

The Im/Possible Conditions of Unconditional Hospitality:
Irigaray and Derrida on the Thresholds of Ethics

“[I]ntentionality opens, from its own threshold...as hospitality, as welcoming of the face....and thus as ethics in general. For hospitality is not simply some region of ethics...its is ethicity itself, the whole and the principle of ethics.”

Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas: 50

As Derrida here intimates, the tradition of post-Heideggerian French thought has come, at least since Levinas’ intervention, to increasingly construe the gesture of hospitality as the axiom of ethical relation. This ‘categorical imperative’ of hospitality, as Derrida termed it in his turn-of-the-millennium meditation, *Of Hospitality* (1997/2000) has also found significant expression in Luce Irigaray’s *Sharing the World* (2008), one of her most recent explorations of how we might begin to cultivate a culture capable of “welcoming the other as other.” (STW: 23) As implied by Irigaray’s choice of interlocutor in this text, the thought of hospitality may be found, partly submerged, in the later Heidegger’s excavation of ‘Being’ and ‘Dwelling’ as linguistic and conceptual cognates. According to Heidegger, dwelling as “the basic character of human being” (BDT: 349) expresses the “*fundamental character*” of “*sparing and preserving*,” (BDT: 354) and denotes that web of activities by which we “cherish and protect...preserve and care for.” (BDT: 352) While at pains to emphasize that it is only in a derivative sense that ‘Bauen’ refers to the material practice of building edifices to safeguard ourselves, families and possessions, it is, nonetheless, in Heidegger’s association of Being with the ‘abode’ in which we are ‘at home,’ that the contours of the hospitality-question begins to find its form.

This Heideggerian provenience is also suggested by the first essay in Derrida's *Of Hospitality*, 'Question d'etranger,' the title of which both recalls the famous 'Seinsfrage,' and also skillfully exploits the double genitive to evoke, not only the popular meme of the foreigner as a problematic question and the questions – at borders, for example - we address to foreigners, but also the way in which the foreigner poses a question for us, one which forces us to address the way we construct, and police, the boundaries of our being, at home, or in our 'homelands.' Recalling Socrates and Theaetetus' dialogue with the Eleatic Stranger in *The Sophist* - an epigram from which opens *Sein and Zeit* - Derrida observes that it is here that "the question of the foreigner as a question of hospitality" is also "articulated with a question of being." (OH: 9) The Eleatic Stranger, Derrida reminds us, is the one who questions the self-identical stasis of Parmenidean Being – a "well-rounded sphere" (ON: 8.43) shackled by Fate to be "whole and changeless" (ON: 8.36-8) – by challenging the rigid separation of Being and non-Being. Thus, the foreigner is the figure whose arrival puts, Derrida continues, "being-in-question," (OH: 3) and the question of how we welcome, or address ourselves, to the (question of the) foreigner becomes then a privileged means of interrogating the ontological structures which open, or close, the possibilities of ethical relation.

As scholars of her work will well recognize, interrogating the circle of self-identical Being bequeathed to the tradition by 'father Parmenides' and his philosophical descendents has hitherto formed a central strand of Irigaray's project. In *The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger*, she laments Heidegger's repeated invocation of "the proposition at the origin of metaphysics: *to be-to think-the same*" (FA: 17) which

functions, she suggests, as a “tautological circle that protects” Being “from fissure.” (FA: 123) Tracing the way in which Heideggerian Being is dependent on a disavowed material/maternal support – figured here as unacknowledged and appropriated air – Irigaray is critical of any construction of Being which pretends it can “close itself up in a circle” and hence “exist as one.” (FA: 99) Similarly, in *Sharing the World*, she returns to the motif of the “autological circle,” (STW: x) with the intention of posing a question to our still “monosubjective culture;” (STW: 2) that which persists in building Being, she suggests, on the basis of “a will for immutability,” the desire “for permanence of self-identity” and “the security of dwelling in sameness.” (STW: 23)

The principal aim of *Sharing the World* is, however, construction rather than critique, and consists in an attempt to fully elaborate the conditions by which we might come to dwell with the other in difference rather than according to the ‘autologic’ of an economy of the same. Departing somewhat from the skepticism directed at the Heideggerian ‘house of Being’ in the *Forgetting of Air*, Irigaray here undertakes a recuperative rethinking of the nature of dwelling that would allow for the extension of hospitality. The axiom of this extension is that the other is “recognized in his or her differences” (STW: xvi) which necessitates, Irigaray informs us, the equal recognition that the “world of one’s own” is now “limited in extension.” (STW: 63) We are unable to extend hospitality, she argues, as long as we persist in denying the finitude of our own world and continue to perceive – and receive – the other as one who inhabits the same world as our own, a process Irigaray denotes as ‘projecting’ the world, and which stands in sharp distinction to the ‘sharing’ evoked by the title. The process by which I offer “respect, welcome, hospitality towards

the Being of the other” (STW: 77) is hence dependent on my “withdrawing of my project towards them,” a gesture both active and passive which “lets the other appear as they are.” (STW: 78)

Irigaray characterizes this passive-activity whereby the other is “entrusted to a letting be” as “a hospitality that is without pre-established dwelling,” (STW: 93) and contrasts it with the way we are usually “taught...to locate the other’s fitting place in an already constituted meaning.” (STW: 21) We are hence habitually encouraged to “welcome the other in a place for guests, a room for guests,” one which is “left vacant for the other...in our dwelling,” but which is constituted by “the very architecture of our world, of our subjectivity.” (STW: 21-22) The space of hospitality is therefore one in which the other is not allowed to appear as they are, and in their difference from me, but is forced to conform to my understandings, or my projections, of their nature as essentially the same as mine. Hence, my hospitality is not one appropriate to the particularity of the other’s being, and the changeless and “immutable dwelling” I offer them is one in which “I have reserved a place for just any guest” and is “neutral or indifferent with respect to the one who is calling.” (STW: 22) My gesture of welcome is in fact no more than the provision of “an empty room,” and, moreover, it is a gesture which conceals the demand that “the other... submit to the same and the Same, on pain of being rejected, expelled.” (STW: 28)

This more-or-less explicit violence in the offer extended to the other - the demand that they conform, or translate themselves, into my idiom or custom – is reminiscent of

Derrida's description of the "first act of violence" experienced by Socrates as he appears before the Athenian Court, the need for him "to ask for hospitality in a language which by definition is not his own, the one imposed on him by the master of the house, the host, the king, the lord, the authorities, the nation" or "the State." (OH: 15) This demand for translation into the language of the host, is, Derrida suggests, characteristic of the submission to the "paternal authority of the logos" (OH: 11) he terms 'conditional hospitality.' The 'minimum' condition of this hospitality, Derrida argues, is that the foreigner answer the question first posed to them at the border or the threshold, 'What is your name?'; a procedure which contractually inscribes the guest in the host's systems of rights, customs and duties, making them responsible before the law of the land, a 'subject-in-law.' In such a way the hospitality offered to the foreigner is conditional on their conforming to the strictures imposed by the host. "You are welcome," the host says, "as long you conform to my rules. No talking after ten, no worshipping false gods, and no, no, no wearing weird clothes."

This conversion of the foreigner into what Irigaray would term 'the-other-of-the-same,' is, for Derrida, far removed from the ethical imperative of 'unconditional hospitality,' which compels us to "give place" to the "absolute, unknown, anonymous other" (OH: 25) the one who is "absolutely excluded and heterogenous." (OH: 21) This law requires me to offer hospitality without contractual obligation, reciprocity, or even the guarantee furnished by a name, and is hence fundamentally at odds with the procedures of hospitality by right, just as, Derrida suggests, returning us the structuring distinction of 'Force of Law,' there is a fundamental antinomy between universal juridical calculability,

and the attentiveness to the particularity of the other which characterizes justice. For Derrida, this antinomy is absolutely constitutive. The infinite demand of ‘unconditional hospitality’ is – as in the case of the justice which it names – only to be grasped through the figure of ‘the impossible.’ The conditions of possibility of the very offer of hospitality necessarily inhere in the traditional constitution of the home, the “sovereignty of oneself over one’s home” and the violent acts of “filtering, choosing...and excluding” (OH: 55) by which that home is maintained *as such*. This is as much to say, in a familiar aporetic formula, that ‘The conditions of possibility of hospitality are the conditions of its impossibility.’ Without a home, no hospitality, however conditional, could be extended, but, nonetheless, the regime of laws and stipulations which inscribe the other within a restricted welcome must take their inspiration, their ethical impulse, from the law of unconditional hospitality. As such, hospitality is constituted, *a priori*, by a “non-dialectizable antinomy” (OH: 77) between “two regimes of law” (OH: 79) which are, as in the case of law and justice, both ‘heterogeneous and inseparable.’

As is often the case, it is in his insistence that we must dwell in the ethical aporia – the grasping of which is, for Derrida, to be understood as the very operation of ‘deconstruction as justice’ – that Irigaray’s thinking most clearly departs from any relation to the project of deconstructive ethics. We can, I would want to suggest, fairly read *Sharing the World* as an attempt to think through the conditions of possibility for the ethical relation designated by Derrida as ‘the impossible,’ as an attempt to chart the transformations that would be required in order for us to extend to the other an unconditional hospitality. The aim of the remainder of this paper will be, therefore, to

embark on an exploration of the means by which Irigaray attempts to execute this Herculean, or potentially – if Derrida is correct – Sisyphean, undertaking, and to offer a preliminary assessment of the extent to which she might be considered successful.

In terms not dissimilar to Derrida's association of 'the impossible' with an orientation to the 'avenir,' Irigaray's journey in *Sharing the World* is principally concerned with elaborating the unconditional ethical relation as that which occurs thorough time, or perhaps better, to borrow from Bergson, as a relation-in-duration. In the opening lines of the text, she informs us that when a singular subject projects their world "as the horizon of the totality of all that exists" then "this world coverts time into space." (STW: ix) Here then we encounter the central insight of Bergsonism – that our tradition has hitherto only understood time in spatialized terms – coupled with a recognition that this tendency is underwritten by the subject's inability to recognize their being as partial, or finite. This non-acceptance of finitude corresponds, Irigaray contends, with an inability to appreciate "the other as an irreducible dimension of human reality," (STW: xviii) a failure which we might also translate into Bergsonian as a denial of the others' difference-in-kind. In projecting the world as the same as myself, Irigaray suggests, all differences are reduced to merely those of degree, you and I are simply different points in an otherwise homogenous space, and hence, "the assessments of the relation to the other will then become only quantitative, that is to say, appraised according to the same scale." (STW: 126)

By contrast, Irigaray insists that in order to encounter the other as such, “another temporality has to be set up,” (STW: 78) one which, as Bergson would surely endorse, allows for the other to “appear in a manner that is each time new and unpredictable.” (STW: 87) In line with Derrida’s assertion that the singular law of absolute hospitality demands that I offer the ‘arrivant’ an “unconditional welcome” (OH: 77) that “let[‘s] them come,” (OH: 25) Irigaray also figures the ethical gesture as that which “let[s] the one who is coming arrive.” (STW: 18) This entirely non-prescriptive welcome is, to Irigaray’s mind predicated on refusing the totalizing or homogenizing subjectivity which operates by “laying down the law on all the exists.” (STW: xvii) Thus for Irigaray, as for Derrida, a genuine hospitality – and hence ethics – which allows the other to appear unconditioned by our pre-determinations, can only arrive as a consequence of eluding the determinations of law, in both its scientific and juridical resonances. While in Bergson’s case, the thinking of the creative potentiality of duration is intended to free Being from the law-like snare of an unbending mechanical determinism, Irigaray, is, by contrast, principally concerned that an open becoming-in-relation may be jeopardized and “frozen” by the “already defined rules and imperatives” (BTW: 47) of the ‘common world’ of the ‘one,’ an allusion to the imprisonment of Heideggerian *Dasein* in “the facticity of an already environing world.” (STW: 75)

While we have hitherto understood Irigaray, perhaps somewhat generically, as a thinker of being-as-relation, *Sharing the World* thus makes abundantly clear that Irigaray gives an absolute priority to the possibilities for becoming inherent in the relation between the two who are different-in-sexuate-kind, as over and above the quotidian “relational

weaving” (STW: 65) of the world of Das Man. Unlike a thinker like Nancy, who indicts Heidegger’s denigration of mediocre everyday relations as a failure to bring the ‘analytic of Mitsein’ to completion in the recognition of the “absolutely originary structure” of being-with (Cf. BSP: 61), Irigaray shares Heidegger’s suspicion that the world of Das Man serves to conceal rather than reveal the possibilities of Being. The world of ‘the one,’ which imposes on us a “pre-given, pre-established...pre-determined objectivity.” (STW: 89) amounts to, she tells us, a “sharing of the same in the Same” (STW: 89) and thus leaves us “submerged in an undifferentiated collective...in which each is confused with the other.” (STW: 113)

To Irigaray’s mind then, the average-everyday world cannot furnish the conditions for elaborating an ethical relation, that which requires the recognition that the other is another-in-kind. In alignment with her previous excavations of the burial of the body of the m/other in the birth of our tradition, Irigaray asserts that the conditions of hospitality can only be arrived at by the subject’s recognition of its past dependency on that ‘first other’ who was not the same as the self. It is the failure to acknowledge this first dependency in a “primitive dual relation” (STW: 112), and perhaps more importantly, to process the dereliction that its necessary loss entailed, which leads the subject to ‘project the world’ as the same, producing a “‘one’” which thereafter functions as “a sort of substitution for the relation with the mother.” (STW: 113) The possibility of entering into relation is thus, perhaps paradoxically, determined by an action of turning away from the everyday web of relation and assuming responsibility for oneself as a finite being, a gesture of ‘self-affection’ which corresponds, Irigaray asserts, to the subject “freely

assuming a transcendence able to found a world of one's own." (STW: xviii) This formulation may initially strike us, somewhat alarmingly, as advocating a notion of self-originating being, one which would replicate the speculative conceit – the pretence of the "logos, the subject" that it might "reflect itself by itself (TS: 74-5) - performed by autological being and so expertly excavated by Irigaray in her earliest work. However, the defining character of this type of being, Irigaray underlines, is that, in denial of its origin in an-other, it projects itself as the totality of the world, and thus excludes the possibility of another's becoming. The only possible rectification of this autological error is, therefore, she contends, to fully embrace the finitude implied by one first dependence on the m/other, and in so doing, found oneself as a necessarily limited and partial, rather than totalized, world.

As long as we do not freely assume this work, the gesture of hospitality will languish, for, all the while that "the relation with the mother is not recognized and the world in which we dwell substitutes itself for this relation," then "otherness" will remain "imperceptible." (STW: 126) Perhaps not unsurprisingly we thus discover that the ability to "construct a relation in time" (STW: 116) with a genuine other, free from pre-determinations derived from merger with the collective one, is dependent on a reckoning with the past. Relational elaboration requires the responsible assumption of finitude, coupled with an "awareness" of the way "a previous relational world... colors the way of experiencing the present situation." (STW: 119) If we fail to interrogate the role "a more or less well-accomplished internalization" has played in "our manner of apprehending the world" (STW: 124) then the hospitality we offer will be simply one more form of

narcissism, the “place that we give to the other” amounting to “a representation of the space that we ourselves occupy...cluttered with our own objects, our projections, our repetitions, our habits and tautologies.” (STW: 24)

Thus, Irigaray asserts, by “removing me from the facticity of my already being there” (STW: 81) the ethical relation can be elaborated on the basis on a new temporality, one in which the “future” is “irreducible to the mere unfolding of my past” (STW: 93) and which preserves the possibility of an attentive welcome to the arriving-other as such. The rewards of this endeavor, are, Irigaray suggests, potentially great, for it represents also the opening of the horizon of my becoming. Nonetheless, the risks are not to be diminished. When I “prepare a space in time in which the other can appear to me...I consent to receive and welcome him or her” while not being able, necessarily “to...I foresee...how the other will modify my existence – my already-have-been and thus my future – the development of my life.” (STW: 93) Moreover, assuming the finitude which is “the condition for an authentic meeting between two subjects,” requires, Irigaray is clear, “a certain dereliction, or a certain terror” (STW: 109) the responsibility for which “is so difficult...that we will attempt various ways of evading it.” (STW: 49) Thus, the work of attaining to the necessary conditions of for the ‘human accomplishment’ of extending unconditional hospitality appears, in significant respects, to present itself still as an “impassible threshold.” (STW: 45)

It is, arguably, because of the risks incurred in opening the self to an absolute hospitality that Derrida determines that such a gesture must always, in practice, be inscribed within

the nexus of contractual rights. I would suggest that Irigaray's account of the possibility of an unconditional openness to the arrival of the other is extremely compelling, and, moreover, articulates a fundamental truth about the extent to which our ability to attend to, and care, for the particularities of others is determined by the sufficiency of our reckoning with history, and the interpolations and projections that it creates. Nonetheless, when we turn our attention to the fact that hospitality must be an experience extended in space as well as time, her account is significantly weakened, by, in essence, the very conditions of the 'at home' identified by Derrida. In spatial terms, Irigaray's principle motif of hospitality is presented in the figure of the threshold, that which, characteristically, "marks the limits of the world of each one" (STW: 1) and prepares a place on "the borders of our own dwelling," for "a meeting with the other." (STW: 8) The threshold is principally construed then as a liminal point which the self may cross in either direction, venturing outwards in order to meet the other, or to returning to the self in the recuperative gesture of 'auto-affection.' In a significant sense then, this image serves to obscure the principal question posed by the guest, who, in requesting – or demanding – hospitality, is asking, not to meet with me outside myself, or to dally on the "openings that are deliberately arranged for having access to the other" (STW: 8), but is rather, asking to be let in, to cross the threshold.

While Irigaray mediation in *Sharing the World* asserts in several places, that relational elaboration requires us to think a new "space-time of an encounter with the other" (STW: 63), we have yet, I would suggest, still far to go in escaping from the aporia indicated by Derrida, insofar as a spatial determination of hospitality is still subject to the requirement that as host exert some degree of sovereignty over the boundaries of their being in order

for it to constitute a home, as such. Irigaray clearly recognizes, and indeed valorizes, the necessity of the borders which allow for the possibility of the return to self in auto-affection, and thus, in a number of places she equivocates in the positioning of the space of hospitality in relation to the self-as-home, locating it both inside and outside. Derrida it seems, was more than aware, in *Of Hospitality*'s second essay 'Pas d'hospitalite,' that the impossible antinomy of the ethical relation was more easily escaped by thinking that relation-in-duration, rather than in its spatial axis, and warns us that "[c]rossing the threshold is entering, and not only approaching or coming." (OH: 123) While it is absolutely the case, as Judith Butler's recent work has beautifully illustrated, that we must ex-pose ourselves to vulnerability in order to open to the ethical relation with the other, it seems, nonetheless, that this openness is necessarily finite, limited to the space between the lintel and the jamb. It remains to be seen whether this limitation is imposed by our inability to sufficiently think the becoming-time of space, or whether it is, as Derrida suggests, absolutely constitutive of hospitality as such. This is, inevitably, a question that we cannot, and should not, attempt to answer here. In relinquishing our foresight, the best we might say is, it is a threshold that cannot yet be crossed.

References

- BDT: Heidegger, Martin, 'Building, Dwelling, Thinking' (1951) trans. Albert Hofstadter: 347-363 in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (London: Routledge, 1993)
- BSP: Nancy, Jean-Luc *Being Singular Plural*, trans. Robert D. Richardson and Anne E. O'Byrne (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000)
- FA: Irigaray, Luce, *The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger*, trans. Mary Beth Mader (Austin, University of Texas Press, 1999)
- OH: Derrida, Jacques, *Of Hospitality*, trans. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford, Stanford University press, 2000)
- ON: Parmenides of Elea, *Fragments*, trans. D. Gallop (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984)
- STW: Irigaray, Luce, *Sharing the World* (London: Continuum, 2008)