

Penelope Deutscher. *A Politics of Impossible Difference: The Later Work of Luce Irigaray*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2002.

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1 Penelope Deutscher's study on Luce Irigaray revolves around a series of questions which have long troubled critics: "Why and how did Irigaray attempt to transform a philosophy emphasizing sexual difference into the basis for pro-feminist social and institutional reform? Why did she and other French feminist intellectuals turn away from the language of equal rights self-evident to the feminisms of most earlier historical periods?" (9). Deutscher provides us with a sophisticated but very readable analysis of Irigaray's works, which is not only focused on the later works (as the subtitle of the book announces), but which incorporates Irigaray's whole œuvre from *Le langage des déments* (1973) to *Between East and West* (2002).

2 Deutscher does not open another round of the feminist "equality versus difference" debate, but instead shows that the premises of Irigaray's philosophical theories are much more complex. Her study centres around the phrase "impossible difference", which highlights Irigaray's play with paradoxes. The fundamental idea is that "difference" is free of connotations which have over centuries restrained or defined women. This in turn implies that this difference does not contain an essence and that it is thus "impossible". This opens up a number of recurring paradoxes which Deutscher combines in order to analyse Irigaray's intersections of multiculturalism and feminism. Irigaray does not accept the opposition of equality and difference that has governed feminist debate for so long because she regards sexual difference as a means to achieve equality. In her introduction, Deutscher states that "I situate Irigaray's work in the context of contemporary debates about the politics of performativity, recognition, multiculturalism, pro-diversity, and identity politics. I propose dialogues between her work and contemporary American feminist, legal, poststructuralist, and postcolonial theory. I also read her from the perspective of Jacques Derrida's later work" (6). These plans succeed brilliantly which to a great extent depends on the accessibility of the text that is achieved by a repetitively circular style built up around the many questions that Deutscher poses. Since Luce Irigaray has repeatedly been criticised for giving more importance to sexual difference than to issues of multiculturalism and race, Deutscher pays particular attention to Irigaray's way of approaching the relationship between feminism and multiculturalism.

3 The first chapter "Sexual Difference as a Basis of Equality" serves as a comprehensive

introduction to Irigaray's œuvre as a whole. Language already plays a crucial role in Irigaray's early texts such as *This Sex Which is Not One*, where she argues that political equality has to be endorsed while at the same time issuing a critique of the language of equality. Critics have accused Irigaray of supporting traditional binary views of the sexes with views of women as emotional, passive, irrational and close to nature. However, Irigaray herself explains that she in no way wants to create and support sexual difference in essentialist binary views. Instead she states that no content can be attributed to the idea of woman.

4 Deutscher makes it clear that like Beauvoir and other equality feminists, Irigaray is concerned with the question of how women and femininity have been represented in Western history and philosophy. In her best-known *Speculum of the Other Woman*, as well as in several other works, Irigaray argues that women have been regarded as the other and have "served as mirrors sustaining masculine identity" (11). With the language of difference, she argues, women are no longer acknowledged as either the other/opposite of men or the same or complement of men, but can for the first time be regarded in their own right. Here the pervading notion of impossibility comes into play, which Deutscher makes very clear in summarising: "Once one accepts that there is no 'as woman' embodied in women's historical options of male equivalent, opposite or complement, it is clear that acting or speaking as a woman is an impossible gesture" (12). Irigaray problematises women's relational identities and the fact that our society has made it impossible to think of distinct male and female subjectivities, although she never states what they would consist of. However, the impossibility to conceive of this difference reveals much about our society, she argues. In order to create new identities, the impossibility of thinking about this difference has to be acknowledged. Therefore Irigaray challenges the belief that equality should be the basis upon which excluded groups should try to gain admittance to formerly prohibited spheres. Deutscher concludes her first chapter with the general insight that "Irigaray means her feminism of difference to act as a useful transformation, not an abandonment of, equality politics" (22) and concretises this thesis in the following chapters.

5 Chapter two traces Irigaray's views on language throughout her œuvre. Over the course of her writing life - particularly in *Parler n'est jamais neutre* - Irigaray criticises her earlier stance of impartial neutrality which she took in works such as *Le langage des déments*, as she comes to the realisation that discourse cannot be sex-neutral. Deutscher works out very clearly that Irigaray's main concern, the effacement of the possibility of sexual difference that originates from depicting women according to a masculine reference point, "implicitly indicates the possibility of sexual difference. Irigaray plays with logic. If there is an

exclusion, there must be something (even if it is no more than a mere possibility) to exclude" (28). Deutscher repeatedly draws attention to Irigaray's rhetorical devices and to her philosophical use of paradox or hypothesis. But ultimately Deutscher manages to show that Irigaray's way of approaching the issues of female representation and sexual difference yields important insights and stimulates new thoughts on old impasses: "Commentary on Irigaray's work has been exercised by the question of whether or not there is sexual difference. But Irigaray reroutes this question. Her point is that western culture has rendered sexual difference impossible and that this should concern us, regardless" (30).

6 Chapter three, entitled "Rethinking the Politics of Recognition", deals with matters of institutional blindness and the lack of recognition of sexual difference. Issues of recognition are discussed in connection with cultural diversity. Irigaray's primary goal is to provide space and rights for identities which are still in the process of developing and which might be different in an as yet indefinable way. Deutscher takes great pains to work out that the contents of sexual difference are constantly left open in Irigaray's work, as "a pair of empty brackets" (49). Here, a development in Irigaray's thinking can be found. Whereas her early works (such as *Speculum*) mimic and exaggerate traditional notions of femininity and women in order to render them absurd, her later works are dominated by the idea of sexual difference as "anticipated, abstract possibility" (49).

7 Chapter four deals with issues of performativity and begins with an introduction to John Austin's theory of speech acts. Irigaray's critics have emphasised that her ideas on the recognition of difference in a legal context have no immediate power, as Irigaray does not occupy a position of institutional authority. At first glance, this appears self-evident and many critics have castigated Irigaray for having the naïveté to think otherwise. However, Deutscher convincingly shows that another approach to performativity is needed here, which is based on the linguistic differentiation between perlocutionary and illocutionary speech acts. She proposes not to judge Irigaray's texts with respect to the consequences which might arise from them (in constitutional or legal terms) but with respect to what her words are already effecting as an act of declaration. Turning to Derrida, Deutscher likens Irigaray's "bill of sexuate rights" with the Declaration of Independence, since in both cases "the subjects formally entitled to the declared rights precede their legal recognition" (67). Deutscher not only repeatedly highlights paradoxes and circular logic in Irigaray's texts, but she also makes their function plausible, referring to many different authors and debates in order to delimit or compare Irigaray's approach. The logic of performativity is indeed a circular one: "Their imagined performativity highlights that Irigaray's sexuate rights are not justified by a prior state of

sexual difference. Further, Irigaray does not argue that as cause-effect relation, the rights would produce sexual difference. But if a culture of sexual difference ever materializes, it might justify the rights" (70).

8 In the fifth chapter entitled "Sexuate Genres", Deutscher argues that Irigaray's ideal is a culture in which sexed subjects not only appropriate others for stabilising their own identity, but is one which would be largely oriented towards acknowledging the other as someone who always remains "not me" and "not mine". This has cultural as well as gender-related implications. Deutscher discusses identity theories from Freud through Merleau-Ponty to Lacan and argues that Irigaray's aim is to imagine a culture in which mediation between subjects replaces the culture of appropriation which we know. Instead of uttering "I love you", Irigaray prefers to emphasise this mediation by replacing it by "I love to you". Mediation according to Irigaray requires participation in what Deutscher terms "sexuate genres" ("genre" cannot wholly be equated with the English "gender" but leads in a similar direction). This is a hypothetical and purely imaginary identity but means that one's relation to women is at the centre of the imaginary identity of woman.

9 Chapter six is concerned with the role of the divine in a politics of difference. Irigaray's interest in religious and spiritual matters pervades her whole *œuvre*, especially in the form of feminist reinterpretations of traditional religious texts. Deutscher traces Irigaray's arguments about the split between man and the transcendent divine, a split which entails the othering of women. Irigaray envisions another kind of deity altogether in arguing for a conception of the divine which is not transcendent, but instead realised in the here and now and connected to the body. Chapter seven, entitled "Interrogating an Unasked Question: Is there Sexual Difference?", repeats, reassesses and deepens previous arguments. Paradoxes and impossibility are once again presented as being important for a culture that prescribes discourses on equality, sameness, negation and complementarity. Sexual difference thus has to be formulated as a cultural impossibility in order to become aware of what our culture refuses to think. Chapter Eight confronts accusations of Irigaray's heterosexual bias in examining her ideas of relations between lovers and friends. Shifts in Irigaray's focus throughout her works complicate the analysis of this question. While she first tends to expose the failure of the appropriation of the other, her later work de-emphasises this point and neglects a critical perspective on appropriation. Her examples focus on heterosexual relations and Deutscher argues that this creates a problem as long as Irigaray presents the "genres" as potentially absolutely different. If Irigaray's arguments are taken further (which Deutscher does convincingly), it becomes clear that it is the subjects themselves which are different

regardless of their relationship to different genres. This difference is then present in every relationship and would apply to homosexual as well as heterosexual relationships.

10 While Chapter nine once again turns to Irigarayan language philosophy and linguistics (especially focusing on Irigaray's critique of Sartre), Chapter Ten finally supplies an analysis of Irigaray's views on cultural difference. This chapter must be placed after an in-depth analysis of Irigaray's ideas of sexual difference since Deutscher poses the question of "whether Irigaray's politics of impossible difference addresses, or offers the potential to address, the thinking of cultural difference" (165). What in Deutscher's opinion greatly distinguishes these two topics is that while Irigaray regards a politics of sexual difference as impossible, cultural difference appears to be more possible. This is mainly due to Irigaray's writings which partly idealize the East (*Entre orient et occident*) and in which she does not adequately reflect on her own appropriation of the other. Deutscher stresses the reason for this: as Irigaray denounces the West as a whole, she is prone to idealisations of Eastern cultures, although her ideas on sexual difference could easily provide a model for a critical rethinking of the topic of cultural difference.

11 Deutscher's conclusion weaves together the many strands that she has discussed and serves as a very accessible round-up. Her main criticism of Irigaray focuses on the fact that Irigaray is not consistent in her concept of difference as impossible, which becomes clear in her treatment of the culturally different. Deutscher ends her study with the statement: "It is intriguing to consider the possibility of an Irigarayan approach to race and cultural difference inflected by the terms of her approach to sexual difference" (193). One great merit of the study is that Deutscher already considers this possibility instead of merely stating it, thus providing creative and stimulating approaches to Irigaray's theory and offering possible practical applications.

12 On the whole, Deutscher's book is a thorough and comprehensive study of Irigaray's works, one which is unique in its theoretical groundings with respect to many debates (post-colonial, feminist, linguistic, philosophical). Readers will find analyses of both Irigaray's well-known and lesser-known writings, while being safely accompanied through the "arbitrary leap of faith" (101) which must be made in order to access Irigaray's texts. However, two minor issues might be criticised. The first is Deutscher's approach to the definition of "feminism." Although it is central to the topic, she does not critically reflect upon the term and its historical implications. She places too much emphasis on French Feminists' (especially of course Irigaray's) new and absolute position as the philosophers of difference and, in doing so, disregards that there have been (non-French) feminists throughout

history who have reflected on issues of difference and the representation of the feminine before (Virginia Woolf among others). The lack of even a mention of such positions, however, is likely due to a certain "anxiety of influence" on the part of French Feminists themselves, who avoid drawing attention to the possible influences of previous feminist writers on their own writing. However, a treatment of feminism, difference and representation in a historical framework would of course exceed the scope of the book. Another feature of the book which might be regarded as weakness by some, although I found it helpful and immensely stimulating, concerns Deutscher's style and structure. As Irigaray's concept of the paradoxical impossibility of difference is hard to grasp (a problem many critics have been unable to solve), Deutscher's study works with constant repetitions, variations and an extensive use of questions. While this may trouble some readers, I found that this circular approach not only does justice to Irigaray's complexity, but makes it possible to connect many different topics within Irigaray's work and thus yields an engaging and differentiated analysis.