

**Amnesia at the Beginning of Time: Irigaray's reading of Heidegger in *The Forgetting of Air***

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Thinking comes to an end when it slips out of its element. The element is what enables thinking to be a thinking. The element is what properly enables: it is the enabling (*das Vermögen*). It embraces thinking and so brings it into its essence.

Martin Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism"

I am trying...to go back through all those places where I was exiled-enclosed so he could constitute his there. To read his text to try to take back from it what he took from me irrecoverably...I am trying to re-discover the possibility of a relation to air. Don't I need one, well before starting to speak?

Luce Irigaray, *The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger*

Thank you for making me mum—I love my life.

Bridget, aged 5

In conversation with Martin Heidegger, Luce Irigaray is very self-conscious about how she situates herself as his interlocutor. She is aware of the debt of thanks that she owes him: that he has been a large enough presence in European philosophy that, like a meteor, he altered its terrain. Heidegger is one of the 'elements' with which Irigaray works, and which *enables* her philosophy. For this reason, she could not but feel close to

his thought. However, of equal significance to their relation is the ‘distance’ that Irigaray places between them: a distance necessary for there to be a relation between them. In this contribution to a discussion—already initiated by other feminist commentators—of Irigaray’s intellectual indebtedness to Heidegger, I wish to draw out the critical aspects of her engagement with his work. It is through her critique of his philosophy that Irigaray distinguishes her ‘ethics of sexual difference’ from Heidegger’s philosophy of ‘ontological difference’. Only by virtue of this ‘distance’ is Irigaray able to express her relation to Heidegger in ethical terms: to show her gratitude to him, and voice her reproaches against him.

Irigaray’s proximity to Heidegger can be read in her interpretations of other philosophers, and it is here that their relation is most commonly scrutinized: in terms of the structure of her argument against metaphysical philosophy; her critical approach to the tradition. The similarity between their projects is far from obvious, but when it is drawn out for us, by Tina Chanter<sup>1</sup> or Ellen Mortensen,<sup>2</sup> a great deal of light is thrown upon her project. Irigaray seems even, rather parasitically, to be drawing upon Heidegger’s metaphysical critique *to make sense of her own*. We find her reiterating Heideggerian motifs with reference to her own project, for instance, when she solicits his support at the opening of *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, heralding as the new epoch of philosophy: sexual difference “the issue in our time which could be our “salvation” if we thought it through.”<sup>3</sup> Moreover, she refers us to Heidegger’s ‘fourfold’—earth, sky, mortal, and divine<sup>4</sup>—in her discussion of relations that need to be re-configured in preparation for a ‘new age’ of sexual difference.<sup>5</sup> In *Ethics*, Irigaray adopts Heideggerian tools to yield her desired reading of philosophy, for instance: his understanding of genealogy;<sup>6</sup> and a focus upon Kant’s forms of sensibility, time and space. In general, Irigaray seems to view various figures in the tradition of philosophy through a Heideggerian ‘lens’.

In *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* Irigaray reads various accounts of space, or more rightly ‘place’, and draws from them consequences for Western philosophy’s understanding of “woman.” She reads in the history of philosophy a certain misunderstanding, or refusal to understand, the relation of place to the construction of subjectivity. That the metaphysician *ceases to think* his relation to his own body Irigaray takes as a sign of a disavowal,<sup>7</sup> and an ‘oblivion’ at the heart of masculine identity. According to Irigaray, the philosopher transfers responsibility for the ‘material aspect’ of existence to his sexed other, ‘woman’, who is understood as having a more inherent relation to the body than ‘man’. For Irigaray, the *forgetting* of place is continually re-inscribed in metaphysical accounts of the subject—or, to phrase this differently, an elaboration of place *as place* is persistently absent from these accounts. Rather, the destiny of ‘woman’ and of place has become intertwined: ‘woman’ is understood by the metaphysician as essentially maternal, and thus is reduced to a particular conception of place.

Irigaray’s reading of philosophy in terms of what it refuses to think very self-consciously echoes Heidegger’s own reading of Western philosophy, in terms of the

forgetting of Being—and the concomitant misunderstanding of time. Both read what the thinker refuses: the limit of their understanding telling a story about what most needs to be thought through. For Heidegger the story to be told would speak to the condition of the possibility of understanding, or thought, per se. Irigaray's aim is more specific than this: to bring the philosopher to an understanding of the limits that he imposes upon his own subjectivity through a process of exclusion (of corporeality, amongst other things). Such limits, she argues, are sexually encoded, but are understood by the philosopher as neutral (or neuter): *logos*, truth, and rationality. Irigaray contends that what is excluded in the appeal to rationality is not simply negative—irrationality—but can be understood positively, according to other syntaxes, or modes of understanding.<sup>8</sup> In her readings of the philosophers, Irigaray stages the encounter using the philosopher's own terminology and metaphorical devices in order to demonstrate his attempts to conceal the limits of his thought. The philosopher is less attentive to the literary devices in his text than his argumentation, and so Irigaray is able to read in his use of metaphor a gesture to whatever the philosopher must *exclude* in order to ensure the coherence of his thought. According to Irigaray, the philosopher's blind spot, the limitation of his discourse unacknowledged as such, is intimately related to a politics of sexual difference. The forgetting of sexual difference is manifest in social, philosophical, and pathological relations between men and women, and between the *concepts* "man" and "woman."

Despite her indebtedness to Heidegger, who provides an approach to her critique of metaphysics, Irigaray refuses to engage with him directly in this work, rather reserving her critical powers for a more sustained encounter to come, in *The Forgetting of Air*. That Irigaray does not turn upon Heidegger in *Ethics* could be seen as an expression of her gratitude to him, or at least of clemency. Recent engagements with Irigaray's texts have begun to explore her indebtedness to Heidegger,<sup>9</sup> and in general a shift in reading her work is occurring. The promise of Irigaray's philosophical critique is now under discussion, her Anglo-American readership becoming more aware of the range of her impact *beyond* the early critique of psychoanalysis in her first two works *Speculum of the Other Woman* and *This Sex Which is Not One*.<sup>10</sup> The comparison between Irigaray and Heidegger, drawn by commentators such as Tina Chanter and Ellen Mortensen, has served to show the depth of Irigaray's philosophical concerns: ontological, ethical, and political. However, to appreciate Irigaray's project in its specificity, it is also necessary to differentiate her from Heidegger.

When Irigaray turns her 'lens' upon Heidegger explicitly, in *The Forgetting of Air*, the results could only be confusing if we were to consider her relation to Heidegger solely in terms of their common concerns. Although they share an 'approach' to the tradition of metaphysics—an approach that might 'properly' be attributed to Heidegger—their point of entry into the system of philosophy is different. Despite the fact that his relation to metaphysics is critical, Heidegger's 'place' as philosopher is not *already* in question before he even begins to speak. Whereas Irigaray attempts to find—or construct—a place of enunciation from within the texts of philosophy, Heidegger is already proper

to it. He is the philosopher upon whom the ‘task of thinking’ had fallen, an inheritor of the metaphysical legacy of his predecessors. Thus, where there is a break in thinking—articulated by the culmination of metaphysics<sup>11</sup>—Heidegger could *rightfully* take thought to its new epoch.

According to Irigaray, however, the forgetting of “sexual difference” founds metaphysics. Thus her task is to upset these foundations, and her appearance—as both thinker and woman—is intended to disrupt the philosophical order. Philosophy, according to Irigaray, establishes itself upon an abyss, *l’oubli*, and is thereby constituted in virtue of the exclusion of difference. Her point of entry into philosophy, then, is already problematized by the very system of thought with which she attempts to engage. For this reason, Heidegger’s critical tools appear strange in her hands, as she attempts to build her philosophy not *upon* the abyss, but from within it. Irigaray finds in Heidegger’s ‘corpus’ the signs of this same constitutive oblivion of sexual difference that she had already identified in the works of other philosophers, using his conceptual apparatus. Her response to Heidegger in *The Forgetting of Air* is articulated as an affect, or symptom, of his forgetting; or in psychoanalytic terms, a return of repressed material. Irigaray writes herself both inside and outside Heidegger’s text by constructing her writing out of his own and as she does so, identifying moments at which a veiled gesture to the sexed other occurs. She draws out of this a position from which she can initiate a conversation, between Heidegger and the female-one (*l’une*) or -other (*l’autre*) whom he would deny.

Finally, *The Forgetting of Air* can be read as instruction to Heidegger in the art of the *acceptance* of gifts, which would require *engaging* with one’s benefactor. According to Irigaray, the philosopher refuses to encounter the otherness that endows him with *logos* or, indeed, with his life: that is, the sexed other. Irigaray engages with Heidegger, who is her benefactor, as well as the beneficiary of their relation. Thus, *The Forgetting of Air* is at once thanks, and an expression of grievance, to Heidegger.

### **The Philosopher’s Vacuum, and the House of Being**

In *Nietzsche and Philosophy* Gilles Deleuze employs Kant’s notion of ‘critique’, as “total and positive,” to describe Nietzsche’s critique of the ‘prejudices of philosophers’: it is “[t]otal because “nothing must escape it”; positive, affirmative, because it can not restrict the power of knowing without releasing other previously neglected powers.”<sup>12</sup> I would like to bring this understanding of ‘critique’ to bear upon Irigaray’s reading of Heidegger, because of the peculiar effects that this text produces: both positive and critical. By forming her response to Heidegger from the passages of his own text—but from a perspective distinct from his own—Irigaray puts into question the unarticulated

ethical implications of his positive ontology. She ‘clears the ground’, to employ a Heideggerian motif, so that the “previously neglected powers” of his philosophy may be released. Irigaray’s relation to Heidegger is best thought as critique in its most equivocal sense (as simultaneously positive and destructive). Her interpretation is not in the least an attempt at fidelity: she expressly wishes to transform his philosophy with her reading of it. I contend that Irigaray’s perspective deepens Heidegger’s own philosophical insights. In particular, his elaboration of Dasein’s uncanniness (*unheimlichkeit*), or homelessness, is put to the service of Irigaray’s feminist critique of his philosophy.

Irigaray begins her book on Heidegger by referring the reader to the final passage of “The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking,” as if to begin where he left off. In that essay, Heidegger had argued that the task of thinking is “reserved for thinking in a concealed way in the history of philosophy from its beginning to its end.”<sup>13</sup> The task of thinking is “concealed,” according to Heidegger, by the mode of thinking predominant to metaphysics: thinking as representing. For Heidegger, it is precisely what is neglected by, or what remains after, the act of representing that gives meaning to thought. Being (that which ‘is’) essentially misrepresents itself, giving itself *as* this or that being in particular. The subject, which relates to the world through thought as representation, founds itself axiomatically (Descartes expressed this with the *cogito*), and has thus become for metaphysics the foundation of the object world, as the *subjectum*, ground.<sup>14</sup> According to Heidegger, although the subject *lives* in a dynamic relation to other beings, it *understands* its relation to Being—to what is—only by means of a process of abstraction, contemplatively in its representations. The important point for Heidegger then is that, through the focus upon representation, the thinker conceals from himself the means—or the *experience*—of his thinking. In this manner, the subject misunderstands its own relation to the world. Moreover, by virtue of its self-conception as the foundation for its own experience, the subject misunderstands the nature of Being. The subject *appropriates* the being of the object to itself in its representation, and in the event of appropriation the object is rent from its context and its meaning. According to Heidegger the foundation of thought is not the subject, but Being, and is thus what escapes, or is excluded by, the appropriative moment of representational thinking. The metaphysician’s blunder, for Heidegger, is to forget what gives meaning to thought. Thus he characterizes the entire history of metaphysics as the history of the forgetting of Being.

Heidegger’s project as a whole involves showing evidence of representational thinking, and thus the forgetting of being, throughout the history of philosophy. Having reached the ‘end of philosophy’, by which time metaphysics has explored the range of what it can think, the “task of thinking” must now be felt as a need. Heidegger calls upon philosophers to explore that which has been “reserved” for thinking in concealment: that which has been forgotten by the metaphysician, but is still ‘there’ for him, as the framework to his thinking. The philosopher is called upon to surrender “previous thinking to the determination of the matter for thinking.”<sup>15</sup> That which remains ‘unthought’, for Heidegger, constitutes the “ground”—the matter—for thinking.

Thus, he solicits us to think *aletheia*, conventionally translated from ancient Greek as ‘truth’, as “unconcealment”:

Unconcealment is, so to speak, the element in which Being and thinking and their belonging together exist.<sup>16</sup>

Appealing to the first philosophers, Heidegger brings to light a conception of ‘truth’ as what enables a most primitive relation between thinking and Being: beyond (or ontologically prior to) representational thinking, which thinks Being as beings. For Heidegger, the ‘end of philosophy’ gives us a ‘place’ of meditation, from which the condition of possibility of thinking can be thought: “The end of philosophy is the place, that place in which the whole of philosophy’s history is gathered in its most extreme possibility.”<sup>17</sup>

Thus far we may observe similarities between Heidegger’s method and that of Irigaray. Irigaray’s own critique of the subject and of the conception of thought as representation—most notably in *Speculum of the Other Woman*—can thus be seen as derivative of his thought. To this extent, to be sure, Irigaray is indebted to Heidegger. In *The Forgetting of Air* Irigaray relates Heidegger’s concerns about the unthought that founds thinking, and attempts *with him* to elaborate the condition of possibility for representational thinking, which would itself be—in its essence—unrepresentable as such. However, Irigaray goes further than Heidegger does by critiquing his philosophy, attempting to release its “previously neglected powers,” the ‘element’ of Heidegger’s thinking that he could not recognize as such. Specifically, by reiterating Heidegger’s own terminology and use of metaphor, what she calls—after Lacan—the philosopher’s imaginary, Irigaray attempts to give the reader a sense of his concerns, beyond what he would himself acknowledge them to be. Through this critique she differentiates herself from him, creating her own place in their relation through her reading of his texts.

Irigaray demonstrates the predominance of spatial metaphors in Heidegger’s philosophy: evidence of a shift in his thinking, from an early preoccupation with the connection of *Being and Time*, to his later meditations upon ‘place’, and the relation of Being to ‘dwelling’.<sup>18</sup> While a case can be made for structural similarities between Irigaray’s work and that of Heidegger in *Being and Time*,<sup>19</sup> it is this later emphasis upon spatiality—ostensibly more promising from a feminist perspective—with which Irigaray concerns herself in her critique of Heidegger. Heidegger comes *close* to meeting the feminist concern for embodiment,<sup>20</sup> but fails to examine the body about which he theorizes. According to Irigaray, Heidegger’s preoccupation with architectural metaphors, with the erection of dwelling places, represents space as masculine: already cleared, appropriated, and fabricated. When, with a more vulnerable countenance, Heidegger discusses Being’s hidden and elusive character, however, ‘the opening’—which reveals as it shelters Being—is depicted as maternal. This place *before construction* is like a womb, and thus Heidegger unwittingly reinscribes a

traditional understanding of the relation between the sexes. Irigaray uses the critical tools provided by Heidegger to interpret his philosophy in terms of its hidden assumptions about sexual difference.

First, let us consider her claim that dwelling presupposes a 'first place' that remains unacknowledged in his writing:

The question of a topology of Being...amounts to the question of Being as a topo-logic. To what extent does Being correspond to a determination of localization that is already constructed by destroying properties of natural "space"? Place being only in virtue of its boundary: between a within and a without, an exterior and an interior.<sup>21</sup>

Irigaray's question to Heidegger, then, would be: what does man exclude so that he can carve out a place for dwelling; from what uninhabitable "region" does Being as dwelling protect him? When we return to Heidegger, in his concern for dwelling, we can then read for this problematic identified by Irigaray. In "Building Dwelling Thinking" Heidegger had argued that the scientific conception of space, as homogenous and measurable "interval," is derived from a prior understanding of 'place' as abode. Place is given to us through the objects with which we are involved: through such involvement, we inhabit things as dwellings, as they are invested with purpose through our intentions. Thus, according to Heidegger our relations to things in the world are essentially characterized by in-dwelling, and so his discussion is steeped in architectural imagery.

Heidegger takes as his exemplar the 'bridge', ostensibly constructed not as a place of dwelling—rather, as a passage between—to show that even this construction is "determined by dwelling": "For building is not merely a means and a way toward dwelling—to build is in itself already to dwell."<sup>22</sup> According to Heidegger, the bridge is more than an interval, or pathway, between two places:

The bridge...does not just connect banks that are already there. The banks emerge as banks only as the bridge crosses the stream. The bridge designedly causes them to lie across from each other. One side is set off against the other by the bridge. Nor do the banks stretch along the stream as indifferent border strips of the dry land. With the banks, the bridge brings to the stream the one and the other expanse of the landscape lying behind them. It brings stream and bank and land into each other's neighborhood. The bridge *gathers* the earth as landscape around the stream...<sup>23</sup>

Thus, by means of building man creates his world as the place of his dwelling: he inhabits the 'landscape', and henceforth makes it his own construction.

Thinking is related to dwelling as essentially as building, for Heidegger, because our being *is* as in-dwelling. When we think we construct relations between things; we draw them nearer and further away from each other, nearer and further away from ourselves,

and in so doing comprehend our own Being in terms of place, as dwelling. We *pervade* the world through thought, constructing it as our home, or 'place'. All building presupposes dwelling for Heidegger, as all thinking is a manner of building. It is at this point in her re-telling of Heidegger's philosophy that Irigaray addresses her concerns to him. For her, the question that Heidegger forgets to ask is: "of what" (*en quoi*) is the *first* dwelling-place that he evokes in his search for a home in the world? Irigaray writes:

The Being of man will be constituted on the basis of a forgetting: of the gift of this *from which* of which he is. Beginning with the void, on which he constructs himself like a bridge. All propositions, and, more generally, the *logos*, work in this way.<sup>24</sup>

According to Irigaray, Heidegger's insistence upon the importance to humanity of dwelling is a nostalgia for his maternal origins, the memory of which is repressed. The repression of the relation to the mother is a *constitutive* oblivion, or forgetting (*oubli*), for Irigaray, upon which—"like a bridge"—Dasein<sup>25</sup> founds its being-in-the-world. Having forgotten—or repressed—the first place of dwelling, Heidegger's philosophy is affected throughout by his search for this 'place', that he encounters only as absence. He "awaits" the return of Being by thinking meditatively rather than in terms of representations (which over-determine Being as beings).<sup>26</sup> Meditatively, he awaits what is absent in representation, to make itself present. This 'void'—that Irigaray identifies as the forgetting of his origin in his mother—thus *constitutes* his relation to Being. Irigaray rearticulates Heidegger's passage on the bridge in order to reveal his problem of oblivion:

Built on the void, the bridge joined two banks that, prior to its construction, were not: the bridge made two banks. And, further: the bridge, a solidly established passageway, joins two voids that, prior to its construction, were not: the bridge made the void. How not suspend that toward which it goes, that toward which it returns, in a serene awaiting.<sup>27</sup>

What, Irigaray then asks, constitutes the forgetting, the oblivion, upon which Heidegger constructs his ontology? An oblivion that, she argues, simultaneously founds metaphysics, and is *constructed by* that same logic. Of what (*en quoi*) is the abyss? Irigaray characterizes the abyss as the *refusal* to remember (or repression of) the philosopher's maternal origin...But why repression; why the *necessity* to forget? Because the philosopher cannot own the debt to his mother, for fear of the impossibility of its repayment. This "debt" is thus forgotten, along with the mother who bore him. 'Woman', by necessity, is rendered outside the system that her absence produces. To put this into the language of grammar, 'woman' cannot be a subject, only an object. 'Woman' does not actively *give birth to* 'man' in his memorial of the event: rather, 'man' births himself

of ‘woman’, who is a passive bodily remnant—the material—of his coming into being. This grammatical representation of the event of birth also has its attendant philosophical resonances. The ‘maternal woman’—understood as a passive receptacle for the potential human being—provides a ready metaphor for place in metaphysical representation. We find in Irigaray’s earlier texts on Plato’s cave, and *chora* (“Plato’s Hystera”), and Aristotle’s conception of place (“Place, Interval: A Reading of Aristotle, *Physics IV*”), analyses of this tendency to give womanly contours to the understanding of place.<sup>28</sup> According to Irigaray, Heidegger does not depart from this philosophical convention: his longing for an abode, and his curious lament for the homeless at the close of “Building Dwelling Thinking,” demonstrate this yearning for a mother whom he cannot name. The mother is erased by virtue of the philosopher’s attempt to attribute his genesis to himself, and thus occult his irrecoverable debt to the mother.

Irigaray reads Heidegger’s nostalgia for the mother again in his preoccupation with death, with which he elaborates Dasein’s essential temporality. As early as *The Concept of Time*, Heidegger attributes to death an ontological priority: Dasein comprehends itself temporally because of the certainty that at some future, yet indeterminable, moment it will exist no longer:

The end of my Dasein, my death, is not some point at which a sequence of events suddenly breaks off, but a possibility which Dasein knows of in this or that way: the most extreme possibility of itself, which it can seize and appropriate as standing before it...The self-interpretation of Dasein that towers over every other statement of certainty and authenticity is its interpretation with respect to its death, the *indeterminate certainty of its ownmost possibility of being at an end*.<sup>29</sup>

The importance of this insight for Heidegger is that what gives one’s life meaning is not the ‘eternal soul’, nor the irrefutable proof that ‘I think therefore I am’. To the contrary, for Heidegger Dasein lives futurally, as ecstatic temporality, in the anxious awareness of its own finitude.<sup>30</sup>

The importance of death for Heidegger is best known in *Being and Time*, yet Irigaray refers in *The Forgetting of Air* to his refrain in “Building Dwelling Thinking” that: “Mortals dwell in that they initiate their own essential nature—their being capable of death as death—into the use and practice of this capacity, so that there may be a good death.”<sup>31</sup> The “essential nature” is thus, for man, the capacity for a good death. Irigaray characterizes this death wish as the sublimated desire to return the unpayable debt to the mother: in exchange for his life, man gives ‘her’ (*elle* slips between nature, the mother, and ‘woman’) back death. This gesture operates at a number of levels. First, having incurred a debt through receipt of his own life, man returns this life at its termination in the event of his death. Irigaray’s response is that this is no return. One life cannot be exchanged for another, and is certainly not equivalent to death—thus he only returns to her “what isn’t any good.”<sup>32</sup> Second, man’s life is given at the expense of woman’s subjectivity.

Woman is represented as merely a means for masculine subjectivity—understood either as the mother (*mater*) from which he is born, or as the wife who bears his name and his children. Woman, as an end in herself, is thus symbolically dead:

This is without a doubt what is at work in his texts. Between this expectation (of what is to come) and commemoration (of what is past) [*entre elles*], he weaves the oblivion of both, by ceaselessly putting them in relation through himself.<sup>33</sup>

Third, man gives himself death by suspending his becoming in a “serene awaiting” for Being’s appearing. Irigaray gives this “awaiting” to be a style of mourning: a sense of the loss of his relation to the mother, whom the philosopher cannot acknowledge, and so projects into a future meeting place beyond what is possible within language.

Is this unpayable debt, and the implications that it has for ‘woman’, (a)voidable? According to Irigaray, the debt is a product of the philosopher’s effort at its erasure: that in his shame at having been conceived by a woman he attempts to conceal the conditions of his own genesis. There is no debt in the womb before the philosopher’s attempt to distance himself from the woman-other who gave him life:

He cannot not take, on the pain of not being. He is not yet free to either take or go away. To come and go, to leave and return whence he came, to withdraw and come take once again. He is enclosed inside her so as to take...<sup>34</sup>

There is no debt where there is no choice but to take. From the inception of his life the exchange between mother and child flows in one direction only. However, debt begins to accrue where the opportunity—to appreciate the gift of life and its bestower—is neglected, and the relation to the mother thus elided: “In (the) place of the first receptacle—of him, or of her—in (the) place of their first “meeting,” there is, now, void.”<sup>35</sup> The void—that ‘place’ where the mother is lost in forgetting—is felt by Heidegger as the anxiety of waiting: for Being, and for death. The meaning of Being for Heidegger becomes death rather than life, because of the refusal to recognize his origins in another.

According to Irigaray, the unrepresentable and irrecoverable debt to the mother occurs only once the child—or the philosopher—enters an ‘economy’<sup>36</sup> in which he attempts to construct his own home *in place of* the one given him by his mother. Ironically, once within the walls of this ‘house of being’—language—the philosopher desires a return to something which ‘exists’ prior to, or which subtends, language. Such a return cannot take place, however, within boundaries already designated *by* language. Irigaray criticizes Heidegger for his continual return to the etymology of words, the appeal of which he takes to be the most archaic. His attachment to *logos* Irigaray interprets as a pathos for what is lost to contemporary understanding. Heidegger fails to consider the possibility that it was an attention only to *logos* that lead us astray from the first: “does the *logos* assume a death sentence?...Is it man’s dearest project to

die? In, from, by means of, for...a mirage? Would his most radical intervention in nature be to transform it into a mirror for himself?"<sup>37</sup> As alternatives for this "mirror" (*logos*) Irigaray provides the 'fluid' elements of water and air. She refers throughout her *oeuvre* to philosophy's inability to conceptualize fluidity,<sup>38</sup> the in-between,<sup>39</sup> and 'passage'—all of which confound logical categories and concepts:

Where, at present, are the fluids? Those that have fed him, those that have made him? And the passage between them and him? The passage between him and she who constituted him with fluids? Won't this irrecoverable gift and this unpaid and unpayable "debt" be repeated endlessly like some natural thing?<sup>40</sup>

By denying passage, the philosopher obscures the relation to the other who created him; and upon the oblivion of passage, he finds a narrative of self-creation. Irigaray brings to light these movements—of denial and self-invention—that she identifies in the texts of philosophy, thereby raising the question of passage with the philosopher. Her suggestion, I contend, is that if the philosopher were to acknowledge the primacy of that first intimacy with his mother, and to give thanks to her for his life, then they would be able to live together: and this living relation would enable the exchange of gifts between them. His origin in woman—the sexed-other *in opposition to whom* he defines his subjectivity—is imagined in philosophical writings as a threat to the integrity of the self. This fear is written in terms of death rather than life, as through death the philosopher imagines himself to repay the debt to the mother, without needing first to acknowledge their relation. Even in the writings of Heidegger, who claims to value proximity and renews the question of place by thinking being as dwelling, passage to woman is closed. Instead, woman becomes the 'there' of Dasein's being-there, the matter with which Dasein builds his world:

[I]t is not clear that man either could or would want to attain her sort of proximity...Even if this proximity does constitute the unthought ground of his thinking. For if he gained it his thinking would no longer have the right to be: not as the same, not as such, not even as being-there.<sup>41</sup>

If the philosopher were to re-open the question of sexual difference, his writing would be driven by other imperatives. When Irigaray 'reads' Heidegger in *The Forgetting of Air* she rewrites his philosophy with him, according to different necessities. As critique, her reading renews the urgency of Heidegger's text by releasing what the text had neglected: what could not be said, but nevertheless conditioned the meaning of his philosophy. In Heidegger's work Irigaray sees the potential for her feminist concerns to be articulated, as if they were there always, waiting for her reading to liberate them from their dormancy. In this way, Irigaray involves Heidegger in the concerns of the present, bringing him to the new epoch in which the question of sexual difference must be thought through.

In the preceding section I attempted to illustrate the complexity of Irigaray's relation to Heidegger. Critical of his positive philosophy, in which he attempts to elucidate the meaning of Being, Irigaray pays Heidegger the surest compliment in her adoption of his method of interpreting philosophy. *The Forgetting of Air* performs at least two functions for Irigaray's relation to Heidegger: first, it is her address to the philosopher who was, perhaps more than any other, her teacher and benefactor. She works through her relation to him in that book—opening a means of communication between them—and so demonstrates to him her gratitude. Second, *The Forgetting of Air* re-vitalizes Heidegger's philosophy by manifesting what she understands to be its previously neglected genetic element. Thus Irigaray brings forth a new, as yet unheard thread in Heidegger's text. By rendering questionable the imagery through which Heidegger presented his philosophy (for example, the 'opening', the abode, waiting, and death), Irigaray undermines the values upon which his project founded itself.<sup>42</sup> Irigaray's intervention into Heidegger's philosophy shows us a benefactor whom Heidegger forgot. By utilizing Heidegger's notion of 'unconcealment', Irigaray awakens for him this slumbering question: sexual difference.

### **Irigaray's Intervention: 'Place' as Interval rather than Dwelling**

For her part, Irigaray elucidates a positive philosophy, beyond simple criticism of Heidegger, but still implicated in her *critique* of ontology. She develops an understanding of place as interval, or passage, and in this way responds to a philosophy of place, found in Heidegger and Aristotle, in which the threat of the withdrawal of security is a concern that must be palliated. Subject to the exigencies of metaphysics, place has become a 'boundary' by means of which one feels safe from the possibility of loss; from the withdrawal of a home that cannot be identified because it was never "demonstrated" in the 'first place'. Although the union, thus asserted, between Heidegger and Aristotle on the issue of place might appear unlikely, for Irigaray the role of place in each of their theories is a repetition of the same desire: to keep oneself back from the abyss; or (what amounts to the same thing), to reassure the subject of his reason and identity, that he is not something 'other' than himself (the other 'representing' an abyss). Irigaray's concern is that 'place', which affords the subject both refuge and material sustenance, is cast as feminine by the philosopher. The philosopher draws upon the maternal metaphor without addressing the mother who provided the original framework for this understanding of place: the gift of life—and of place—is taken by the philosopher, and its source is then forgotten as such.

For Irigaray, the identification of 'woman'—as maternal—with place plays a crucial part in the history of the forgetting of sexual difference. For, if maternal corporeality provides the template for place, as an envelope for the subject, then women's bodies, maternal or otherwise, come to be understood as potential vessels for men's bodies,

and for the bodies of the children that they engender. In *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* Irigaray addressed this problem to Aristotle, whose account of place she takes to be paradigmatic for all metaphysical conceptions of place, which are “still and forever Aristotle’s.”<sup>43</sup> By reading Aristotle’s account of place Irigaray senses his need for shelter against modification. Place accomplishes for Aristotle a counter-point to the heavenly bodies, in perpetual motion just beyond the world of our experience. According to this account, place defines an object apart from other objects nearby, such as the air which surrounds it: place is that “which is the proper and primary location of each body.”<sup>44</sup> Without place things would disperse, they would lose definition, or would be condemned to continual movement.

For Heidegger, too, place—conceived as “dwelling”—restores stability to Dasein, whose relation to the world, as determined by Western nihilism,<sup>45</sup> had reached a point of crisis. Thus, from Irigaray’s perspective Aristotle’s notion of place as ‘vessel’, and Heidegger’s account of place as ‘dwelling’, share a misappropriation of the female body in common. According to Irigaray, in as much as woman’s body has come to play the role as an ideal place for the philosopher, women have lost their bodies as *their own* place. For Aristotle, what enables an object to move is that place is neither matter nor form, thus the thing is separable from its place. But if ‘woman’ *is* place, then her movement is necessarily restricted, her destiny bound to the content given her by ‘man’. A common result of ‘woman’s’ displacement, says Irigaray, is that women come to look for their place in the child, passing “ceaselessly through the child in order to return to herself,” and in this way she “captures the other in her interiority.”<sup>46</sup> Women would be in need of what Irigaray calls a “double envelope,” to enable their movement, unless men could constitute *themselves* as a place for women.

Is he able to receive woman in the reverse of herself? In the mourning for herself? Can he beckon to her and welcome her into himself once he has separated himself from her? Since he must separate himself from her in order to be able to be her place. Just as she must move toward him. If any meeting is to be possible between man and woman, each must be a place, as appropriate to and for the other, and toward which he or she may move.<sup>47</sup>

The masculine “morphology, existence, and essence,”<sup>48</sup> however, are interpreted not as *receptive*, but as active and penetrative. Thus, if philosophy were to address woman’s *atopia*, the terms by which men identify themselves *as masculine* would necessarily undergo a transformation. If the question of sexual difference were to be addressed, the masculine subject (or Dasein) would need to feel place not as a home—always already there for him, in virtue of Being’s essence as dwelling—but as an ethical encounter with the other.

Irigaray’s conception of place as interval, passage, or fluid-medium, attempts to address the forgetting of sexual difference in Western philosophy. Contrary to

Heidegger's understanding of dwelling, which for him determines the being of all places, Irigaray asserts that what is concealed in all dwelling is the passage between mother and child. That for Heidegger even a bridge is a kind of dwelling demonstrates, for Irigaray, the extent of his blindness to passage. For her, the place in which the two meet constitutes the possibility of all dwelling elsewhere: embodiment occurs precisely where *there is no shelter* from the risk of becoming other. The necessity that informs Irigaray's conception of place is to account for movement and growth, descriptives for a place shared between foetus and mother, between lovers, and for living itself. Fluidity is the element of mediation for Irigaray, in part because fluids (water and air) are necessarily ill-defined, slippery, belonging to no one place, but able to move from one container to another, or to rest as a puddle: *sans contours*. However, fluids mediate also because barriers are not always as rigid as they seem. In fact, corporeal barriers (skin, for instance), *insofar as they live*, are already permeable and porous:

...the fetus is a continuum with the body it is in...it passes from a certain kind of continuity to another through the mediation of fluids: blood, milk...<sup>49</sup>

...there are times when the relation of place in the sexual act gives rise to a transgression of the envelope, to a porousness, a perception of the other, a fluidity. And so it becomes possible to imagine that generation of a certain kind might occur by crossing membranes and sharing humors with the other.<sup>50</sup>

Beyond the shelter of an abode, or a vessel, two beings constitute one another as interlocutors, the porosity of membranes producing a place in which they can converse without loss of one to the other.

Whilst for Heidegger, place is given by virtue of boundaries (he refers to the Greek: *peras*),<sup>51</sup> for Irigaray place is produced wherever boundary, between two beings, comes apart. The philosopher's ethical responsibility is to honour the other's part in the production of his place: that, thanks to their coming together, he was given life. By remembering to Heidegger 'air'—which, she contends, is the most fluid element—Irigaray shows his reliance upon what is 'essentially' a "homeless" medium to build his ontology of Being. We see Heidegger's concern for the homeless:

The real dwelling plight lies in this, that mortals ever search anew for the essence of dwelling, that they *must ever learn to dwell*. What if man's homelessness consisted in this, that man still does not even think of the *real* plight of dwelling as *the* plight? Yet as soon as man *gives thought* to his homelessness, it is a misery no longer.<sup>52</sup>

If Heidegger were to give thought to the homelessness of his sexed-other, instead of man in general—as if it were his own—perhaps he would be able to constitute himself as a place for the other. With *The Forgetting of Air*, Irigaray rewrites Heidegger's

philosophy so that within it resonates the voice of the homeless: his mother, always already his home. In this way, Irigaray unsettles Heidegger's domestic order, the place that he gave himself at the 'end' of philosophy. Finally, Irigaray writes *The Forgetting of Air* as an articulation of her relation to Heidegger, and thus produces her own place, as the philosopher of sexual difference.

## Notes

1. Tina Chanter, *Ethics of Eros: Irigaray's Rewriting of the Philosophers* (New York: Routledge, 1995).
2. Ellen Mortensen, *The Feminine and Nihilism: Luce Irigaray with Nietzsche and Heidegger* (Oslo: Scandinavian UP, 1994).
3. The quote reads in full: "Sexual difference is one of the major philosophical issues, if not the issue, of our age. According to Heidegger, each age has one issue to think through, and one only. Sexual difference is probably the issue in our time which could be our "salvation" if we thought it through." Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (New York: Cornell UP, 1993) 5.
4. See Martin Heidegger, "Building Dwelling Thinking," trans. David Farrell Krell, *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1977) 323-339.
5. See Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* 8.
6. Although the concept of 'genealogy' is properly Nietzschean, Heidegger's methodology relies upon a genealogical understanding of origin: not chronologically, but ontologically prior. For instance, for Nietzsche Christian virtue depends, in its essence, upon an understanding of evil (that which is dangerous to oneself). The 'evil' is thus negated in 'virtue'. Likewise, for Heidegger the genealogical origin of metaphysics is a constitutive forgetting of Being: philosophy is thus an *avoidance* of true thought. For Irigaray, the forgetting of sexual difference gives philosophy to be as it is. See Tina Chanter (1995), Ellen Mortensen (1994), and Joanna Hodge, "Irigaray Reading Heidegger," *Engaging with Irigaray*, ed. Carolyn Burke, Naomi Schor, Margaret Whitford (New York: Columbia UP, 1994) 191-210.
7. Elizabeth Grosz defines 'disavowal' as "a simultaneous recognition and refusal to recognize...It results in the process of the 'splitting of the ego'." As with the fetishist, to whom Freud refers in his elaboration of disavowal, the philosopher denies the otherness of the mother. See Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (St Leonards, N.S.W.: Allen & Unwin, 1994) 212 n.4.
8. We can understand this claim also through Irigaray's plaint to Nietzsche in *Marine Lover*, that what is not already appropriated to him is not thus equivalent to nothing: "Nothing? This whole that always and at every moment was thus becoming new? Nothing? This endless coming into life at each moment? Nothing? This whole that had laid by the mantle of long sleep and was reviving all my senses? Nothing, this unfathomable well?" Luce Irigaray, *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (New York: Columbia UP, 1991) 5. We also see her put to Jacques Lacan the proposition that 'woman' is not nothing simply because 'she' is outside his system of meaning. See Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke (New York: Cornell UP, 1985) 86-105.
9. To date, Irigaray's commentators on the subject of her relation to Heidegger have focussed upon *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, and Ellen Mortensen (1994) demonstrates Irigaray's

reliance upon a Heideggerian framework in the book on Nietzsche, *Marine Lover*. See also Joanna Hodge (1994), Tina Chanter (1995), and Claire Colebrook, "Feminist Philosophy and the Philosophy of Feminism: Irigaray and the History of Western Metaphysics," *Hypatia* 12.1 (1997): 79-98. Each of these critics develops an account of the methodological similarities between Heidegger and Irigaray. Ellen T. Armour provides a more sustained examination of *L'Oubli de L'Air*. See Ellen T. Armour, "Questions of Proximity: 'Woman's Place' in Derrida and Irigaray," *Hypatia* 12.1 (1997): 63-77.

10. Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (New York: Cornell UP, 1985). Tina Chanter (1995) writes: "I think that if feminists become more aware of the philosophical background that much of Irigaray's work both assumes and plays off, her contribution to feminism will be clearer and, perhaps, better appreciated" (9). Pheng Cheah and Elizabeth Grosz express a desire to distance Irigaray from her early psychoanalytic works, in order to emphasize the socio-political import of her work: "Most commentators regard her as primarily a thinker of subjectivity, identity, sexuality, and desire and rarely consider her as a political theorist or an analyst of social and cultural life. Thus, even the most sympathetic readers have tended to extract the social and political implications of her work from her earlier and primarily psychoanalytic texts, which are taken as so emblematic of her work that her later writings are rarely read, let alone discussed. Consequently, *Speculum of the other Woman* and *This Sex Which is Not One* have effectively functioned as synecdoches of her entire oeuvre. Elizabeth Grosz and Pheng Cheah, "Of Being-Two: Introduction," *Diacritics* 28.1 (1998): 5-6.

11. See Martin Heidegger, "The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking," trans. David Farrell Krell, *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writing* 373-92.

12. Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson (London: Athlone, 1986) 89.

13. Heidegger, "The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking" 377-378.

14. The Latin *subjectum* refers to "the material out of which things are made" (*The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, 1992). See Claire Colebrook's discussion of *subjectum* in relation to Heidegger's critique of Descartes's *cogito* in "Feminist Philosophy and the Philosophy of Feminism: Irigaray and the History of Western Metaphysics." According to Heidegger, before Descartes the idea of the *subjectum* referred to that which underlay knowledge or was the basis of an assertion. In the Cartesian *cogito*, thought takes itself as its *subjectum* and becomes its own ground. Thought therefore becomes the *subject*—that which is to be thought (84).

15. Heidegger, "The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking" 392.

16. Heidegger, "The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking" 388.

17. Heidegger, "The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking" 375.

18. Although discussion of Dasein's being as "in-dwelling" can be found in Heidegger as early as *Being and Time*, he was concerned to expose the hidden—yet essential—relation between Being and temporality in that work. He felt a need to develop an insight into the temporality of things so as to dislodge the association of 'thing-ness' with space, predominant to metaphysics. Heidegger's temporization of space can thus be seen as part of his assault upon dualism. Later, in works such as "Building Dwelling Thinking," "Discourse on Thinking," "The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking," and the "Heraclitus Seminar" we see a shift in his thinking to a notion of Being as dwelling, and this period is associated with a predilection for architectural metaphors. See Martin Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking*, trans. John M. Anderson and E. Hans Freund (New York: Harper & Row, 1966). See also Martin Heidegger and Eugen Fink, *Heraclitus Seminar*, trans. Charles H. Seibert (Alabama: U of Alabama P, 1979).

19. Tina Chanter (1995), in particular, constructs a useful survey of these structural similarities, through a reading of Heidegger's introduction to *Being and Time*. See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962) 21-63.

20. Elizabeth Grosz develops notions of space as dwelling, *à la* Heidegger, for the purposes of

her feminism of embodiment. See in particular the chapters “Women, *Chora*, Dwelling,” and “Architecture from the Outside.” Elizabeth Grosz, *Space, Time and Perversion* (St Leonards, N.S.W.: Allen & Unwin, 1995) 111-124.

21. Irigaray, *The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger*, trans. Mary Beth Mader (Austin: U of Texas P, 1999) 19.

22. Heidegger, “Building Dwelling Thinking” 324. Heidegger, in a characteristic manoeuvre, returns us to the root of the verb to build in German (*Bauen*) to teach us that building and dwelling belong to one another essentially (*Buan* in high German means to dwell). For Irigaray, this would represent his commitment to *logos*, of which she is critical in *The Forgetting of Air*.

23. Heidegger, “Building Dwelling Thinking” 330.

24. Irigaray, *The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger* 30.

25. “Dasein” can be translated as “being-there/here,” but also as “presence” or “existence.” English translations most usually leave it in the German.

26. For Heidegger’s account of “meditative” thinking, see his *Discourse on Thinking*. The notion is also used in “The Question Concerning Technology” and, to a lesser extent, “The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking” where he writes: “Whether or not what is present is experienced, comprehended or presented, presence as lingering in openness always remains dependent upon the prevalent opening. What is absent, too, cannot be as such unless it presences in the *free space of the opening*” (386). Meditative thinking can be understood as awaiting nothing in particular, and thus allowing Being to appear freely, without determination by representations. The ‘opening’ is the place that we are given in meditative thinking, which allows the free appearing of Being.

27. Irigaray, *The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger* 30.

28. The likeness of Heidegger’s Being to Plato’s *chora* is particularly striking. The resemblance can be seen in Elizabeth Grosz’s account of *chora*: “Plato cannot specify any particular properties or qualities for *chora*: if one could attribute it any specificity it would immediately cease to have its status as intermediary or receptacle and would instead become an object (or quality or property). It is thus by definition impossible to characterize. It is the mother of all qualities without itself having any—except its capacity to take on, to nurture, to bring into existence any other kind of being.” Grosz, *Space, Time and Perversion* 114.

29. Martin Heidegger, *The Concept of Time*, trans. William McNeill (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992) 11.

30. The importance that Heidegger awards death leads him to give time an ontological priority over space in *Being and Time*, while Irigaray’s focus upon birth gives space a priority. She writes at the beginning of chapter six, in *The Forgetting of Air*: “It is with respect to the original privilege granted to time that the question of the foundation should be posed to Heidegger—this he has said. Isn’t time already an incorporation of space whose tissue, thus appropriated, will constitute subjectivity? Won’t he turn this “in” space where man originally comes about, and does so even prior to any subjectivity, into an “in time” where spatiality itself will then appear? Taking place inside a double inversion, where man stays as if within a sheltering horizon that extends beyond him” (95).

31. Heidegger, “Building Dwelling Thinking” 328-329.

32. Irigaray, *The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger* 52.

33. Irigaray, *The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger* 45.

34. Irigaray, *The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger* 32-33.

35. Irigaray, *The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger* 30.

36. Elizabeth Grosz points out the etymology of economy: *oikos* in ancient Greek means home, or dwelling. Although Irigaray uses the term ‘economy’ to describe a masculine system of meaning throughout her writings, this significance is especially pertinent to her critique of Heidegger. See Elizabeth Grosz, *Space, Time and Perversion*.

37. Irigaray, *The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger* 13.
38. See Luce Irigaray, "Volume-Fluidity," *This Sex Which is Not One*. See also "Place, Interval: A Reading of Aristotle, *Physics IV*" in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, and *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche*.
39. See Luce Irigaray, "Sorcerer Love: A Reading of Plato, *Symposium*, 'Diotima's Speech,'" *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*.
40. Irigaray, *The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger* 33-34.
41. Irigaray, *The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger* 86.
42. The notion that the imagery used by the philosopher has something essential to say about his philosophy would not be controversial for Heidegger. He viewed metaphor as part of the etymology, or origins, of language. This being so, his metaphors cannot be regarded merely as illustrations, but are essential to the meaning of his work.
43. Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* 40.
44. 209a, quoted in Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* 36.
45. Western nihilism is for Heidegger the history of the forgetting of Being: the forgetting of one's place 'in' (or alongside) the world of things. Heidegger fears that the nihilistic disposition puts us—and our environment—at great risk of disaster. The exploits of the Soviet and U.S. governments in space (Heidegger lived to see the moon landing) were shocking to Heidegger, as they signified humankind's loss of the sense of belonging to the earth.
46. Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* 35. This passage echoes Freud's analysis of the way that women seek to appropriate social value through the boy child: "The feminine situation is only established...if the wish for a penis is replaced by one for a baby, if, that is, a baby takes the place of a penis in accordance with an ancient symbolic equivalence." Sigmund Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton, 1965) 128.
47. Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* 39-40.
48. Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* 39.
49. Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* 46.
50. Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* 46.
51. In "Building Dwelling Thinking" Heidegger writes: "A space is something that has been made room for, something that is cleared and free, namely, within a boundary, Greek *peras*. A boundary is not that at which something stops but, as the Greeks recognized, the boundary is that from which something begins its essential unfolding. That is why the concept is that of *horismos*, that is, the horizon, the boundary" (332). Irigaray responds to this passage in *The Forgetting of Air*: "That which escapes being bounded becomes the very boundary itself. And where Being still offers itself in the form of physical, sensible phenomena—in the Greek world—the material support of the *apeiron* (unbounded) is constituted as a *peras* (limit). Isn't this what is constantly being "fabricated" with the gesture that appropriates the world? And isn't this the reason that this gesture always involves a groundless danger? The boundary is sometimes revealed there as the boundary of thinking, though it sought to be the bounding of the world by thinking. Where unbounded nature would still remain, would man discover only his own yet-unthought void? A vertigo proceeding from an attainment of the borders of that place where man maintains himself, and not from reaching the edges of some natural abyss? (16-17).
52. Heidegger, "Building Dwelling Thinking" 339.