Irigaray's approach to subjectivity and ethics evoke a sense of the "already but not yet" that in the rhetoric of the New Testament is the *basileia tou theou*.

For Irigaray, ethics concerns itself with the possibility of relation with a genuine other. This means that the other is not approached in terms of opposition or identification, since both approaches reduce the other to the parameters of the same and function as a mirror of narcissistic identity. The more pessimistically inclined might suggest that such a relation with a genuine other is impossible. But the possibility that there be some relation, or at least the possibility of consummation, is an important one. It is on these grounds that Irigaray criticises Lacan, and why perhaps the work of Jacques Derrida is not finally appropriable to Christian theology. The possibility of consummation is, of course, the precondition for hope, because without at least the possibility of a relation with a genuine other, nothing new can arise. But to suggest an eschatological dimension is not necessary a deferral of the problem. Rather, it is to insist that we need to work towards its realisation in the here and now.<sup>99</sup> Some manner of consummation must therefore be possible in the present, even if in a mode that is characterised by its evanescence.<sup>100</sup> Theology in the light of the critique of metaphysics should, Irigaray suggests, tend towards the eschatological. A theology that is truly affirming will, according to Irigaray, imply two inseparable parousia, of both God and the other.<sup>101</sup>

#### THE PAROUSIA OF THE "THIRD"

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98. Irigaray, *Ethics*, 148

99. See Irigaray, *Ethics*, 147.

100. The clearest intimation of Irigaray's belief in the possibility of this consummation is found in *Elemental Passions*, her poetical work that explores the possibility of the nuptial union. In this text, there is finally an encounter and union with the other as other, though in a mode characterised by its evanescence. See Irigaray, *Elemental Passions* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

101. Irigaray, *Ethics*, 147.

The parousia of the divine and of the other, though distinct, are inseparable. The divine parousia enables us to truly welcome the other as other because it is God that establishes us as full subjects and enables us to break with the dualistic and narcissistic identifications of the imaginary. To break with the imaginary and dwell in the symbolic, "in which one is capable of thinking *about* one's imaginary, instead of being thought *by* it",<sup>102</sup> is for Irigaray dependent upon the possibility of a real other, that is more than the other of the same and which is guaranteed by "the third".<sup>103</sup> I have already discussed the importance of the "third" within Lacanian thought. I have not yet mentioned the significance of Emmanuel Levinas for Irigaray's project. Irigaray's approach to ethics is substantially influenced by Levinas. Her concern for sexual difference is itself an elaboration upon Levinasian themes. It is Levinas who give the role of the third its full ethical, social and religious significance. For Levinas, the "third" is the trace of the divine.

It is only thanks to God that, as a subject incomparable with the other, I am approached as an other by the others, that is, for myself.... God is not involved as an alleged interlocutor: the reciprocal relationship binds me to the other man in the trace of transcendence, in illeity. The passing of God, of whom I can speak only by reference to this aid or this grace, is precisely the reverting of the incomparable subject into a member of society.<sup>104</sup>

With the entry of the "third" I also become other for the other and my responsibility for the other now comes to include care of myself. It is perhaps here that the feminist concern for women's autonomy can be reconciled with the notion of person as "for the other". In which case the feminist question then shifts towards the terrain explored by Irigaray and the problem of women's access to a symbolic constructed upon a male *imaginary* and the need for a *double syntax*. The concern to establish women's subjective autonomy, then, is not at odds with the priority of the other, but presupposes it. Unless women are able to symbolise more adequately relations between and amongst women, every other is in danger of being eclipsed by imaginary identifications. Likewise the existing symbolic economy of men amongst themselves, to the extent that it reduces every other to the parameters of the same, suffers the

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102. Whitford, *Luce Irigaray*, 91.

103. See Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, 35, in which Irigaray forwards a "different" version of the "third man" argument as found in Plato's *Parmenides*, 132a-b, and in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, 990b; 1039a; 1079a. Briefly, the argument is that if x is a man because he resembles the Idea of Man, there must be a third "man" in whom the humanity of these two is united. Irigaray's interest in the argument is to establish both identity and differentiation. The argument also establishes that relativity is prior to the absolute of the Idea. Perhaps, as well, this argument establishes the precedent for the notion that informs eastern trinitarian theology that personhood is prior to essence.

104. Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991) 158.

same fate.<sup>105</sup> Irigaray's call for a feminine divine, therefore, is more properly understood as a prerequisite for genuine community.<sup>106</sup> Meanwhile, the ideal condition of language and the symbolic mediation of full subjectivity is elusive. It is primarily when Irigaray turns to the question of hope, that she turns to theological discourse.

#### HOPE, THEOLOGY AND IRIGARAY

The primary source for Irigaray's hope lies in the person of Jesus, although not as the totality. That claim Irigaray considers to be more apposite of the diabolical. "But", Irigaray argues, "Jesus refuted the notion of himself as this totality when he affirmed that, in order for the spirit to come into the world, he must die."<sup>107</sup> Irigaray suggests "that the divine incarnation of Jesus Christ is a partial one; a view which" Irigaray believes to be "consistent with his own. 'If I am not gone, the Paraclete cannot come'."<sup>108</sup> Irigaray's Jesus is the eschatological prophet, and although she invokes Joachim of Fiore's third age of the Spirit, I do not believe that her use of the notion is entirely incompatible with more orthodox articulations of the same idea.<sup>109</sup>

In her search for the divine in the feminine, Irigaray looks to the incarnation of the spirit, which "has never taken place except, prophetically, at Pentecost. The spirit appears as the third term. The term of alliance, of mediation? By fire?"<sup>110</sup> The third term that establishes us as full subjects has yet to be incarnated in the here and now. Irigaray does not suggest that this incarnation in any way competes with the unique incarnation of Christ. Rather it is its completion, as Christ is the "first fruit"<sup>111</sup> of our redemption and divinization. Irigaray insists on the incarnation of the spirit in order that this hope not to be dismissed as mere utopianism. "Why should this theology or theologality of hope remain a utopia? Not an inscription in the flesh. *An atopia*."<sup>112</sup> This inscription in the flesh is the flesh made word. It is the inscription of our embodiment

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105. When Irigaray stated that "the symbolic order is an imaginary order which becomes law" she means that the dominant symbolic order is governed by a male imaginary to the extent that it fails to establish a relation with a genuine other. See "Luce Irigaray" in Elaine Hoffman Baruch and Lucienne J. Serrano (eds.), *Women Analyze Women in France, England and the United States* (New York: New York University Press, 1988) 159.

106. See Irigaray, "Divine Women", in *Sexes and Genealogies* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993) 57-72.

107. Irigaray, "Equal to Whom?", 66.

108. Irigaray, "Equal to Whom?", 76.

109. Invoking such heterodox notions seems a little risky, but maybe we should question why eschatological and pneumatological emphases tend so often towards, or are consigned to, the lunatic fringe?

110. Irigaray, *Ethics*, 48.

111. 1 Cor 15:20.

112. Irigaray, *Ethics*, 147. Rahner asserts that "all eschatological assertions have the one totality of man in mind, which cannot be neatly divided into two part, body and soul". *Theological Investigations*, vol. 4, 240.

in the symbolic as full subjects. Only then will both women and men be able to come to life through the incarnation of the divine in the couple, through "the alliance of heaven and earth".<sup>113</sup> It is for this reason that Irigaray also insists on the particularity of Jesus, and his maleness and the "sexual significance of his message".<sup>114</sup> The significance of Jesus' relation with women, to the extent that it is sexual, is also prophetic.

Irigaray attempts to look beyond the "father-son" paradigm which has occluded the emancipatory significance of his message. "The spirit" she argues,

eludes this "couple". This event is announced in the Gospel itself: the female, the women partake not in the Last Supper but in the Pentecost, and it is they who discover and announce the resurrection. This seems to say that the body of man can return to life when woman no longer forgets that she has a share in the spirit.<sup>115</sup>

Regardless of the strengths and inadequacies of Irigaray's argument, the eschatological hermeneutic could provide an important resource for feminist theology. While it avoids the nostalgia that accompany so many myths of origin it is nonetheless faithful to the text to the extent that it takes the text seriously and attempts to bring both the text and what it proclaims to life. The eschatological hermeneutic accepts the tradition as received but insists that it is not the end of the story and in doing remains open to mystery of the other.

Although Irigaray holds it to be of utmost importance to keep faith with older traditions and maternal genealogies, she does not attempt to project the feminine back onto God. The endeavour is too fraught, both exegetically and psychologically. To merely reverse the economy of *phallogocentric* discourse, through the rhetoric of the goddess, is to leave it intact. God in the present tense is usually a "he". Simply neutralising the gender of God, as we have seen, is as we have seen no answer either, since as Derrida has argued, "to neutralise the sexual mark" is a classical ruse that is "only a hidden way of confirming man in his power".<sup>116</sup> The best way to subvert the existing paradigm is to work towards the incarnation of God in the couple and establish the *double syntax* at the heart of the symbolic order. The couple however should not be confused with a duality. The couple that truly respects the otherness of the other is perhaps better understood in terms of a trinity. "If the pair of lovers cannot safeguard the place for love as a third term between them, they can neither remain lovers nor give birth to lovers."<sup>117</sup> It is the mediation

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113. Irigaray, *Ethics*, 147

114. Irigaray, "Equal to whom?", 72ff.

115. Irigaray, *Ethics*, 149.

116. Derrida, "Women in the Beehive", 194.

117. Irigaray, *Ethics*, 27.

of the third term that places the lovers in a properly social and symbolic context.

Irigaray challenges theology to rethink the importance of the eschatological dimension of the Christian kerygma. To the extent that our thinking about the Trinity has been shaped by the preoccupations of the "metaphysics of presence", we have tended to consider the Trinity in terms of origin. This metaphysics makes the implicit assumption that it is in full presence, uncontaminated by any form of mediation or otherness that the divine essence most fully resides. Consequently, any notion of fulfilment is considered to be secondary and derivative when it comes to God because God is already fullness itself, complete, whole and superabundant. Even God's work is already complete and eternally present in God's eye and needs only to be revealed. From a human perspective, however, to emphasise this originary model of the divine is to feed a nostalgia that, according to Irigaray, is an obstacle to ethics. From a psychoanalytic perspective it is primarily a narcissistic view of the divine that serves as a guarantor for our own narcissism. The value of taking human subjectivity as our starting point in our thinking about God depends naturally upon the particular model of subjectivity. The notion of subjectivity that I am suggesting is not the Augustinian sense of the subject as an individual, but of subjectivity mediated through intersubjectivity. It is a human subjectivity that is always already graced by the other, by language and by God, as its formal cause, not as an alien imposition. Intersubjectivity has three modes of relation; to the self, the other and the third. It is here that we encounter the divine, as the ultimate horizon of subjectivity, but also in the positive movement of desire itself. It is only in its fulfilment that origin is made intelligible.

#### THE FATHER AND THE SPACE FOR RECEIVING LOVE

In attempting to bring Irigaray into dialogue with more mainstream theology, I believe that we could do well to consider the Father in terms of the "third". For Levinas, this "third" is always already passed, gone before us. But this is not the totality of the Christian experience. The Father has always been the most remote of the three persons of the Trinity, not so much because he is the font of divinity, but because he is also the furthest horizon of divine subjectivity and absolute futurity. Both the *sensible transcendental* and the *double syntax* could be considered to manifest in the perichoretic reciprocity between the Son and the Spirit. The Son is born of the Spirit, annointed by the Spirit, and sent by the Spirit. The Spirit is also the Spirit of the Son, and the Spirit of Sonship, and sent by the Son. But while each provides a dwelling place for the other, they do not collapse into each other or occupy the same space. Not only are all the Son's actions oriented towards the other, but his own centre and the source of his being is also elsewhere.

Salvation history records the joining of human and divine intentionality, not in terms of a nostalgia towards a lost origin but towards the Father in whom divine intentionality seeks the fulfilment of all things. Hans Urs von Balthasar considers that we only become persons when we embrace the particular mission that God has in store. Hitherto, we are merely individuals.<sup>118</sup> This idea is suggestive in that it also suggests that it is only through the divine missions of the Son and the Spirit that we are brought to fulfilment as persons in sharing the life of the Father. Full subjectivity remains an eschatological reality, but one that is also grounded in the "already" of the present. It is not an autistic transcendence that abandons the other, or the material conditions of our existence, since we only enter the divine life through the Son and the Spirit. It is the Son and the Spirit who in their perfect reciprocity also provide a model for our relations of mutuality with the human other and for the divine incarnation in the couple.

But lest I take too many liberties in theologising Irigaray, I should conclude with an important caveat. "While God can help to arrange space, space-time, he never takes 'the place of'. He lets difference be achieved, even invites it to happen. He does not fulfill it."<sup>119</sup> The paradigmatic ethical relation for Irigaray is also characterised by withdrawal. It is a relation whose exemplary gesture is the caress.<sup>120</sup> In my withdrawal, I allow a space for the other to become. This approach resonates with Irigaray's favourite Johannine statement that "it is for your own good that I am going because unless I go the Advocate will not come to you." (John 16:7) The nature of love, Irigaray argues, is not just to give love, but to create a space for its reception.<sup>121</sup>

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118. Brian M. Nolan, "Person, Divine", *The New Dictionary of Theology*, 759.

119. Irigaray, *Ethics*, 167.

120. See Irigaray, "The Fecundity of the Caress: A Reading of Levinas' *Totality and Infinity*, 'Phenomenology of Eros'," in Irigaray, *Ethics*, 185-217.

121. Irigaray, *Ethics*, 55.