

Unthought Nature: Reply to Penelope Deutscher and Mary Beth Mader

*F*irst, I must thank Mary Beth Mader and Penelope Deutscher for their meticulous reading and questioning of my work. Because my response to Mader builds on my response to Deutscher, I will reply to Deutscher first.

What am I doing, Deutscher asks, in mapping aspects of Butler, Schelling, and Irigaray onto one another? Closing her discussion, Deutscher wonders whether I might be following Irigaray's own reading method, that of expanding and transforming an author's project by focusing on what that project itself excludes. Let me explore this suggestion with reference to an instance of Irigaray's practice of this method, in her *Ethics of Sexual Difference*, apropos of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's late ontology as sketched in the last chapter of *The Visible and the Invisible*, "The Intertwining/The Chiasm." Many of Irigaray's criticisms of Merleau-Ponty in the course of her reading are debatable, but my concern here is solely to elucidate the nature of her reading method.¹

Irigaray reads Merleau-Ponty's late ontology of flesh as structured by an *impensé*—an unthought—of what she calls the "maternal sojourn." On

the one hand, Irigaray recognizes that Merleau-Ponty attributes maternal qualities to flesh: he refers to flesh as “the mother” (Merleau-Ponty 267) and as “being by porosity and pregnancy” (149). His text implies that in being enfolded in a world of flesh, the subject prolongs its “maternal sojourn,” remaining ensconced in a substitute womb (Irigaray 173). But on the other hand, Irigaray thinks, Merleau-Ponty’s flesh provides a womb that has been restructured to give the subject a level of agency and control vis-à-vis its mother that no embryo or fetus has. Merleau-Ponty understands the flesh of the world in terms of active/passive, touching/touched reversibility (different variations of which obtain within each body-subject, between subjects, and between subjects and things). Thus, he still understands the contact or contiguity between beings in terms of the traditional active/passive polarity, albeit reconceived as reversible. But, Irigaray suggests, in the contiguity between pregnant woman and fetus, both are “more passive than any passivity taken in a passive-active couple” (*Ethics* 154). Moreover, she thinks, by understanding touch in terms of reversibility, Merleau-Ponty conceives it as anticipating or prefiguring vision, insofar as the latter has historically been defined in terms of active/passive polarity—so that although Merleau-Ponty roots vision in touch, he ultimately still privileges vision. But again, in the womb there obtains a relation of touching that absolutely precedes any possibility of vision, Irigaray suggests—a relation in which neither participant can see the other.

In what sense, exactly, is the maternal sojourn the unthought of Merleau-Ponty’s position? His account of flesh is structured by an effort to avoid acknowledging the maternal sojourn as Irigaray identifies it (as involving an invisible touching “more passive than the passive”). The structuring effects of the avoidance are manifest in that Merleau-Ponty conceives flesh with reference to the maternal sojourn (as its prolongation), yet in point-for-point antithesis to that sojourn. So the maternal sojourn is not a matter that lies unequivocally outside Merleau-Ponty’s thought. The maternal sojourn is an unthought that is internal to Merleau-Ponty’s thought—a matter to which he is not indifferent, of which on the contrary he is aware, yet which he tries to avoid or disavow, with shaping effects on what he does say. Irigaray, then, identifies an exclusion that constitutes Merleau-Ponty’s thought. She does this by noting how the characteristics he ascribes to flesh (reversibility; the mapping of vision onto touch) do not seem to fit the mother/fetus relation. She describes that sojourn in terms that negate Merleau-Ponty’s terms for flesh, in terms of a touch devoid of reversible poles and preceding any visibility. Just as Deutscher says,

Irigaray's method is to expand and transform Merleau-Ponty's conception of flesh in light of what she identifies as its constitutive exclusion.

This lengthy account helps me clarify whether my own reading method is the same as that of Irigaray. Let me consider my reading of Judith Butler. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler often appears to be interested in the genealogy of *claims* about sex rather than in sex itself. But as Deutscher may be suggesting, Butler might hesitate to draw this distinction, preferring to enfold "sex itself" into our claims about sex as their purported subject-matter or referent. This would create a difficulty for my view (as stated in my *Luce Irigaray and the Philosophy of Sexual Difference*) that Butler addresses sex itself rather than "sex itself."

An important passage in Butler, from my perspective, occurs in her early essay "Variations on Sex and Gender: Beauvoir, Wittig, Foucault," a passage in which Butler asks (with reference to Monique Wittig), "Why don't we name as sexual features our mouths, hands, and backs? Her [Wittig's] answer: we only name sexual [. . .] those features functional in reproductive activity" (135). I take it that Butler endorses this answer that she attributes to Wittig, that is, that in Butler's view we class as sexed those body parts that have to do with heterosexual sex and reproduction, and this because at the center of our gender norms is the prescription of heterosexual sex and reproduction (that is, because these norms comprise what Butler in *Gender Trouble* calls "the heterosexual matrix"). So, for Butler, what we count as sex is shaped by gender: certain bodily properties count as sex-conferring just when they are viewed in light of heteronormative gender.²

Are these claims of Butler's claims about sex itself? They do amount to a claim that sex is how biology appears to us, or is the significance that biology takes on for us, in light of gender. But does this entail that really, in the (hypothetical) absence of gender, biology is *nonsexed*? This implication would follow if Butler thought that we *only* count certain bodily properties as sexed because of gender or that certain bodily properties *only* appear to be sexed and to constitute us as sexed individuals given gender. (This is far from an absurd view—there could certainly be breasts, penises, etc., without gender, but without gender, those bodily parts would not suffice to make individuals sexed.) While Butler might be read as agnostic here—as thinking that we just cannot know what biology, absent gender, might be like—she can also be read as affirming the *only* in the above statements. Indeed, she regularly makes statements that encourage such a reading. Consider, for example, her statement that

“gender [. . .] designate[s] the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are *established*” (*Gender* 7, emphasis added). The talk of *establishing* suggests that sex is instituted or created for the first time as an effect of gender, so that without gender, there would be no sex. Insofar as Butler’s texts admit of and, at times, encourage such readings, the idea that we are naturally, biologically, nonsexed can readily be drawn from Butler’s thought despite her reluctance to theorize about sex itself.

This is not to say that the avoidance of sex itself (like the maternal sojourn for Merleau-Ponty) structures Butler’s thought. The situation is rather that, although she has good reasons for not wanting to theorize sex itself (namely, her concern to foreground the political and contested character of all reference to sex), she comes close to engaging in such theorization, in spite of herself, to the extent that she suggests that we only count as sex what we count as sex because of gender. My method of reading Butler, then, is to extend her into what, in spite of herself, she comes close to doing.

My method of reading Irigaray is similar. She has reasons for denying that we are naturally anything other than either female or male in each case. But to support her belief in natural sexual duality, she reads thinkers—Hegel, Hölderlin—who write from within a tradition of philosophical thinking about nature, also including Schelling, in which nature is seen as entering into but always also passing beyond dualities. As such, Irigaray finds herself writing from within an approach to nature in which nature always exceeds dualities, but she stops short of embracing this approach in full. Nonetheless, to the extent that she comes close to doing so by virtue of positioning herself within this tradition, her thought admits of being extended into that of which she has stopped short. The way I read Butler and Irigaray, then, is to extend their ideas not in terms of avoidances that structure their thought, but rather into areas with which their thought is contiguous despite itself.

Turning now to Mader’s many questions, I will focus on two: (1) whether the rhythmic difference with which (as I tried to show in my book) Irigaray equates sexual difference collapses back into conventional biological sex difference; and (2) how we can access putative tendencies, potentials, or natures other than through what they allegedly condition—so that there is a threat of tautology in this talk of tendencies and of the putative tendencies being redundant. (The problem here recalls that discussed by Hegel under the rubric of the “dilemma of explanation”: if we invoke underlying dispositions or tendencies in order to explain something, then

either those dispositions must have a different content to the *explanandum*—in which case, though, an explanatory gap remains—or the dispositions have the same content as the *explanandum*—in which case they are redundant [465].)⁵

On the former question, as Mader rightly says, Irigaray often describes sexual difference as a difference in the relations of boys and girls to their maternal origin. Irigaray has recently suggested that this is her fundamental account of sexual difference, anything else she has said of it being secondary.⁴ However, the relational account cannot be Irigaray's only or most fundamental view of sexual difference because there must be a difference in the potential generative capacities of boys and girls to make possible their divergent resolutions of the transition away from their maternal origin. This worries me because it suggests that Irigaray thinks (as Mader has neatly put it in a recent article) that “the girl is in fact *a little mother born of another mother*” (374). Yet one of the most attractive elements of Irigaray's thought, to my mind, is her proposal that we should disambiguate being a woman from being a mother and contest the reduction of the female to a maternal function. Disappointingly, Irigaray now seems to effect the very reduction that she promised to contest. To a significant extent, it is to circumvent this problem that I have tried to excavate from Irigaray's writings an alternative understanding of the sexes in terms of rhythms of growth rather than potential relations to biological reproduction (and so, too, why I have sought to distinguish this talk of rhythms from discourses of biology). In this understanding, girls and boys would relate to their mothers via resemblance or difference in respect of rhythm rather than reproductive function.

But, as Mader convincingly argues, to know that there are just two—linear versus cyclical—rhythms and that these correlate with our current sex categories, Irigaray must already be relying on those very categories, which differentiate human beings on sexual-reproductive grounds. This reliance is reflected in that Irigaray picks out only—or at least primarily—bodily features relating to sex and reproduction as manifestations of men's and women's rhythms, while neglecting nonreproduction-related features that disconfirm her linear/cyclical distinction.

If Irigarayan sexual difference is sex difference *redescribed* philosophically as grounded in rhythms, then, sexual difference is still *sex* difference so redescribed. In that case, contrary to what I argued in my book, later Irigaray does think that *sexual* difference, both as rhythmic difference and (derivatively) as difference vis-à-vis maternal origins, is entangled with—not cleanly separable from—biological, reproductive *sex*

difference. But this entanglement of sexual and sex difference need not be a problem with Irigaray's position unless reference to biological sex must always be merely ideological.⁵ And, I submit, it is not merely ideological, because—contrary to Butler as I interpreted her earlier—we do not *only* cluster certain reproduction-related biological properties together because of gender; we do so partly because they really do cluster.⁶

What of the consequent problem that, for Irigaray, the little girl seems to be a little mother like her mother? I am drawn toward the tentative thought that Irigaray is pointing out a truth: that there is a centrality of the mother to each child (a psychical, not necessarily a social, centrality), which is such that—generally, not universally—as any child learns his or her sex/gender identity, he or she maps this identity in terms of being the same or different in kind to the mother. So a sense of being (for instance) female will be bound up from the start with an identification with the mother. Thus, perhaps Irigaray's work can assist in thinking why it might psychically be very difficult—albeit not necessarily impossible—for us to disambiguate the maternal and the female/feminine.

Mader's second question concerns the broadly Aristotelian metaphysics of tendencies, potentials, and realization that I find in Irigaray. Generally, I think that reference to essences, potentials, and "natures" can be politically valuable by providing grounds for criticizing existing social institutions that stifle our potentials. Likewise, the claim that these institutions are a certain way—for instance, patriarchal—"essentially" rather than "accidentally" can support a politics of radical change by entailing that those institutions must be fundamentally transformed and restructured. Reference to nature and to essences, then, can provide normative grounds for social criticism.

The problem, though, is that as soon as we want to identify any particular unfulfilled tendencies or dispositions, it becomes difficult not to naturalize actual features of human beings. An ontology of flux and becoming in which there are no determined regularities or dispositions might therefore seem to promise more critical leverage. The problems with such an ontology, though, are, first, that without identifying any particular unfulfilled tendencies, we cannot recommend any determinate direction of political change and, second, that since the flux of materiality will have to be restricted in some ways by any determinate political arrangement, we need further criteria to tell us which restrictions are more desirable than others. Supposing that for these reasons we do want to identify some unfulfilled tendencies and potentials: how can we do so since *ex hypothesi* these are unrealized? Foucault's suspicion would be that when we make

any such identification, we have been led to postulate as an unrealized potential something that is in actuality prohibited or barred (for instance, sexuality) merely because the prohibition inescapably refers to what it bars in a way that suggests that that thing really, extradiscursively, exists. When Irigaray identifies unfulfilled potentials on the part of women and men, something slightly different appears to happen: she seems to naturalize what is already actual, such as the norm reducing the female to the maternal, or certain socially legitimated male forms of aggression. But then rather than facilitating change, Irigaray's reference to natures or potentials risks prohibiting change by reinstalling the actual as its horizon.

However, Irigaray's mode of reading may offer a way forward. As I have suggested, she identifies the unthought of a text by looking for what that text both refers to and also negates, indicating the presence of a structuring avoidance. Irigaray then thinks the text's unthought by negating that text's negation, for example by characterizing the maternal sojourn in terms of a touching prior to visibility, negating Merleau-Ponty's idea that touch and vision map onto one another. This reading method might give Irigaray a way to identify women's (and perhaps men's) unfulfilled potentials as the unthought of Western culture (assuming for now that we can speak of such an entity)—as that which Western culture negates or thwarts but to which it also refers. But there has to be evidence that Western culture refers to, or is preoccupied with, these potentials as well as thwarting them. The evidence, for Irigaray, is that Western culture has its intellectual and mythical basis in certain ancient Greek texts, such as the *Oresteia* of Aeschylus, which narrate the suppression of preexisting matrilineal forms of life that operated upon a more cyclical time frame. Western culture thus combines a mythical reference to matrilineal and cyclical forms of life with a point-for-point negation of their features—being instead patriarchal and organized around the linear temporality of progress and technological development. By negating this negation, Irigaray can infer that these matrilineal forms of life had a cyclical time frame because there is a connection between being female and cyclical rhythms, and hence that female sexual difference consists in a distinctive rhythm of growth unrealized in modern Western societies. At least in principle, then, Irigaray's reading strategy offers her a way to identify unfulfilled potentials without simply reproducing what actually exists.

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Notes

- 1 The objection that Irigaray's criticisms of Merleau-Ponty are uncharitable, artificially inflating the difference between his ontology of flesh and her philosophy of sexual difference, is found in many of the articles in Olkowski and Weiss.
- 2 It might seem that Butler's statement regarding Wittig concerns sex in the sense of the erotic rather than (as I have interpreted it) in the sense of biological sex difference. But the context makes clear that Butler sees these two senses of sex as integrally related. (Just before the above-quoted statement she writes: "For Wittig, when we name sexual difference, we create it," and "What distinguishes the sexes are those anatomical features, which either bear on reproduction directly, or are construed to aid in its eventual success.") Butler understands the integral relation as follows: because our gender norms are organized by heteronormativity, it is those bodily properties that are relevant to heterosexual sex and reproduction that are taken to define us and to sort us into two sexes—so that the two senses of sex are, effectively, conflated.
- 3 The phrase "dilemma of explanation" comes from Inwood 59–64.
- 4 University of Nottingham Seminar held by Irigaray, June 2006. Reported in Roland de Vries, unpublished doctoral dissertation.
- 5 For a statement of this position, see Stryker, who writes: "The so-called 'sex of the body' is an interpretive fiction" (62).
- 6 I defend this view in chapter 1 of *An Introduction*.

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