

The Status of Love in Philosophy: An Examination of The Role of Love (Eros) in the Work (or Works) of Selected French Thinkers.

By

Mark Kourie

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Supervisor: Prof. Benda Hofmeyr

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	i
Dedication	ii
Table of Contents	iii
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
1. Themes	1
1.1. Eros and Alterity	1
1.2. Eros and Touch	4
1.3. Eros and Transcendence	6
1.4. Eros and Death	8
1.5. Eros and Plurality	9
2. Overview	11
Chapter 2: Love's Debt to Levinas	13
1. Introduction	13
2. Key Concepts In Levinas's Work	15
2.1. The Other	16
2.2. The Face	19
2.3. Ethics is First Philosophy	20
2.4. Time and The Other	23
3. The Phenomenology of Eros	25
3.1. Eros in the Work of Levinas	25
3.2. <i>Totality and Infinity</i> - Offering The Terminology of Eros	30
3.2.1. Need and Desire – Enjoyment and Transcendence	30
3.2.1.1. Eros: Where Need and Desire Collide	33
3.2.2. A Voluptuous Meditation	35

3.2.3. Shut Up and Kiss Me: The Non-Signifyingness of Nudity	37
3.2.4. The caress	39
3.3. Eros as equivocation	41
4. The Transcendence of the Future – Fecundity and Paternity	43
4.1. Fecundity and Paternity	44
5. Love Eternal: Love and Death	46
6. Rich in poverty, poor in wealth – Levinas’s critique of Platonic eros	47
7. Woman and the Feminine	49
8. Conclusion	52
Chapter 3: The Feminine Objects – Eros In The Thought Of Luce Irigaray	56
1. Introduction	56
2. Irigaray’s Problematisation of Levinas and the Proposed Solution	59
3. The Feminine Fundamentals: The Basic Tenets of Irigaray’s Deconstructive Thought	61
3.1. Madness and its Method: Irigaray’s Psychoanalysis	67
3.2. Critiquing the Masculine Transcendental Subject	71
3.3. A New Imaginary	72
4. I Love To Irigaray – Irigaray’s Views On Eros	75
4.1. Sorcerer Love	76
4.2. The Language of Love	80
4.2.1. The Sensible Transcendental	80
4.2.2. Wonder	83
4.2.3. The Threshold	84
4.2.4. The Mucous	86
5. The Fecund Touch of Lovers: Irigaray’s Critique of Levinas’s Eros	86
5.1. A Lovers’ Tiff or Grounds for Divorce? Irigaray’s Reading of the Role of the Woman in her “Fecundity Of The Caress”	89
5.2. In the Name of the Mother: The Problem with Paternal Fecundity	92

5.3.Touch Made Visible: The Priority of Touch over Sight	95
5.4.The Fecundity of the Caress	95
5.5.Divine Eros: Carnal Yet Transcendent	100
5.6.The Lady Doth Protest Too Much Methinks: Evaluating Irigaray’s Critique of Levinas	104
5.6.1. Irigaray’s Homophobia	108
6. I Love You To Death: But My Death Or Yours?	110
7. Conclusion	113
Chapter 4 – Naked and Exposed: Using Nancy to Extrapolate Eros as the Exposure of the Self as an Erotic Body	117
1. Introduction	117
2. Sidestepping Parmenides: Nancy’s Critique of Alterity in Levinas	122
3. Thinking is Love	128
4. Shattering the Dialectic	134
4.1. Challenging the Dialectic	134
4.2. The Heart Exposed	137
4.3. Self Love: Pride	139
4.4. Broken Heart	142
5. The Transcendence of Love	146
5.1. Love Unveils Finitude	149
6. Love and Desire	151
7. Shattered Eros: The Plurality of Love has Erotic Undertones	154
7.1. Love’s True Name: The Promise	156
8. Orgasmic Joy, Love and Concern	158
9. Irigaray, Nancy, and the Body	162
9.1. Touching and the Body	163
9.2. The body	167
10. Nancy: A Brief Critical Reflection	174

11. Conclusion	175
Chapter 5: Conclusion	182
1. Loving Me, Loving You: Eros and Alterity	182
2. Touching Me, Touching You: The Tactility of Eros	184
3. The Possibility of Erotic Transcendence	188
4. Till Death Do Us Part: Eros and Death	190
5. Eros and Philosophy: The Legacy of Plato's <i>Symposium</i>	191
6. Eros Pluralises	193
7. Final Remarks	195
List of Sources	196

Chapter 1: Introduction

DH Lawrence mused that “We’ve made a mess of love/Since we made an ideal of it.” In the final stanza of his poem, *The Mess of Love*, Lawrence says

The moment the mind interferes with love, or the will fixes on it,
Or the personality assumes it as an attribute, or the ego takes possession of it,
It is not love any more, it’s just a mess.
And we’ve made a great mess of love, mind-perverted, will-perverted, ego-perverted
love.

Could this mess be tidied up by subjecting love to philosophical enquiry? It is the aim of this dissertation to examine this possibility, and in particular, to examine the status of eros in the work of three recent French philosophers: Emmanuel Levinas, Luce Irigaray, and Jean-Luc Nancy. There are a number of philosophical problems (which may be interpreted in line with Lawrence’s diagnosis of ‘the mess of love’) that plague a philosophical investigation of love. The task of this introduction is thus to define these problems and direct the trajectory of the attempts to solve them as we find such attempts in the work of the three thinkers named above.

1. Themes

The following outlines the key definitions and the themes which run through the course of this dissertation. It is important to note, however, that the thematic overview which follows does not correspond directly to the structure of the dissertation as a whole. Rather, these themes appear in each chapter in connection with the particular thinker which that chapter discusses. But since the final aim of this dissertation is a critical comparison between the selected thinkers, a summary overview of such a comparison is given here according to theme, rather than the progression of the dissertation, for the sake of overall clarity.

1.1. Eros and Alterity

Since eros is a species of love which is felt toward another person, it must necessarily be complicit with alterity. Indeed Levinas, Irigaray, and (to a somewhat less explicit, but nonetheless significant, extent) Nancy, all investigate eros as one particular concept which their figuration of alterity has important implications for. What alterity is, however, is a matter of subtle disagreement between these three philosophers, and hence understanding these differences sheds light upon the status of eros in their respective thought.

In Levinas, we find that eros is an equivocal relationship with radical alterity, or ‘the Other.’ But since Levinas is the thinker of alterity *par excellence*, his stance on eros is necessarily one worth considering. For Levinas, the problem of eros is a problem of narcissism. As we shall see, Levinas’s

analysis renders it impossible for eros to truly reach the Other beyond the ego, and hence what is ultimately loved is not the Other, but the ego's pleasurable experience of the Other. On the one hand then, eros is narcissistic because what is loved cannot be anything beyond the self. On the other hand, this love is contingent upon the absolute alterity of the Other. Hence eros is an ambiguous movement which lapses back into egoism despite its contingency on egoism's opposite: the Other. Levinas thus labels eros 'equivocation' since it involves the simultaneity of pleasure's sameness and the alterity of otherness. But who is this Other? Levinas supposes that the Other in eros is none other than the feminine beloved: a frail and passive figure whose passivity and vulnerability reveals a future which eros cannot anticipate. This future, as we shall discover, is to be understood here as akin to radical alterity, since Levinas's particular configuration thereof indicates that alterity - like the future - is that which is radically new. Alterity as the future, however, presents a problem regarding the possibility of a relation, for how can a relationship be established with which is 'yet to come?' Eros, in Levinas, serves a particularly important step towards establishing a relationship with radical alterity. But, this relationship is not precisely accomplished in eros, since eros is troubled by its equivocal character as mentioned above. Thus Levinas considers eros as an important step towards understanding an *unambiguous* relationship with alterity which he claims is better expressed in the paternal relationship between father and son. Hence while the erotic relation with alterity is ambiguous and equivocal, its implicit consequence is not. Moreover, Levinas emphasises that his conception of paternity is not restricted to biology, but encompasses a disposition towards others which anyone regardless of gender may adopt. However, Levinas's focus on the paternal relationship opens his thought up to a rigorous feminist critique, which we find in the philosophy of Luce Irigaray.

Irigaray takes exception to the apparent preferential treatment which the masculine receives in Levinas's work. Since Levinas considers the erotic relation with the feminine as ambiguous and equivocal, while he considers the paternal relation as transcendent and ethical, Irigaray argues that Levinas misunderstands alterity, which she argues is anchored in sexual difference. For Irigaray, the Other is not an absolute metaphysical alterity, but otherness is rather embodied in sexual difference. As such, eros gains a far more privileged status in Irigaray's work than it does in Levinas's, since Irigaray considers eros as a possibility within which the relations between the 'real' poles of alterity can be cultivated in an ethical fashion. Eros provides Irigaray with a situation within which the masculine and the feminine may interact in a generous and rejuvenating way, and thus eros not only serves as an indication of bodily fecundity but of spiritual fecundity as well. Irigaray constructs eros as an ideal site for men and women to interact ethically inasmuch as ethical interaction between men and women would be defined by allowing each to be 'for themselves' rather than at the service of the other. If the poles of gender encompass the radical difference which constitutes alterity, then eros is a situation where those poles of alterity can inform one another without assimilating one another.

Irigaray argues that the deferral of the feminine other to the obscurity of equivocation, whilst showing preference for a relationship with the son, is a misconstruction of alterity which favours the masculine and hence perpetuates the structure of patriarchy. Eros can indeed reach the other, claims Irigaray, but only if we consider the feminine other in her own terms, unobliged to the whims of a fearful masculine desire for domination.

A comparison between Levinas's and Irigaray's respective thoughts on eros, however, yields an interesting dilemma regarding gender. On the one hand, Levinas's figure of eros allows for more possibilities of gender because he considers 'masculine' and 'feminine' to be categories which apply in some proportional measure to any and all human beings. Whilst the masculine resembles the egoism of sameness (which left unchecked might occlude the alterity of the Other), the feminine would be otherness itself. But this implies that sexual pleasure, in the egoism of eros, must be considered as essentially masculine. This therefore does not account for the differences between masculine and feminine pleasures, and hence becomes problematic in terms of the empirical distinctions between masculine and feminine. On the other hand, if Irigaray allows for such empirical distinctions to be made, then it is at the cost of understanding gender far too rigidly, where biological sex is too strictly entwined with being a man or a woman. Irigaray's thought does not allow for a subtle mixture of masculine and feminine in each person, which Levinas does allow (to his credit). But if we are to take Irigaray's feminist reading of Levinas seriously, as well we should, then an alignment with his view must be modified somewhat. In order to overcome this subtle yet insidious dilemma, we turn to Jean-Luc Nancy's understanding of love for a possible solution.

Where the primary problems regarding eros in Levinas and Irigaray pertains to the status of eros as the relation between self and other as masculine and feminine, Nancy's version of eros supposedly occurs at a more fundamental level than the binary pairs which Levinas and Irigaray examine. Both Levinas and Irigaray assume that love is a feeling which originates in a subject, and moves towards that subject's 'other.' Nancy, in contrast, considers love not as a *feeling*, but as the ontological mode in which a self is *exposed* to another. Love circumscribes the ego's operation, and exposes the self of which the ego is but a dialectically constructed - yet ever incomplete - part. In other words, Nancy considers love to be that which renders an ego incapable of being alone: love exposes the self to, and as, 'being-with' or *Mitsein*. And while Nancy resists making the distinction between various kinds of love, including eros, my interpretation of his work shows that eros subtends all loves due to embodiment. But Nancy's thought on the body also destabilises a binary conception of gender; it rather implies a pluralistic and fragmented multiplicity of sex and gender, which in turn assists an argument to counter Irigaray's insistence on a dual picture of gender. Nancy's work implies that every single body is sexed as a unique configuration of various bodily relations; and thus the exposure of

such a body can be construed as eros. Eros, on this view, is the exposure of the body inasmuch as it is sexed. It is both the exposure of the body as sexed, and the subtle variations in which such an exposure takes shape. Thus, if all loves entail some body, then all loves will necessarily be subtended by eros because that body is necessarily sexed. Nancy's view therefore both encapsulates and surpasses the views offered by Levinas and Irigaray. As exposure, eros is not the selfish return to egoism that Levinas argues, but at the same time it remains the exposure to an other who is beyond the sensibility of eros. Eros, for Nancy, can be understood as fundamental and hence is aligned with Irigaray's praise of eros. But Nancy's view allows more room for gender difference than Irigaray's view might allow.

1.2. Eros and Touch

The tactile dimension of eros is an important theme dealt with by each thinker examined in this dissertation. The phenomenological analyses which characterise Levinas's work indeed necessitates that something be said of the sensuality of an erotic encounter. For Levinas, the loving caress is a selfish move, charged by a voluptuous motivation. But the fact that the caress touches another person means that the erotic caress is predicated upon alterity despite the selfish desires of such a touch. Thus Levinas (1979:254) will say that the caress seeks a "future never future enough," and that it is the Other who signals this undetermined future which the egoism of erotic touching ceaselessly appropriates. For Levinas, the sensuality of eros testifies to its immediacy and its egoistic character, and hence the erotic touch is insufficient to establish a transcendent relationship with the Other. Again, Levinas looks forward to the fecundity of paternity to configure a relationship which transcends the sensuality of erotic immanence.

Central to this formulation is the way in which Levinas understands 'the face.' While we will explore this in greater depth later, the face of the Other is – in brief – that which signals the alterity of the Other beyond the phenomenal experience of another person's actual face. Although the encounter with the face of the Other is not reducible to an empirical encounter, it is, for Levinas, nevertheless something seen (and also something which sees). But the face is not something which touch can really encounter, because touch – unlike sight – is confined to the sameness of immediate experience. Sight, on the other hand, may be considered to 'see' to the horizons of phenomenal experience, beyond which Levinas ultimately 'locates' the Other. Since eros is such a tactile experience, and the intensity of touch in eros is so profound, the face is liable to be occluded momentarily between waves of voluptuous sensuality. Hence the face 'disappears' in Levinas's eros, or at best it shifts between moments of fleeting appearance. Paternity differs from this because it is untainted by the voluptuousness of eros. The face of the son thus offers Levinas a chance to establish a transcendent

relationship with the Other, and this relationship is unfettered by the equivocal, ambiguous, and ultimately narcissistic, characteristics of eros.

The primary objection which Irigaray takes to Levinas's view regarding the sensuality of eros is the priority he accords to sight. Irigaray claims that sight is itself a form of touch, since the eyes touch the head and light touches the eyes in vision. The fundamentality of touching is something that Irigaray therefore claims Levinas overlooks, and this oversight comes at the price of denouncing the erotic feminine a just position of subjectivity. If, on the other hand, touch were recognised as fundamental, the erotic caress would no longer be understood as insufficient to enter into an unambiguous relation with alterity. This is to say that Irigaray's claim regarding the erotic caress is one which affirms it as a means by which a relationship with alterity can be established, yet it is also one unconstrained by the supposed selfishness Levinas identifies in erotic pleasure. Rather, Irigaray understands eros as the ideal opportunity for the masculine and the feminine to relate on ethical terms, and hence erotic touching serves to connect the poles of sexual difference in such a way that they can inform one another without subsuming one another under the immanence of pleasure. By adopting Merleau-Ponty's notion of the chiasm¹ (which explores the overlapping potential of touch), Irigaray formulates the erotic relation as a chiasmic interaction between the two poles of radical alterity, namely the masculine and the feminine. Thus Irigaray maintains that by recognising touch as fundamental, an unambiguous relation can be established in eros, prior to procreation. Moreover, the ethical relation is now framed as one between man and woman, instead of one being framed solely in masculine terms as between father and son.

Nancy shares Irigaray's formulation of touch as fundamental and as chiasmic. Furthermore, both Irigaray and Nancy maintain that the erotic caress is not restricted to skin on skin contact. Indeed, the meeting of eyes across a room, or the touching of voice to ear, can also be considered dimensions of erotic touching. However, Nancy's thought on touch is not bound up in the rigid duality of gender which characterises Irigaray's work. The fact that Nancy's thought on the body radically pluralises gender beyond the masculine/feminine duality thus leads to some subtle differences between his thought on erotic touching and Irigaray's. Derrida notes how Nancy's consideration of touch is

¹ The word 'chiasm' is one used to indicate the crossing over of lines, that is, in the form of an 'X'. Merleau-Ponty's chiasm is thus essentially the fact that there is a crossing over, of our capacity as body-subjects to touch, and be touched, to be seen, and to see, and ultimately by extension to experience the world, and to be experienced by the world. Merleau-Ponty (1987:123) asserts that the world is real in that our sensation of it "does not mean that there was a fusion or coinciding of me with it: on the contrary, this occurs because a sort of dehiscence opens my body in two, and because between my body looked at and my body looking, my body touched and my body touching, there is overlapping or encroachment, so that we may say that the things pass into us, as well as we into the things".

chiasmic, not in the sense of masculine and feminine meeting each other and then returning to themselves as gendered subjects, but as a more abstract ‘self touching itself touching the other.’ Hence Nancy’s conception of erotic touch would be akin to Levinas’s caress inasmuch as the touching of passion is one which makes the self more aware of itself. Yet, Nancy allows more room in eros for alterity than Levinas does because of the second half of the chiasmic touch being the ‘you’ who is touched. In other words, where Levinas’s caress searches for an untouchable Other but fails to find it, Nancy’s touch touches upon the untouchable, and hence does reach the other in a certain sense. As will become clear in the chapter devoted to Nancy, to consider touching as ‘touching upon the untouchable’ opens touch up to the possibility of an encounter with the other. Thus, as Nancy’s thought on love indicates, eros should not be ranked as subordinate to any other kind of love (unlike Levinas, who implies that paternal love is somewhat more pure than erotic love).

1.3. Eros and Transcendence

One need only to listen to a love song, or watch a romantic movie, to know that eros is commonly associated with a sense of transcendence. But in the context of this dissertation, whether or not erotic transcendence is a real possibility is one facet of the philosophical problem of eros. For Levinas, after Descartes, the structure of transcendence is found in the relationship with infinity. But unlike Descartes, Levinas figures transcendence in the social relationship with the infinite Other found in the alterity of another person. But transcendence as such presents a contradictory paradox which eros is unable to solve. A relationship which is transcendent, Levinas notes, must be one in which the ego (that which is transcended) cannot be so overwhelmed by the Other (that which causes the transcendence) so that the ego is destroyed. But simultaneously, if the ego does not transcend itself, then transcendence is impossible. How then does the ego survive in the face of transcendence? This paradox is something which eros may appear to address, if its egoism is contingent upon an inassimilable radical alterity. However, Levinas maintains that although this satisfies the first criteria for real transcendence (that is that the ego is not lost in its erotic relation with the Other), it does not satisfy the second condition because the ego does not transcend itself. A transcendent relation, as stated above, must be one in which the ego is not obliterated by the overwhelming alterity of the Other yet at the same time it must be one in which the ego transcends itself. Hence, Levinas identifies the solution to this paradox in the structure of the paternal relationship, which we have already noted is a disposition towards another which anyone can adopt to anyone else, regardless of gender. To adopt such a disposition in eros would, apart from being somewhat taboo, be impossible due to the nature of the erotic relation. Indeed, eros is so charged by its voluptuousness that the ego is overemphasised, and as such cannot be considered to transcend itself. Hence erotic transcendence is impossible, but it does lead to the possibility of transcendence in the paternal relation.

As is to be expected in Irigaray's critique of Levinas, the emphasis on paternity as the site of transcendence is considered unjust. Irigaray identifies at least two criteria of patriarchy in Levinas's formulation of transcendence. Firstly, it is teleological: eros is but a step towards understanding the truth of transcendence which is engendered in the consequences of eros. Secondly, the second half of Levinas's paradox can only be resolved by disembodiment of transcendence. If transcendence requires that the ego be transcended but also not lost, then the only possible resolution is in an Other who is also an ego or an 'I' (the son). But Irigaray implies that even if Levinas's paternal disposition can be adopted by women, it still occludes the feminine inasmuch as the feminine is associated with bodily sensuality. Irigaray therefore redefines transcendence as 'enstatic,' which is the opposite of ecstasy. Rather than transcendence being the movement beyond the self, Irigaray configures it as the realisation of one's own boundaries, beyond which one is aware of radical alterity. But this realisation cannot be separated from gender, since Irigaray claims that the difference between same and other is sexual difference. Thus eros does offer transcendence inasmuch as in eros the poles of radical alterity meet, and 'give each other their boundaries' as sexed beings. But if transcendence is founded upon the erotic relation between masculine and feminine, then transcendence is denied to erotic relations which do not adopt this duality of gender. Hence, a solution is once more sought after in Nancy's view of love.

Nancy's view of transcendence, like Irigaray's, is one that depends upon the recognition of a limit. But this is not the limit of a subjectivity which is at any point complete (such as completely male or female). To consider gender as the limit of a subject's being, Nancy implies, is to consider the property of a subject to be its limit. But, Nancy further argues that the love of the self as property amounts to pride, which negates alterity in order to affirm the ego. Hence, to consider erotic transcendence as the delimitation of gendered subjectivity is to suppose that eros facilitates the love of self as property, which is pride. Rather, Nancy argues that love initiates transcendence because it shatters any illusion that a subject is whole. Love, Nancy claims, breaks the subject open to the relation with others, and this rupture is a pre-condition for the existence of a subject. Moreover, inasmuch as love is a condition for being-with, and 'to be' cannot be anything but being-with, something of the subject remains outside of itself (Nancy 2003:261). Thus there is no self-enclosed ego which is yet to be transcended in a loving relation (erotic, paternal or otherwise). Nancy thus constructs it inversely: the loving relation is the very precondition for the possibility of an ego, and this loving relation means that no being can wholly belong to itself. Instead of considering the self as that which arises when the ego is in a genuine relationship with the Other, Nancy proposes that the self is the site in which an ego, as the 'I' (and indeed any other pronouns), can be found. Since these pronouns are by nature defined by the relations amongst them (the pronoun 'I' only makes sense if there are other pronouns such as 'you,' 'we,' etc), the self must be open in order to allow such

relations to exist. Thus if love is that which opens the self to these relations, then the self is transcended by its very nature as being-with, or *Mitsein*.

1.4. Eros and Death

Transcendence is often configured as an encounter with something completely inappropriate, that is, with something which infinitely exceeds the self. It seems that in all three thinkers, eros is intuitively connected with another mysterious element of human experience, namely the relationship with death. Indeed, Levinas likens the Other to death, due to the fact that both death and love are so radically beyond the thinkable. But he nevertheless maintains that death cannot be the mystery with which a transcendent relation can be established, because once my death occurs I cannot relate to it as I no longer exist. But if my death is impossible to relate to, then how can I formulate a relationship with death? Levinas argues that it is the death of the beloved Other which is my concern, rather than my own death. When loving another, I fear his/her death more than my own. In resonance with the Song of Solomon, Levinas therefore asserts that love is as powerful as death, but neither more nor less. When the beloved Other dies, love persists in grief, and this attests to the power of love to continue in the face of death. But at the same time, the love for the beloved cannot restore her or him to life, and hence the power of death persists in the face of love.

Irigaray's psychoanalysis of our relationship with death is somewhat opposed to Levinas's view. Irigaray claims that the mystery which we call death, in its unthinkability, inspires great anxiety in those who ponder it. According to Irigaray, however, sexual alterity is just as mysterious as death. The history of patriarchy, in Irigaray's view, hinges upon a substitution of one mystery for another. In order for the patriarchal man to avoid the terror of his own mortality, he turns to another mystery which is far more easily dominated than the inevitability of his death. Hence Irigaray claims that if a loving relation is to be established between the poles of alterity, that is, between men and women, man must face up to his own death and accept the consequences of his mortality. In so doing, Irigaray believes that perhaps man has a more authentic possibility to engage in an ethical erotic relation with a woman, where she no longer acts as manipulable substitute for the irrepressible inevitability of death.

Yet Irigaray's view fails to account for the paradox of death which Levinas unveils. If it is impossible to have a relationship with death because death eliminates that which is capable of 'having a relationship,' then how is facing up to one's own mortality supposed to authenticate the relationships between lovers? Indeed, facing up to one's own death seems impossible, since one can only relate to its anticipation and not to its actuality. Nancy's view on the connection between finitude and love might offer a solution, for Nancy claims that love unveils finitude. If Nancy is correct, then it is in the

loving exposure of being with others that we realise our own mortality, because those we love are also mortal. Thus, and in line with Levinas, the death of the beloved other is of concern because it is through his/her finitude that I can come to appreciate my own. Moreover, our mutual finitude places a limit on our opportunity to love, and hence finitude impels us to love authentically (as Irigaray insists we ought to do). But despite the fact that my love ends in my grave, my end does not signal the end of love itself. If love is the pre-condition for anyone to exist, then I can rest assured (and in peace) that love continues with respect to others, despite my own demise. Hence, love remains as powerful as death, just as Levinas reminds us in lieu with the Song of Solomon.

1.5. Eros and Plurality

Eros does not only serve to describe a relationship with alterity, but it also serves to unveil a deeper point regarding plurality. Each thinker examined in this dissertation makes a connection between eros and plurality, and I think this connection is rooted in Levinas's analyses of eros in his earlier works. In these works, Levinas makes use of eros in order to overcome the unity of Being declared by Parmenides in ancient times. For Parmenides the only thing that truly exists is Being itself, and all else is but mere appearance. But Levinas subjectivises Parmenides's claim, insisting that it is the ego which experiences *its being* as an unchanging stasis, or a sameness, from which escape is desired. In the social relationship, the sameness of the ego comes to 'face' the Other, whose alterity calls the overarching appearance of sameness into question. What this means is that sameness and unity – that which Parmenides identifies as Being - are mere appearance, where in fact it is the Other who signals the question of ethics as first philosophy. Where traditionally 'first philosophy' deals with the question of ontology,² Levinas claims that it is the question of the Other, and whether one's existence is justified in the face of the Other, that are the questions of first philosophy. Hence, it is ethics, and not ontology, with which metaphysics (or first philosophy) must deal. Eros, inasmuch as it is the prototypical relationship with an absolutely contrary feminine alterity, thus provides the template for breaking Parmenides's view of Being from a unity into a multiplicity or plurality. Sexual difference and feminine alterity, however, cannot fully prove that Parmenides is wrong since Levinas looks to fecundity and paternity in order to solidify the transcendent relationship with alterity. In a sense, Being as 'the One' is not yet broken up into 'the many' by the erotic relationship, it is merely tearing at the seams. Only once paternity is established as the resolution to the paradox of transcendence, that is where the ego and the Other may relate unambiguously, is it possible to consider Being as a diverse plurality rather than a unified whole.

²As in Aristotle, where first principles are sought in his *Metaphysics* in order to deduce the nature of reality.

But if Irigaray's feminist critique is taken into account, the apparent teleology to which Levinas subjects eros is indicative of a masculine preference for linearity and unity. Despite the fact that Levinas's aim is to emphasise the pluralistic nature of Being, Irigaray insists that such a plurality must already be possible in eros, lest plurality amount to nothing more than a masculine sameness disguised as 'the many.' In Irigaray's view, plurality is the principle of the feminine, dictating her pleasures as multiple and her nature as the 'sex which is not one.' The masculine, on the other hand, is the principle of unity, and any proclamation which aligns itself with either unity or masculinity is but a patriarchal bias of discourse. Eros, on this view, is a site in which the masculine and the feminine can relate on equal terms without annihilating their respective difference, and hence in Irigaray's thought is considered to be the ethical encounter *par excellence*. If plurality is to be accorded a just place in discourse, then eros must be cultivated in such a way that the feminine is given her rightful place as importantly different but of equal importance.

But because Irigaray's view of gender is somewhat rigid, a problem arises because plurality is restricted to femininity and men are prescribed as unitary. But it would be absurd to assume that all men are the same, and therefore plurality must be considered in such a manner that it applies to both men and women alike. But at the same time, plurality must not be considered in such a way that men and women become the same, that is, subject to an overarching concept of plurality which in fact unifies rather than diversifies. Hence, in line with Nancy's ontology and his view of love as 'shattered,' there is perhaps a way to extrapolate a connection between gender, eros, and plurality, which adheres to these two aforementioned criteria. If love is the condition for being-with, and being-with is fundamental, then love is also fundamental. Simultaneously, if to be requires a bodily existence, then being-with is also a bodily existence. Furthermore, if love is the exposure to others, and the exposure of the body is erotic, then being-with is also erotic. But being-with is not a unified being-there, nor is it being-there in a unified single 'there.' Rather, Nancy constructs being as 'being-singular-plural,' a somewhat dense ontology which we have occasion to explore in greater detail in the chapter devoted to his views on eros. But if Nancy's view is coherent, and I believe that it is, then eros is the fundamental exposure of a plurality of bodies to one another, and these bodies are not restricted to either one of two genders. Even in the face of an Irigarayan critique, Nancy's view of gender tends to be more comprehensive, whilst at the same time accounts for gender difference and alterity. Ultimately, although Nancy's philosophy is not flawless, his thought does offer significant insight into solving certain problems in the respective thought of Irigaray and Levinas. Hence the plurality of gender to which eros connects in Nancy's thought is a far vaster plurality than either that of Irigaray or Levinas. However, I think that Nancy's admitted debt to Levinas also applies on this point; that is, of eros's connection with a pluralistic view of Being.

If this dissertation were to have one conclusion, then it would be that eros is of prime significance for contemporary Continental philosophy, despite its subtle acknowledgements in the greater projects of philosophers. If postmodern philosophy (in the broadest sense of Continental philosophy after 1968) is known for one thing, it is its emphasis on plurality (deconstructing grand narratives and so forth notwithstanding). Thus the problems which eros presents to philosophy, and which are examined in this dissertation, link up quite significantly with a general trait of postmodern thought. If we are to take the notion of plurality seriously, then I believe that eros must be accorded an important status in the unfolding of such a notion. While I do not claim that there is a direct linear relationship between Levinas, Irigaray, and Nancy, I do believe that a certain trajectory of thinking is common to all three. Moreover, it seems evident that it is in Levinas's early work where such a trajectory begins.

2. Overview

Hence the first chapter of this dissertation examines eros in the work of Levinas. Thus Levinas's work as a whole is introduced, and the key concepts for his work are explained, before a more rigorous exposition of his thought on eros is given. Having done this, this dissertation proceeds to connect Levinas's understanding of eros to his formulation of fecundity and paternity, as well as the implications of this regarding gender. Subsequently, the connection between love and death is explored in order to set the stage for Irigaray's and Nancy's respective considerations regarding the macabre affair between love and mortality. Finally, a short comparison is given regarding Levinas's philosophy of eros and Plato's *Symposium*, thus grounding Levinas in the Western philosophical tradition despite his innovative deviations from the standard Platonic view.

The second chapter of this dissertation is devoted to the work of Irigaray. Irigaray's deconstructive psychoanalytic approach is laid bare in order to clarify the feminist's approach to critiquing Levinas. Moreover, by exploring some of Irigaray's novel interpretations of various concepts regarding love, her own thought on eros is thus discussed. Having laid out the fundamentals of Irigaray's thought thus, her robust critique of Levinas is exposed together with an evaluation of this critique. Indeed, Irigaray's view on the connection between love and death unsurprisingly stands strongly opposed to Levinas's own. Hence, in this chapter, the irreconcilabilities between Levinas and Irigaray are made explicit, with the view to overcoming the impasse between the thinkers by turning to the work of Nancy.

The third chapter thus begins by situating the complex ontology of Jean-Luc Nancy in contradistinction to Levinas's phenomenology of the face. Having achieved a rudimentary outline of Nancy's 'being-singular-plural,' the chapter thus delves into a deeper reading of Nancy's essay on love, *Shattered Love*. By exploring his critique of the dialectic, and the themes by way of which

Nancy considers (and as we shall see, even *declares* love), the chapter elucidates how Nancy collapses views on love which try to isolate and categorise different kinds of love. Since this dissertation by default isolates eros, and in light of Nancy's resistance to separating eros from other kinds of love, how Nancy considers eros must be extrapolated by taking his work on the body into account. In so doing, eros is established as the exposure of the body as sexed, and as such, Nancy's view is considered to offer solutions to the problems raised when contrasting Levinas and Irigaray on eros.

Hence the concluding chapter provides a thematic analysis akin to the one offered earlier in this introduction. Whilst an exhaustive analysis of eros falls beyond the limited scope of this dissertation, it can at least be concluded that the status of eros in contemporary thought may be slight in its mentioning, but it is highly significant in its impact. Eros, as developed by Levinas in his early work, directs a trajectory of thought which underpins notions fundamental to postmodernism: its emphasis on alterity, the reconciliation between sensibility and transcendence, the significance of death and finitude, its rootedness in the Western tradition since Plato, and - perhaps most significantly - its emphasis on plurality.

Perhaps there is still a chance to tidy up the mess which the cynical Lawrence laments we have made of love. Perhaps, by recognising eros' fundamentality and yet resisting the urge to separate love from eros, there may yet be a chance for love to again yield wonder beyond the mind/will/ego perversion which Lawrence attributes as the cause of the 'mess.' Thus, what better place is there to start investigating this possibility than with Levinas, whose notion of the Other stands in direct contrast to notions of mind, or will, or ego.

Chapter 2: Love's Debt to Levinas

1. Introduction

Levinas's writings, which span the bulk of the 20th century, cannot be underestimated when it comes to the thinking of eros. The vast depth of Levinas's work has inspired many thinkers in the Continental tradition, so much so that Jean-Luc Nancy (2003:269) claims that "every philosophical inquiry on love today carries an obvious debt to Levinas, as well as points of proximity." Not only does Levinas's phenomenology of eros serve as a means for him to argue that alterity ultimately lies beyond the scope of phenomenology, but it stands out as worthy of consideration in itself. Indeed, the entire trajectory of thought on eros identified in this dissertation begins with Levinas's (1979:255) reconceptualisation of the passionate encounter as "the equivocal *par excellence*."

But before excavating the depth of Levinas's phenomenology of eros, it is necessary to contextualise his thought and explain the key components of his work as they pertain to the role of eros in his thought. The first such component examined in this chapter is none other than Levinas's famous concept of 'the Other.' The Other is the cornerstone of Levinas's work, yet its elucidation is impossible without touching upon the epiphany of its revelation, or 'the face.' The explication of these two concepts is pivotal in grasping the fundamental point of Levinas's entire *oeuvre*: that ethics is first philosophy. Thus the chapter proceeds to give a summarised overview of what this fundamental point means, including its implied principle of infinite responsibility to the Other. The penultimate element of Levinas's thought which requires clarification is his formulation of time. Levinas understands time not as the marching on of ticks on a clock, but rather that the Other offers a solution to Parmenides' paradox of the present inasmuch as the Other signals the future.

Once these elements have been succinctly explained, the stage is set for a thorough delving into his phenomenology of eros. Again, the prolific expanse of Levinas's writing demands that his thought on eros is contextualised. Thus an overview of the thinker's views on eros is given, tracing its development over the course of his work. Subsequent to this, certain vital erotic concepts are extracted from Levinas's thought to highlight the equivocation he finds inherent in eros. Firstly, the difference between need and desire serves as a bridge to connect the key elements of Levinas's thought to his phenomenology of eros. Levinas addresses the difference between the needs which arise from a bodily existence, and the desire for something 'Other' to such an existence. Need is shown as belonging to the order of the ego (or 'the same'), whereas desire is shown to belong to the order of the Other. Having clarified the distinction between need and desire, it becomes possible to explain Levinas's later thought which asserts the simultaneity of need and desire, thus introducing the nature of eros as equivocal.

The second sense in which eros is equivocal is explained through ‘voluptuousity.’ Voluptuousity is identified as the moment in which erotic desire is suspended, and it brings to light the egoism involved in the erotic encounter. Yet voluptuousity is simultaneously contingent on the presence of another, and hence the ambiguous and equivocal nature of eros comes to the fore. The nudity of the Other, most notably the feminine Other, is subsequently addressed. Levinas identifies a certain profanity in this nudity, which hinges once again on an ambiguous presentation: of the future without meaning or signification. Whilst these two concepts depict the mood of equivocation, the caress is the equivocal in action. This shows that the caress itself is an act of *double entendre*, caught in the present but directed towards the future, searching for but never grasping the Other.

The caress is a fundamental concept in this dissertation, as also Irigaray (Chapter 3) and Nancy (Chapter 4) offer their own nuanced formulations of touch. Indeed, Levinas’s understanding of touch will not go without much critique. The strength of the critiques offered by Irigaray and Nancy is evaluated both in the chapters devoted to them, and in the conclusion of this dissertation.

Having outlined these elements of eros, a concise examination of ‘eros as equivocation’ can be given. As such, the primary thread of this dissertation gains thrust. Levinas establishes a necessary duality in eros, which is critiqued but also expanded upon by both Irigaray and Nancy in the following chapters. Indeed, one of the conclusions of this dissertation is that Levinas opened the thinking of eros up to plurality, a theme which whilst also present in Irigaray’s thought finds full expression in Nancy.

It is worth noting that eros is instrumental for Levinas in thinking transcendence. By contrasting the erotic relation to fecundity, Levinas establishes transcendence as ambiguous in the erotic relation. This move is interpreted and critiqued as patriarchal by Irigaray and as dialectical by Nancy. All three thinkers, however, think transcendence significant. Hence an investigation of Levinas’s account is conducted; focussing specifically on fecundity, paternity and filiality.

It is also fitting to note the relation between death and eros in Levinas’ thought. Love and death have a peculiar relationship, one which all three thinkers in this dissertation touch upon in their own way. Therefore, it seems prudent to explore Levinas’ conception of a love ‘as powerful as death.’ Indeed, love reveals that it is the Other’s death which is of greater concern than my own, although love is not yet the ethical *responsibility* for the death of the Other. Moreover, Levinas’s configuration of love’s relationship with death offers us a perspective through which it is possible to explain love’s connotation with eternity. This is the case because if death does not strictly happen to me, as indeed Levinas maintains, and love persists even in the event of the Other’s death, then love is justifiably labelled as ‘eternal’ because the Other’s death does not signal the necessary end of love, nor does my own because death does not truly happen to me.

As a necessary addition to the picture of eros Levinas paints, a short but cogent discussion is given on his interpretation of Plato's *Symposium*. Levinas discusses the difference between need and desire in terms of *poros* and *penia*, the father and mother of eros (according to Diotima in Plato's *Symposium*). Desire, need, and eros play out in specific, albeit different, sets of relations for both Plato and Levinas. Moreover, Levinas' critique and interpretation of Plato's *Symposium* serves as an interesting point of comparison with both Irigaray and Nancy, in their respective interpretations and critiques of the Platonic work. Indeed, all three thinkers can be considered to trace their own conceptualisation of eros to the Plato's work, despite their respective deviations from his particular formulation of eros.

The penultimate section of this chapter explores Levinas's conceptualisation of the feminine. The feminine is crucial in Levinas's early prototypes of alterity. But more importantly for this dissertation, the feminine is necessarily complicit in eros. Although Levinas does not restrict the feminine to biology, feminist scholars have critiqued his use of the term. This is significant inasmuch as a critique of the feminine has consequences for eros. Thus this section looks forward to the next chapter on Irigaray. Although Levinas considers gender in somewhat out-dated and traditional ways, the points which he does raise cannot be completely abandoned since - as I argue in this dissertation - he opens up a space for a pluralistic yet fragmented thinking on gender found in the work of Nancy.

Finally, the chapter concludes by drawing all the aforementioned developments together in order to direct the specific thematic trajectories explored in this dissertation. Through the problematisation of the feminine, the entire conceptual schema built up by Levinas is shaken up. A resolution to this problem is therefore sought after in the subsequent chapter. Ultimately, as will become clear, Nancy is right in that we are profoundly indebted to Levinas in the thinking of love, and indeed, eros.

2. Key Concepts In Levinas's Work

Four elements of Levinas's work must be made explicit before one can grasp the full meaning of his phenomenology of eros. These are 'the Other,' the 'face,' 'ethics as first philosophy' (or 'ethics is metaphysics') and Levinas's theorisation of 'time'. If Levinas is to call eros equivocal, it is in at least these four senses. Hence, if we are to understand what this equivocation entails, these fundamental aspects of his theory need clarification. The following subsections therefore address these facets of Levinas's work, and although the accounts are not exhaustive, they should suffice for the purposes of understanding Levinas's thought on eros.

2.1. The Other

By way of a superficial definition by negation, ‘the other’³ is precisely that which is not ‘the same.’ These two concepts are found in Plato where they refer to the “highest categories of being” (Levinas 1987:48). Levinas (ibid.) claims that hitherto, philosophy has for the most part searched for truth in terms of the same. This is exemplified in the primacy given to ontology, but its consequence is at the Other’s expense. Indeed, Levinas’s entire body of work can be described as a call for philosophy to rediscover the real significance of the Other. For now however, an elucidation of the concepts of the same and the Other is necessary.

Levinas considers the ‘same’ as referring to anything which falls within the dimension of the ego; or a single person’s consciousness (Critchley 2004:15). But this does not simply refer to the idea a person has of him or herself, or the thoughts which they experience. Rather it refers to subjective thoughts together with the objects such thoughts find themselves contemplating (ibid.). Whatever the object of my consciousness is, I apprehend it in some way or another in relation to *my own being*. Whatever exists will, if appropriated by a subject, be reduced to the same. This extends from things, to animals, thoughts and indeed even other human beings (although human beings can complicate the matter, as we shall soon see). All these things remain within the realm of ‘what is,’ or Being. Thus, all experience, knowledge and understanding lies within the domain of same.

Although Levinas acknowledges that Being is that which allows all things to be, that is, Being is “the self-unfolding act of Being through the manifestation of particular beings” (Hofmeyr 2012:4); he also identifies a “flip side of this expansive and progressing event of Being” (ibid.). This reverse side of Being refers to the fact that it is also sheer and all-encompassing, reducing everything that exists to a sameness, which would be characterized by the “persistence *to be* or perseverance in Being” (ibid.). Levinas names this persistent fact of existence it the “*il y a* [there is]” (Levinas 1987:46). To formulate this, Levinas asserts that even should all beings disappear, an abyssal ‘is-ness’ or “plenitude of void” (ibid.) would linger on. In the philosopher’s poetic prose, the *il y a* is an “impersonal, anonymous, yet inextinguishable ‘consummation’ of being, which murmurs in the depths of nothingness itself” (Levinas 1989:30). Although it would be absurd to suppose that there could actually be something like Being if there were no beings, and Levinas indeed admits as much (1987:46), he supposes that if we *imagine* this it can serve to explain that Being is not only an

³ As Critchley (2004:16) notes, “Levinas makes a distinction between two forms of otherness, distinguished by *autre* and *autrui* in French...*Autre* refers to anything which is other, the computer at which I am typing [for example]...*Autrui* is reserved for the other human being with whom I can have an ethical relation.” For the purposes of this chapter, the distinction between *autre* and *autrui* is made by capitalising the ‘O’ when it refers to the personal Other.

“empowering dynamism” (Hofmeyr 2012:4), but also something which ultimately fills us with dread (ibid., p. 8). Thus Levinas asks us to imagine how even in the absence of any existent beings, an impersonal and plain existence nevertheless remains; it would be an ‘existence without existents’⁴. Being is always there irrefutably, and not even nothingness itself can truly negate it.

Life and death may refer to *my* existence, but even after my death the *il y a* remains unchanged. The sheer fact of existence, for Levinas, does not pause to mourn the end of a being’s vitality. “To be or not to be is not the question,” says Levinas (1991:3). Whether I live or die does not mean much in terms of the *il y a*; it will rumble on without change or loss (indeed it has nothing to lose). Being qua Being, at least if we consider its insidious reverse side which the concept of the *il y a* reveals, does not confer any meaning on human life as such.⁵ It is as it is, no more and no less. My existence qua existing itself is an inadequate justification for my continued existence, and this will lead to Levinas’ formulation of ethics as first philosophy.

But one might take exception to such a statement. For to have a sense of self, that is to say that ‘I am,’ surely distinguishes me in some way from the anonymity of Being? It certainly could, as Levinas (1987:53) explains in what he terms “hypostasis.” When an existent is aware of its existence, this is consciousness (Levinas 1987:51). This awareness of my existence gives an identity (my Ego, or the ‘I’) to the sheer anonymity of Being. Having an ego is a “mode of existing” (Levinas 1987:53), but it is not yet something more than merely existing as such. In other words, to conjugate the infinitive ‘to be,’ and say instead that ‘I am,’ does not definitively prove that the ‘I’ does anything more than merely exist. It is simply hypostasis, defining being in a certain mode, style, or tone, but unable to offer full escape from the sheerness of Being itself. Despite being armed with an Ego, I remain within and under (‘hypo’) the unchanging, unmoving (‘stasis’), shadow of the *il y a*. All that I experience, whatever I reduce to the same, falls under the umbrella of Being as such. It is true that living in a world in which I can satisfy my material needs can offer a pseudo-relief to the existential pressure felt due to the weight of Being as such, and that the ethical encounter with the Other offers an epiphanic glimpse at transcending this weight. But these are themes to which we shall return later in this

⁴A point of view exactly opposite to Nancy’s, as in Chapter 4 we shall see that the deconstructionist claims that there are only existents (beings) and no existence in general (Being as such). Levinas (1987:46), like Nancy, does admit that “existing does not exist.” But the latter thinker thus objects to Levinas use of the *concept* of existing without existents as a basis upon which to build a metaphysics.

⁵ Indeed, the entire Heideggerian project prioritises Being over the relation with the Other. Levinas therefore sees Heidegger’s project of prioritising ontology over metaphysics as precisely the reduction of everything Other to the same (Levinas 1957:49-54).

chapter. For now it is sufficient to note that in hypostasis, Being's sheer anonymity, its heavy weight, and its eternal monotony, render me in utter solitude.

Hypostasis and living in the world are both transcendent steps already removed from mere anonymous Being. But since 'everything is,' the anonymity that characterises Being as such nevertheless haunts a being and, in a certain way, all of our existential pursuits are geared towards an escape from the unbearable heaviness of Being. Something transcendent may offer this chance for escape. Levinas's (1957:53) conceptualisation of the transcendent is modelled upon that of Plato and Descartes. In echoing Descartes' understanding of the Infinite, Levinas (1957:54) will illustrate how transcendence operates as something 'Other'. In other words, it does not have its origin in the domain of the same.

In his *Third Meditation*, Descartes deduces that the idea of the Infinite cannot originate within a finite being. Ultimately, this will serve as one of his proofs for the existence of God. Descartes explains that the cause of anything must have at least "as much reality in the efficient and total cause as in its effect" (Descartes 2007:39). For example: a hot bowl of soup (the effect) cannot be hotter than the stove upon which it was warmed (the efficient cause). When this understanding of causality is applied to the idea of Infinity, something interesting comes to light. The idea of Infinity cannot be caused by anything less than infinite. Thus if human beings are finite, then the cause of the idea of Infinity cannot be a human being. Descartes will therefore claim that God exists as an infinite being, and thus He caused the idea of Infinity Himself, placing it within finite beings. Levinas's project is not the same as that of Descartes, however, but the Cartesian meditation on infinity provides Levinas with the "formal design" (1957:53) for thinking the Other.

The idea of Infinity is remarkable inasmuch as it is always *more* than the idea we can have of it. And since, when thinking infinity, the "I from the first *thinks more than it thinks*" (Levinas 1957:54) the way transcendence operates reveals itself in the concept of the Infinite. Since we are not infinite, Levinas (1957:54) maintains that in thinking the infinite we become aware of something that is *radically other*; something which can never be integrated into our consciousness by the process of reduction to the same. Thus, infinity always lies beyond the frontier of what can be assimilated by my ego. In this sense, it is an exteriority; it is beyond anything I can ever apprehend as 'me.'

Therefore the idea of Infinity cannot originate within the domain of the same. Levinas thus links the idea of Infinity with the Other (1957:54-55). That which is Other must be something exterior in the aforementioned sense. The Other is therefore something transcendent, beyond the ontological reduction to the same. But unlike Descartes' assertion of the infinite as originating in an infinite

being, or God,⁶ Levinas (1957:54) claims that the “idea of Infinity is the social relationship.” What Levinas alludes to here is that the Other presents itself not as a revelation of a divine creator, but rather through the faces of the other people who constitute our sociality.

2.2. The Face

In a way similar to infinity, when one is faced by another person, the exteriority of that Other is always more than the idea one has of him or her. The other person remains *infinitely other* and thus he/she resists being assimilated by the ego’s operation of reducing to the same (Levinas 1957:55). There is a mystique within another person, an inaccessibility that presents itself without being anything but Other (Levinas 1957:55). One can never truly *know* another person completely, or subsume them under the same. The implication here is that if one claims to have this knowledge, it would not only be the denial of the Other and alterity, but this denial would be self-deception⁷. The other person is always an enigma; the inaccessible experience of their being can never be grasped. And yet, through the speaking and expression of another person’s face - even in the simplicity of a gaze – one can witness the frontier of another person’s being, pointing beyond his/her existence within the ego’s schema of understanding. Hence alterity, or the Other, shines through the face.

It would be well for us to note that the word ‘face’ in English does not testify to the divine quality of the French ‘*visage*.’ Although the word ‘visage’ exists in English also, it is not used in any translations of Levinas which I have come across. Waldenfels (2004:64) notes that the French word “refers to seeing and being seen.” This implies the alterity behind another person’s face, in that they have the ability in themselves ‘to see.’ But it also refers to the ‘visibility’ of this alterity, in that the face itself is also ‘seen.’ The face therefore does not refer simply to the physiognomy of another person’s head. For Levinas (1957:55) it is the phenomenological testimony of their existence as radically Other.

In the words of Stella Sandford (2000:25), “this absolute alterity, refractory to any totalisation or subsumption in the same is *instantiated* as *autrui* [the human other], whilst at the same time is paradigmatically – but not only – *le moi* [the ego – literally ‘the me’], the subject.” Because we can

⁶ It is true that occasionally, and especially in his later works, Levinas equates the Other to God. A comprehensive exploration of Levinas’ equation of God to the Other is something which, however, lies beyond the scope of this dissertation and is thus not further discussed. But the Infinite can only be revealed through an encounter with other humans, that is in *the face* of the Other, and hence the following section addresses the theme of the Infinite.

⁷ If I deny the existence of the Other, I assume then that the Other is me because I would reduce him/her to the same. In so doing, I lie to myself inasmuch as I believe I am what I am not.

only experience the world from our subjective position, the fact that we have an intuitive notion of alterity indicates that it is, in some part, within us. Yet, it does not originate there; it originates in the other person. Again, Levinas's use of the idea of Infinity bears resemblance to this, as the aforementioned outlines. The idea of the Other, just like the idea of the Infinite, does not originate in the ego. The Other is therefore a heteronymous idea; it comes from without, revealed as an epiphany through the face.

One could ask what this means? Indeed, it is through the face that meaning itself is made possible. Furthermore, the signification (or signifyingness) of the face is of particular importance when discussing Levinas's presentation of eros. The face is the expression, or the speaking, of an "event of otherness" (Sandford 2005:25). As such it implies a relationship which necessarily must be one of contact, both linguistic and sensory (and thus includes both dialogue and the gaze). But this event of otherness is not the simple empirical experience of another person's face, nor can the face be reduced to what is seen in the literal face of another person (their expressions, facial characteristics, etc). Rather, it is the calling into question of my very being inasmuch as my being potentially robs another of his/her right to exist (the implications of which we will have occasion to return to). Signification, as that which constitutes what is meaningful, is "produced [in its first instance] in the face" (Levinas 1979:261). In other words, the very possibility of meaning itself can come only from the Other through the epiphany of the face. As the witness to another person's face, I experience signification as the expressions and words which come from that face. Yet what is happening is that the alterity of another is presenting itself to me. What is unknown and hidden from me is brought forward from beyond my experience, from the Other. Furthermore, the face signifies purely by virtue of being a face (ibid.), not only in speech or engagement. As Levinas (ibid.) so eloquently puts it, "one does not have to explain it, for every explanation begins with it." The face of the Other can therefore be encountered "not in any intuition, and not in any set of propositions, but rather only through dialogue"⁸ (Gonzalez 2008:42). Thus Levinas's famous claim that ethics is first philosophy can be explicated. The next section explores this notion inasmuch as it relates to Levinas's thought on eros.

2.3. Ethics is First Philosophy

The central notion of Levinas's work, of 'ethics as first philosophy,' is a deeply rich and profound one. The full extent of this notion, however, cannot be explored in this dissertation. Nevertheless, a certain basic understanding of it must be explicated in order to illustrate how Levinas considers the erotic relation an equivocal one on the level of ethics.

⁸ Dialogue here should not be understood solely in terms of verbal communication, but also includes any non-verbal communication by which the face may also signify.

The aforementioned already notes Levinas's idea of the reduction of the other to the same. Indeed, it is Levinas's (1989:77-78) contention that Western philosophy is guilty of prioritising this operation of knowledge over the relation to the Other. This is exemplified in how many thinkers accord prime importance to knowledge of what it means 'to be.' But this knowing, for Levinas (1989:76), is always "an activity which *appropriates* and *grasps* the otherness of the known." Knowledge, as the knowledge of Being, always appropriates and thereby reduces to the same. As such, founding metaphysics in a search for knowledge ultimately results in a closed "self-consciousness" (Levinas 1989:78), ignorant of the irreducible and transcendent nature of alterity.

Yet, as the aforementioned has made clear, Levinas identifies a poverty of meaning in Being as such. The *il y a* presses down upon the Ego, instilling in it a horrific solitude. Without the signification of the face, that is to say without the Other, meaning itself is impossible. Hence, despite the partial transcendence of hypostasis and enjoyment (enjoyment shall be expounded upon further in this chapter), the solitude of my being is ultimately meaningless. Indeed, meaning can only arise through the epiphany of the face and thus the relation with the Other. But the revelation of the face is not simply that. The face of the Other forces me to ask myself "if my being is justified, if the *Da* of my *Dasein* is not already the usurpation of someone else's place" (Levinas 1989:85).

Transcendence therefore does not only instil the idea of the Other in me, but it also implies that I am responsible for him/her. When confronted with the Other, I am faced with an ethical resistance to my powers to kill. The commandment of the face is "You shall not kill" (Levinas 1959:55). In other words, the epiphany of the face is not only the apparition of the Other, but it appears as *infinitely other* and thus resists any annihilation or assimilation. To be sure, this resistance is "ethical" rather than real. This "ethical resistance" (Levinas 1959:55) or commandment not to kill is revealed by virtue of the alterity of the face. Prohibition nevertheless does not render violation of the Other impossible. The resistance of an absolutely exterior being is something I cannot but acknowledge, although it does not signal a determination. I remain free to either respond to or ignore this appeal, but I cannot help but hear it. Transcendence is thus fundamentally an ethical imperative in the form of this commandment.

Furthermore, the face of the Other is "vulnerability itself" (Levinas 1989:83), and as such it confronts me with the other person's mortality. In other words, the face reveals not only the infinite alterity of another, but also the mortal nature of the being whose face would be such an epiphany. This confrontation with another person's mortality forces me to ask myself whether "I [have] become the accomplice of the death to which the other, who cannot see it...as if, even before vowing myself to him, I had to answer for this death of the other, and to accompany the Other in his mortal solitude" (Levinas 1989:83). My being is not my primary concern; it is the being of the other person and whether I am complicit in his or her mortality. In the face of the Other, I am thus confronted with the

fact that my own being risks the continued existence of another. To justify my existence I must be held accountable for the risk it places on his/her existence. But the Other is infinite, and I am finite. My responsibility for the Other is therefore also infinite. Thus I am responsible for the Other before I can even consider myself as a being at all, inasmuch as my very right to be is placed in question by the Other (Levinas 1989:83). Paradoxically, this is precisely how I come into being (in any meaningful sense), according to Levinas – as *ethical* subject.

To consider myself as a being would be to ask the question what it means ‘to be.’ But if I must justify my existence before I can even consider what it means ‘to exist,’ then ethics must be considered first philosophy rather than ontology. Levinas (1989:86) states it thus,

the question of the meaning of being: not the ontology of the understanding of that extraordinary verb, but the ethics of its justice. The question *par excellence* or the question of philosophy. Not ‘Why being rather than nothing?’, but how being justifies itself.

Thus when Levinas considers ‘ethics’ it must be considered in the sense as outlined here. Ethics is not the normative or prescriptive moralising of those three classical ethical paradigms, utilitarianism, deontology and virtue ethics.⁹ But how would this relate to the extensive phenomenology of eros that Levinas develops? Furthermore, what does ethics considered as first philosophy imply for human action?

Levinas’s thought challenges ethical paradigms which would be based on similarity of experience, rather than otherness. If one assumes absolute commonality between self and other as a point of departure for ethical thought, the dimension of alterity is neglected. The Other’s world is cast aside for higher ideals of common feature. This, for Levinas, leads to a totalising view of the world, which ultimately removes both my own agency from my world and the other’s agency from their world. Simon Critchley (2004:13) puts it thus,

The claim is that if I conceive of the relation to the other in terms of understanding, correlation, symmetry, reciprocity, equality and even...recognition, then that relation is totalised. When I totalise, I conceive of the relation to the other from some imagined point that would be outside of it and I turn myself into a theoretical spectator on the social world of which I am really part, and in which I am an agent.

This idea of the other as absolutely Other, meaning that their phenomenal experience of the world cannot be commensurate with my own, presents a problem to ethical positions which would view others as reflections of self. The search for a common happiness (the project of Utilitarianism) fails to

⁹ Although this is not to say that Levinas’ thought cannot be connected to such theories, but any such connections lie beyond the scope of this particular project

answer a far more pressing question asked by Wild (1979:13), “How can I coexist with [the Other] and still leave his otherness intact?”

The answer Levinas provides to this question in *Totality and Infinity* is that it is through a genuine dialogue, meaningful language interaction, that one can engage with the Other in such a way as to truly account for alterity (Wild 1979:14). Rather than focus on systems which reduce the Other to the same; one is impelled by the Other’s presence and the weight of their gaze to speak words which would mean something *to him/her* in that moment of engagement. It is therefore not the case that partners in dialogue are subsumed beneath the dialogue itself, a dialogue which reveals a truth higher than both of them. As discussed in the aforementioned, discourse becomes possible precisely because the face is the event of signification itself. Before words are exchanged, the face of the other already presents a challenge to my very being, inasmuch as it is a call for the justification thereof. Discourse is therefore a teaching and a critique to which I *have to* respond, that is if the possibility of an ethical relationship is to be maintained. Therefore it is only by being open to dialogue with another whereby one can enter into an ethical relation with him/her (Wild 1979:14).

The erotic relation, in contrast, is not strictly the ethical one I have sketched out above. Eros is therefore not ethical as such, since certain elements of the erotic encounter may occlude the signification of the face. While there is transcendence in eros, at the same time it is rooted in egoism. Thus when eros is ambiguous in the ethical sense, it is due to the ambiguity of ethical transcendence and voluptuous immanence. But before we get ahead of ourselves, one final key element of Levinas’s work must be outlined. Only once Levinas’s conception of time is established can his phenomenology of eros be properly explained.

2.4. Time and The Other

It has already been discussed how Levinas considers Being without beings as a sheer ‘is-ness’, the anonymity of the *il y a*. This is reminiscent of Parmenides’s understanding of Being as simple, motionless and unchanging. Parmenides (2011:VII:01-05) says,

One path only is left for us to speak of, namely, that It is. In it are very many tokens that what is, is uncreated and indestructible, alone, complete, immovable and without end. Nor was it ever, nor will it be; now it is, all at once, a continuous one.

Parmenides therefore insists that the only truth that can be stated about reality is that ‘It is.’ For him, the past, the future, and indeed the experience of change – considered as the movement from the former to the latter – are all an illusion. Levinas desires to break with Parmenides’s view, but does so in a manner unexplored by other thinkers. Time is not impossible for Levinas, as it might be for

Parmenides; the Greek considers the past and future as illusory appearances in the static present of the 'It is.' But, in the order of the *il y a*, time is impossible. It is just as Parmenides would describe it: alone, complete, immovable and without end (or beginning). The *il y a* itself is eternal and infinite, but Levinas (1987:52) maintains that in the rumbling of this sheer existence there is not even a 'present.'

The Ego, as will be recalled, comes into existence by way of hypostasis. But the hypostatic Ego does have a present instant, inasmuch as it is conscious: it is "in touch with its existing" (Levinas 1987:51). The present as the hypostasis of the Ego is "a rip in the infinite beginningless and endless fabric of existence" (Levinas 1987:52). It is the *possibility* of a past and a future inasmuch as it constitutes a beginning, but it remains nothing more than that. But, as Levinas (ibid.) clearly states, "[p]ositing hypostasis as a present is still not to introduce time into being." The present is simply where timeless 'existing' becomes an 'existent' with the *possibility* of time.

In terms of the past, the Ego naturally can remember things. Levinas (ibid.) says, however, "it has a history, but it is not history." The past *cannot be* the present. And an Ego can only be in touch with its existing as the present itself. Thus, it is not history itself despite the fact that it can remember its history. Any recollection would be recollection in the present, despite being a recollection of what might traditionally be considered the past. The existent is therefore trapped in an unmoving present, recollecting a past but never being it. In a sense, the moment is not 'ever fleeting' and ungraspable – it is ever present and riveted.

The solitude of the Ego is "the indissoluble unity between the existent and its existing" (Levinas (1987:54). In other words, one cannot separate the material character of an existent from the very fact that it exists. The Ego is in touch with itself, it identifies with existing and as such it is alone. If this is consciousness, then it is also solitude: a conscious existent must recognize the impossibility to be anything other than what it is. Furthermore, if consciousness of objects or 'knowledge' is the reduction of anything other to the same, consciousness remains alone even amongst the objects in the world which provide it with 'enjoyment,' 'nourishment' and 'understanding.'¹⁰ The Ego is alone not because it *lacks* the Other, but because it cannot be separate from itself or the order of the same to which it reduces all that it is conscious of.

How is it then possible to testify to the possibility of 'the future?' In *Time and the Other* (1987), Levinas uses death to exemplify the approach of the future. Death is unthinkable, and it is this quality that characterises its signalling of the future. But death, in itself, is not the future as time because - as

¹⁰ The relation between the subject and objects in the world is discussed in greater detail later in this chapter, within the section exploring Levinas' formulation of need and desire.

Levinas (1987:77) notes - my death does not happen *to me*. Death happens, but at the moment of its happening *I* am no longer. Thus it does not offer anything other to the hypostasis of consciousness. Death is significant in that it “is not the present” (Levinas 1987:80). But despite it being a negation of the present, death is not ‘the future.’ It might merely be the cessation of any possibility. Death’s steady encroachment on my life does not alleviate my solitude, nor does it offer me a moment outside my own. It does, however, offer the template of an alterity, something other than the present in which the I finds itself stuck. Again this alterity is the Other person, and the future may be revealed in the epiphany of the face.

“Time itself,” Levinas (1987:79) maintains, “refers to this situation of the face-to-face with the Other.” Death is never the present, and neither can it relate to my present instant. Death happens the moment my present is no longer, we miss each other like ships in the night. Another person, on the other hand, can enter into relation with my present instant of existing. And as I see his/her face and come to terms with the frontier of my own present instant, the Other therefore signals the future beyond it. Time is therefore “not the feat of the subject alone, but the intersubjective relationship” (Levinas 1987:79). Stated otherwise, it is only when my instant is connected to another instant, or the instant of an Other, that time might become possible beyond a static Parmenidean present moment.

3. The Phenomenology of Eros

Allusions to the equivocal and ambiguous nature of eros have already been made throughout the preceding text. But what is eros and why does Levinas consider it to speak double? In this section of this chapter a short overview of eros is given as it appears in the context of Levinas’s thought as a whole. Following this, certain themes important for this dissertation are extracted from the section devoted to eros in Levinas’s *Totality and Infinity*.

3.1. Eros in the Work of Levinas¹¹

Levinas is not best known for thinking eros, but the theme is quite prominent in his work up to and including *Totality and Infinity* (1979). Indeed, the thinker’s main concern in referring to eros is to point to an alterity that eros itself cannot entirely encapsulate. The erotic encounter serves as the “prototype” (Levinas 1987:76) for the relationship with the Other, inasmuch as the erotic encounter involves both a relationship with the reduction to the same and the revelation of the Other. Eros thus

¹¹ The following section offers a brief chronological sketch of eros as it features in three of Levinas’ major works. Since the dates of first publication and the references offered in the text differ, here are the works listed chronologically according to the dates of first publication: *Time and the Other* (1948), *Totality and Infinity* (1961), and *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (1974).

serves an instrumental function. It provides Levinas with a situation to show that the Other can bear a relation with the same; the Other is not so other that it is useless to think about.

“Eros,” says Levinas in *Time and the Other* (1987:76) is as “strong as death.”¹² In the context of that work, eros exemplifies a mystery which, unlike the mystery of death, can be experienced. A relationship with the future cannot be established through the approach of death, since death is an event which nullifies the very possibility of such a relationship. The event of the Other is the only way in which ‘my present instant’ can relate to another instant and hence be given time. In that work then, eros is the prototype of a relation to the Other as giving time.

Furthermore, in these earlier writings Levinas uses eros to exemplify sexual difference itself, not much unlike Irigaray.¹³ Levinas (1987:87) argues that the feminine is absolutely ungraspable; neither the appropriating light of reason, nor the immanence of enjoyment can capture the radical alterity of the feminine. Thus the feminine serves as the example of radical alterity itself. As such, the feminine not only signals time, but also disrupts the unbreakable unity of Being envisioned by Parmenides. Thus Levinas (1987:85) says,

The difference between the sexes, is a formal structure, but one that carves up reality in another sense and conditions the very possibility of reality as multiple, against the unity of being proclaimed by Parmenides.

The static ‘one-ness’ of Being is ‘carved up’ into a plurality by sexual difference. As we shall see, this is comparable to Irigaray’s division of the Hegelian absolute into masculine and feminine inasmuch as both Levinas and Irigaray declare reality as disunity (although Levinas is not explicitly addressing Hegel here). Indeed, Irigaray attempts to think the feminine principally as a plurality, and thus another point of close connection between the two thinkers can be made. Furthermore, if Levinas considers the relation between the sexes as eros, and Irigaray is correct in thinking the feminine as plurality itself, then it can be argued that love offers the possibility for thinking the relationship between the singular and the plural. Should this indeed be the case, we shall see a close resemblance to the thought of Nancy as discussed in Chapter 4.

¹² Levinas quotes the *Song of Solomon* which says “Love is as powerful as death” (Song of Songs 8:6, Today’s English Version). The notion of ‘love as strong as death’ does not appear in *Time and the Other* only. In *La Mort et le Temps* (1991) a more exhaustive account of what it means to say love is as strong as death is given. The relation between love and death is given more specific attention later in this chapter.

¹³ Although Irigaray finds problems in Levinas, her entire project of an ethics of sexual difference is greatly indebted to Levinas’ thought on alterity. This is discussed in further detail in Chapter 3, and presented summarily in the Conclusion.

Moreover, Levinas's aim is to overcome traditional conceptions of the relationship with the feminine, considered in dialectical terms such as master/slave or activity/passivity. Levinas therefore argues for an asymmetrical - and therefore non-dialectical - relation with the feminine Other. A dialectical relationship would involve the feminine being reconciled with the masculine under an over-arching concept, such as 'love.' But love considered thus would be the reduction of the Other to the same, and thus violate Levinas's entire project. Rather, the feminine is essentially a "slipping away from the light" (Levinas 1987:87). As such, the feminine is an ungraspable mystery, always beyond any attempt to illumine it through knowledge. Levinas (ibid.) therefore considers the feminine as "refractory" to any power that would hope to seize upon it. But this does not accord the feminine a power which would result in a quasi-mystical obliteration of the (masculine) ego and thereby nullify the possibility of a relation between the two. How can a relation then be considered where the feminine is neither subsumed within the realm of the same (exemplified in dialectics) or where the feminine overwhelms to the point where relation is impossible? Levinas (1987:86) would answer that the profanation of a mystery remains a possible relation to that mystery, and eros is therefore defined as such. Thus, Levinas argues against at least three traditional positions regarding eros: a fusional consideration of love, where lovers unite as complementary parts of a whole; a dialectical masculine/feminine opposition reconciled in love; and love as merely the egoistic experience of pleasure. These three positions subordinate alterity to an impersonal (or perhaps covertly masculine) third term: 'union,' 'love,' or 'pleasure.' Rather, eros as *profanation* at once relates to, but fails to nullify, alterity. Love would thus be a relationship which "does not *ipso facto* neutralise alterity but preserves it" (Levinas 1987:86). Hence *Time and the Other* offers a strong point of departure in giving eros a significant status in contemporary French philosophy, as the erotic may be a relationship with a radical alterity which does not annihilate its otherness.¹⁴

In *Time and the Other* Levinas also discusses certain concepts vital to his understanding of eros; concepts such as 'voluptuousness,' 'profanity,' 'the caress,' 'the feminine' and 'fecundity.' These concepts are discussed in greater detail in the sections that follow since Levinas analyses them more rigorously in *Totality and Infinity*. But it is interesting to note their development over the course of Levinas's work. Eros, in *Time and the Other*, is not explicitly equivocal, as it is in *Totality and Infinity*. Indeed, Levinas (1987:90) accords pleasure philosophical significance inasmuch as his thinking "consists in affirming voluptuousness as the very event of the future, the future purified of all content, the very mystery of the future." Levinas thus leaves eros untarnished despite its sensual component; here it is rather the situation *par excellence* in which the future as such (necessarily

¹⁴ Eros as such a relationship will be demonstrated in the work of both Irigaray and Nancy in the subsequent chapters.

contingent on the Other) is accomplished. Indeed in *Time and the Other*, the caress searches for the mystery which signals this transcendence of time, inasmuch as the caress “is the anticipation of this pure future without content” (Levinas 1987:89). Here Levinas does not yet characterise the caress as the ambiguously enmeshed duality of sensation and transcendence as we read in *Totality and Infinity*. In sum, the erotic situation in *Time and the Other* appears to be one where the transcendence of the future is most apparent.

In *Totality and Infinity* it seems that Levinas treats eros with growing suspicion. Levinas therefore shifts his focus from the transcendence complicit in the erotic encounter to the ambiguous simultaneity of transcendence and immanence. The voluptuous sensuality of eros threatens to overshadow transcendent alterity, due to the “exorbitant ultramateriality” and “exhibitionism” (Levinas 1979:256) of immanent sensory pleasure. Perhaps the phenomenology of eros offered in *Totality and Infinity* can be read as a thorough reworking of ideas foreshadowed in *Time and the Other*.

The section in *Totality and Infinity* (1979) entitled “The Phenomenology of Eros” forms part of Levinas’s phenomenological musings on the experiences of daily life. As such, it is interwoven with Levinas’s aim to push phenomenology to its limit and thus allude to the Other. Experiences of enjoyment are thus analysed in order to establish a notion of radical alterity (Wild 1979:13). This involves pointing to a dimension of experiencing others which cannot be apprehended in any ideas confined to one’s own singular experience. The phenomenology of eros is interesting precisely for this reason. Levinas (1979:254) states:

The metaphysical event of transcendence – the welcome of the Other, hospitality – Desire and language – is not accomplished as love. But the transcendence of discourse is bound to love. We shall show how in love, transcendence goes both further and less far than language.

Love is therefore not the same as the definitive features of the ethical relationship: ‘welcome,’ ‘hospitality,’ ‘Desire’ and ‘language.’ Yet love does involve transcendence beyond the possibilities of language. But this transcendence simultaneously fails to reflect the genuineness of dialogue. Hence the relationship between the self and Other in love is far more complicated than Levinas’s prior analysis in *Time and the Other*.

Both books deal with similar characteristics of eros; such as voluptuousness, the caress and the profane. But the later work exposes each theme as dual and ambiguous, whereas in the former each serves simply to allude to the radical alterity of the feminine. *Totality and Infinity* thus emphasises *eros* as equivocation, but this emphasis can be interpreted in several ways. The very nature of equivocation means that eros might not be interpreted as equivocal upon first glance. This is indeed what makes

equivocation so tricky. As a linguistic device, equivocation allows one to tell a lie whilst telling the truth, or use the truth as a lie. Equating love to this double speak thus yields particularly interesting paradoxes, which are explored in greater detail in the sections to follow.

Levinas establishes eros as not only as equivocation, but also as a private relation, “supremely non-public” (Levinas 1979:265). As such it stands in contrast to the social relation, which as will be recalled, is ethics. The erotic relation as a private one provides an interesting point distinguishing Levinas from the other thinkers addressed in this dissertation. Levinas divorces eros from the political or the public, and thus differs sharply from Irigaray and Nancy.

Eros remains a cornerstone in Levinas’s work, even as he departs from explicitly dealing with it in works subsequent to *Totality and Infinity*. For example, in *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (1991), Lingis (1991:xv) notes that

the highly original concepts that were elaborated to formulate the erotic relationship...are now the basic concepts with which the ethical relationship of responsibility with the other is formulated. The ethical relationship with alterity is now described with concepts opposed to those of presence, the present, aim, or intentionality. These concepts will be used to formulate saying itself, and the signifyingness of speech founded on an existential structure of being for-the-other, in terms of a making-contact that precedes and supports making signs. The ethical relationship in this book thus acquires, if not an erotic, a sensuous character. Though still realised in language, it is described as sensuous contact and closeness, and not at all as a sort of Kantian rational respect.

Therefore, although *Otherwise than Being* departs from explicitly dealing with the erotic encounter, the nature of ethics itself takes on sensual and subtly erotic undertones. Ultimately the later work will emphasise that even sensibility itself is “wholly sustained by ethical responsibility” (Lingis 1991:xvi). Thus the development of the erotic in Levinas’s thought is not something to be underestimated, despite it seeming only tangential to his concept of “the Other” upon a superficial reading. A full study on the development of Levinas’s thought on eros through these three works, however, lies beyond the scope of this dissertation (indeed, it might constitute a dissertation in itself). It is sufficient to note that eros serves a particular purpose throughout Levinas’s work, namely that it provides him with a moment which points to transcendence which is simultaneously steeped in sensuality.

What is of particular interest for the purposes of this dissertation, however, includes Levinas’s phenomenological descriptions of the erotic encounter, together with its status as equivocal. Therefore the following section works through certain moments in the phenomenology of eros given in *Totality and Infinity*. As the dissertation plays this phenomenology off against Irigaray’s and Nancy’s respective critiques, the following section offers an in-depth exploration of eros as the equivocal *par excellence*.

3.2. *Totality and Infinity* - Offering The Terminology of Eros

Whilst the chief aim of *Totality and Infinity* could be described as an attempt to explore the ethical possibilities of language, the book also offers an interesting account of the erotic. Eros points to the Other but simultaneously emphasises a rootedness of the ego to itself. This double meaning is articulated by Levinas (1979:255) in the following passage:

An enjoyment of the transcendent almost contradictory in its terms, love is stated with truth neither in erotic talk where it is interpreted as sensation nor in the spiritual language which elevates it to being a desire of the transcendent. The possibility of the Other appearing as an object of a need while retaining his alterity, or again, the possibility of enjoying the Other, of placing oneself at the same time beneath and beyond discourse – this position with regard to the interlocutor which at the same time reaches him and goes beyond him, this simultaneity of need and desire, of concupiscence and transcendence, tangency of the avowable and the unavowable, constitutes the originality of the erotic which, in this sense, is *the equivocal par excellence*.

The oxymoronic contrasting of the terminology in the above quote alludes to the equivocal nature of the erotic. Love as the ‘enjoyment of the transcendent’ is something which, as we shall soon see, would be seemingly contradictory within a Levinasian framework. How then is it possible to enjoy the Other? Enjoyment characterises the satisfaction of need, whilst transcendence is betokened by the infinite thirst of desire. Love is therefore the ‘simultaneity of need and desire,’ as well as the simultaneity of the contradictory terms which surround this pair in the above quote. Eros is therefore a curious experience since it is both sensual and spiritual. Levinas alludes to this distinction in the ways love is spoken about. On the one hand, the sensuous nature of ‘erotic talk’ reduces language to sensation, while on the other hand, language can elevate love to a spiritual level, for example in the sublime poetry of a love song. But if sensation is enjoyment, and the Other is transcendent; love has a peculiar power to embrace both. Therefore, the chief characteristic of eros which Levinas identifies is that love is the ‘equivocal *par excellence*.’ The following section thus clarifies the distinction Levinas makes between need and desire, in order to illuminate the equivocal nature of eros in these terms.

3.2.1. Need and Desire – Enjoyment and Transcendence

Intuitively, the difference between need and desire could be understood thus: the satisfaction of need entails meeting the conditions for life, whereas desire refers to the want for things beyond these conditions. But Levinas does not understand the difference between need and desire in such simple, almost utilitarian, terms. Levinas maintains that where need lies within the domain of the ego, desire is ‘metaphysical desire’ or the desire for the transcendent Other (Levinas 1979:33). In order to clarify the affair between the need and desire, an analysis of need as distinguished from desire is made, before it is explained what it means when the two are enmeshed in eros.

Although *time* is only accomplished through the transcendence of the Other,¹⁵ a certain *space* may be carved out of the anonymity of the *il y a* by enjoying objects in the world (1987:63). Need allows the Ego to move from a static mere ‘being’ to a ‘living from’ inasmuch as the satisfaction of need is necessary for life itself. But the satisfaction of need only occurs ‘in the present’ so to speak. The ego thus exists not only as a living body (and therefore as material), but also in extending its consciousness to objects in the world; appropriating them into the same as it needs them (ibid.). As this extension of consciousness, need therefore circumscribes the space in which the ego is able to sustain itself as living material.

In such a space, there is a separation between the ego and the object which satisfies it. This is to say that our relationship with objects in the world is one with otherness, but not with the *absolutely other* characteristic of the ethical relation. As such, the satisfaction of need would be the necessary appropriation of this provisional alterity into the same, in eating for example. The relationship with objects of need therefore offers the ego the possibility to ‘forget’ its enchainment to itself, but not to escape it (1987:64). Although I am not the apple I eat, the apple I eat does not offer me anything beyond my own existence (it is not ‘absolutely other’). Rather, it is *I* who eat it, digest it, convert it into my energy, appropriating it as food.

But the satisfaction of need consists not in simply meeting the bare necessities for living a life. A life lived is a life enjoyed, and it is this *enjoyment* (including sexual enjoyment) which characterises need for Levinas. “Nourishment,” says Levinas (1979:111), “as a means of invigoration, is the transmutation of the other into the same, which is in the essence of enjoyment.” ‘Nourishment’ includes all interactions with worldly objects, from smelling a flower to enjoying the fresh air when walking (Levinas 1987:63). It is thus *existential* nourishment, rather than a merely physical/biological one. Indeed, this nourishment characterises what it means to be in the world, rather than exist solely as a hypostatic ego. Nourishment therefore accords an “ecstatic existence – being outside oneself – but limited by the object” (Levinas 1987:63). To eat an apple therefore allows me a momentary reprieve from the existential solitude imposed by the *il y a*. But this reprieve is limited inasmuch as once I swallow my last bite, the apple is no longer separate from me – I have ‘transmuted it into the same.’

The relation with the objects of enjoyment is one of “light” (Levinas 1987:64). This is a reference to the ‘light of reason;’ a philosophical theme since Plato’s sun outside the cave, and a phrase coined by Augustine in his doctrine of illumination. Whereas for those thinkers this light of reason refers to transcendence, Levinas reverses such a conception by considering this light of reason as immanent. In

¹⁵ See the aforementioned section on time.

other words, our relationship with objects of enjoyment remains one characterised by a ‘consciousness of.’ As such this relation operates by assimilating or appropriating those objects within the schema of understanding that makes an ego aware of itself.¹⁶ Thus, even though the enjoying ego does transcend itself to some extent, this transcendence is “wrapped in immanence” (Levinas 1987:65). It is not transcendence because the ego remembers its enchainment upon an inevitable return from the objects of its enjoyment. Need therefore operates within the domain of the ego or the ‘I’ despite it possibly appearing otherwise.

If this is so, then sexual enjoyment must also involve this egoistic transmutation of other into the same. The body of my lover becomes an object which I enjoy. A distinction thus arises between eros and mere sexual need. The satisfaction of sexual desire divorced of love is banal; precisely due to the limitation of the ‘object’ of enjoyment. This is testified to in the ego’s return to itself once carnal enjoyment has subsided. Eros, however, is more complicated than simple enjoyment due to the presence of another person; his/her alterity as *infinitely other* is invulnerable to such a transmutation (although alterity may be denied or ignored).

If sex is only this carnal appropriation, then it is not eros. When another person is reduced to an object only, the epiphany of his/her face is glossed over; a denial of the radical alterity which shines forth from it. As merely an object of enjoyment, the other person is reduced to the same. In a case such as this, Levinas (1979:254) maintains that sex amounts to nothing but “incest”. Furthermore, it is incest in the most extreme sense, because “what is desired is not even another related person, such as a brother or sister, but *one-self*” (Gonzalez 2008:48). The ethical resistance of the face, the exteriority of the Other as infinitely other, is ignored. Hence its consequent demand to justify one’s being is unmet. Therefore an ethical dimension ought to be involved in sex; namely that one is impelled to recognise the alterity of the other person. Eros is thus not simply concupiscent sexual need. If Levinas defines eros as the simultaneity of ‘concupiscence and transcendence,’ and concupiscence is structured as sexual need, then what testifies to transcendence? The answer is desire, and it must be clarified in contrast to need as the following outlines.

Unlike need, desire is “situated beyond satisfaction and nonsatisfaction” (Levinas 1979:179). When one’s needs are abated, they dissipate (albeit temporarily) and the ego realises it has never stopped being immanent. But in contrast to need, desire is unquenchable and thus can never be abated. One

¹⁶ For Levinas, need does not consist in merely satisfying a ‘lack.’ Indeed it is the very opposite: need is the extension of the Ego into the world which allows it to live. Although my needs are motivated by the fact that I lack something, the fact that I can satisfy them allows me to be happy. Need is therefore supported by the Ego’s *excess*, moving beyond itself (albeit only to return), rather than simply a deficiency it cannot satisfy.

desires precisely what one can never have, and thus desire is never satisfied (Bloechl 1996:6). If desire is infinite, then the only thing that one can desire would be that which is also infinite. This should recall the heteronymous character of the infinite; it is not something which I can *have* as such. Rather it appears as exteriority, and thus always as more than I can ever think is. Desire is therefore clearly the desire for ‘the Other.’ Levinas notes that this desire is thence a *metaphysical desire*, and thus relates to his consideration of ethics (Sandford 2000:20). Therefore desire would be the motivation to justify my existence, taking on the infinite responsibility for the Other. Hence, it is the relationship with the Other which “accomplishes” (Levinas 1979:179) desire as such. If there were no Other, then there would be no ‘ethical resistance,’ no ‘vulnerability’ of the face, and thus no motivation to meet these conditions for ethics. Moreover, if the face of the Other impels me to engage in meaningful dialogue with him/her (as discussed in the aforementioned), then desire is also the desire for meaningful dialogue. Desire is thus distinguished from need inasmuch as need falls back into the realm of the same where desire is ever directed towards the Other.

The simultaneity of need and desire in eros makes eros more complicated than one might expect. For purposes of clarification, it would be good to note that the simultaneity of their occurrence must be considered as an inseparable enmeshment. One cannot analyse need and desire separately and arrive at eros simply by their addition. To do so would be to say that eros is exactly the same as having a conversation over dinner. This is quite obviously not the case.

3.2.1.1. Eros: Where Need and Desire Collide

The presence of another person in the erotic means that both desire and need are intertwined as eros unfolds. Yet eros is marred by this double appearance. In eros, desire is not realised as language because it is enmeshed with need. The face can thus signify no more. As such, eros is directly contrasted to the signification of the face. More explicitly, an attempt is made to touch the Other although this attempt fails despite its incessant searching (this touch and searching is ‘the caress,’ and is discussed in greater detail in the following subsections). Hence the significance of language is greatly diminished, if authentic speech is not rendered impossible altogether. Moreover, Levinas (1979:260) states that the “face of the beloved does not *express* the secret that *Eros* profanes; it ceases to express...it expresses only this refusal to express, this end of discourse and decency.” Eros exposes the alterity of the Other in great depth, but meaning cannot arise due to meaning’s connection with the face as an event of speech and expression. This is why Levinas says love ‘goes both further and less far than language.’

Levinas (1979:254) writes

It is as though the too great audacity of the loving transcendence were paid for by a throw-back this side of need. But this *this side* itself, by the depths of the unavowable to which it leads, by the occult influence it exercises over all the powers of being, bears witness to an exceptional audacity. Love remains a relation with the Other that turns into need, and this need still presupposes the total, transcendent exteriority of the other, of the beloved. But love also goes beyond the beloved. This is why through the face filters the obscure light coming from beyond the face, from what *is not yet*, from a future never future enough, more remote than the possible.

The ‘this side’ of need refers to its immanence, that is to need’s connection to the realm of the same. In eros, need must refer to the sensual immanence of touch. But need is different in eros inasmuch as it is the Other, as the beloved, which provides the possibility for such a need to be enjoyed. It will be recalled that the Other signals the future, but in eros this future is ‘never future enough.’ This implies a certain movement beyond the possible, to a future always beyond the future. But how can there be a ‘future beyond the future?’ Due to need increasingly encroaching towards the Other, and the consequent ‘throw-back’ to immanence, the future is *never future enough*. The carnal need of an erotic encounter ceaselessly scratches at the surface of the Other’s exteriority, attempting to dig ever deeper in search of infinity without the possibility of grasping it. Is it possible for this future to be realised? “Love,” says Levinas (1979:266), “seeks what does not have the structure of an existent, the infinitely future, what is to be engendered.” It is rather the engendering of a child that provides the possibility of such a future, as we shall see in the section dealing with the fecundity of eros.

Since erotic need presupposes the exteriority of the Other – and thus his/her infinite otherness – erotic need must be complicit with metaphysical desire. Recognition of the other person as Other is thus fundamental in formulating eros as eros, i.e. love. But the complicity of desire is not simply the addition of a new structure to the structure of need. Its complicity in eros distinguishes eros from need so much so that the erotic cannot be considered as a mirror of need with the added feature of transcendence. Rather it is the simultaneous occurrence of need and desire in relation to *a single person* as Other. But in relating to that person so, he/she is neither considered merely as an object of enjoyment (amounting to incest) nor as the transcendence of the Other (the ethical face-to-face relation and genuine dialogue). In other words, the enmeshment of need and desire in relation to another person reveals something completely different: the erotic.

In summary, the ecstasy of sex immerses the lover in enjoyment. Its carnality espouses an egoistic experience, and is thus always immanent. Moreover, since the other person is radically Other to his/her lover, the metaphysical desire to justify one’s being persists in conjunction with erotic pleasure. But desire cannot be realised in the erotic relation itself precisely due to the ‘throw-back’ of

need. What justifies this ‘throw-back’ is found in what is to be engendered through fecundity. However, I will return to this in the following sections of this chapter where fecundity and paternity is made more explicit.

We have already noted that as the double appearance of need and desire, eros is the double appearance of enjoyment and transcendence. But how is the experience of sex justified as enjoyment? Similarly, how does the Other reveal itself despite the carnal immanence of sex? Levinas offers thick phenomenological accounts of ‘voluptuousity’, erotic nudity, and ‘the caress,’ which the following examines in order to illuminate the status of enjoyment and transcendence in eros.

3.2.2.A Voluptuous Meditation

Because Levinas is giving a phenomenology of eros, he is trying to articulate the erotic experience from the perspective of a lover as it happens to him or her. In other words, Levinas is not attempting to describe eros in neutral terms divorced from the erotic experience as such.¹⁷ Rather, the thinker describes the directions in which our conscious attention - or the consciousness we have of our experience - would flow. When Levinas focuses on voluptuousity, he therefore seeks to articulate love as it is experienced by a lover in the erotic encounter. The attention of the lover in that moment is, as we shall see, directed in two opposing directions, namely towards the Ego in pleasure and to the Other in desire.

Erotic desire, for Levinas (1979:259), when summoned up in the intimate revealing of the beloved to the lover, moves the subject into “happiness.” This is a paradoxical happiness, as sexual wanting, and the movement thereof, is also a kind of “suffering” (*ibid*). This makes sense in that yearning as such is not pleasant. But it is remarkable that sexual desire is. Voluptuousity is thus the erotic desire itself (Levinas 1979:260), but as it is suspended in the moment of its yearning. Hence Levinas labels it as “not only impatient, but impatience itself” (*ibid*). The key to its clarification is that it is not aimed at sexual gratification. Voluptuousity does not satisfy the erotic wanting. Rather, voluptuousity is a hiatus in the passionate movement of the sexual encounter, and Levinas meditates upon it in order to illuminate the kinds of relations at play.

¹⁷ Such a ‘neutral’ perspective might be one called for in scientific explanations of sex and love. A scientist would speak of what happens to nerve endings, blood flow, heart rate and so forth. This would thus involve observing love from a standpoint outside its occurrence, and subsequently inferring general trends from multiple observations. This kind of explanation however, cannot offer an explanation of what it *means* to love, it can only describe the phenomenon in terms outside of the experience of it. Whilst such investigations are not unfruitful, if considered as the only truth regarding love then the ethical dimension of the experience (as Levinas understands it, for example) could be placed in jeopardy.

Voluptuousness is the essence of the erotic experience with another person. It refers in part to how my pleasure is the pleasure of my beloved. But it is not in the sense that I literally experience the pleasure of my lover - that would be impossible since my physical pleasure is trapped within me. Yet, that which brings me pleasure is in pleasing my lover, and my lover's pleasure is taken in pleasing me. Levinas (1979:270) puts it thus, "[v]oluptuousness, as the coinciding of the lover and the beloved, is charged by their duality: it is simultaneously fusion and distinction." The 'fusion' Levinas alludes to here should be reminiscent of the appropriation to the same. Voluptuousness thus involves an element of need, of integrating what is other into the same. Sexual pleasure assumes the other person as an object of need, 'fusing' it with me as need is satisfied through appropriation. But, this fusion cannot be the totality of the erotic act¹⁸ since it is contingent upon a distinction or separation. This would be the relation with the inassimilable Other, without whom eros is love no more. Lovers are thus two distinct beings, retaining their alterity one to each other.

"Voluptuousness," says Levinas (1979:266), "hence aims not at the Other but at his voluptuousness; it is voluptuousness of voluptuousness, love of the love of the other." This 'love of the other's love' restates the ambiguous and equivocal nature of love: whilst love is rooted in egoism, it is simultaneously contingent on the presence of another person and his/her status as radically other.¹⁹ Another dimension of eros' equivocal nature is thus made more explicit. A lover is therefore held in a tension between the egoism of his/her pleasure and the contingency of that pleasure on the pleasure of his/her beloved, whose exteriority indicates alterity beyond the egoism of pleasure.

The transcendence of the Other, as we have already noted, refers not only to the call for ethical responsibility, but also signals the future and thus time. As the ambiguous duality of immanence and transcendence, eros therefore involves a simultaneity of the present and the future. To explicate this simultaneity further, the following section compares erotic nudity to the epiphany of the face, before exemplifying the dual appearance of present and future in the touch of the caress.

3.2.3. Shut Up and Kiss Me: The Non-Signifyingness of Nudity

The role of voluptuousness is not simply to induce pleasure and happiness. It is via voluptuousness that the profanity of the naked feminine²⁰ is revealed. The word 'profane' is a curious one to use, as it

¹⁸ Eros as the fusion of beings is the view held by Aristophanes in Plato's *Symposium*. A discussion on Levinas's critique of Plato is given later in this chapter.

¹⁹ We shall see in Chapter 4 that Nancy critiques Levinas on this point. For Nancy, considering love as 'the love of love' is indicative of a dialecticism and teleology, which the postmodernist seeks to collapse.

²⁰ Levinas's use of the feminine is critiqued in greater detail later in this chapter. This section therefore simply provides an exposition of Levinas's thought.

generally refers to the irreverent treatment of something sacred. This might imply that eros is not ethical, or that it involves the mistreatment of an alterity which should be respected as something sacrosanct. But in *Time and the Other*, Levinas (1987:86) maintains that “profanation is not a negation of mystery, but one of the possible relationships with it.” If we recall that the mystery to which Levinas refers is the transcendent alterity of the Other - signalling the future - then the profane is not necessarily an ‘unethical’ stance towards the Other. Rather, it refers to eros as the equivocal; a theme which the subsequent section thus introduces.

Profanation is, for Levinas (1979:257), both “the simultaneity of the clandestine and the exposed;” as well as “the mode in which erotic nudity is produced” (ibid.). The clandestine is “not nothingness - but what is not yet” (Levinas 1979:256), and as such must refer to the future, the ‘not yet’ being that which is ‘yet to come.’ But the co-occurrence of an exposed body with such a future obscures any concrete meaning of this future. Inasmuch as voluptuousness denotes extreme immanence, the event of the future as an event of speaking (the face) is hence overlooked. ‘The future’ thus may indicate various possibilities. It may refer to the future ‘I,’ ‘who is also an other,’ or ‘the son,’ engendered in the fecundity of eros. It may also be the future of erotic pleasure, urged ever onward by its impossibility of ‘grasping’ the object of desire – the Other. But this hidden dimension, the clandestine, may simply refer to the future as signalled by the Other. Despite all its possible meanings, however, the future remains an *undetermined* future. Eros is not teleologically orientated towards reproduction, sexual gratification or indeed time itself. The future in eros is not a specific future, it has no specific end. Rather it is “the otherness of the other...infinite and timeless...futuraity itself” (Bloechl 1996:8). It is this ‘futuraity’ which fuels erotic desire, differentiating love from brute sexual need. Furthermore, perhaps this relation with futurity gives eros its eternal connotation which, as we shall later see, places it on equal footing with the inevitability of death. Thus it is otherness which distinguishes love from animalistic copulation. But this otherness also characterises eros as profane, since the voluptuous character of erotic lust subverts the chance for the future to be signified in dialogue. A profane relation with the Other arises when the face (as an event of speaking) is obscured by the impulse to touch, instilled through the immodesty of erotic nudity. Touching is chiefly immanent, it is sensation and - in eros - it is pleasure. Profanation is thus the equivocal presentation of the transcendent future (the Other) coupled with the immanent sensuality of lust. The hidden dimension of the future is present, but in no way calls for signification or discourse. This is why Levinas can claim the ‘simultaneity of the clandestine and exposed.’ The flesh may be exposed, but the future as such is given no meaning through dialogue.

Thus nudity does not *signify* the future, as the face might.²¹ Although the clandestine signifies “being not yet” (Levinas 1979:257), in eros this is ‘not yet’ even signification. Rather it is a “non-signifyingness” (Levinas 1979:264); which at the same time is neither the opposite of signification nor a prelude to it. Non-signifyingness, argues Levinas (1979:261)

already has forms behind it; it comes from the future...for the chaste nudity of the face does not vanish in the exhibitionism of the erotic...Only the being that has the frankness of the face can be “discovered” in the non-signifyingness of the wanton.

The face, as will be recalled, is the event of signification; the moment when dialogue can be taken up with the Other to answer for one’s own being. “The principle, ‘you shall not commit murder,’” Levinas (1979:262) maintains, is “the very signifyingness of the face.” This refers to the commandment implied in the notion that ethics is first philosophy. But erotic nudity is an “inversion of the face” (Levinas 1979:262) where non-signifyingness and signifyingness are intertwined as “the primordial event of feminine beauty” (Levinas 1979:263). Hence eros is ‘beyond the face,’²² inasmuch as non-signifyingness “pre-supposes” the face but is only ‘discovered’ when one looks past it (and the ethical command it signifies) to the naked body of the beloved. Furthermore, the beauty of the feminine “presents a face that goes beyond the face...[which] expresses only [a] refusal to express, [an] end of discourse and decency” (Levinas 1979:260). If the face is the event where otherness can express itself, the erotic feminine is a coy refusal to do so in the wantonness of passion.

Indeed, this makes the presentation of erotic nudity equivocal in itself. If we are to label eros as the equivocal *par excellence*, then it must be the most extreme equivocation imaginable. This would be something akin to speech without speaking, or speaking without speech, an impossible extreme of double meaning. Thus Levinas (1979:260) says that

[t]he erotic nudity says the inexpressible, but the inexpressible is not separable from this saying...The mode of “saying” or of “manifesting” itself hides while uncovering, says and silences the inexpressible, harasses and provokes. The “saying,” and not only the said, is equivocal. The equivocal does not play between two meanings of speech, but between speech and the renouncement of speech, between the signifyingness [significance] of language and the non-signifyingness of the lustful which silence yet dissimulates.

Thus, in the lustful silence of eros, the call to signification is renounced despite the unveiling of the Other. As the face, the Other would be an event of speaking. But as a naked body, any such speech

²¹ Levinas does mention how the nudity of the face testifies to the vulnerability of the other person. But erotic nudity is different because the nude face is modest, where erotic nudity is immodesty itself.

²² This is the title of the section in *Totality and Infinity*, which Levinas devotes, *inter alia*, to eros and fecundity (Levinas 1979:249).

would be ‘interpreted as sensation,’ and thus not genuine dialogue. Further still, the event of speaking as such (the face) is presented as an event of non-speaking (the naked - lustful - body). If metaphysical desire is accomplished as meaningful language, in eros the Other ‘harasses’ and ‘provokes’ desire because it cannot be accomplished by the erotic itself. In uncovering the body the purity of the face as such is obscured. Whilst the uncovered face offers the frontier of an exteriority, the naked body taints the epiphanic and transcendent character of the face with lust. Lust tells me that this body before me belongs to me and my pleasure – its exteriority is thus transgressed and *profaned*. But transcendence is not lost in eros, although its lustfulness renders meaning (as language) void. The erotic relation as profane is thus reinforced by its status as the equivocal itself.

It is not possible, in Levinas’s eyes, to avoid the self-interest that a sexual encounter espouses. But the transcendence of the Other is complicit in equal measure with the selfishness and immodesty of voluptuousness and nudity. The erotic experience is not the ethical face-to-face relation. The nakedness, profanity and immodesty of the sexual encounter ushers those involved into their materiality and the unreserved enjoyment thereof. Rather than converse with the Other, eros is the situation where I touch him/her. I wish to ‘enjoy the Other’ and hence the relationship with the Other is profane. Hence the alterity of the other person is ‘profaned:’ it cannot be witnessed (as an epiphany) detached from the impossibly difficult injunction to touch it. Enjoyment of the Other, however, remains unclear. How can the immanence of touch and sensation be connected with transcendence? The answer lies within Levinas’s formulation of the caress.

3.2.4. The caress

The caress, the physical gesture of love through touch, although voluptuous and thus sensual, also “transcends the sensible” (Levinas 1979:257). Levinas explains:

The caress consists in seizing upon nothing, in soliciting what ceaselessly escapes its form toward a *future never future enough* [emphasis added], in soliciting what slips away as though it *were not yet*. It *searches*, it forages. It is not an intentionality of disclosure but of search: a movement unto the invisible. In a certain sense it *expresses* love, but suffers from an inability to tell it.

The caress is initiated through erotic nudity. The naked skin of my lover calls me to touch him/her. Hence, the caress seeks to touch the future, but since this future is hidden it can never do so. As I touch my lover, I am aware of my touch as such because it is *I* who touch.²³ Although touch is immanent, transcendence always indicates something beyond what I can touch (alterity, for example). Thus to touch and feel another person in an erotic encounter is, for Levinas, literally to strive to grasp

²³ To caress is somewhat like Merleau-Ponty’s chiasm, a comparison which is returned to in Chapter 4.

the hidden future presented in the naked other. Desire for the Other and the need for sexual gratification are enmeshed in the caress. The caress touches the frontier of Otherness, thus affirming the profane encounter with alterity. But the fact that my lover is a *beloved Other* is precisely the reason I am called to touch in the first place. To caress is not a wanton fondling. It is to caress the one I love in particular because he/she is radically Other to me. But since the caress remains within the present, it can never grasp the future as alterity signals it. Nor can the future speak through touch, as touch is rooted in sensation and hence immanence.²⁴ Hence, eros speaks equivocally once more: at once the future is presented and coupled with a persistent attempt to touch it in the present.

If the epiphany of the face is the event of transcendence, then it must be complicit in eros. Furthermore, sex hinges not only the need for satisfaction, but on *desire* which looks forward towards a future. As already aforementioned, the arrival of the future is the arrival of the Other. Eros therefore cannot be abated in the immediate, but is necessarily aimed towards the future. The Other as future is not discovered via sight in the erotic encounter. Rather it is through touch, or the caress, that the future arrives as such.

An intuitive understanding of the word ‘caress’ yields it as describing the touching of the beloved’s body with the hands; a gentle stroking which ‘searches’. Yet in Levinas’s phenomenology of eros, he explicitly alludes neither to intercourse nor to the uncontrolled touching of passion. Indeed, Levinas admits that the caress is not guided by any specific intention, but he also neglects some elements of love-making which might affect his argument. If the ‘caress’ is simply a euphemism for coitus, then perhaps the aforementioned dualities - of need and desire, immanence and transcendence, and present and future - nevertheless persist through all acts of love. Yet this seems somewhat deficient inasmuch as such a euphemism fails to capture the extreme intimacy and power of being entered by, or entering into, another person. If the caress simply refers to touching, however, then why does Levinas not account for the difference between the flirtatious touch of an arm and the deepest acts of intercourse? Is there no difference between stroking the skin of the beloved and actually entering him/her or being entered by him/her? Indeed, one can easily caress someone without experiencing the close binding force of a sexual encounter. This point, again taken up by Irigaray and thus discussed in Chapter 3, perhaps indicates that Levinas’s modesty in describing the erotic experience prevents him from speculating upon a possible ‘unison’ of lovers with each other. Verily, Levinas would oppose a theory of unison as denial of the Other in preference of the same. Nevertheless, Irigaray argues that in eros

²⁴ Irigaray critiques Levinas on this point, by claiming that he prioritises sight over touch. Indeed for Irigaray the intimate touch of lovers is far more indicative of recognising alterity than the epiphany of the face is. This is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3.

the self and the other overlap in such a way that they ‘share’ subjectivity, without necessarily abolishing the radical otherness which constitutes lovers’ sexual difference. This kind of thinking may challenge Levinas’s formulation of eros as equivocal, but judgement on this point of critique is reserved for Chapter 3. For now, it is sufficient to say that Levinas’s phenomenology is not as extensive as we might be led to believe.

As we shall see, Levinas’s reluctance to meditate upon actual intercourse stands in contrast to Nancy’s thinking, where orgasm is a moment which exemplifies a singular subject’s contingency on another. This view is not so far removed from Levinas’s own; that is, that a meaningful existence hinges upon the encounter with the Other. But Nancy formulates it in erotic terms pushed further than Levinas is prepared to account for. As will become clear in Chapter 4, this accords love a more privileged status in Nancy than one could extrapolate from Levinas’s work. Perhaps we could consider Nancy’s defence of love as taking Levinas’s thought on eros further than Levinas was willing to go at the time. In any case, such a discussion is reserved for Chapter 4.

3.3. Eros as equivocation

By now, it should be clear that eros is fraught with moments which testify to its equivocal nature. Indeed, the equivocation of eros lies in the voluptuous experience of it. Levinas (1979:270) maintains:

Voluptuousity, as the coinciding of the lover and the beloved, is charged by their duality: it is simultaneously fusion and distinction. The maintenance of duality does not mean that in love the egoism of the love *wills* to obtain the testimony of a recognition in the love received. To love to be loved is not an *intention*, is not the thought of a subject thinking his voluptuousity and thus finding himself exterior to the community of the sensed (despite the cerebral extrapolations of voluptuousity). Voluptuousity transfigures the subject in himself, who henceforth owes his identity not to his initiative of power, but to the passivity of the love received. He is passion and trouble, constant *initiation* into a mystery rather than *initiative*. Eros can not be interpreted as a superstructure having the individual as basis and subject. The subject in voluptuousity finds himself again as the self (which does not mean the object or the theme) of an other, and not only as the self of himself.

The above quote indicates how eros necessarily involves both ‘fusion’ and ‘distinction.’ In moments of sexual ecstasy, I am at once fully aware of my body as distinct from my lover’s. At the same time, he or she will remain infinitely other to me. I may feel a sense of ‘oneness,’ or fusion, with my lover. But the pleasure which suggests this fusion is a pleasure belonging only to me. A sense of fusion therefore cannot negate the rootedness in oneself induced by the pleasure of sex. But neither does the pleasure of sex eliminate its contingency on the other person as Other. Hence, eros involves both need - and its subsequent appropriation of the other (here reduced to object) into the same - as well as the desire instantiated by the infinite alterity of the other person. This double nature of love therefore affirms its ambiguity for Levinas.

Furthermore, eros is not aimed exclusively at the other's body and beyond to their alterity. It is also the love of the other person's love. But since the other's love is contingent on my own, in loving the love received I simultaneously love my own love. "If," muses Levinas (1979:266),

"to love is to love the love the Beloved bears me, to love is also to love oneself in love, and thus return to oneself [this would be need]. Love does not transcend unequivocally – it is complacent, it is pleasure and dual egoism. But in this complacency it equally moves away from itself; it abides in a vertigo above a depth of alterity [this would be desire] that no signification clarifies any longer – a depth exhibited and profaned."

Sandford (2000:50) notes that in French, the noun *ambigu(ë)* means something that is not as obvious in its English equivalent. Whilst in both languages the implication is of different possibilities in interpreting a linguistic phrase, in French, the word itself is ambiguous because it also means, "that in which two opposing qualities are united, or that which participates of two different natures" (*ibid*). Thus the equivocation of eros is not that it can be interpreted *either* as egoistic or altruistic, but rather that it is both. And since eros is 'the equivocal *par excellence*' it is the dual peak of both egoism and altruism.

The ambiguity of love is complicated even further when one examines the situation of self and other. Voluptuousity "transfigures the subject in himself", a sentiment which harkens back to Levinas's *On Escape* (2003:55) and the 'enchainment' of the self to itself. Yet simultaneously there is a dimension of radical alterity in eros. And this infinitely other otherness is the only thing which can allow the self some respite from its enchainment to itself whilst nevertheless calling it to be responsible.

Eros is thus the height of both selfishness and responsibility. The pleasure induced by sex forces one into "an exorbitant ultramateriality", the pinnacle of self-awareness. But since it simultaneously involves she or he who is my beloved, whose face will obliterate my sense of self, love also points us to the most fundamental point of ethics, which is transcendence (Sandford 2000:36).

In sum, eros is equivocal in the four senses alluded to earlier in this chapter. Firstly, the Other appears equivocally inasmuch as its exteriority (and the desire that this entails) is passed over by the throw back to an interior dimension of need. Secondly, the purity of the face is obscured by the exhibitionism of nudity. Thirdly, ethics is not the project of eros, since the sheer physicality of the experience roots the subject in a world of immanence, despite the call of transcendence through desire. Finally, time is not properly achieved in eros due to the non-signifyingness of nudity. It thus seems to be a fundamentally difficult project to narrow one's focus onto eros itself, for the moment one claims it to be one thing it unveils itself as another. This is a significant insight which closely resembles Nancy's vision of love as 'shattered,' and this correlation is discussed more fully in Chapter 4.

Yet, that which makes eros interesting and of significance to Levinas is that the transcendence involved lies ‘beyond the face’; as is suggested by the title under which the “Phenomenology of Eros” appears. This transcendence is “the transcendence of trans-substantiation” through which the “I is, in the child, an other” (Levinas 1979:267). The accomplishment of eros, in fact its desire, is thus the future discovered in fecundity.

4. The Transcendence of the Future – Fecundity and Paternity²⁵

The transcendence of the Other in eros is marred by the egoism of voluptuousness. The immediacy of need fixes the lover to himself/herself, despite being propelled by desire for futurity. The subject in eros thus always returns to him/herself. As such, the Parmenidean picture of being is cracking, but it is not yet broken. In a certain sense, eros fails to fully rupture the static Parmenidean ‘it is.’ The need in eros inevitably reduces to the same, despite this reduction’s contingency on the presentation of an infinite future in alterity. Therefore a certain formal problem concerning transcendence arises, which ultimately is solved via the structure of paternity.

The classical conception of transcendence, Levinas (1979:274) says,

is self-contradictory. The subject that transcends is swept away in its transcendence; it does not transcend itself. If, instead of reducing itself to a change of properties, climate, or level, transcendence would commit the very identity of the subject, we would witness the death of its substance.

Thus, Levinas’s conceptualisation of transcendence challenges the classical commonplace conception of it. To say that a subject retains his/her identity in transcendence shows that transcendence to be superficial at best. But if the subject loses his/her identity in this transcendence, then he/she has changed and thus not transcended himself/herself. The question thus arises as how to formulate transcendence in such a way that both the above movements are retained without losing either? Although the erotic might suggest a solution it remains too heavily weighted on the ‘this side’ of need - and hence the retention of identity - for it to be enough to make this contradiction tolerable (Sandford 2000:66).

To fully break the static Parmenidean ‘One’, a concept of transcendence is needed which testifies to both the transcendence and the retention of identity. In *Time and the Other*, Levinas (1987:91) asks:

²⁵ Irigaray critiques Levinas for his use of the masculine forms, ‘the son,’ ‘paternity’ and ‘fraternity’ when he discusses eros. Indeed, Levinas does not neglect maternity (for example in *Otherwise than Being and Beyond Essence*). But Irigaray neglects to take that work into account in her critique inasmuch as maternity is not explicitly connected with eros. A fuller discussion of this follows in both Chapter 3 and Chapter 5.

How in the alterity of a you, can I remain I, without being absorbed or losing myself in that you? How can the ego that I am remain myself in a you, without being nonetheless the ego that I am in my present – that is to say, an ego that inevitably returns to itself? How can the ego become other to itself?

This can only be achieved in the ‘transubstantiation’ of fecundity and paternity. The ‘son’ is both the father and a stranger. The son is both an ‘I’ and an ‘Other.’ Fecundity and paternity thus serve to illustrate the breaking of Parmenides’ eternal present inasmuch as the aforementioned contradiction of transcendence is changed from contradiction to paradox.

How does Levinas testify to this? We may recall that the ‘future’, which is invisible to the searching caress, is one dimension of the erotic experience, while the egoistic need for satisfaction and the ambiguous unveiling of the face are other dimensions. Without erotic egoism, futurity would overwhelm the ‘I’ absorbing it in ‘the you.’ Eros is a relation with the Other by virtue of its profanity, indicated by the exorbitance of materiality in sexual pleasure. By using the metaphors of fecundity and paternity, Levinas formulates a relation where erotic need no longer testifies to the presence of the ‘I,’ and therefore it is a relation with a mystery that is not profane, but nevertheless remains a relation between an ‘I’ and a mysterious ‘you.’ The ‘I’ is present in the son, but in such a way that it does not return to itself. The son is the ‘future I,’ an event in which alterity and ego are in relation without either being lost.

4.1. Fecundity and Paternity²⁶

For Levinas (1979:267), fecundity is the relation to a future that “does not enter into the logical essence of the possible.” The son “come[s] to pass from beyond the possible, beyond projects” (*ibid*). The son is not an idea, simply projected upon the world. He is an other person, infinitely other to the father. Even though the son is - in a sense - his father, as an Other he cannot be apprehended by his father. Levinas (*ibid*) thus considers the son “me [as] a stranger to myself.” What this means is that transcendence is present in fecundity without it succumbing to the aforementioned problematisation. The relation between father and son thus finally breaks Parmenides’ eternal present; the son’s life is not united with his father’s, but simultaneously the son *is* his father. Levinas (1985:70) writes:

The fact of seeing the possibilities of the other as your own possibilities, of being able to escape the closure of your identity and what is bestowed on you, toward

²⁶ Levinas’ use of the masculine form here is critiqued quite significantly by feminist scholars, and indeed by Irigaray as we see in Chapter 3. Thus, when reading this section, the reader is asked to bear in mind that feminist critique of Levinas is duly noted, and the masculine forms are retained only to remain faithful to Levinas’ text itself. Furthermore, although Levinas does devote significant attention to maternity (particularly in *Otherwise than Being and Beyond Essence*), this theme is not given significant attention in this dissertation due to its focus on *Totality and Infinity*.

something which is not bestowed on you and which nevertheless is yours – this is paternity. This future beyond my own being, this dimension constitutive of time, takes on a concrete content in paternity.

Paternity is thus a transcendence through which the ‘I’ escapes itself, and its return to itself, since both ‘I’ and Other are manifest in the son.

Progeny is therefore not a repetition of replicated egos (Levinas 1979:268). Rather

the I is other and young, yet the ipseity that ascribed to it its meaning and its orientation in being is not lost in this renouncement of self. Fecundity continues history without producing old age. Infinite time does not bring an eternal life to an aging subject; it is *better* across the discontinuity of generation, punctuated by the inexhaustible youths of the child (*ibid.*).

The son will continue his father’s line beyond his father’s death, into the ‘future never future enough’ that the erotic caress searches for. The ego thus transcends time itself, whilst remaining mortal. As such, the ego is authenticated as something beyond the banality of Being. This transcendence is linked to infinite time, because desire (the metaphysical desire for the Other) is not put to rest in the son. The son will also know this desire. Thus the father’s desire is transcended – not in abating that desire, but in engendering desire in a future beyond the father’s life (Levinas 1979:269). This process continues, since the son has his own fecundity, which will allow him to transcend his desire in the engendering of his own son; and so forth *ad infinitum*.

It is important to note that Levinas is not advocating procreation as normative. Levinas is no biologist, and he is not advocating a practice rooted in biological facts. Fecundity and paternity provide the exemplary site wherein the problem of transcendence is resolved. But Levinas (1985:71) maintains that “one can very well conceive filiality as a relationship between human beings without the tie of biological kinship. One can have a paternal *attitude* [emphasis added] with regard to the Other.” Despite the biological nature of fecundity, paternity and sexuality, Levinas does not discuss them in terms of their biological correlates. Rather, their biological nature testifies to, but does not limit them to, their ontological significance. As such, fecundity and paternity offer metaphors for considering the nature of a relation between the ego and the Other where neither is overwhelmed by its opposite. Furthermore, the metaphor of paternity connotes with responsibility, emphasising Levinas’s fundamental point of responsibility for the Other. Without parental figures, a child cannot survive; a parent is responsible for the life of an Other. Paternity is therefore strikingly similar to the ethical relation as discussed in the aforementioned, since both involve the realisation of the one’s possible complicity with the other’s mortality. Furthermore, if the infinity of time is evinced in paternity, responsibility for the Other would therefore be emphasised as infinite here too.

Eros then, in *Totality and Infinity*, is geared towards a responsibility to the child that is engendered in fecundity. This is a true ethical relationship, one that cannot be achieved simply in the erotic relationship between man and woman due to the immanence and profanity of need. Furthermore, since the immanence of eros taints the transcendence of the future, the erotic experience is granted salvation only through the engendering of a son. In other words, the profane relation with the Other is forgiven inasmuch as it leads one to consider fecundity. Finally, the transcendence of time in paternity emphasises its ethical responsibility in contrast to the immanence of eros, which is caught up in sensual voluptuous pleasure.

5. Love Eternal: Love and Death

The paradox of death's non-occurrence has already been touched upon in the aforementioned. Death is not enough to signal the future, although its mysterious nature offers the template for alterity. When Levinas (1987:76) quotes the *Song of Solomon* to say that "Love is as powerful as death" (Song of Songs 8:6, Today's English Version) he means to show that love is just as mysterious as death and hence may offer a situation where alterity may be in relation with the Ego, despite the profanity of this relation.

But this is not the only reference to love's equation with death. Davis (2007:37) notes that in *La Mort et le temps*²⁷ (1991), Levinas analyses the paradoxical relationship between love and death further. In lieu with *The Song of Solomon*, Levinas notes that death and love are both stronger than each other, but also just as strong as each other. The death of the beloved Other is of greater import because his/her death would render he/she who is left behind "a guilty survivor, bereft of the possibility of dialogue with the deceased" (Davis 2007:37). The gravity of death is not that it will happen to me,²⁸ but rather it is that I survive the death of those I love. But even though my lover is no more, the very fact that I grieve attests to the persistence of my love. Hence something 'lives on' even in death, and this would be love. Death does not vanquish love, but neither can love deter the inevitability of death. Hence, 'love is as powerful as death.'

The significance of this for the purposes of this dissertation is threefold. Firstly, the equity of love and death illustrates that love is possibly as inevitable as death is. This is not to say that all people will fall in love. Some people live a life of celibacy, whether by choice or by circumstance. Love as understood here is not *only* eros, but all love (since in Chapter 4 we shall see how Nancy argues that

²⁷ A 1975-76 series of lectures published in English alongside another 1975-76 series of lectures entitled "God and Onto-Theo-Logy" in one volume *God, Death, and Time* (2000).

²⁸ As it will be recalled, Levinas maintains that death does not happen to *me*, it has only happened as soon as *I am* no longer.

eros cannot be thought separately from all other types of love). In other words, experiencing love in the course of one's life is as inevitable as ultimately facing death. But if death is inevitable for us all, then surely for love to be just as powerful as death, love must have just as much influence as its grim counterpart? And what recourse can we have to discuss love's inevitability other than labelling it 'eternal' and 'infinite'? Indeed, this will be an integral part of Nancy's argument as discussed in Chapter 4, where it is shown that love is fundamentally constitutive of all human beings. This leads to the second reason for the significance of love's relation with death. As we shall see, Nancy also emphasises love as unveiling finitude. Since Levinas notes that love persists even after death, then it is possible to argue that it is through love that death is given significance. However, since Nancy 'thinks immanence' and Levinas 'thinks transcendence,' the two thinkers should be quite opposed to one another. Yet, a similar relation between love and death can be identified in both, despite the nuanced differences between them. Finally, in the subsequent chapter we see that Irigaray notes a particular relation between death and 'woman,' as well as between love and 'woman.' For her, 'man' copes with 'his' fear of death by using another unthinkable but more immediate term as its replacement ('woman') that 'he' might dominate it (and thus dominate women). Simultaneously, Irigaray calls for the cultivation of eros as the ethical relationship between man and woman. Stated simply, when man and woman love each other authentically, man at once accepts his mortality and enters into an ethical relation with his 'other' (woman).

Love and death thus are bound in a peculiar affair, the explication of which forms a thread framing the argument in this dissertation.

6. Rich in poverty, poor in wealth – Levinas's critique of Platonic eros

Gonzalez (2008:41) notes that Levinas levels an ambiguous critique against the concept of eros in Plato's *Symposium*. Indeed, all of Plato's party-goers in the *Symposium* offer different accounts of eros, and hence, whilst some might be more aligned with Levinas's view, others are not. The version of eros which bears the brunt of Levinas's critique is that of Aristophanes. Aristophanes posits eros as a wish to rejoin with one's 'other half' and thus return to an originary state of wholeness. This particular guest at the banquet imagines originally whole beings, but smote in twain by gods envious of these beings' happiness. Aristophanes thus thinks that eros is the wish to reunite with a lost half, and thus return to an original state of wholeness and happiness. As such, eros could be considered a desire for something which inherently belongs to the ego, or the desire for immortality. Eros would thus be "an egoism that seeks only to return to and affirm the self in its self-sameness" (Gonzalez 2008:47). Aristophanes' account of eros thus resembles the extremity of need, and thus amounts to incest as discussed in the aforementioned. But Socrates also mistakes the nature of eros, at least in

part, inasmuch as he claims towards the end of the *Symposium* that eros desires the immortality only found in the world of Forms.

For Levinas, on the other hand, Desire is not directed towards the egoistic goal of immortality. Rather desire is for “the other, the Stranger. It is absolutely non-egoist; its name is justice. It does not link up beings already akin” (Levinas 1979:63). Desire, engendered in fecundity, allows the transcendence of time but not the transcendence of death. Desire’s aim is not to return to the ego, and if immortality is the project of an ego which hopes to sustain itself, then it is not the object of Desire. Rather, Desire propels itself to a future beyond all projects (never future enough), and something which has no identity (the ‘not yet’). In a certain sense, Desire does not *know* what it wants – it simply wants without end. This is clearly not the view of Aristophanes, since reuniting with one’s lost half appears to bring an end to wanting inasmuch it completes one’s being. But Plato also offers a critique of Aristophanes, made elaborate in Socrates account of his prior conversation with Diotima.²⁹ Gonzalez (2008:51) notes that Plato and Levinas can therefore be considered to be more aligned than a superficial reading might allow.

Socrates recalls Diotima’s insight in the *Symposium*. The wise woman notes that eros is a *daimon* (a spirit), who moves between “lack and possession, in between poverty and wealth, as philosophy is in between ignorance and wisdom” (Gonzalez 2008:50-51). Inasmuch as Socrates’ words are also Plato’s, the writer of the dialogue also critiques Aristophanes’ view of eros. The movement of eros as told by Diotima can be interpreted in at least two ways. One could be that eros mediates between the polar oppositions of ‘poverty and wealth’ and thus collapses their apparent opposition. This view, as we shall see, will be in accord with Levinas’s own. The second interpretation could be that rather than collapse this opposition, eros reinforces it inasmuch as it is necessary to mediate between its poles. This is the view which Levinas critiques, as the following outlines.

Levinas (1979:114-5) characterises both need and desire in terms of ‘poverty’ and ‘plenty’ (*penia* and *poros* respectively in Greek). The link between enjoyment and need has already been outlined in the aforementioned. Thus, if we understand enjoyment as connotative of wealth, then need is the wealth one finds due to one’s insufficiency. Levinas (1979:118) states that “happiness suffices to itself through the ‘not sufficing to oneself’ proper to need.” The paradox of need is that it is the lack at its heart which pre-empts any possible satisfaction and hence enjoyment (Gonzalez 2008:47). Stated otherwise, “need is *penia* (poverty) as a source of *poros* (wealth)” (ibid., p. 48). Desire would be the

²⁹ The importance of Diotima’s view for Irigaray is outlined in Chapter 3. Indeed, Irigaray hopes to revisit Diotima’s perspective in order to allow the feminine aspect of the *Symposium* to rise to the surface of thinking. Furthermore, in Chapter 5, Irigaray’s emphasis on the ‘*daimonic*’ or ‘in-between’ character of eros serves as a point of critique against Levinas’ ranking of eros as somewhat less preferable to fecundity and paternity.

reverse. If need espouses a wealth gained through the ego's poverty, this wealth remains within the realm of the same. As such, it cannot offer transcendence 'beyond' Being. The realisation that the 'wealth of poverty' (need) is insufficient is therefore desire. Due to this insufficiency the wealth discovered through need's satisfaction is thus poor in contrast to the desire for the Other. Desire is therefore "the *penia* of *poros* itself" (ibid.), or the insufficiency of wealth to offer the possibility of transcendence.

Since eros is the ambiguous simultaneity of need and desire, it therefore collapses the distinction between poverty and plenty. This is not to say that they disappear, but rather that they appear doubly, they overlap. The plenty of eros would be its pleasure and voluptuousness, whilst its poverty would be the insufficiency of said voluptuousness to accomplish desire (and this poverty thus testifies to the contingency of desire itself). Therefore Levinas's interpretation would be in agreement with the first interpretation offered of Diotima's speech³⁰.

7. Woman and the Feminine

When Levinas called (1987:85) the feminine the "absolutely contrary contrary [*le contraire absolument contraire*]", whose contrariety in is in no way affected by the relationship that can be established between it and its correlative, the contrariety that permits its terms to remain absolutely other," he opened himself up to a wealth of feminist critiques and interpretations. But what is the feminine for Levinas? In his references to the feminine, does he refer to biological sex or to something which all persons have access to? If the feminine is restricted to biology, this would imply that eros is only possible for heterosexuals. But if it is not, where does that leave actual women? Levinas does not make trite and oversimplified references to the feminine. Hence a feminist critique of his thought must be both rigorous and charitable, lest it misconstrues the real significance of gender in Levinas's work. This section therefore touches upon the status of the feminine in Levinas's work, but an extensive treatment of gender in Levinas cannot be explored for the sake of this dissertation's particular focus. Thus the feminine is discussed primarily in relation to eros.

In Levinas's earlier works, particularly *Time and the Other* (1987), the feminine provides a template for alterity itself. Levinas (1987:88) says that "alterity is accomplished in the feminine" and that there is an "exceptional place for the feminine in the economy of being" (1987:78). The implication here, and a significant one at that, is that the feminine is the means by which Levinas breaks with the unity of Being proclaimed by Parmenides. Indeed, this significance underpins the thought of Irigaray and Nancy who, despite their differences with Levinas, nevertheless owe him a great debt in their

³⁰ This will be an important connection between Levinas and Irigaray, whose feminist engagement with Diotima is discussed in greater detail in the subsequent chapter.

formulations of difference and multiplicity. Furthermore, Levinas considers the feminine as the “alterity which commands the erotic relation” (Levinas 1985:66). In other words, by introducing the feminine into his thought, Levinas hopes to show the contingency of eros on alterity; a view which stands in sharp contrast to the theory of erotic fusion propagated by Aristophanes. Although in *Totality and Infinity* the erotic relationship becomes complicated by the simultaneity of need and desire (as discussed in the aforementioned), the importance of the feminine as “the *of itself other*, as the origin of the very concept of alterity” (1985:66) cannot be overlooked.

Feminist scholarship on the matter is, however, immersed in debate regarding whether Levinas’s use of ‘the feminine’ is a just one. This debate focuses on a number of points,³¹ but of import here is Levinas’s move away from the feminine in his later works where eros, as the relation with the feminine, seemingly diminishes in importance (Chanter 1995:201). Such a move is particularly evident in *Otherwise than Being and Beyond Essence* as Levinas shifts his attention from eros and paternity to maternity. Despite maternity representing the “ethical *par excellence*”, many argue that the exclusion of the feminine as such from Levinas’s later works belies patriarchal and “stereotypical... restrictions on sex roles” (Chanter 1995:198-9). Yet, Levinas’s discussions of eros and maternity are not geared towards prescribing roles to actual men and women. Rather, he is using quite ordinary elements in human life to allude to concepts such as transcendence, alterity and ethical metaphysics.

In order for Levinas to break with Parmenides, he needs the concept of the feminine inasmuch as it provides him with the route by which to think multiplicity itself (Levinas 1987:85). Sandford³² (2000:40) notes that in Levinas’s earlier work, “[t]he erotic relation highlights the formal structure of sexual difference as the possibility of *transcendence*. This is, in short, *a metaphysics of sexual difference*, or sexual difference as metaphysics.” This difference is thus not an empirical one, which would be a matter of chromosomes, hormones and genitals. Rather, masculine and feminine indicate a duality in the structure of reality itself, and the relationship between them both offers a means to think

³¹ Indeed, Levinas’ assertion that the feminine is the ‘contrary’ of the masculine is contentious inasmuch as it implies that the feminine cannot be equal to the masculine, and as such can be considered as subordinate to it. But at the same time, Levinas prioritises alterity over sameness, and thus the feminine as ‘contrary’ is this alterity itself. Thus it can be argued that the feminine in Levinas work can in fact be considered more important than the masculine.

³² Although Sandford (2000:39-63) critiques Levinas inasmuch as the shift away from eros and the feminine in his later works belies a preference for the masculine, this argument is not discussed here. This dissertation focuses on eros, and as such in the works where Levinas discusses eros the feminine plays a fundamentally important role.

transcendence. Furthermore, it is via sexual difference that Levinas introduces duality into metaphysics, as opposed to the traditional unity, breaking Parmenides' view in twain.

The significance of this is that if masculine and feminine are metaphysical categories, rather than only biological ones, Levinas does not prescribe a heterosexual norm for eros. Indeed, in *Ethics and Infinity*, Levinas (1985:68) indicates that

the ontological differences between the masculine and feminine would appear less archaic if, instead of dividing humanity into two species (or two genders), they would signify that the participation in the masculine and in the feminine were the attribute of every human being. Could this be the meaning of the enigmatic verse of *Genesis* 1.27: "male and female created He them"?

Therefore the erotic relation as the profane one between the masculine and its feminine other is not restricted to the sexual relationship between a man and a woman. It could refer to the relation between two men or two women as well, inasmuch as each person potentially 'participates' in both the metaphysical categories of gender. Levinas (1985:66) says, "the pathos of the erotic relationship is the fact of being two, and that the other is absolutely other." Therefore the biological sex of each lover does not change the erotic relation being one between masculine and feminine. What *is* important is that there are *two* people in eros, each one correlating to both the same and the Other. In Sandford's (2000:37) analysis of gender in Levinas's work, she emphasises that the "economy of the same [is] coded as masculine." Need therefore would belong to the masculine, as well as the pleasure which accompanies need. Following this, the feminine must be the Other for whom insatiable desire is felt. Thus each lover would be masculine inasmuch as their erotic experience involves some element of sexual need. Yet each would simultaneously be desired as Other, or as feminine, inasmuch as the beloved remains an Other irreducible to the satisfaction of that need alone. Whether the lovers are a homo- or heterosexual couple is not relevant to the metaphysical point: eros is the interplay between masculine and feminine as same and Other respectively.

But if this is the case some problems may arise. One could question why the feminine is consistently relegated to the realm "Other," and held as an impossible object of desire? One cannot substitute the masculine for the feminine, making the feminine the dimension of the same and the masculine the dimension of the Other. To do this one would undermine the asymmetrical relation between same and Other. The feminine must always be the Other in order for the concept of radical otherness to remain intact. But how would such a view relate to women's real embodied experiences? Would this not imply then that the experiences of women, in terms of knowledge, needs and pleasures, are in fact masculine? This does injustice towards the lived difference in experience between men and women. Moreover it seems not only naive, but also unjust, to ascribe sexual pleasure and the dimension of need to masculinity alone. If Levinas's understanding of the feminine is to be interpreted by women in

their day to day lives, it may affect how women relate to their bodies, their unique bodily needs, and sexual pleasures. It is true that Levinas uses masculine and feminine to illustrate the metaphysical point of duality or multiplicity, but the choice of gender for this project becomes problematic. Even if the feminine is simply metaphorical, then Sandford (2000:47) quite rightly points out that the metaphor would have no meaning if it had no bearing on real empirical women. But if the metaphor does relate to real women, then it seems an unjust one. This may be why Levinas moves away from eros in his later works since his project is to understand ethics as metaphysics. But since this dissertation focuses on eros, the problems raised by the feminine as the Other in eros cannot be ignored. For this reason, the next chapter turns to the work of Luce Irigaray in order to discover whether it is possible to conserve the differences between masculine and feminine whilst ensuring that the feminine is done some measure of justice.

8. Conclusion

Having journeyed through the most significant aspects of Levinas's work in order to highlight the importance of eros in it, a number of important themes directing this dissertation are brought forward. As the Other is the fundamental idea which drives Levinas's work, his project in discussing eros is to show its contingency on the Other. Since the Other - revealed in the epiphany of the face - demands the justification of one's being even before the question of Being as such might be considered, ethics – rather than ontology – must be considered first philosophy. But the erotic relation with alterity presents a difficult problem where ethics and ontology collide. This relation is first comprehensively stated in terms of 'the profane' in *Time and the Other*, and later as 'equivocal' in his first *magnum opus*, *Totality and Infinity*.

Eros is profane inasmuch as it is the clash of need and desire, as need belongs to the order of the same and desire to the order of the Other. If alterity is a mystery, to impose need and pleasure upon it does not negate such a mystery, but rather profanes it. Furthermore, the enmeshment of the two forms of want situates eros as equivocal inasmuch as need betokens the selfishness of pleasure, and desire strives to accomplish the demand to justify one's existence in the face of the Other. Need and desire thus demarcate the boundaries between self and Other, and eros is revealed as a curious, yet ever failing attempt to blur such boundaries. To overcome these boundaries through eros is impossible for Levinas, as eros consistently throws back to the immanence of need. But this point is picked up upon in Irigaray and Nancy, who may offer a challenge to this impossibility.

Levinas illustrates the equivocal enmeshment of need and desire by demonstrating the voluptuous character of an erotic encounter as contingent upon the love of the Other. Voluptuousness is the love of the Other's love, but despite this necessary connection to the Other, it remains a moment of egoistic

pleasure. Erotic pleasure itself is thus equivocal, as the pleasure of one love is contingent upon the pleasure of the Other; absolutely unknowable and yet directly influencing the enjoyment of eros. The profane nature of eros is thus further emphasised. Despite the exteriority of the Other in voluptuousness, and the transcendence such exteriority implies, the call to genuine dialogue is overshadowed by the lustful call of nudity.

Profanation is thus made explicit in the inability of nudity to ‘speak of the future’ as the face would. The future in eros presents itself without signification, and is undetermined, unspecific and timeless. Whereas the face signifies the ethical imperative ‘you shall not kill,’ eros glosses over this commandment without contravening it. Eros is thus profane, rather than murder. Furthermore, this leads to the consideration of eros as the equivocal *par excellence*; speaking without speech or speech without speaking. A significant point of connection between Levinas, Irigaray and Nancy is thus brought forward. Irigaray claims that eros may serve a mediating function, which is akin to speech and mediates between the two gendered poles of alterity. Indeed this view stands partially as a critique of the role Levinas ascribes the erotic feminine. In contrast to Irigaray, but still holding fast to a Levinasian trajectory, we shall see how Nancy meditates upon the difficulty encountered by thinking when it attempts to capture love, and for him, this testifies to the fact that love always offers new possibilities beyond thought. Nevertheless, Levinas exemplifies the equivocal and profane character of eros through the act of touch, the caress, which searches for a future whilst never finding it.

The caress is eros in action, and Levinas uses it to illustrate the equivocal relations caught up in eros. As such, the caress is a touching which necessarily must be a return to the immanence and immediacy of the same. However, that which the caress attempts to touch is precisely the Other: a future never future enough which consistently dodges all attempts at being grasped in the present. Thus the caress is caught up in both directions of need and desire, and thus illustrates the ambiguity of eros. Yet perhaps Levinas underestimates the significance and power of the caress, perhaps due to a certain modesty or reticence inspired by the profane character of eros. The caress is something which Irigaray critiques significantly, inasmuch as it is touching itself which imbues fecundity in the lovers themselves, rather than for what is to be engendered in the ‘son.’ Furthermore the motif of touching is extensively developed by Nancy, the significance of which allows a point of contact between subjectivities, constituting them as such. For Levinas, however, the reconciliation of erotic equivocation, epitomised in the ambiguity of the caress, is to be found not in the immediate, but rather in the future as the engendering of a son.

Thus despite eros being non-teleological, its salvation for Levinas is that it implies the fecundity of paternity and thus makes possible an unambiguous relation between self and Other. In fecundity, Levinas identifies a resolution to a formal problem with transcendence wherein the ‘I’ and the Other

may relate without one swallowing the other. Indeed, this is not a biological reduction, but rather the ontological testimony to the possibility of a metaphysical relation which conserves otherness. As such, paternity is a disposition that anyone can have towards another, exemplifying that the projects of the other person can remain the projects of the 'I' but nevertheless extend beyond all possible experience of that 'I.' Thus, where eros profanes the ethical imperative and its implicit responsibility, fecundity and paternity emphasise this responsibility as the responsibility of parent to child. Furthermore, paternity and fecundity offer the transcendence of time itself, exposing an infinity to which this responsibility is ultimately connected as infinite as well. Yet despite Levinas's insistence that this is neither dialectical nor teleological, both Irigaray and Nancy identify features of dialectics and teleology in Levinas's consideration of fecundity as the saviour of eros. Indeed, the masculine forms which Levinas uses are heavily critiqued in Irigaray's feminist philosophy. And for Nancy, the implication that paternal love is somewhat more authentic than erotic love is a problematic hierarchy, which stands to jeopardise the pluralistic nature of love itself. Yet despite the fact that both Irigaray and Nancy are to critique Levinas, the latter thinker introduces the very framework in which the two former must work. And while the fecundity of eros provides the framework to transcend time without a project of immortality, the persistence of love after the death of the Other testifies to love's timeless nature.

Love is as strong as death, and as such this attests to the ethical imperative Levinas formulates wherein the death of the beloved Other is of more concern than my own. Since death does not happen to me it is rather the death of those I love which acquaints me with death's power. Thus Levinas provides yet another point of consideration when thinking eros, both in Irigaray and Nancy. For Irigaray, the fact that both death and radical alterity are unthinkable, the substitution of the gendered other (or woman) for death is a means by which both the inevitability of death and the alterity of the other may be ignored. Thus, we shall see how a certain reading of Irigaray proposes that cultivating eros might allow both the possibilities of respect for alterity and bravery in accepting death's inevitability are interconnected. Furthermore, the relation between love and finitude in Nancy illustrates that love and death are involved in a strange affair, which testifies to the inevitability and eternal power of both.

Since both Irigaray and Nancy discuss Plato's *Symposium*, it is worth investigating Levinas's own position on the Greek's work. For Levinas, a particular reading of the *Symposium* reveals a respect for eros as the enmeshment of need and desire. Furthermore, this concept is necessarily related to the view Diotima offers Socrates in the *Symposium*. Irigaray's respect for this early figure of feminist thought can thus be closely related to Levinas. The *Symposium*, for Nancy, represents the fundamental difficulty in trying to separate thinking from love, and thus Levinas's formulation of the complicit

nature of need and desire may compare quite closely with Nancy's own thought on 'thinking as love.' Indeed, the view proposed by Aristophanes – namely that of eros as fusion – is heavily critiqued by Levinas as one which subsumes alterity into the same. Since a project of preserving the difference between same and Other can be identified in both Irigaray and Nancy too, many correlations between the thinkers arise. Nevertheless, for Levinas it is the feminine other which is the alterity in eros, but his considerations of the feminine come under close scrutiny by feminists, and thus the final section of this chapter serves as the bridge to the next.

Despite the fact that the feminine in eros provides the template for alterity, as well as for thinking multiplicity, Levinas's use of the feminine is critiqued by feminist scholars. Although concepts such as maternity might offer the feminine as the 'ethical *par excellence*,' the feminine is somewhat marginalised in his thought. The feminine may be reduced to certain sex roles, feminine enjoyment is considered to be unrealistically similar to its masculine counterpart, and it is unclear whether Levinas's use of the feminine bears a close relation with the actual experience of real women. Despite the fact that the masculine/feminine dichotomy is, for Levinas, a metaphysical one before it is a biological one, one can question the validity of such a distinction if it bears no resemblance to the empirical lives of women. Indeed, the feminine is more directly associated with equivocation, ambiguity and lust than with the ethical imperative reserved for fathers and sons. Thus, this dissertation turns to the work of Luce Irigaray to explore the possibility of both engaging with Levinas's thought on eros and departing from it.

Chapter 3: The Feminine Objects – Eros In The Thought Of Luce Irigaray

1. Introduction

The problem of the feminine in Levinas is one which many feminists have taken upon themselves to address. This dissertation however selects only one in the trajectory of contemporary French thought, a feminist reading of Levinas which is particularly critical. Luce Irigaray's psychoanalysis and deconstruction, when applied to Levinas's thought on eros, results in a nigh complete reversal of his views. Irigaray nevertheless simultaneously also adopts many of the core concepts in Levinasian thought to achieve this inversion. In this chapter, we thus see how Irigaray 'turns Levinas on his head,' and that by pitting the two thinkers against one another an irreconcilable impasse is reached. Yet, this impasse is one which may be traversed when we turn to the thought of Jean-Luc Nancy in Chapter 4.

In order to foreshadow the rigorous critique Irigaray levels against Levinas, the chapter begins with an overview of what problems she identifies in Levinas and the possible solutions to such problems. Thereafter, the fundamentals of Irigaray's deconstructive approach are laid bare in order to clarify one half of her approach. Irigaray's work is, however, made most formidable by the alliance she makes between deconstruction and psychoanalysis. Hence a brief detour through the fundamentals of her critique of psychoanalysis and her re-appropriation of it for the purposes of feminine subjectivity is also provided. Both Irigaray's deconstruction and her psychoanalysis are geared towards destabilising the assumption that theories of subjectivity apply universally to both men and women, and thus she illustrates that the masculine subject is predicated upon a feminine other which has been denied a rightful status throughout the history of Western thought. In light of this, Irigaray aims to develop new possibilities of imagining the feminine, and she does this by dividing the Lacanian concept of the Imaginary into two components which apply differently to men and women respectively.

Eros offers Irigaray a situation from which to achieve this salvation of feminine subjectivity. Hence the chapter turns to some of the basic considerations which Irigaray develops regarding the erotic. Irigaray re-reads Plato's *Symposium* in the attempt to re-articulate Diotima's feminine voice, and Irigaray's does this in a manner to show Diotima's view conforms to Irigaray's own axiomatic assertion regarding subjectivity as divided into masculine and feminine. The feminist thinker thus shows that the Platonic understanding of eros, as a step on the path towards the love of the good, is a misnomer which denounces feminine subjectivity. Instead of Plato's teleological view of eros, Irigaray develops eros as a mediating factor between concepts traditionally associated with the masculine and feminine respectively. As such, eros offers itself as an intermediary between terms that

traditionally exclude each other; such as the depths and the heights, carnality and transcendence, or the erotic and the ethical.

Irigaray therefore develops what she considers a more fruitful way in which to discuss eros. Thus she introduces terminology which suits her project of asserting eros as a situation both of ethical possibility and in which to understand subjectivity. The first of these discussed in this chapter is Irigaray's concept of the sensible transcendental, which the feminist uses to argue for the possibility of transcendence as intimately connected to the body and the senses. As such, beauty exemplifies the possibility of a 'sensible transcendence' and the appropriate passion with which beauty is approached is wonder. Irigaray thus re-articulates Descartes' notion that 'wonder is the first of all the passions' in order to emphasise the radical alterity embodied in a subject who is different sexually. But since Irigaray considers eros as offering the possibility for exchange between radically other subjectivities, she needs to provide some means of understanding this mediation. Irigaray therefore develops two concepts which are central to understanding her formulation of eros, namely the threshold and the mucous. Where the threshold represents the limit of the other, the mucous offers a means of access which allows for the meeting of subjectivities which is not a fusion (since fusion would imply a reduction to the same). Although these four concepts do not exhaust the list of novel terminology in Irigaray's theory of love, for the sake of economy this dissertation identifies them as the most important in discussing the feminist's conceptualisation of eros in particular relation to Levinas and Nancy.

Once these fundamental aspects of Irigaray's thought are made clear, the chapter moves on to Irigaray's encounter with Levinas. Although Irigaray devotes two texts to her critique of Levinas (with various subtle jibes at him scattered amongst the rest of her work), this section focuses particularly on her re-reading of him in an essay entitled "The Fecundity of The Caress" (1993:185-217; 2001:119-144). Some reference is made to the more direct "Questions to Emmanuel Levinas" (Irigaray 1991:178-190), but since both texts level the same essential critique, this chapter examines the former with more rigour since it offers a far more nuanced engagement with Levinas's work on eros.

There are five themes which form the brunt of Irigaray's critique of Levinas regarding eros. The first is related to Irigaray's primary concern since it examines the possibility of reading feminine subjectivity and agency into Levinas's account of eros. Unfortunately for Levinas, Irigaray identifies that he fails on this account, since the beloved woman is considered as a passive object of love rather than an active female lover who complements the male lover in eros. The second problem with which Irigaray finds fault is Levinas's implicit assumption of a patriarchal genealogy, evinced in the priority he accords paternal fecundity in his earlier work as the salvation of eros. The third problematic that

Irigaray develops regards the priority of sight over touch found in Levinas's work. As we shall see, by according touch more import, Irigaray illustrates that eros need not be considered as too carnal to be a real ethical relation. Indeed, the fourth point of Irigaray's critique draws upon the three aforementioned points so that she might reverse Levinas's idea that the fecundity of eros is geared towards the reproduction of a child. Irigaray postulates that the fecundity of eros rather exists between the lovers themselves, and offers them the opportunity to 'give birth to each-other' inasmuch as she identifies eros a moment which nourishes both poles of gendered subjectivity. Fifthly, and finally, Irigaray asserts eros as a situation wherein transcendence can be genuine, since unlike Levinas, she emphasises the notion that transcendence is an experience rooted in the bodily experience of sexed subjects.

Once Irigaray's critique of Levinas has been clearly laid out, an evaluation of this critique is given by pitting Irigaray and Levinas against each other regarding eros. The yield of this comparison shows that the two thinkers arrive at an impasse, since Irigaray's critique essentially reverses Levinas's entire consideration of the erotic. But Irigaray's own formulation is not without fault, since she necessarily operates from within a Levinasian framework. Moreover, Irigaray's formulation of gendered subjectivity is shown to be somewhat more rigid than Levinas's, and whilst this aligns itself with her project of a just articulation of feminine possibilities it becomes complicated when trying to understand who exactly is feminine and who is masculine. Indeed, the implication of Irigaray's thought shows that sexual subjectivity is too intimately rooted in biological sex, and this renders the possibility of love between people of the same biological sex, as superficial at best. Indeed, the possibility which Levinas (1985:68) grants gender, namely that all people might participate in the masculine and the feminine,¹ is not possible to read into Irigaray and this renders her thought somewhat lacking when it comes to the nuances of real erotic encounters. If homosexuals are necessarily marginalised by Irigaray's rigid fixing of gender, then I find that her account of eros is insufficient to account for eros in its universality.

For the sake of clarity, this chapter distinguishes between the Levinasian concept of 'the Other' and Irigaray's own conception of otherness. As we shall see, for Irigaray the real 'Other' is the feminine other. For purposes of practicality then, this chapter refers to the Other as it appears in Levinas with a capital 'O,' and the other as it appears in Irigaray with a small 'o.' The reason for this is, as we shall see, that Irigaray identifies Levinas's Other as an other derived from the masculine economy of the

¹ See Chapter 2, Section 7 "Woman And The Feminine"

same, which amounts to nothing more than a masculine projection of an impossible absolute which occludes feminine subjectivity.²

The penultimate section of this chapter regards Irigaray's thought on the relationship between love and death, which unsurprisingly stands in direct contrast to Levinas's. Where Irigaray's thought can be interpreted to mean that Levinas is guilty of bypassing feminine subjectivity in order to avoid the anxiety felt by the masculine due to his mortality, the connection Levinas makes between death and love emphasises alterity more than the application of Irigaray's thought to his own would account for. This therefore serves to emphasise the impasse between the two French thinkers, but it also looks forward to the thought of Jean-Luc Nancy, which may offer a possible means of negotiating the seemingly irreconcilable differences between Levinas and Irigaray.

This chapter thus concludes by reflecting upon both the positive and negative points which a comparison between Irigaray and Levinas yields with regards to eros. By identifying the root of the impasse between the two thinkers, the foundation is laid looking forward to the subsequent and penultimate chapter of this dissertation which explores the thought Jean-Luc Nancy offers with regards to eros as love.

2. Irigaray's Problematisation of Levinas and the Proposed Solution

We have already seen that Levinas is both praised and criticised by feminist thinkers, for introducing the feminine into philosophical discourse but failing to provide a just account of her, respectively. Irigaray is most definitely one such feminist, although her praise of Levinas's achievements is subdued at best, if his influence on her is not down-right ignored. This is a point of critique against Irigaray which unfolds over the course of this chapter, and it is noteworthy point since much of the underlying framework of Irigaray's thought in general is Levinasian at its core. Nevertheless, eros is fundamental to Irigaray's work, and thus her critique of Levinas is primarily directed at his understanding of the feminine in eros.³ The following therefore provides a brief outline of Irigaray's

² This matter is perhaps more clear in the French, since when Irigaray writes of the feminine other she uses the term '*un(e) autre*.' It is therefore the gendered characteristic of French words which Irigaray exploits to emphasise her point on sexual difference, rather than the limited capitalisation of terms available to us in English. Hence this chapter consistently refers to Irigaray's concept of the other as the 'feminine other' unless it is appropriate to describe that other as the masculine other (if we speak of the masculine other of the feminine). This might elucidate Irigaray's notion of the real other as 'the other of the other' rather than 'the other of the same,' since for her, otherness is primarily sexed.

³ Although Irigaray does touch upon other elements related to the feminine in Levinas, such as maternity and the home, these are minor references in comparison with eros. And since this dissertation focuses on eros, if 'maternity' and 'the home' are touched upon, then an in-depth examination thereof is not given for the sake of maintaining the dissertation's focus.

critique, and the view that she would condone instead of Levinas's analysis. Once these have been sketched in brief, showing where Irigaray's critique stems from and where her response is directed, we can examine the route which she takes to critique Levinas and arrive at her view on eros.

The focal point of Irigaray's critique of Levinas is the connection he makes between fecundity and eros. As it will be recalled, Levinas finds that in eros, ethics lapses into pleasure, rendering eros a profane and equivocal relation. What eros alludes to, however, namely the fecundity of the paternal relation between father and son, is emblematic of infinite responsibility and also provides the formula to resolve problems associated with transcendence. Defenders of Levinas's position would be reluctant to admit that eros' association with fecundity, which has a far greater ethical character, can be seen as a teleological move (i.e. that the end goal of eros is fecundity and paternity). Yet it is precisely this connection with which Irigaray finds fault, as it indeed does appear to be a teleological move on Levinas behalf (as we shall see, Nancy finds himself in agreement with Irigaray on this point, as he also accuses Levinas of teleology with regards to paternity). Irigaray figures Levinas's development of fecundity and paternity as a move which compensates for an implicit failure of eros to have a truly ethical character, as if eros has no significant ethical meaning beyond its function in engendering a child. Whether or not this is the case remains to be seen, and is discussed in greater detail in the sections that follow.

Nevertheless, the reasons which Irigaray provides for this argument are of particular interest for this dissertation. As we shall see, Irigaray uses her own breed of psychoanalysis to make the claim that (most) Western philosophy hitherto has unconsciously privileged a discourse which bears the features of the male body. Furthermore, this privilege is the root of patriarchy both in discourse and in social/political experience. Irigaray's response to this discovery is two-fold: firstly she believes that through a strategic use of deconstructive techniques, she can show that this patriarchal discourse is dependent upon the feminine perspective which it occludes; and secondly, that by opening up space for discourse from a feminine perspective Irigaray might offer the possibility to 'heal' (as a psychoanalyst would) the patriarchal discourse in question and thus account for an ethical relationship between the sexes. The formulation and application of these techniques with regards to Levinas is elaborated upon in the sections to follow. For the sake of clarity, however, the conclusions which Irigaray arrives at are stated in brief here. Irigaray identifies an association of all things spiritual and transcendent with a masculine subject, whilst the opposite, namely that which is carnal and therefore erotic, is associated with a feminine subject. Thus, if ethics is associated with the spiritual and transcendental, and is also divorced from the carnal and erotic, this is exemplary of the occlusion of feminine subjectivity in favour of a more masculine one. Furthermore, this does not only deny the status of feminine subjectivity, but the feminine is also oppressed at the mercy of the masculine (this

oppression would be the essential structure of patriarchy). By divorcing eros from ethics, women are denied ethical and political significance, and are instead reserved as the ‘place’ or container of ‘man.’ The notion that eros is private, as Levinas indeed asserts,⁴ is symptomatic of such a reservation. Hence it is unsurprising that Irigaray finds this patriarchal bias in Levinas’s thought on eros,⁵ which seemingly reserves transcendence and ethics for the paternal relationship, and relegates the erotic to the equivocal interplay between need and desire in the face of the feminine.

Rather than make an attempt to show that the feminine subject is just as capable of ‘spiritual and transcendental’ ethics, Irigaray desires to incorporate ethics into eros itself. Her aim in doing so is to place emphasis on the significance of sexual difference, and suggest an opportunity to cultivate an ethics thereof. Irigaray claims that if the erotic encounter can be understood as one which has the possibility of being ethical, then a just relation between the sexes can be formulated. This would at once liberate women from being consigned to the bedroom, and at the same time neither prescribes they ‘get themselves to a nunnery.’ What I mean by this is that Irigaray thinks that if eros can be understood as ethical, then neither is ‘woman’ reserved as the place for ‘man,’ nor is the feminine expected to emulate the lofty spiritual ethics associated with the masculine. Therefore the fundamental assertion that Irigaray makes with regards to eros is that it must be ethical if the feminine, and hence women, are to be granted ethical status without perpetuating the structure of patriarchy.

The Irigaray/Levinas debate on eros is therefore a bold one, and the question arises as to how Irigaray approaches this project. In order to get to grips with Irigaray’s understanding of eros, this chapter now turns to the basic tenets of Irigaray’s thought, before moving onto a more detailed account of Irigaray’s debate with Levinas.

3. The Feminine Fundamentals: The Basic Tenets of Irigaray’s Deconstructive Thought

Whitford (1991a:10) asserts that Irigaray’s philosophy is geared at examining the “*passional foundations of reason.*” Irigaray approaches this through a tactical use of deconstructive techniques and her own particular breed of psychoanalysis. These two approaches act parallel to one another in an attempt to uncover unacknowledged feminine dimensions in philosophical understanding.

The essence of deconstruction, in the words of Atkins (2005:266), is to show that

⁴ See Chapter 2, Section 3.1 “Eros In The Work of Levinas”

⁵This is most evident in *Totality and Infinity*, and the works prior to that *magnum opus*. Although in later works Levinas does use maternity (rather than paternity) to exemplify the ethical relationship, this is apparently insufficient for Irigaray to reconsider her critique of eros.

meaning is always overdetermined. On this view, every linguistic term draws its meaning from its connections to a network of other terms that form its unnoticed background. The positive value of a term is actually a function of its *difference* [emphasis added] from all other possible terms – terms to which it implicitly refers.

As such, a deconstructionist would claim that any assertion of ‘the truth’ necessarily rests upon the network of other linguistic terms which differ from that assertion. Of primary concern for Irigaray, however, is how terms associated with ‘man’ or the masculine are necessarily predicated upon terms associated with ‘woman’ or the feminine. The bane of all deconstruction is ‘the binary opposition,’ “a dichotomous structure in which two terms are presented as contradictory, thus mutually exclusive” (Atkins 2005:267). When things are thought of in binary logic, one term of the binary pair (man/woman, for example) is always privileged at the expense of the other where the first holds “a positive value while the second is said to be a negation of the first” (ibid.). Deconstruction thus offers itself as a useful resource for feminism, inasmuch as it reveals that certain concepts, such as ‘reason,’ ‘truth,’ ‘unity’ and ‘ethics’ are associated with ‘man,’ and the negation of these terms, for example ‘emotion,’ ‘irrationality,’ ‘multiplicity,’ and ‘carnality,’ are associated with ‘woman.’ “This system,” says Atkins (ibid.), “has come to be called ‘phallocentrism,’ a kind of semantic economy that turns on the principle value of the masculine (the ‘phallus’⁶.” Irigaray’s project is therefore to expose the phallogentric biases in philosophical texts and thus reveal philosophy’s debt to the feminine ‘other’ which it marginalises. Thus to uncover the ‘passional foundations of reason’ directly alludes to deconstruction, inasmuch as the phallogentric bias would divorce reason and passion, relegating the former to the masculine and the latter to the feminine. Thus Irigaray argues that philosophy, despite pretensions of being based supremely on ‘reason,’ is in fact based on the negation of passion, and in so doing philosophical discourse unjustly marginalises women and the feminine.

Not only does Irigaray uncover phallogentric biases through deconstruction, but she also makes use of psychoanalysis to uncover a similar debt to the feminine. Stated simply, Irigaray psychoanalyses both philosophical texts and psychoanalytic theory itself to show that both ‘repress’ the role played by the

⁶ The phallus here must be understood in the context of Lacanian psychoanalysis, not simply as a penis. In the most basic terms, the phallus is “an entirely imaginary object invested with an *entirely imaginary and undefined* power” (Bailey 2009:76). Within the framework of Lacanian psychoanalysis the phallus thus co-ordinates much of the psyche’s activity. But the principle problem Irigaray finds with this, as we shall see, is that despite the denial of the phallus being the penis, it nevertheless has a particularly masculine connotation which most likely marginalises a formulation of ‘the feminine’ as something other than simply the inverse, or reverse, of ‘the masculine.’

maternal.⁷ The real relationship between mother and child is the ultimate prerequisite for any meaning whatsoever, inasmuch as meaning can only arise since humans have bodies, and those bodies were born of a woman. As Atkins (ibid.) puts it, Irigaray considers that “the very process whereby meaning is produced through the symbolic resources of language is tied up with the corporeality of the maternal relation.” The importance of the maternal for Irigaray is that it forms the backdrop of all symbolic representation. Hence her writings are consistently aimed at uncovering this debt to the maternal-feminine. A fuller discussion of Irigaray’s psychoanalysis is reserved for later in this chapter, since the implications of her critique of psychoanalysis itself as phallogocentric reveal an interesting perspective on eros.

In utilising such techniques, Irigaray uncovers aporias in the texts she analyses. These aporias stem from a restrictive masculine rendering of ideas, and thus can only be solved by allowing feminine subjectivity to voice itself to complement the texts under discussion. Irigaray’s approach is therefore characterised by a poetic style and a certain lack of clarity and precision. This does not necessarily render Irigaray’s work philosophically untenable, although some hold the opposite to be true.⁸ Rather, the idea is that Irigaray affirms the feminist agenda, but also leaves it up to her readers to interpret her injunction for a feminine utopia in their own terms (Whitford 1991a:23-24). In other words, although Irigaray’s writing might be plagued by opacity with regards to precise definition, the motivation behind it is deliberate, and it is geared towards generating new possibilities of imagining feminine subjectivity. Thus whilst aporias might be revealed, they are not necessarily solved. It is up to Irigaray’s readers to carry forth her agenda on their own terms.

An example of one such aporia, which is discussed in greater detail further along in this chapter, is the notion of eros we find in Plato’s *Symposium*. If eros is the love of bodies which leads to the love of the Good, as Plato would have us believe, then how is the distance between body and idea mediated? Or in other words, if the love of the Good is the true object of love, then why does it begin with the love of bodies? And is not the erotic necessarily predicated upon the physical act of love? As we shall see, Irigaray finds that the Socratic insistence on a single and absolute object of love in fact divorces eros from the body. Hence the very thing which characterises eros as erotic no longer plays a role in defining it, since its ultimate end is not the love of another body, but rather the ideality of Goodness.

⁷ An interesting connection could be made between Irigaray and Levinas regarding maternity, but it would be an extensive and in-depth one. Such a discussion must therefore be reserved for elsewhere since the focus of this dissertation is eros.

⁸ Irigaray is one of the thinkers criticised in the book *Fashionable Nonsense* (1998) by Sokal and Bricmont. Although their critique of her is restricted to her use of scientific concepts in philosophy, the impact of the book itself is often extrapolated to imply a critique on the entire project of postmodernism (see for example Dawkins, R. 1998. ‘Postmodernism Disrobed.’ *Nature* 394:pp141-143.)

This corresponds to Irigaray's critique of phallogentrism, since the masculine frame of reference (the love of ideas, and hence reason) excludes its feminine counterpart (the carnal passion of eros). Her reading of Plato thus shows the prejudices of (*inter alia*) form over matter, spirit over body, and thus ideal love over bodily love.

Yet Irigaray resists offering clear precise definitions of 'woman' or 'the feminine.' As we shall see, it is her contention that to do so would in fact render the feminine once more at the mercy of a masculine desire for such clarity and precision. Rather, her project is to open up the possibility for change in thinking the feminine. Sandford (2000:137-138) notes that Irigaray's failure to say exactly what the feminine is creates a potential shortcoming in her work, especially if Irigaray maintains that her critique of Levinas operates from the standpoint of descriptive phenomenology. For Sandford (2000:237), the issue is problematic because she argues that Levinas uses the feminine as a "*philosophical category*" rather than to denote an account of empirical women. Simultaneously (and as we have noted in Chapter 2), Sandford critiques Levinas for the choice of the word 'feminine' if it does not in fact refer to empirical women. Irigaray would be guilty of a similar conflation, since if she uses the feminine to discuss empirical women (inasmuch as she uses it in the context of phenomenology) then it becomes problematic if such a phenomenology is formulated in the abstract terms appropriate to discussing the feminine as a philosophical category. But as we shall see, it is much more evident in Irigaray that the feminine relates directly to real women than might be read into Levinas. This is however not unproblematic, for as we shall see, a faithful reading of Irigaray makes it impossible for real men to identify with the feminine and real women with the masculine. This becomes a problem inasmuch as it may render it impossible for eros to be considered legitimate between people of the same biological sex.

Yet if one examines Irigaray's work at large, it is evident that she refrains from giving any crystalline definition of 'woman' or 'the feminine' because she aims to allow for a plurality of identity under the term 'woman,' or precisely to say that woman is the 'sex which is not one.' As such, to ask Irigaray 'what is the feminine?' and expect a single unified concept in response would be to overlook the fact that Irigaray considers the feminine to be plurality itself, both as a philosophical category⁹ and embodied in each and every empirical woman. As Irigaray (1985b:30-31) states,

(Re-)discovering herself, for a woman, thus could only signify the possibility of sacrificing no one of her pleasures to another, of identifying herself with none of

⁹ As we shall discover later in this chapter, the notion of a philosophical category likely corresponds to Irigaray's understanding of language as shaping and directing thought, belying her Lacanian background. Thus what Irigaray understands by the feminine as a 'philosophical category' would be its role as a concept which shapes how we imagine and understand what it signifies and connotes.

them in particular, *of never being simply one*. A sort of expanding universe to which no limits could be fixed.

Irigaray thus cannot offer much in terms of a ‘roadmap’ to being feminine, precisely because she considers the feminine an impossible concept to isolate. In other words, if the feminine were to be pinned down, ‘given limits,’ and thus defined as a singular ‘thing,’ this would contradict Irigaray’s contention that the feminine is ‘never simply one.’ Plurality appears, at least for Irigaray, to be the principle characteristic of the feminine, and as such it accounts for the differences amongst women and prescribes no particular univocal essence. But such an understanding may seem ‘useless’ inasmuch as it offers no scheme for instrumental application. Indeed, many feminists critique Irigaray for not providing practical applications of her philosophical thought (and perhaps we can consider Sandford amongst them, for demanding of Irigaray to provide a precise ‘what’ to which her phenomenology applies). Whitford (1991a:9-25) argues, however, that Irigaray’s agenda is not necessarily geared to offer *practical* solutions to women in crises (of identity, in the social/political realm, etc.). Rather, Irigaray’s project is to examine the *theoretical* foundations of patriarchal discourse, unveil the prejudices therein, and finally to offer the *possibility* (but often no more than that) to imagine ‘woman’ or ‘the feminine’ in another way. This would be achieved by redistributing the symbols which connote with ‘the feminine’ in such a way that ‘woman’ can be thought of as ‘for herself’, and not ‘for man.’

To emphasise the necessity of such a project, Irigaray (1996:35) predicates her entire oeuvre on the notion that ‘nature,’ ‘the subject’ and indeed ‘the universal’ must ‘be two’.¹⁰ Furthermore, the emphasis on the duality of sexual difference is to emphasise the notion that ‘woman’ must not be defined as the inverse of ‘man.’ Should this be the case, the number of the sexes would ‘add up to’ zero, and for Irigaray this represents the reduction of the other to the same¹¹ (Irigaray 1985a:159). It therefore seems that Irigaray considers reality itself as divided, and as such parallels to the division of masculine and feminine. For Irigaray (1996:47-48), sexual difference is self evident, and the full implications of this constitute an important aspect of philosophy which as of yet remains to be thought through thoroughly. In other words, it is imperative for Irigaray that sexual difference is taken axiomatically and absolutely, and the consequences thereof should be examined. Indeed, the fact of this division necessitates the rethinking of eros, inasmuch as eros is the ideal situation where the difference between masculine and feminine can be related (as we shall later discover). Nevertheless,

¹⁰ We can see this fascination with the ‘two’ from a simple cursory glance over the titles of some of Irigaray’s writings. For example: *This Sex Which is Not One* (1985), *Being Two: How Many Eyes We Have* (2000), *To Be Two* (2001), etc.

¹¹ Understanding the reduction of the other to the same is most definitely a debt Irigaray owes to Levinas, and her adoption of his concepts ‘same’ and ‘Other’ shall be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter.

the question of sexual difference is therefore, in Irigaray's (1993:5) view, "the issue in our time which could be our 'salvation'." In *I Love To You* (1996) and a talk titled, *Perhaps Cultivating Love Could Provide For Our Safety* (2010), Irigaray proposes that rethinking love, and in particular eros, could be our 'salvation' by negating the need for war. Implicit in this view is that war arises from the impossibility to mediate differences. For Irigaray (1996:31) it is money - that great equaliser, and a major contributing factor to the practice of war - which is the primary means of mediation in our time. But money fails to fully realise reconciliation between differences because it neglects the full possibility of desire (Irigaray 1996:33). For example, sexual desire cannot be reduced to capital, as this would negate any possibilities of sexuality to be considered in terms other than money. To assume that sex can be reduced to money would imply that eros and sexuality are nothing more than a sophisticated form of prostitution. The implication of such a view is necessarily problematic for Irigaray if her focus is on considering eros as possibility which allows women (and indeed men too) to be 'for themselves.' Indeed, Irigaray (1996:31) supposes that *love* mediates more appropriately between what she considers to be the most radical difference (that of sexual difference between man and woman). And if this is the case then the claim that violence is necessary to overcome differences could be rendered void (Irigaray 2010). This is a brief sketch of a significant portion of Irigaray's work, but I mention it only to illustrate that the connection between the question of sexual difference and the question of love is of fundamental import in *oeuvre*, even in her thoughts on something so far removed from love such as war. The idea that love is the mediator *par excellence* between the most radical difference is returned to later in this chapter.

To address the question of sexual difference, Irigaray (1993:9) claims that discourse (from philosophy, to theology, to science, to psychology) must be re-evaluated, re-structured and re-interpreted in such a way as to affirm feminine agency and subjectivity. Indeed, in outlining Irigaray's view, Sandford (2000: 134) notes that

the reduction of sexual difference has been the reduction of the feminine other to what Irigaray calls the 'masculine' economy of the same. This economy of the same is not mediated through a neutral term but through the criterion of the masculine itself. Within this economy the feminine other is not thought in her alterity *qua* feminine but only as the dialectical opposite of the masculine, the not-masculine. In effect, 'the feminine' translates as the inferior of the masculine, the copy of the original masculine, the pathologized masculine, the castrated masculine, and so on.

Thus, the revaluation of discourse would involve the re-interpretation of the role of the feminine, and the assertion of the feminine as 'other' in places where it is considered in terms of the 'masculine economy of the same.' This would not be geared towards undermining the 'true' position of the masculine – rather, a more authentic version of masculinity could be imagined should femininity to be

authentically engaged with. To bring about such authenticity, a process of balancing masculine discourse and its history with a feminine ‘other’ is necessary. This would be achieved through the facilitation of a mutually beneficial dialogue between the two sexes. And in order to achieve such an open dialogue, the disassembly of ideas which prioritise the masculine (which appears even under the guise of the neuter) is necessary. Thus the articulation of a feminine subjectivity would begin, and would no longer be at the mercy of promoting solely masculine ends.

In order to establish a just subjectivity for ‘woman,’ Irigaray re-reads philosophical texts with the aid of psychoanalysis, and shows how these texts tend to take the shape of a male body. To contrast this then, she emphasises the feminine elements which are forgotten or left out. What can then be made of the theory, most of the time, is left up to Irigaray’s reader. For example, when Irigaray (1993:185-217) reads Levinas’s “Phenomenology of Eros”, she challenges the significance of Levinas’s emphasis on the son as ‘the Other’ towards whom eros is ultimately oriented. Moreover, Irigaray’s project necessarily deviates from Levinas’s conception of eros as equivocal, since she reads this as a failure to allow the feminine an ethical status in eros. Irigaray therefore attempts to open up the space for feminine agency in the erotic encounter, thereby making eros itself more representative of an encounter with the Other than the face-to-face encounter we find in Levinas. Thus, whilst Irigaray adopts Levinas’s understanding of the Other, she also adapts it to suit her own project of understanding an ethics of sexual difference. And where Levinas’s phenomenology is an attempt to point beyond the sensuality of erotic and to the Other, Irigaray emphasises the impossibility of this to be anything but a physical experience. For Irigaray, eros is thus the situation *par excellence* where transcendence is possible, precisely because eros is sensual and physical.

But before we can really come to terms with Irigaray’s critique of Levinas, the context of her thought as psychoanalytic must be explained. We have already noted that for Irigaray, the universal status of sexual difference is a fundamental tenet of her approach. Thus Irigaray also extends this self evident divide to psychoanalysis itself, with the implication that the masculine and the feminine have a differing psychological structure. The following section thus exposes the basic outline of Irigaray’s psychoanalytic framework inasmuch as it applies to her critical re-reading of Western philosophy, and to Levinas in particular.

3.1. Madness and its Method: Irigaray’s Psychoanalysis

When Irigaray published *Speculum of the Other Woman* in 1974, she was expelled from the Department of Psychoanalysis at Vincennes. Her political stance on feminist issues caused other psychoanalysts to distance themselves from her, and disavow her work (Whitford 1991b:5). In her defence, Irigaray pointed out that having no political position (what other psychoanalysts at the time

claimed is imperative in being a psychoanalyst) is itself a political position. Hence, Irigaray's psychoanalytic project is expressly feminist. Her project is not, however, geared towards offering practical solutions to feminist problems, but more indirectly to disrupt discourse itself. Be that as it may, Irigaray's critique of psychoanalytic theory provides an interesting perspective not only on psychoanalysis, but also opens up a new way to understand eros.

Essentially, Irigaray's critique of psychoanalysis can be summed up in three points (Whitford 1991a:31). Firstly, psychoanalysis is historically determined, especially in its understanding of women. Any claims that psychoanalysis is not historically determined elevates its phallogocentric bias to the status of a universal value. Irigaray (1985a:160) claims that psychoanalysis is part of philosophical discourse, despite assertions to the contrary. The reason Irigaray identifies for the pretention that psychoanalysis is not philosophy is because psychoanalysis deals most overtly with the difference between the sexes. If sexual difference is actually the primary philosophical question of our age, as Irigaray indeed argues, then the fact that psychoanalysis claims not to be a philosophical discourse is due to a masculine prejudice which asserts that it knows how to configure sexual difference objectively (*ibid.*). But in (Freudian as well as Lacanian) psychoanalysis, the feminine is understood in terms of 'lack' (lacking the phallus), that is, the feminine is the negative of the masculine. By considering the two sexes in these terms, the masculine and the feminine do not "add up to two" (Irigaray 1985a:159), and hence the other (the feminine) is subordinated to the same (*ibid.*). Psychoanalysis is thus subject to the same phallogocentric bias Irigaray identifies in the history of Western philosophy, and this bias is precisely a consequence of history rather than an essential truth which psychoanalysis has discovered. Thus, through deconstruction and the application of psychoanalysis to itself, a new movement in history can develop – the feminist liberation of women – even in that discourse itself.

The second point of critique levelled by Irigaray asserts that the "social order which determines psychoanalysis rests on the unacknowledged and incorporated mother" (Whitford 1991a:31). Thus, within the context Irigaray's critique of the Oedipal stage,¹² both the little boy and little girl realise

¹² The Oedipal stage is a major phase of human development according to psychoanalytic theory. Both for Freud and Lacan, it is in the Oedipal stage that a child comes to awareness of its gender. Central to Oedipal development is the awareness a child develops of 'the phallus,' which boys realise they have and girls realise they lack. Coupled with this is the child's realisation that his/her mother lacks a phallus. Hence, the little boy will desire his mother, whilst the girl will reject her. The father's presence emphasises to the little boy that union with his mother is forbidden (or taboo), and hence the boy identifies with his father in the hope that some day he, like his father, will find a woman of his own (and hence as substitute for the desire for his mother). Conversely, the little girl rejects her mother as she lacks a phallus, and desires her father since he possesses what she lacks. Eventually, the girl realises that her lack of a phallus requires a substitute, and the perfect one (at least in the Freudian/Lacanian account) is a child. Ideally, this child should be a boy, whose possession of a phallus will meet the girl's (now woman's) Oedipal desire for a phallus.

their unhappiness, not because of their possession or lack of a phallus, but rather because they are coming to terms with the loss of unity with the mother. It is the mother who originally provided both the little boy and little girl with a *home*, in the womb. They both wish to find something which will bring them the happiness and contentment of the womb. Furthermore, according to Lacan, before the mirror stage (in which a child really starts forming a concept of itself by seeing its reflection in a mirror), the *mother* is the only point of reference which allows an infant to start forming an idea of what or who it is (Bailey 2009:37). Yet, in both the Freudian and Lacanian account of child development, the maternal-feminine understood as this ground of subjectivity is accorded little or no significance in the face of more important elements, such as the phallus and the ‘Law of the Father’.¹³ Thus Irigaray emphasises the role of the maternal in subject formation prior to the mirror stage, and extends such emphasis even to the womb, where the very corporeality of a baby is contingent on its mother. As such, the maternal is the fundamental ground of subjectivity inasmuch as having a mother is a necessary condition for having a body, which is in turn the necessary and sufficient condition for having a conscious experience and a sense of self. But the fact that psychoanalysis underemphasises this is indicative of its phallocentrism. In other words, the failure of psychoanalysis to account for the maternal feminine is indicative of its prejudice for the masculine.

Finally, psychoanalysis itself is permeated by the cultural phantasies¹⁴ of its context, despite its commitment to dealing with the phantasies of those who seek psychoanalysis for therapeutic purposes. In other words, if psychoanalysis can be applied to works of literature and film, then why can it not be applied to itself? By doing this in a certain way, Irigaray maintains that certain defences have been erected in psychoanalysis itself, and these act to resist feminist critique of the discourse whilst perpetuating its phallocentric bias (Whitford 1991a:31). Hence Irigaray hopes that in making these defence mechanisms explicit, she might salvage the feminine and promote it to a more worthy position.

But whilst Irigaray critiques psychoanalysis, she simultaneously uses it as the framework from which the new understandings of the feminine might evolve. Hence, Irigaray adapts the Lacanian conceptualisation of the Real, Imaginary and Symbolic orders. Bailey (2009:88) notes that Lacan considers these three dimensions as informing all “phenomena associated with the human mind: they provide a framework for the understanding of the normal functioning of human mind, of psychopathology, and also of all human institutions and creations.” If Lacanian psychoanalysis is the

¹³ The little boy’s realisation that his mother belongs to his father, and he is forbidden from realising his desire for her.

¹⁴ One could understand ‘phantasy’ in this context as the way in which symbols are coordinated to convey meaning to the brute and unsymbolised Real.

development of the idea that language structures consciousness, then these three orders have to do with the way in which language is arranged in order to do so. It is important to note that the three orders should act together, since if they do not, or they are incoherent, then this would amount to psychological dysfunction (Bailey 2009:90). I will define these orders in simplistic terms. The Imaginary order is the order of *images*,¹⁵ the most important of which is the ‘self image’ or ideal ego (Bailey 2009:91-93). A child’s first ideas about itself formed through the mirror stage are thus part of the Imaginary. The Imaginary thus pertains not only to pictographic images, but to all ideas which have yet to be fully articulated. In other words, the Imaginary contains ideas, but not the *representation* or symbolisation of those ideas.

This leads us to the Symbolic, which contains the representations, or ‘signifiers,’¹⁶ that refer to the ideas, or ‘signifieds,’ housed in the Imaginary (Bailey 2009:94-95). Signifiers form chains of connotative associations which allow multiple signifiers to correlate with a single signified. This allows for the possibility of talking meaningfully about something. But it is the interaction between the Symbolic and the Imaginary that gives rise to meaning as such. The Symbolic without the Imaginary would consist of speech amounting to nothing more than garbled sounds. And the Imaginary without the Symbolic would consist of unnameable content, rendering such ideas nothing more than “half-baked and unstable” (ibid., p. 92). It is important to note that the Symbolic order is a shifting matrix of associations, and as such “pre-exists the individual, who has to gain access to it” (ibid., p. 95). Gaining access to the Symbolic order occurs as the newborn comes to understand the presence/absence of its mother as something other to the environment (ibid., p. 96). In other words this is the first time that a newborn can ‘symbolise’ its mother’s absence, by crying for example.

Finally, the Real is “*that which has not yet been symbolized*, remains to be symbolized, or even resists symbolization” (Fink 1995:25). In other words, if the Imaginary refers to images and ideas, and the Symbolic refers to the representations of those ideas, the Real is thus that which is neither Imaginary nor Symbolic. The Real is a brute and meaningless reality, which provides the ground from which the Imaginary and Symbolic can make sense or meaning.

¹⁵ The Imaginary is not, for Lacan, the creative or ingenious capacity of human thought.

¹⁶ Lacan’s version of psychoanalysis can be considered as founded upon the psychoanalysis of Freud and the structural linguistics of de Saussure. For de Saussure, a symbol (or Sign) is composed of two elements: the signifier and the signified. The signifier refers to the vocal emission or acoustic pattern of the spoken word, whereas the signified refers to the idea to which such a vocal emission correlates. Lacan’s ingenuity is his appropriation of this simple division to the structure of the psyche. His theory of the unconscious, for example, holds that it is made up of *signifiers* connected by a matrix of associations which informs the way in which they can be understood to relate to signifieds. (Bailey 2009:42-47).

What is most significant for Irigaray then, is the way in which the feminine is understood firstly as idea (in the Imaginary), and secondly in the representation of that idea (in the Symbolic). Thus Irigaray's critique of 'masculine' or 'phallogocentric' discourse, is essentially geared towards re-arranging the relationships between signifiers in the Symbolic order to allow for possibilities of feminine subjectivity, agency, etc. Thus Irigaray naturally objects to certain terminology which thinkers (Levinas amongst them) associate with the feminine, because even a simple misnomer might connect with a network of associations which inform the meaning ascribed to the feminine. For example, if the feminine is associated with the word 'emotional,' that word may connote with others which might be quite derogatory ('pathetic,' 'hysterical,' 'volatile,' and 'uncontrolled,' for example). Thus, Irigaray would reconfigure these connotations as they appear in philosophical discourse through her deconstructive and psychoanalytic reading of texts.

3.2. Critiquing the Masculine Transcendental Subject

For Irigaray, there exists a division in the symbolic order which "allocates the material, corporeal, sensible, 'natural' to the feminine, and the spiritual, ideal, intelligible, transcendental to the masculine" (Whitford 1991a:149). In terms of phallogocentric discourse, the spiritual/transcendental implies a masculine subject, and thus if ethics is associated with the transcendental (as it is in Levinas, for example), then ethics is implicitly masculine. Women are cut off from the lofty heights of the transcendental, ideal, or spiritual, inasmuch as the feminine implies sexuality and the body. Since, for Irigaray (1993:5), devising an ethics of sexual difference is the "one of the major issues, if not the issue, of our age," she considers it of utmost importance that we rethink the discussion of ethics in terms of the erotic, material and 'natural' in order to construct the notion of an ethical feminine subjectivity. This rethinking should not diminish emphasis on the erotic in an effort to equate the transcendental subject to women because this would only serve to reinforce rigid masculine notions of subjectivity. Rather, subjectivity, conceptualisation, knowledge and social organisation must be incorporated into the erotic, simultaneously salvaging eros from its damnation to carnal animality and rescuing feminine subjectivity from a small world of unimportant and marginalised corporeality.

In order to achieve this melding of subjectivity, ethics and eros, Irigaray must show how transcendental notions of subjectivity are based on masculine conceptions of subjectivity, but at the same time that these masculine concepts are indebted to an other (*un(e) autre*) – which would be the feminine other. The aforementioned critique of psychoanalysis serves as an example of this, where the mother is not given enough credit as a subject, whilst she is in fact a more important factor in identity formation than even the phallus. As we shall later, it also resembles the forgetting of the mother as woman and subject in Lacan's mirror stage – which extends beyond infancy through to adulthood in the process of specularisation.

It is therefore important for us to see Irigaray's critiques of philosophers in the context of her attempt to recuperate feminine subjectivity. Irigaray must be seen as a kind of therapist for discourse – using psychoanalysis to heal the conflicts which arise out of the repression of the maternal-feminine. In light of this, when Irigaray critiques thinkers and instead imagines ideal situations, we must understand her attempts as geared towards penetrating the structure of the Imaginary and Symbolic orders to build up the possibility for a more just feminine imaginary (and thus feminine ego and subjectivity).

3.3. A New Imaginary

As discussed in the aforementioned on Lacan, the Imaginary order is that which governs the ego and its formation in the mirror stage, and the Symbolic order is where linguistic relationships exist prior to the egoistic subject. These linguistic relationships determine the extent of what is possible to imagine, inasmuch as the better one represents an idea (in terms of signifiers) the easier it becomes to envisage as an idea.

For Irigaray, however, the Imaginary does not only consist of the thought-images to which signifiers correspond, but it is also the realm of the phenomenological imagination (as found in Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, for example). In contrast to Lacan, Irigaray thus considers the Imaginary as something which is intentional, conscious, and inventive (Whitford 1991a:54). She does this to allow for the possibility of *creating* an idea of the feminine hitherto un-imagined. But what is most distinguishing about Irigaray's understanding of the imaginary is that it is sexed. According to her, works of imagination, such as poetry, literature, art and writing, will share the morphological characteristics of a gender. The male imaginary evokes a sense of unity, teleology, linearity and self-identity since it is an attempt to make sense of things from a phallic perspective (indeed, such words are appropriate to a phallus). Since Irigaray considers women as plural, however, the feminine imaginary is linked with plurality, non-linearity and fluid-identity (which as we shall see are linked to the lips). As Irigaray (1985b:26) states,

The one of form, of the individual, of the (male) sexual organ, of the proper name, of the proper meaning . . . supplants, while separating and dividing, that contact of at least two (lips) which keeps woman in touch with herself, but without any possibility of distinguishing what is touching from what is touched.

What is thus at stake whenever one encounters works which typify the male imaginary, is the 'division,' and at worst the rejection or suppression, of the female imaginary. Hence, a large part of Irigaray's project is to salvage the feminine imaginary so that it stands in some sort of harmonious relationship with the male imaginary. This is evident in Irigaray's ideation of the erotic encounter in *The Fecundity of the Caress* (Irigaray 1993:185-217; 2001:119-144). Although this essay is a critique

of Levinas, it may be more of a supplement to Levinas than a bid to outdo him; to articulate the feminine which is ‘divided’ by the masculinity of his discourse. In order for a real ethics of sexual difference to be made manifest in philosophical discourse, such a move would be necessary in order to articulate a version of feminine subjectivity Levinas does not give credit. A fuller discussion of this is given in the section of this chapter devoted to the Irigaray-Levinas debate. For now, it is merely important to understand that all works of imagination, philosophy seemingly amongst them, ultimately bear resemblance to a male or female body, i.e. they are either unitary, goal-oriented and linear, or plural, fluid and non-linear.

It is Irigaray’s contention that most of Western philosophy is a result of ‘specularisation.’ Specularisation is the continuation of Lacan’s mirror stage¹⁷ into a man’s adulthood, and indeed all his works, where his masculinity is projected onto women in order to negate them and affirm himself as a man. A woman thus exists as a negation, like a mirror off of which a man might read the projection of his masculinity. But with regards to the mirror stage, Whitford (1991a:58-59) explains that

the mother supports the processes of the male imaginary, but is not herself represented, a neglect equivalent to matricide. Whatever philosopher Irigaray approaches...the strategy is always the same – to look for the resistances and defences which conceal the original crime of matricide.

In other words, there is an underlying assumption in most Western philosophy its discourse applies universally. But what this philosophy does not take into consideration is that by applying itself universally, it projects a masculine form or idea onto a feminine, forcing it to affirm masculinity inasmuch the ideas themselves do not apply to women. Thus, the maternal-feminine ground of subjectivity is repressed, and is done so by the (masculine) desire for the certitude of self. In this process of specularisation, “women as body/matter are the material of which the mirror is made, that part of the mirror which cannot be reflected, the tain of the mirror for example, and so never see reflections of themselves” (Whitford 1991a:34). Thus, whilst the masculine understands itself by the negation of the feminine, women are denied the chance to define themselves independently of the definition of man. The feminine serves simply as a mirror for man, when it is actually what is behind that mirror that constitutes the possibility of an authentic notion of femininity. The world thus conceived results in philosophies of ends and rigid binary oppositions (Whitford 1991a:58-59). Of primary concern for Irigaray, is the rigidity of the binary oppositions which characterise phallocentrism (as discussed in the aforementioned). Most of Western philosophy propagates this phallocentric view, and hence it is a projection of a male morphology onto the world.

¹⁷ In which a child forms its ego through identifying first with its mother, and then with its reflection in the mirror.

To open up the possibility of a feminine imaginary, Irigaray must develop a ‘signified’ around which such an imaginary can develop. In Lacan, the Phallus is one of the primary signifieds in the imaginary which allows the formation of the ego (Bailey 2009:94). Of course Irigaray would not choose such a blatantly masculine idea, and thus she develops an idea which would correlate to the phallus in its power for ego formation, but would connote with plurality rather than unity, non-linearity rather than linearity, etc. ‘Woman as mother’ is an insufficient symbol of femininity, since this places ‘woman’ in a utilitarian role: she who is to give birth and ideally to a son (if not a son, a daughter who will marry a man and give birth to a son, and so on. The matrilineal genealogy is thus denied by the very definition of woman as mother). Irigaray (1977:24) hence introduces the ‘lips’ to act in place of the phallus when understanding feminine sexuality. Lips touch each other, and in doing so, they offer a fruitful way in which to assert the feminine as for-itself. Where phallogocentric discourse understands the female genitalia as “a hole-envelope that serves to sheath and massage the penis in intercourse: a non-sex, or a masculine organ turned back upon itself, self-embracing” (Irigaray 1977:23); the concept of the lips afford women the chance for auto-affection, asserting that a woman’s pleasure is not defined at the mercy of a man’s. The introduction of the lips in psychoanalytic theory jeopardises the traditional understanding of the Oedipal conflict in that it eliminates the ‘penis envy’ that the little girl supposedly feels. Furthermore, the lips offer an opportunity for the little girl not to reject her mother,¹⁸ but rather to identify with her and be a woman *with* her mother. A matrilineal genealogy can thus be constructed, and thus the patriarchal phallogocentric bias in psychoanalysis is destabilised precisely by abandoning a teleological conception of woman as mother.

Furthermore, the lips’ touching each other links the feminine with listening, as when the lips of the mouth are touching in silence (Irigaray 2010). Listening illustrates a passivity that is not at the disposal of the active agent in dialogue. Rather the activity of speaking needs the passivity of listening in order to be meaningful. In this sense, the lips imply an active passivity – just as listening is an active process of being receptive. Thus Irigaray is deconstructing the traditional binary of active/passive, where the former associates itself with the masculine and the latter with the feminine.

The lips also provide the opportunity to symbolise feminine subjectivity in a positive way (as opposed to defining the feminine as the negative of the masculine). ‘The lips’ can refer to the genital labia or the lips of the mouth for example, and by referring to more than one body part the lips thus emphasise plurality. Since they always exist as a pair, the two lips say that the feminine ‘is not one,’ emphasising plurality once more. Furthermore, since the lips can be connoted with different body parts and exist as a pair, the fact of this connotation further emphasises plurality. The lips thus symbolise how feminine

¹⁸ Which the Freudian/Lacanian narrative understands as an integral part of a little girl’s experience of the Oedipal phase.

sexuality does not operate on one level only, but they do so in a positive way (contrary to the traditional definition of the feminine as what the masculine is not). Thus the concept of the lips elicits a more just possibility of feminine sexuality and subjectivity.

But according to Irigaray (1985b:78), the alternative to phallogentrism is achieved not via

elaborating a new theory of which woman would be the subject or the object, but of jamming the theoretical machinery itself, of suspending its pretention to the production of a truth and of a meaning that are excessively univocal.

Here Irigaray clearly discloses her deconstructive-psychoanalytic approach. She emphasises that any attempt to posit a new theory of woman within a subject/object dichotomy would again be taking the form of an ‘excessively univocal’ masculine imaginary, and therefore merely playing into the unconscious mechanism of patriarchal discourse. The female imaginary, that is an imaginary which takes the shape of the feminine body in its plurality, must therefore not only be excavated from the fragments in masculine discourse, but also invented. This inventive possibility can be realised through a creative interaction between male and female imaginaries. And as we shall see, this is possible through imagining love.

4. I Love To Irigaray – Irigaray’s Views On Eros

Love thus plays a highly significant role in Irigaray’s thought. It is important to stress that Irigaray aims to establish an ethics of sexual difference, and is thus not simply addressing the plight of women only. She wishes to discuss the relationship between man *and* woman, because for her the two poles of gender are the exemplars *par excellence* of radical alterity. Irigaray’s call for the excavation of the debt owed to the feminine in the male imaginary, and the call for the invention of a more fleshed out feminine imaginary are necessary in her mind to establish a relation between the sexes which could be a “chiasmus or double loop in which each can go toward the other and come back to itself” (Irigaray 1993:9). Instead of a traditional model where genders act like magnets, with positive attracting negative, Irigaray proposes that what is needed is a “double pole of attraction and support, which excludes disintegration or rejection, attraction and decomposition, but which instead ensures the separation that articulates every encounter and makes possible speech, promises, alliances” (ibid). This is manifest in the erotic encounter, although it is not limited to it. Irigaray maintains that the ethical relationship is established by the loving relationship between masculine and feminine, but only if each party is accorded the place and the time to be a subject for themselves, as well as for the other. The erotic relationship, in sum, is therefore the birthplace of the ethical relationship.

The quote above is an important one, since as we shall see in the following chapter, Nancy’s own deconstruction of love perhaps yields it as something which mediates ‘the separation that articulates

every encounter and makes possible speech, promises and alliances'. We shall see how for Nancy, love breaks open 'the heart' of subjectivity, and the broken subject is the only one that can authentically relate to another (whether this be by speech, promise, alliance, or indeed any other relation). Nevertheless, this chapter now turns to some of the fundamental concepts Irigaray uses to understand love.

4.1. Sorcerer Love

Naturally, when speaking of eros in philosophy, one has to at some point mention Plato's *Symposium*. In Irigaray's analysis of the Greek's work she focuses on the female character in the dialogue, Diotima, and suggests that it is noteworthy that it is Diotima who is the one to teach Socrates the nature of love. However, it seems that Irigaray contends that Socrates (and thus Plato) bastardises Diotima's thought on love with his masculine prejudices. Consequently, Socrates is unable to comprehend love as "that which stands between, that which makes possible the passage between ignorance and knowledge" (Irigaray 1993:21). As we know, Plato asserts that eros is that which leads one to beauty, which in turn leads one to the Form of beauty as it is shared in all things. This in turn may spur one onto the knowledge of the most high and admirable; or the Form of the Good, since for him the Good, the Beautiful and the True all imply each other. But Irigaray seems to interpret this as a failure to acknowledge the mediatory character of eros, since for Plato the erotic love of bodies is but one step towards the ultimate goal of knowing the Forms whereas Irigaray considers eros as that which makes the transitions between any such steps possible.

Irigaray thus considers the Platonic understanding of eros to overlook the feminine perspective. As the aforementioned has shown, Irigaray identifies the male imaginary as linear and teleological. If we interpret Plato's *Symposium* as situating eros as merely a step on the path to the Good, then such an interpretation is clearly a masculine one. Yet, Irigaray (1993:21) stresses the importance of eros as an "intermediary that allows for the encounter and transmutation or transvaluation" between knowledge and reality.

Irigaray (ibid.) reads Diotima as observing the nature of love as the mediator *par excellence* in a world which is "always in movement, in a state of becoming." Thus, Irigaray is asserting a metaphysic in direct contrast to the standard Platonic one; which holds that the true reality is an unchanging world of Being, and the world of 'becoming' is merely the world of appearances. Once again, the deconstructive/psychoanalytic framework from which Irigaray launches her critique is evinced in such a view, since a static world of Being is a unitary view, and is hence typically masculine. The fluidity of the feminine imaginary is occluded by this, and hence Irigaray would emphasise love not as a Form, but as the mediating force which facilitates all becoming itself.

The mediating action of eros is therefore its characteristic feature. And it mediates everything.¹⁹ Rather than be a god, with godly powers to attain all his desires, Diotima accords the personified Eros the status of a *daimon*. Eros would thus be

neither mortal nor immortal...between the one and the other...His function is to transmit to the gods what comes from men and to men what comes from the gods. Like all that is daimonic, love is complementary to gods and to men in such a way as *to put everything in touch with itself* [emphasis added]. A being of middle nature is needed so that men and gods can enter into relations, into conversation (Irigaray 1993:23).

The above quote²⁰ hints at a number of important concepts in Irigaray's work which are of import in this dissertation. Firstly, what is neither mortal nor immortal can only be eternal and beyond time. This therefore testifies to the timelessness of love; despite the endless amount of instances in which love is expressed, the expressing of love nevertheless persists in consistently novel circumstances. Secondly, love's action as mediator between 'gods and men' is reminiscent of the import Irigaray accords to being able to move between the 'subterranean' and the 'celestial'; from the depths of Being to the heights of transcendence. Access to transcendence – a subject usually reserved for the masculine imaginary - is thus granted to the feminine via the mediating force of love. Moreover, love prevents transcendence from overwhelming that which it transcends and negating its very fact of transcending in doing so. Hence, by being able to love in a way that is not simply as beloved objects of male desire, women are allowed access to the transcendent – I discuss this further when I discuss the 'sensible transcendental' below. This shows the importance of love in establishing dialogue between the sexes and hence an ethics of sexual difference. Finally, Irigaray uses the phrase 'to put everything in touch with itself' quite deliberately. Touch is of fundamental importance to Irigaray in the sense that she accords touch a more primary dimension than sight. As we shall see in the sections to come, putting 'everything in touch with itself' informs a more just relationship between things than what a 'God's eye view' from a transcendental point of reference might reveal.

Irigaray speculates that the feminine subjectivity encapsulated in Diotima's perspective on eros is twisted by the indirect account we have of it, as it is recounted through the mouth of Socrates as he speaks for Plato. Irigaray says this because as Diotima's speech progresses, she deviates from the notion of love as mediating to a teleological notion of love, with an emphasis on the procreative aspect and the sublime beauty and wisdom about which Plato obsesses (Irigaray 1993:27). But Irigaray attributes this to the persistence with which Socrates questions Diotima regarding love. From

¹⁹ This will link Irigaray's view on love with Nancy's, as we shall see in Chapter 4.

²⁰ This quote is an imitation with slight, but deliberate, deviations from the actual speech Diotima gives in Plato's dialogue. This exemplifies Irigaray's mimetic style as I mentioned briefly in the introduction.

the moment Diotima tells Socrates that love gives birth to beauty both of the body and of the soul, Socrates dissects Diotima's answers in order to find a single goal for which love ought to strive. Irigaray, however, accuses Socrates of twisting Diotima's feminine view of love to suit the ends of the traditional Platonic understanding of love; as that which is a step on the path to true wisdom.

Irigaray would rather have us dwell on the duality of love's fecundity, which is of body and soul (Irigaray 1993:25-26). Thus Irigaray pauses upon the moment before Socrates imposes his view on Diotima, and as such Irigaray speculates upon what the possible feminine view informing Diotima's own might have been, had Diotima not been misled by Socrates. The split between the body and soul is, for Irigaray, the move which delegates the feminine to the carnal and the masculine to the sublime. Hence the fact that Socrates refused the possibility of accepting this duality indicates his phallogocentric bias. For Socrates, the love of ideas (as an activity of the soul, and hence 'spiritual') is superior to the love of bodies as the ideas refer to a permanent reality unfettered by the decay and instability of the physical world. Irigaray's objection to this view is not that the love of bodies should be considered equivalent to the love of ideas. Rather, she holds that the separation of body and soul designates eros a carnal viciousness divorced from the spirit, or in more modern terms the potential psychological fruitfulness of a physical relationship. It is therefore important, in Irigaray's view, to maintain the 'daimonic' and mediating character of love between the loftiness of spirit and the subterranean carnality of the flesh.

Thus, for Irigaray, The relation between men and women can only be called love if there is fertility of *spirit as well as of body*. Love between men and women cannot only be fecundity of the body, since this would place the child as the telos of love – a move in which

a sort of teleological triangle is put into place instead of a perpetual journey, a perpetual transvaluation, a permanent becoming ... if procreation becomes its goal, it risks losing its internal motivation, its "inner" fecundity, its slow and constant generation, regeneration (Irigaray 1993:27).

But what is this 'inner fecundity'? For Irigaray (1993:26), it is the capacity of love to regenerate the subjectivity of each lover or even generate new possibilities of subjectivity for lovers. In other words, the 'spiritual' aspects of the lovers' being, that is "our character, our opinions, our desires, joys and pains, our fears" (Irigaray 1993:28) can be reformed, reconnected, seen from a different perspective, realised and engendered through a loving encounter with an Other. Love must exist therefore as a medium between 'mortal and immortal,' between the sensible and the transcendent.

How does this then relate to the interpretation of Plato's *Symposium* offered by Levinas and explored in the previous chapter? If we recall, Levinas considers the Platonic eros as wealth in poverty and poverty in wealth. The notion that eros is the child of *penia* (poverty) and *poros* (wealth) correlates

with Levinas's formulation of need and desire. Need would be the wealth that arises from poverty, inasmuch as the surplus of meeting needs' lack amounts to happiness. Desire would be the poverty of such a wealth, inasmuch as the happiness of egoistic satisfaction can never account for the insatiable desire for the Other. Eros would be the equivocal simultaneity of need and desire, and hence be at once the wealth of bodily pleasure and the poverty this encapsulates in light of the infinite desire for the Other.

Irigaray's formulation is thus not far off Levinas's mark. For Irigaray, eros must be the intermediary between the transcendental and the corporeal. If desire in Levinas refers to the transcendent, and need to the material need of the body, then are not Levinas and Irigaray identifying the same principle in eros? Indeed, Irigaray's project would be to connect the depths of corporeality to the heights of spirit, and thus eros is the irreducible intermediary which facilitates such a connection. Levinas's formulation of eros, however, necessarily falls back to the 'this side' of need, and hence requires fecundity to salvage the possibility of transcendence. Thus, Irigaray would find fault with Levinas's damnation of need in preference of the transcendence towards which desire points. We can already see hints at Irigaray's critique of Levinas here – as the position she adopts is essentially the same as Levinas, but Irigaray does not follow through to a fascination with pure transcendence as Levinas does. Irigaray (1989:44) reads Diotima's project as considering beauty itself as "that which confuses the opposition between immanence and transcendence," and if eros would be the love of beauty it would thus be the love of this confusion. Although something similar can be read into Levinas's own figure of eros as equivocal, Irigaray sees the pursuit of transcendence beyond this as perpetuating a phallogocentric bias which prefers transcendence to corporeality and thus marginalises the feminine. It seems that she would rather prescribe a comfort with the blurred distinction between immanence and transcendence which eros offers. But the full confrontation between Levinas and Irigaray is reserved for the section devoted to it later in this chapter. For now however, it would be prudent to explore the terminology which Irigaray introduces in order to develop her understanding of eros.

4.2. The Language of Love

Irigaray's poetic style and often convoluted metaphors can be misconstrued as yet another postmodern flaunting of mumbo-jumbo rhetoric (cf. Sokal and Bricmont (1998)). However, if her terms are placed within the greater context of her project, certain relationships come to light which illuminate interesting perspectives on love. There are therefore a number of concepts which require clarification before we can continue to explore the relationship between fecundity and the subjectivity of lovers. These are 1) the 'sensible transcendental', 2) 'wonder,' 3) 'the threshold,' and 4) 'the mucous.'

4.2.1. The Sensible Transcendental

We have already noted how Irigaray reads Diotima as considering beauty as that which confuses the distinction between immanence and transcendence. The sensible transcendental thus refers to this character of beauty, that it both inspires a sense of transcendence but nevertheless remains a material thing. Irigaray thus contrasts her view to Plato's inasmuch as she contends that the contemplation of the beautiful cannot be separate from those things to which beauty pertain. If beauty blurs the distinction between immanent and transcendent, then it is at once both sensible and transcendent. Irigaray (1993:32) therefore defines the sensible transcendental as the "material texture of beauty." Furthermore, she claims that the person who truly perceived this sensible transcendental would have

"seen" the very spatiality of the visible, the real which precedes all reality, all forms, all truth of particular sensations or constructed idealities. Would he have contemplated the "nature" of the divine? This support of the fabrication of the transcendent in its different modes, all of which, according to Diotima, come under the same propaedeutic: *the love of beauty*. Neither the good, nor the true nor justice nor government of the city would occur without beauty. And its best ally is love.

But Irigaray (1993:33) also admonishes that beauty must be considered not as a disembodied idea, but as "an always already sensible horizon on the basis of which everything would appear." We can see the connection here between the sensible transcendental and Irigaray's contention that love 'puts everything in touch with itself.' The idea that beauty is the horizontal condition for all appearance seems to imply that beauty pre-exists all appearance. This is a somewhat Platonic notion inasmuch as it prescribes that all things share in the beautiful, but it deviates from Platonism due to an added twist of *sensibility*. It is as if Irigaray would draw Plato's Forms into the very material of the sensible world, whilst retaining their spiritual character. As such, it is unsurprising that Irigaray (1993:27) lauds "permanent becoming," an oxymoron which captures the essence of Irigaray's deconstruction. For Plato, permanence and becoming belong to different realms: permanence is the property of Forms and becoming is the world of appearances. Yet, Irigaray's project is framed by her critique of discourses which prefer one (masculine) thing over another. A permanent becoming would therefore correlate to the sensible transcendental inasmuch as both are oxymoronic indications of the possibility for masculine and feminine to remain separate but also with one another united by love.

This seems very confusing at first. Whitford, as the foremost commentator on Irigaray, is herself also somewhat confounded by the precise meaning of the sensible transcendental. Whitford (1991a:47) states:

In its most general sense, I think the sensible transcendental is not a precise concept; it is a condensed way of referring to all the conditions of women's collective access to subjectivity. From one point of view (although this is not an

exclusive definition), it can be seen as the symbolic order in all its possibilities of and for transformation, in other words, language as a field of enunciation, process, response, and becoming, but a field in which there are two poles of enunciation, so that the 'I' may be 'male' or 'female', and so may the 'you', so that the speaker may change positions, exchange with the other sex; it follows, too, that the divine other must also be potentially of the female sex. And so we find that the sensible transcendental is also referred to as a god.

What this means, to my mind at least, is that the sensible transcendental refers to the point of entry into a world which extends beyond me. I can only know that it is there because I sense it – that is, the transcendent is not available through a process of pure deduction or contemplation. Just as Levinas's phenomenology of the face is predicated upon the epiphany of its revelation, the transcendent (that is, the Other) must be sensed for its revelation to be an epiphany. The Other does not come to me through contemplation, but only in the face-to-face encounter. It requires sense, sensation and sensibility. The transcendental, in the radical alterity that, for Irigaray, is another sexed subject, cannot be deduced purely through theoretical metaphysical speculation. It must be sensible. Hence the sensible transcendental plays an important role in eros for Irigaray, referring to how the I-You relationship can be one of the exchange of spirit through the sensuality of the body (as Whitford alludes to in the above quote).

Although Whitford admits that the above definition is by far not the only one, her definition is perhaps only suited to her own ends. It works for her because it is aligned with her particular interest, namely the status of language as a mediator between genders, and the political implications which would ensue from interpreting Irigaray thus. But I think it is much simpler, and perhaps more instructive with reference to eros, that we consider the sensible transcendental in the terms I lay out above. This might lead to Whitford's 'poles of enunciation' since as we know from Levinas it is in language that the ethical relationship and the distance between self and Other is mediated.²¹ Perhaps other, simpler definitions that Whitford offers elsewhere, which simply mimic Irigaray, would make better sense. Namely, that the sensible transcendental is that which overcomes "the split between material and ideal, sensible and intelligible, female and male" (Whitford 1991b:19) as well as between "body and spirit, immanence and transcendence, and their assignment to women and men respectively" (ibid., p.117). The essential point regarding the sensible transcendental is that the experience of the transcendental is an embodied one, and hence the split between the metaphysical speculations associated with the transcendent cannot be divorced from the embodied experience of the speculator.

²¹ See Chapter 2, section 2.3 "Ethics as First Philosophy"

Irigaray (1996:104) therefore claims that

transcendence is thus no longer ecstasy, leaving the self behind toward an inaccessible total-other, beyond sensibility, beyond the earth. It is respect for the other whom I will never be, who is transcendent to me and to whom I am transcendent. Neither simple nature nor common spirit beyond nature, this transcendence exists in the difference of body and culture that continues to nourish our energy, its movement, its generation and its creation...It is the movement and transformation that limits the empire of my ego, of the power of *you*, or of the community and its already established values. It remains in me, enstasy rather than ecstasy, but ready to meet with the other, particularly through language, without sacrificing sensibility.

For Irigaray, the transcendent is accessible through the senses and dialogue, and it is predicated upon the other as an other who is different sexually. The fact of transcendence ‘limits the empire of an ego,’ not by overwhelming that ego in a ‘total-otherness’ which denotes a disembodied transcendence, but forcing oneself into oneself by recognising ‘the other whom I will never be’ as the sexual other. As we shall see, eros is the ideal situation wherein such a transcendence can be found, inasmuch as it is eros which makes sexual difference most available to the senses (particularly to touch). Eros could be considered a state of absolute ‘enstasy,’ or knowing the limits of one’s ‘ego-empire’ inasmuch as its borders will be marked by the intensity of sexual pleasure. Nevertheless, the emphasis remains on the idea that transcendence is a sensory experience, hence Irigaray insistence upon the ‘sensible transcendental.’

It is no surprise that beauty offers evidence of the sensible transcendental, because beauty is first witnessed through sense. And yet, as Diotima explains to Socrates, the knowledge of the beautiful leads to a sublime and transcendent knowledge. Paradoxically, however, the connection between beauty and sublime knowledge denotes an inseparability between the transcendent and the sensible. Beauty can only be sensed whether seen, heard, touched, smelt, tasted or thought (thought as the activity of an embodied subject who ‘senses their thoughts,’ rather than thought as the privileged access to a separate realm of Ideas through pure abstraction). Hence the definition given at the outset of this section which Irigaray herself provides: that one who understands the sensible transcendental has access to the ‘material texture of beauty,’ has ‘seen spatiality’ itself, apprehended ‘reality before it is real’, and so on. The question remains as to how this is actually possible, and in order to gain insight into that question this chapter now explores Irigaray’s adaptation of Descartes’ passion of wonder.

4.2.2. Wonder

Irigaray uses Descartes’ notion of wonder to illustrate the impossibility of complete appropriation. Wonder is the first passion, that passion from which all others originate. “Passively experienced

passions” (Irigaray 1993:72) are those which would enclose the subject, where the body is separated from its life, language and breath. Separating the body from the mind, for Irigaray, would separate feeling from thought, thus creating a need for an ideal point of reference to understand feeling. This would in turn subordinate passions to serving the function of “religiosity, slogans, publicity, [and] terror” (ibid.) in order to guide self-understanding. Religiosity, slogans, publicity and terror would predispose a subject’s passions to serving the ends they imply. Wonder is no such enclosing passion; it looks out as if a ‘window’ onto the world. Irigaray (1993:73) quotes Descartes:

When the first encounter with some object surprises us, and we judge it to be new or very different from what we formerly knew, or from what we supposed that it ought to be, that causes us to wonder and be surprised; and because that may happen before we in any way know whether this object is agreeable to us or is not so, it appears to me that wonder is the first of all passions; and it has no opposite, because if the object which presents itself has nothing in it that surprises us, we are in no wise moved regarding it, and we consider it without passion.

Thus, wonder is the primary passion, which would also be the disposition of sense towards the world. Linking this with the sensible transcendental and beauty would therefore be quite simple. Approaching the world from the position of wonder denotes that one is open to beauty. Cultivating a sense of wonder not only towards the world, but more importantly to those who are gendered otherwise than myself would be integral in perceiving the sensible transcendental (or in other words, sensing the transcendent). To be in awe of the otherness of the other at once opens one up to the transcendence of the other, but one simultaneously remains rooted in the body because wonder is a passion. Furthermore, approaching the other from a predetermined disposition (the religiosity, slogans, public opinion and terror to which Irigaray refers), might occlude the ‘surprise’ that their difference actually presents to me.

For Irigaray, wonder is before and after appropriation – it is wonder at the excess that can never be apprehended in those who are sexually different. It exists in all of the senses. It attests to the ever present possibility of a new perspective, a new tone or turn of the other’s phrase, a new scent, or taste or feeling, or combination of them all. Wonder is present, bridging past and future “without a wound, awaiting or remembering, without despair or closing in on the self” (Irigaray 1993:75). Just like the sensible transcendental, Irigaray (1993:80) describes wonder as

a passion that maintains a path between physics and metaphysics. A primary passion and perpetual crossroads between earth and sky, or hell, where it would be possible to rework the attraction between those who differ, especially sexually. A sort of platform or springboard for the regression of investment without engulfing, annihilation, or abolition by the other or by the world.

The feeling of wonder ensures that the sexed other is not assimilated into an egoistic picture of the world, precisely because in wonderment one quietly accepts what one cannot understand. It allows for

a comfortable experience of what cannot be apprehended, a comfortable distance from the mystique of the sexed other. Wonder is therefore a beginning, it is generative and rejuvenating if returned to, always open and belying the primal attraction to the world. Moreover, one cultivates a sense of wonder by actively acknowledging one's own limits. One returns to it in those moments when one realises that one's experience of the world is incomplete; it would be a humbling of the ego in the moment of realisation that one does not, and cannot, know everything.

Wonder considered thus would also imply a limit or horizon of possible understanding. In terms of eros, and the erotic encounter, Irigaray understands this limit as a threshold, which is both the physical limit of the body, but also the frontier of desire. What does the existence of such a frontier imply, especially in terms of the erotic encounter? The next subsection discusses this very notion.

4.2.3. The Threshold

In brute anatomical terms, the threshold refers to the orifice which is entered into in a sexual act. It could be the vagina, the mouth or the anus. But considering the threshold only in terms of crass animalistic sexuality removes its significance as erotic; which would imply more than the banal urges that constitute unsymbolised sexuality. The threshold is thus more than just the biological point of entry; it is a symbol of erotic significance and as such indicates the frontier of one's being inasmuch as one is a sexual being. It can therefore be considered in terms more abstract than a biological point of entry. It could be understood as the frontier of sexual subjectivity. The threshold is thus also significant due to the potential relations to other symbols in the symbolic order, which if considered rightly might contribute to the development of an ethics of sexual difference.

The threshold is thus the border or frontier of the sexed subject, and the desire that fuels its consciousness. The threshold thus denotes the limit of subjectivity, both in the sense of the body and of desire. Moreover, the threshold implies that both the body and the desire which fuels it can be *entered into* by another body fuelled by its own desire; a 'crossing of the threshold' so to speak. At the same time, the threshold indicates a limit to the body and the desire it 'houses.' But the threshold is not impenetrable, as if the body were self-contained, or as Whitford (1991a:159) puts it, "a closed house." Traditionally, the male subject is a 'closed house,' because he is conceived impenetrable.²² But women are not closed; they are 'entered into' in lovemaking, or 'left from' when they give birth.

²² The idea of the male body as impenetrable explains the taboo on homosexuality (Whitford 1991a:159), but does not necessarily indicate that the male body has no threshold. Indeed, the very idea of the threshold might call the 'closed house' of masculinity into question.

The notion of a threshold is introduced by Irigaray in order to allow women to conceive of themselves not as the property of men, but as proper to themselves. As such, women have the right to decide who may cross the threshold, implying that women have the right to refuse sex and have the right to abort an unwanted child (Whitford 1991a:160). But, for the purposes of this dissertation, the specific subjectivity of women and the rights entailed to them is not the main concern. Rather, the main concern here is to understand the status of eros in Irigaray's thought. Thus, I think that the most important aspect to understand with regards to the threshold is that it firstly serves to denote the frontier of subjectivity, but in a sense that the subjectivity in question is not closed off or impenetrable.²³

If wonder is the passion which indicates the limit of understanding and appropriation, then the threshold provides an open limit which ensures the sense of wonder. And if the sensible transcendental is contingent upon maintaining an approach to the sexual other from the disposition of wonder, then the threshold will play an important role in understanding how the sensible transcendental relates to eros. If the threshold is crossed during the erotic act, and this allows for a notion of a meeting, or overlapping, of subjectivities to become possible, such an overlap would be 'beyond wonderful,' and perhaps as such reveal the transcendent in the sensuality of sexual ecstasy (perhaps the 'attaining' of the sensible transcendental which Irigaray speaks about).

But in order for the threshold to be crossed, a mediating substance is necessary. This mediation is necessary because without an irreducible mediating factor, it becomes far too easy to reduce the other to a designated space for the self, or more precisely, to reduce the feminine as the space or enclosure for the masculine. In other words, if the threshold is broken into, rather than invited into via the mediation of some or other force, then this would constitute a kind of colonisation of feminine subjectivity; an invasive conquering of a space that is hers, rather than an invitation into that space. Irigaray uses the mucous as another symbol for a mediating factor between the two poles of masculine and feminine.

4.2.4. The Mucous

As with the threshold, the mucous can be considered in the literal biological sense. Such a consideration is helpful in understanding Irigaray if we are to understand how the mucous mediates the crossing of the threshold. In the sexual act, mucous is literally the substance which mediates the two sets of genitals. But mucous is also integral in the operation of the respiratory system, and as such is integral to breathing and speech. Mucous is the body's primary mediating substance, for respiration,

²³ This open body would apply equally to men and women, otherwise homosexuality would be disqualified. Eros – in the full sense of the notion – must apply to all loving erotic situations.

digestion and sexual intercourse. But the mucous should be understood in terms of Irigaray's psychoanalysis and is thus, like the threshold, more significant on the symbolic level.

The mucous represents the fecund relationship between the sexes, inasmuch as this relationship is full of possibilities; what is yet to be said and the possibilities of new modes of subjectivity for men and women. The mucous is thus symbolic of the un-theorised because it represents the possible, the future, becoming, and so forth. How does the mucous represent these? Firstly, the mucous is interior, and is thus not reflected in an ordinary flat mirror. This means that the mucous cannot be appropriated through the use of another person as a mirror, and hence the 'mother's mucous' is not a point of reference in her role as mirror during the mirror stage (Whitford 1991a:163). Thus, if Irigaray aims to theorise a perspective from which 'woman' is not simply the mirror for 'man,' then the mucous offers a possibility to construct such a theory without recourse to the phallogentric male/female binary. Secondly, since the mucous is interior, it is "more accessible to touch than to sight" (ibid., p.163). As we shall see, this corresponds to the role it plays in sex and the primacy Irigaray subsequently accords to touch. Finally, the mucous corresponds not only to sexuality but also to speech; and these two modes of interaction are considered by Irigaray to be the primary ways of mediating the relation between that which is radically other.

The four terms outlined above certainly do not exhaust the plenitude of novel terminology that Irigaray offers in order to rethink many aspects of Western philosophical discourse. However, they are the most important ones to understand when discussing Irigaray's thought on love. Armed with the above clarifications it is now possible to delve into Irigaray's descriptions of the erotic act itself. The following section thus assesses Irigaray's re-reading of Levinas's "Phenomenology of Eros" in order to illuminate how a just relation between the sexes can be imagined in the amorous encounter.

5. The Fecund Touch of Lovers: Irigaray's Critique of Levinas's Eros

Irigaray's "Fecundity of the Caress" is one of a number of essays of which her *Ethics of Sexual Difference* is composed. In turn, these essays are the reproduction of lectures which Irigaray presented in 1982 at the Erasmus University in Rotterdam. The text is a highly critical re-reading of Levinas's "Phenomenology of Eros" in *Totality and Infinity*. This particular text of Irigaray's is highly enigmatic, since she at once mimics Levinas's already dense style and combines such mimicry with terminology significant to her own opaque and inexplicit phrasing. The later and more explicit "Questions to Emmanuel Levinas" (1991) is perhaps more pointed in its critique of Levinas, and Irigaray's critique of Levinas is almost brutally clear. But despite what some scholars (Ince 1996) might argue, to my mind both the texts are quite biting critiques of Levinas. Although the "Fecundity of the Caress" is more subtle and ironic in its attack, to consider it sympathetic to Levinas is greatly to

underestimate the severity of Irigaray's critique. Sandford (2000:136) makes one such underestimation, claiming that Irigaray's reading of Levinas is somewhat sympathetic to the man's work, but simply explores textual possibilities which are "underdeveloped or are immediately closed off." Moreover, these two commentators (Sandford 2000:133; Ince 1996) note how Irigaray's framework is essentially Levinasian²⁴ despite her protestations against his views on eros. Yet others still (Roberts 2005) find Irigaray to be intensely critical of Levinas's patriarchal gestures, and think this to be a justified position. What we shall see is that when pitted against one another, Irigaray and Levinas arrive at an impasse. Ultimately – in my view at least – neither view on eros is acceptable in full, but both make very interesting points. Despite the fact that both thinkers are incongruent on a fundamental level, there may be a possibility to salvage some good points from each thinker by finding their correlates in the thought of Jean-Luc Nancy, something which I shall explore in the subsequent chapter.

The essence of Irigaray's critique of Levinas can be summarised in the following quote:

To assign the loving couple as a male lover and a beloved woman already assigns them to a polarity that deprives the female lover of her love. As object of desire, of the desirable, as call to the alterity of the night or the regression to need, the woman is no longer she who also opens partway onto a human landscape. She becomes part of the male lover's world. Keeping herself on the threshold, perhaps. Allowing the limits of her world, her country, to founder, to be swallowed up. But remaining passive within the field of activity of a subject who wills himself to be the sole master of desire. Leaving him, apparently, the whole of sensual pleasure, leaving him to a debasement without recourse to herself. What remains for him is reliance on the son as the continuation of his path. (Irigaray 2001:135)

Levinas's fatal error, Irigaray claims, is the division of lovers into an active male 'lover' and a passive female 'beloved.' This is due to the French '*amant*' (lover) and '*aimée*' (beloved) being masculine and feminine nouns respectively. Levinas seemingly codes the subject in his works as implicitly masculine, as 'virile' and 'heroic' (Sandford 2000:37). But in so doing, particularly with reference to the lover in eros, Irigaray identifies a binary of 'active loving' and 'passive seduction' being set up over the course of the text. It is this passivity of the female beloved with which Irigaray finds fault, and her critique of Levinas appears not only as a critique of his philosophy, but also of men and women should they adopt his phenomenology as accurate. Whilst those sympathetic to Levinas might assert that the point of his work is not to apply his phenomenology as an overarching practical guide to good living, but to understand the metaphysical implications of reality as essentially ethical, Irigaray's project is to examine and re-arrange the symbols associated with women inasmuch as those

²⁴ A point to which we return later in this chapter, under the section titled, "The Lady Doth Protest Too Much, Methinks: Evaluating Irigaray's Critique of Levinas."

symbols play an important role in the formation of feminine subjectivity. If the feminine is denied desire, responsibility and will in the erotic encounter, then Irigaray thinks that eros amounts to not much more than “rape” (Irigaray 2001:139). This is a harsh accusation to lay against Levinas (albeit one which is masked in Irigaray’s obscure style) whose philosophy is consistent in its humble praise of the Other, ethics, and, responsibility. But it seems that there are hardly ever half-measures in Irigaray; and when she identifies a potential threat to the feminine, her critique is biting, ironic (sometimes to the point of sarcasm) and adamant.

Thus, with reference to the above quote, Irigaray is ironically accusing Levinas of reducing the feminine to the masculine economy of the same. The irony in Irigaray’s critique is not restricted to the fact that the very notion of reducing someone to the economy of the same is through and through a Levinasian idea. Indeed, the implicit assumption here is that Levinas violates the very principles he invents, and through this implication Irigaray finds that Levinas’s phenomenology of the erotic encounter denies woman her sexuality and thus her ‘world.’ Ultimately, as we shall see, Irigaray finds that the feminine (and hence woman) is merely a step upon the way for the ‘male lover’ to reach an “autistic transcendence” (Irigaray 2001:138) in the son, at the expense of denouncing his maternal origins.

Nevertheless, the ‘polarity’ which Irigaray identifies in Levinas denies the feminine her humanity, something which is evident in the following quote when Levinas (1979:263) says,

The beloved is opposed to me not as a will struggling with my own or subject to my own, but on the contrary as an irresponsible animality which does not speak true words. The beloved, returned to the stage of infancy without responsibility – this coquettish head, this youth, this pure life ‘a bit silly’ – has quite her status as a person. The face fades, and in its impersonal and inexpressive neutrality is prolonged, in ambiguity, into animality. The relations with the Other are enacted in play; one plays with the Other as with a young animal.

It is no surprise that these few sentences would have feminist scholarship in uproar. The implications here are significant for feminine subjectivity: woman as beloved has no will, woman as beloved is incapable of responsibility, woman is infantile, coquettish, animalistic and non-human. Whilst Sandford (2000:54) quite correctly notes that it would be ridiculous to think that Levinas himself considered real women as less than human, the question thus arises as to why the feminine must be considered as such in his philosophy. Furthermore, as we noted in the previous chapter, the choice of ‘the feminine’ as a philosophical concept must have some bearing upon - or draw some influence from - the status of real women. Thus, Irigaray’s response to Levinas can be understood as an attempt to salvage the feminine as a philosophical concept inasmuch as the symbolic associations with the feminine do have a real bearing on the way women relate to themselves as women (and indeed the way men relate to women).

Levinas's male lover, maintains Irigaray, abandons the feminine to the abyss, faceless. Irigaray takes this to be the shortcoming of Levinas's formulation. It is due to Levinas's conception of caress, and its failure to really touch the other (and perhaps to his modesty in not going further to the meeting of genitals) that Irigaray sees as an excuse; a recourse to patriarchal paternity as eros' true salvation. Furthermore, Irigaray asserts that the erotic relationship can be ethical, in that the male lover could "leave the woman her face, and even...assist her to discover it and to keep it" (Irigaray 1991:184). The tracing of the outlines of the Other, and the outline of the Self being traced, remind each of their subjectivity through the erotic touching. Hence, the man can assist the woman to discover and keep her face by exemplifying her limit. It is implicit that this ethical imperative applies both ways. Hence Irigaray argues that eros maintains a horizontally mutual relationship between man and woman, whilst at the same time it preserves the asymmetry of masculine and feminine identity; an asymmetry which is integral to considering them as the poles of radical alterity.

5.1. A Lovers' Tiff or Grounds for Divorce? Irigaray's Reading of the Role of the Woman in her "Fecundity Of The Caress"

The phallogocentric bias manifests itself in Levinas's phenomenology particularly with regard to concepts associated with the feminine, some of which are explicit in the aforementioned quote from Levinas's *Totality and Infinity*. Thus Irigaray's deconstructive approach shows the unethical nature of these associations in terms of Levinas's own ethics of responsibility to the Other. As already discussed in the aforementioned, Irigaray considers the sexual other as the most radical other and the respect for sexual difference is the fundamental ethical imperative of our age. Thus, her reading of Levinas yields that his association of the feminine with "infancy, animality, or maternity, one aspect of [her] mystery, the relation to the cosmos, is not brought to light" (Irigaray 2001:127). Therefore, woman's connection to the immanence of the cosmos, and this relation's implicit importance for feminine subjectivity, is glossed over by the Levinasian 'male lover.' This therefore violates the principle upon which Irigaray's ethics is founded, namely the respect for the one who is sexually different as absolutely other.

Furthermore, the relegation of the beloved woman to "infancy or beyond" (Irigaray 2001:126) provides a platform for the male lover to ascend "up to the greatest heights" (ibid.). This "impossible match" (ibid.) negates the possibility of an ethical relation between man and woman in favour of the implicitly masculine achievement of transcendence. Whereas the masculine is granted the chance for ethical responsibility, the feminine is in fact responsible for "unveiling a difference that remains obscurely connected to him" (Irigaray 2001:130). This difference is sexual difference, and once again Irigaray is insisting that the sexual other remains unacknowledged in Levinas's perspective on eros. Thus the paradox, for Irigaray, is the fact that the fundamental difference upon which ethics is

seemingly founded – namely sexual difference – is glanced over by Levinas’s male lover in his pursuit of ethicality in transcendence. Yet the irony is that this figurative male lover has ignored the very source of the chance to be ethical, and his pursuit of ethics has caused him to forget how to love. If we recall Irigaray’s recounting of Diotima’s teaching, eros must be that which *mediates* between the ‘depths and the heights,’ and thus since eros is connoted with woman’s carnality “perhaps the beloved woman’s secret is that she knows, without knowing, that these two extremes are intimately connected” (Irigaray 2001:129).

But should the beloved woman fall into the seductive trap of the male lover, she furthermore denies herself the chance to be an authentic woman for herself.

She divests herself of her own will to live in order to become what is required for his exercise of will. Which assigns her to the place of non-willing in his ethics. Her fall into the identity of the beloved one cancels out any real giving of self and makes her into a thing, or something other than the woman that she needs to be. She lets herself be taken but does not give herself. She quits the locus of all responsibility, her own ethical site. She is placed under house arrest, lacking the will and movements of love. (Irigaray 2001:129-130)

Once more, it seems that Levinas’s phenomenology of eros is not about love, inasmuch as it seemingly denies the feminine a chance to do so. Naturally, one might retort that Levinas (1979:266) defines voluptuosity²⁵ precisely as the “love of the love of the other,” which would imply that eros is contingent on the fact that the female beloved is capable of loving the male lover, since that is in fact what the male lover’s love aims for. Yet, it may be recalled that despite the duality of eros, the lover indeed lapses into loving the fact that he loves, or in other words, the desire for the Other lapses into need. It is precisely the concept of sexuality as egoistic need with which Irigaray is finding fault, since this turns the feminine into nothing more than a ‘thing’ incapable of exercising her own will, unable to ‘give herself’ and hence only to ‘be taken.’

Levinas (1979:256) opens his phenomenology of eros with the line, “Love aims at the Other; it aims at him in his frailty.” This conjures up the sense of the beloved as a trembling singularity, and the movement towards him overwhelmed with pathos. The use of the masculine pronouns²⁶ here is deliberate, as Irigaray identifies in them a kind of Freudian (or should we say ‘Irigarayean’?) slip. She (Irigaray 2001:133) notes that the “fragility and weakness of the beloved woman are the means by which the male lover can experience love of self as of a beloved who is powerless. Flesh of which he would remain the actual body.” In the apparent denial of feminine subjectivity, Levinas’s male lover

²⁵ See Chapter 2, Section 3.2.2. “A Voluptuous Meditation”

²⁶ The masculine forms are more obvious in English, as in the French each noun is itself already associated with a gender.

reduces the feminine to the economy of the same, thereby loving himself and not the beloved feminine other. It will be recalled that such an act, that is to love oneself by denying the alterity of the other, amounts to the most extreme form of incest for Levinas.²⁷ Hence if Irigaray's critique is valid, then Levinas once again violates the principle which he himself invents. Moreover, he does so in the opening lines of his seminal formulation of eros. The feminine is, according to Irigaray, thus not understood in her own terms, and eros is considered solely from the view of the masculine.

Inside this male territory, even if she plays at disguising herself in various showy and coquettish poses which he "strips away" in the act of love, she still lacks both the identity and the passport she needs to traverse or transgress the male lover's language. Is she some more or less domesticated child or animal that clothes itself in or takes on a semblance of humanity? Takes on the subject's unconscious and involuntary movements, veils them in softness, in folds, in spaciousness to give him back some room. Wraps herself up in the remainder of what he has taken in and from love. But what of her call to the divine? (ibid., p.128)

The erotic encounter thus considered leaves woman without the opportunity to express her own love, and hence she can do naught but play along with the male lover's narcissistic fantasy. But this amounts to woman being the place for man, and not a place for herself. Woman's divine possibility, which is intimately connected with eros in the sensible transcendental, is thus ignored. Exhausted, suffering, and yet ignored, the beloved woman is once more "reduced to infancy, left to herself or to animal savagery" (ibid., p.139). The male lover, in his voracious sexual power, "approaches the other to reduce it to that which is not yet human in himself. Sensual pleasure that does not take place in the realm of the human and will not be its creation" (ibid.). Ultimately, Levinas's male lover does not understand the full human potential of eros, nor does he really love the beloved woman. For Irigaray this is ugly and immoral, "neither ethical nor aesthetic" (ibid.). We can thus understand that in the context of Irigaray's thought, most notably with reference to the sensible transcendental and the wonder which presupposes it, the male love in Levinas is obsessed with only one half of the formula: transcendence. But the male lover cannot understand that the transcendence of eros is contained in its sensuality (he does not grasp the sensible transcendental), and thus he is without wonder for the feminine other which provides him the opportunity to discover this.

What is the mistake this ignorant male lover makes that would justify such a biting critique? Whence comes the motivation to say that the male lover reduces the female beloved to the economy of the same? To answer this, we must turn to the role which paternity plays in Irigaray's critique of Levinas's understanding of eros.

²⁷ See Chapter 2, Section 3.2.1. Need and Desire – Enjoyment and Transcendence.

5.2. In the Name of the Mother: The Problem with Paternal Fecundity

Recalling Levinas's understanding of paternity, we understand that for him the paternal relation offers a solution to the problems of transcendence in eros²⁸. Paternity is the relation of the 'I' to an 'Other' who is both. The problem of transcendence, that is, of either losing oneself in the Other or never actually having left the 'I' is thus resolved in the 'son' who is both. Furthermore, the son provides the 'I' with access to "infinite time" (Levinas 1979:268) inasmuch as the 'I' in the son experiences the desire for the Other who indeed grants time (as something other to the static instant of the 'I'). This process continues *ad infinitum* and hence realises the 'future never future enough' which the erotic caress searches for but fails to realise in eros.

The most obvious problem one would expect Irigaray to find with this view is the implicit connection it has with promoting a patriarchal genealogy rather than matrilineal genealogy.

Revealed only in the son, fecundity continues to disguise itself as the fecundation of the lovers in difference. As the fruit of communion between lovers, male and female, the son becomes the male lover's ornament and display of the same as himself, the position of his identity in relation to, and through, paternity (Irigaray 2001:133).

Even though the son might be an 'Other,' Irigaray maintains that he would in fact belong to the same. This is because, as we have noted on many occasions prior to this, that the only true other is the one who differs sexually. Thus, since both the father and the son are men, the true difference underlying ethics is bypassed. But one might object to this, since as we noted in the previous chapter, Levinas does not consider paternity only in the biological sense. Rather, it is a metaphor to allude to the relation with the Other where the problem of transcendence is resolved. Seemingly anyone can adopt a paternal attitude (perhaps even a woman to another woman), inasmuch as it allows the 'I' and the 'Other' to remain in an unambiguous relation of transcendence (albeit a paradoxical one). Whether or not Irigaray is aware of such an argument, it is unclear. It does not matter though, because even if paternity were only a metaphor, Irigaray would still maintain that looking towards some other relation in order to salvage ethicality beyond a damnable night of eros is a move which bypasses the very feminine subjectivity which is the condition for eros.

For Irigaray (2001:123)

the son does not resolve the enigma of the most irreducible otherness. Of course, he is not engendered without having had his place in the crypt of the beloved's womb. Where the lover falters, and whence he returns, without any possible

²⁸ See Chapter 2, Section 4 "Fecundity and Paternity".

recognition or vision of this terrain. Does the son appear to the father as the impossible image of his act of love?

It seems like Irigaray is stating the obvious by noting that the son must have had a place in the womb, but it is an obvious fact which is absent in Levinas's *Totality and Infinity*.²⁹ As we shall see, the very notion of fecundity in Levinas is turned on its head by Irigaray in her claims that the fecundity of eros exists between the two lovers' subjectivities.

If the paternal relation is the relation to infinite time, Irigaray (2001:126) would argue that the beloved woman is "necessarily an object, not a subject with a relation, like his, to time. She drags the male lover into the abyss so that, from these nocturnal depths, he may be carried off into an absolute future." Thus even if the paternal relation were justified, it is nevertheless predicated upon the feminine as the point from which the male lover may launch himself into the transcendence of infinite time. Levinas's understanding of time, for Irigaray (ibid., p.131) is "too closely connected with counting," and is hence a linear masculine notion of time ignorant of the 'return' which characterises eros.

Feminine time, on the other hand, would be cyclical (Ince 1996:136), and represents the embodied experience of the rhythms of growth and nature. For Irigaray the rhythm of eros oscillates between night and day, and as such indicates a "return to a certain night whence the lovers can arise differently illuminated and enlightened" (Irigaray 2001:125). We shall return to this deconstruction of the light/darkness binary soon enough. For now however, it is sufficient to note that Irigaray finds the metaphysical time in Levinas insufficient for the rhythms and cycles of an embodied life.

In Levinas Irigaray thus identifies a teleological move, where the goal of eros is a transcendence to be found in the son. But this obsession with futurity, and the transcendence it offers, ignores the urgency of the "here and now" (ibid., p.127). If this is the primary concern of eros, it is guilty of "uprooting the female lover from her fundamental habitat" (ibid.). In other words, the feminine as a place for herself is negated, as if she were a victim of a forced removal for the sake of a lofty transcendence in the child. What of the very relation to the female beloved herself? Why, asks Irigaray is the beloved woman abandoned to the "anonymity of love?" In looking forwards to the paternal relation and the transcendence it promises, Levinas ignores the immanence and the sensible transcendental possible in eros.

²⁹ Admittedly in *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas does accord maternity significant importance. But Irigaray does not pick up upon this, although as we shall see, she would nevertheless consider relegating woman to maternity (not to be confused with recognising the maternal-feminine as the repressed ground of subjectivity) as still an act which makes 'woman' the place for 'man.'

Paternity as the goal of eros therefore appears to Irigaray (2001:121) as an insidious goal which in fact implies parental roles rather than the roles of lover. This would be “radically unethical. Lacking respect for the one who gave me my body and enthusiasm for the one who gives it back to me in his amorous awakening” (ibid.). Irigaray is thus referring to the unconscious debt to the maternal-feminine ‘who gave me my body,’ and this debt is glossed over if the erotic act does not remind the lovers of their incarnate and carnal bodily existence. In other words, to see eros as directed to the goal of reproduction does not celebrate the body, and as such the maternal-feminine who granted the very possibility of a body is not accorded the proper gratitude due to her. Irigaray thus insists on the removal of paternity and maternity as the ends towards which eros aims. Not to do so means that “the lovers, male or female, substitute for, occupy, or possess the site of those who conceived them” (ibid.). Thus it would be a denial of the bodily experience of *lovers* by considering them instead as potential parents. This, for Irigaray (ibid.) is what truly constitutes “the unethical” and “profanation”.

To consider eros as profane is thus itself a profane consideration, because in making this assumption one implies that an apparently more genuine relation to otherness manifests itself in paternity. But in doing this, the male lover (as inherently paternal) ‘possesses’ the female beloved as implicitly maternal. The truth of the maternal-feminine - that which granted both lovers the possibility to experience bodily love as *lovers* and not just for the sake of becoming parents - is therefore what is really profaned. If one takes into account the axiomatic principles of Irigaray’s thought, namely that radical alterity is made up of sexual difference and that the maternal-feminine is the repressed ground of all subjectivity, then it is evident that Levinas’s phenomenology of eros prescribes something unethical from her point of view.

What then should eros be like, if it is not the profane relation to a mystery or geared towards the transcendence of paternity? Irigaray’s “Fecundity of the Caress” is an obscure text to say the least, and to render Irigaray’s alternative in clear terms is no mean feat. Nevertheless, the following is an analysis of this text which interprets Irigaray’s alternative to Levinas’s understanding of eros in as clear a manner as possible. By way of some reference to works other than the “Fecundity of the Caress,” it is evident that the suppositions which prioritise sight over touch are complicit in all the considerations which prioritise other forms of love over eros.

5.3. Touch Made Visible: The Priority of Touch over Sight

For Irigaray, the tradition of phenomenology³⁰ privileges the sense of sight over touch. This privileging prioritises the masculine economy of the same in order for one to know oneself (Whitford 1991a:151). This might be exemplified in the mirror stage, which makes use of sight in order to recognise oneself in a mirror and thus develop an ego. But the emphasis on sight rather than touch exemplifies, in terms of Irigaray's feminist project, a repression of the darkness of the womb and hence the maternal-feminine. Moreover, the subjection of touch to sight removes the character of the other as tangible (Irigaray 2010:sp). The caress falters in Levinas's phenomenology because it is not considered as a viable means of encountering the other as Other. Since the caress lies within the realm of touch, it is too immanent and sensual to be granted the possibility of an epiphany in Levinas's phenomenology of eros.

And yet, touch is fundamental for Irigaray because it provides a means of being aware of another without sight. "First of all," states Irigaray (1993:164), "the tangible is received, perceived prior to the dichotomies of active and passive." Irigaray uses the theme of the unborn touching its mother in the womb as an example of this. Moreover, the eye itself is touching the body before it sees, and sight is light 'touching the eye'. Another example, more pertinent in discussing love, is the touching involved in intercourse, where the *invisible* is accessed through touching. The invisible but tangible part of the self is an irreducible part of the self (Irigaray 2010:sp), and thus when one is touched without seeing, the most primary aspect of one's being is 'caressed.' This therefore means that the other can be 'felt' without needing to be seen, especially in the erotic act. For Irigaray (ibid.) touch would literally be the 'light' which guides all perception, and in today's visual culture it is vital to emphasise the tangible lest we succumb to an oculo-centrism which perpetuates the dominion of one over another (be that male over female, black over white, and so forth). The gaze perpetuates a dichotomy of activity and passivity, the onlooker and the spectacle. On the other hand, touch remains ambiguous because to touch is always to feel oneself touching, and thus in touching the other person one is at once aware of both oneself and the other.

5.4. The Fecundity of the Caress

When we touch, we simultaneously sense each other. The caress, therefore, is the moment in which the most fundamental sense, touch, comes into contact with another's most fundamental sense. By being touched I also touch the other where they touch me. Thus, Irigaray uses the caress as a point

³⁰ Irigaray includes Levinas in this tradition, despite the fact that Levinas's project is in fact a critique showing the limits of phenomenology using its own language. Indeed, if Levinas uses phenomenology it is to point beyond it to the non-phenomenal Other.

from which two people might ‘give birth to each-other’ in that they are experiencing each other on such a primal/primary level. One way of understanding what Irigaray is alluding to is that if I am touched, on my calf for example, I become aware of myself at a place where I may not have been aware of at that moment. Touch thus ‘awakens’ the flesh, and this is why when caressed it is a “dressing within and without” (Irigaray 1993:186). Nudity is “contemplated” and “adorned” in this sense, rather than “evoked, invoked nor taken in pleasure” (ibid). The caress serves neither as a recollection of something past (‘evocation’), nor an appeal to something greater (‘invocation’), nor a simple hedonism (‘pleasure’). Rather it allows the ‘contemplation’ and ‘adornment’ of the flesh, tracing the outline of what is me, of what I am. To caress and to be caressed are activities which can provide new, indeed radically other, perspectives on both my own subjectivity and the other’s. Thus the caress seeks otherness but does not subordinate it to the same; it establishes a limit more fundamental than any limit established through the gaze. I need to be touched by an other in order to view both myself and her from a new perspective (that is contemplating and adorning the flesh, affirming otherness); but it is in this very dependency on the other that protects him/her from being assimilated by the gaze. Hence Irigaray (2001:124) states “that which lets itself go in the most intimate touch remains invisible. Touch perceives itself but transcends the gaze.”

The gesture “which weds without consum(mat)ing, which perfects while abiding by the outlines of the other, this gesture may be called: the touch of the caress” (Irigaray 2001:120). The touch which ‘outlines’ the borders of another body brings us into closer contact with the sexual other through the mutuality that is experienced in touch. Irigaray (ibid., p.125) argues that since eros involves the primal and primary sense of touch, the visual image is abandoned, and touch shapes “as if for the first time, on the first day” (ibid.). The erotic act at once imitates and transcends the event of birth; although it is different it is located in the same region of the body, it is the same ‘threshold’ which is crossed repeatedly. This implies the ‘renewal’ which Irigaray consistently alludes to.

If we recall that the face is the frontier of radical alterity, then Irigaray (ibid.) claims that “[I]overs’ faces live not only in the face but in the whole body. A form that is expressed in and through their entire stature. In its appearance, its touch.” Irigaray thus finds that the figure of eros presented by Levinas does not celebrate the body, since he considers nudity profane, obscuring the purity of the face which alludes the absolute alterity of the other. Irigaray suggests that the meeting of naked bodies offers a face-to-face relationship unmasked of pretensions, static facial expressions or rehearsed habits (ibid., p. 124). The reason Levinas might object to this is that the sensuality of sex distracts one from

realising the Other's alterity, due to the intensity of sexual pleasure which roots oneself in oneself.³¹ Irigaray (ibid., p.121) stands in complete contrast, as the following quote indicates:

Touch makes it possible to wait, to gather strength, so that the other will return to caress and reshape, from within and from without, a flesh that is given back to itself in the gesture of love. The most subtly necessary guardian of my life is the other's flesh...Bringing me back to life more intimately than any regenerative nourishment, the other's hands, these palms with which he approaches without going through me, give me back the borders of my body and call me to the remembrance of the most profound intimacy. As he caresses me, he bids me neither to disappear nor to forget but rather to remember the place where, for me, the most intimate life is held in reserve. Searching for what has not yet come into being for himself, he invites me to become what I have not yet become. To realise a birth that is still in the future. Plunging me back into the maternal womb and beyond that conception, awakening me to another birth – as a loving woman.

The caress therefore reminds the lovers of the borders of their own bodies. But it is especially significant for the female lover, since the erotic act literally awakens the most intimate part of her body, invisible and only accessible via the sense of touch. Thus Irigaray insinuates that by touching another person intimately, I realise that his/her body is radically different from my own. Thereby I can come to realise that the sexual other is radically other. This recalls the 'enstatic transcendence' discussed in the aforementioned on the sensible transcendental. In the erotic relation, the sexual other directly affects me, and hence any transcendence that may be complicit with his/her otherness is *sensible*. Thus for Irigaray, the living, pulsing, naked body reveals the alterity of the other before it is shaped in the face that is seen. In a Levinasian sense, the face is lost in love; but only because touch subverts the oppressive disposition of sight and the gaze, and the defensive static stance of being the spectacle. Lovers, for Irigaray, have the opportunity to encounter each other with the pure and most primal sense, and through the touching of body-to-body, rather than the gaze of face-to-face, the radical alterity of the other, is encountered on a most primordial level.

This is important for Irigaray as it offers the opportunity to consider feminine subjectivity in positive terms, underived from the masculine. The caress is predicated upon feminine beauty as an "invitation to inhabit this dwelling...a call for the communion in the secret depths of the sensible realm and not for a defloration of herself as woman" (Irigaray 2001:139). The erotic act authenticates the feminine as the loving woman, her mystery a tangible one which the masculine is privileged to encounter. The Levinasian definitive figures of femininity, 'the dwelling' and 'the depths' are resuscitated by Irigaray to indicate the possibility of communion between lovers. Moreover, the pleasure of eros is something to be celebrated rather than treated with suspicion for its failure to reach an implicitly disembodied transcendence. Touching and caressing must be good since "this memory of the flesh as the place of

³¹ See Chapter 2, Section 3 "The Phenomenology of Eros"

approach means ethical fidelity to incarnation” (ibid., p.144). We can identify Irigaray’s emphasis on embodied subjectivity here, which dictates the priority of sexual difference. Touch is therefore fundamental, and deserves recognition as such. In turn, this implies that rather than failing to achieve the loftiness of Levinas’s ethics as metaphysics, it is eros which can support ethics as the just relation between man and woman.

Fecundity is therefore not the possibility for eros to result in pregnancy and the child. Rather, the fecundity exists between the lovers in eros. For Irigaray (2001:123) “what is most interior and what is most exterior are mutually fruitful. Prior to any procreation.” Love allows each lover to interact with his/her other in a beautiful way, and such an interaction is capable of producing new ways of being. Irigaray (ibid., p.132) understands the caress as a fecundity of the “here and now, of lovemaking: the gift to each of the lovers of sexual birth and rebirth.” Fixing one’s view on the future forgets the here and now, the joyful immanence of the erotic encounter. But this immanence is at once connected to the cycle of life, in its connection with the threshold across which birth takes place.

Fecundity is, for Irigaray, a passive form of creative power “more passive than any voluntary passivity, yet not foreign to the act of creating/procreating the world” (Irigaray 1993:195). It allows the lovers to create themselves anew from their position of love. It is the condition for love to mediate between the lovers, and thus to mediate between the sensible and the transcendental. The fecundity of eros allows the lovers to rediscover themselves and each other as they touch in rhythmic passion, and to approach their future together without inscribing it in a specific condition such as a child. It is through the fleeting yet primal, and indeed primary, dimension of touch that the lovers can face each other, granting unto one another “an intimacy that keeps unfolding itself more and more, opening and reopening the pathway to the mystery of the other” (ibid., p.189). Fecundity is thus brought to the present in Irigaray, where in Levinas, it is aimed towards the future.

Irigaray’s emphasis is therefore not on the procreative power of love to produce children, but rather to ‘new worlds’ which lovers can create and explore together. To view love as primarily procreative relegates the continuation of the genealogical line - and more specifically the genealogy of father and son (as Levinas expounds upon in his analysis of eros) - as the ‘telos’ of love. For in addition to the fecundity of love being that potential from which new subjectivities as lovers may emerge, they are ‘fecund of body’ as well as of ‘spirit.’ A child may be the result of love, but it must not be its condition lest the feminine subject position as an active lover (not merely a passive beloved) be occluded in the relation between father and son (or even mother and daughter, as that would still imply a teleological necessity for eros). Irigaray (1991:199) states it thus

The child should be for himself not for the parent. When one intends to create a child, giving the child to himself appears as an ethical necessity. The son should not be the place where the father confers being or existence on himself, the place where he finds the resources to return to himself in relation to this same as and other than himself constituted by the son. From my point of view, this gesture fails to achieve the relation to the other, and doubly so: it does not recognise the feminine other and the self as other in relation to her; it does not leave the child to his own generation. It seems to me pertinent to add that it does not recognise God in love.

“To caress, for Levinas, consists,” says Irigaray (1991:179-180), “not in approaching the other in its most vital dimension, the touch, but in the reduction of that vital dimension of the other’s body to the elaboration of a future for himself [in the child, and more specifically, the son]”. The caress is aimed towards the future for Levinas, and Irigaray claims that this is an assimilation of the feminine into the dimension of masculine time, thus negating her alterity (ibid, pp.179-180). The timeless immediacy of the erotic experience is subordinated under the importance of a future masculine ‘I’ (the son). The importance, pleasure and intimacy of the erotic experience for woman – exemplified in the caress which always slips from its present to the permanence of its memory - is subordinated to the future of man. It is problematic for Irigaray that Levinas salvages *eros* from its failure to be ethics through the future of the son. Levinas’s caress grasps at nothing in the Other but the possibility of the future self and Other, only in the son. Irigaray, on the other hand, claims that the caress exemplifies the most pure of relationships. For her, the caress will reveal that fecundity underlies *eros* itself, but not in the sense of fecundity of a future that would save a failure of the erotic schism. Rather, fecundity mediates the relationship between the lovers and is thus *primary* in the love relationship.

The threshold and the mucous are thus significant in understanding the caress, as it is the mucous which allows for, and symbolises, the mediation between masculine and feminine. Levinas’s phenomenology fails on this account for Irigaray. She (Irigaray 2001:122) sees his phenomenology as falsely understanding that the male lover is

always alien to the intimacy of the mucous, not crossing the threshold, still remaining outside, [he] continues to caress until he founders in some abyss. He does not attain communion in the most inward locus of the feeling and the felt, where body and flesh speak to each other.

What Levinas seemingly does not grasp is that the possibility of ‘communion’ between man and woman is in fact a real possibility. The mucous testifies to this, and since (as discussed in the aforementioned) it symbolises the un-theorised, Irigaray uses the mucous as symbolic of the fecundity between man and woman which would supposedly allow new possibilities of subjectivity to be invented. “The most intimate fecundity of love,” for Irigaray (ibid., p.123) is that “of its caress, of its transcendence of all restraints on this side of the other’s threshold.” It inspires “wonder at what is reborn from the heart’s depths” (ibid.) and hence *eros* testifies to otherness rather than lapsing into

sameness. If the corporeal ‘sameness’ of need overshadows the intensity of the other’s incarnation in eros, then “the male lover risks an infinite outpouring into some dead being” (ibid., p.134). He would not have understood the limit that is the threshold, and hence appropriated who lies beyond it in a disavowal of the caress which “needs the other to touch itself” (ibid.). In other words, eros must be contingent on the alterity of the other as an incarnate, tangible and sensual other. As such, the fecundity between lovers is predicated upon the possibility of establishing a relation, and this relation is testified to by the mucous. This in turn inspires the wonder felt for what lies beyond the threshold, or the sexual other.

5.5. Divine Eros: Carnal Yet Transcendent

Levinas’s eros is therefore almost completely inverted by Irigaray. Where for Levinas, the erotic encounter lapses into the sameness of need, for Irigaray it falls more closely on the side of transcendence since it involves the most intimate touching of the sexual other. Irigaray is almost brutal in her critique of Levinas. In his thought, she (Irigaray 2001:131) argues that

sensual pleasure would hold fast to the fate of an exorbitant ultramateriality that has fallen away from discourse...an original sin without redemption...For the male lover, the transcendence of the Other justifies this infidelity to love. Returning to his God in a discontinuity of eros.

Thus eros falls short for Levinas in lieu of deeper possibilities of transcendence, for example in paternity. But Irigaray (ibid., p.139) maintains that “no ‘human’ flesh is celebrated in that eros.” The female lover is damned to the carnal, the animalistic and the infantile. Irigaray (ibid., p.123) deconstructs this by claiming that “if the surrender of the beloved woman – and of the female lover – means a childlike trust, an animal exuberance, it illuminates the aesthetics and ethics of the amorous gesture, for those who take time to reopen their eyes”. Eros is inherently ethical for Irigaray, and also beautiful, inasmuch as it allows a fruitful interaction between the poles of radical sexual alterity. Irigaray (ibid., p.138) finds that Levinas’s male lover is “seduced by the gravity of the Other but approaches the female other carelessly...without regard for what shines and glistens between them.” Irigaray thus finds that the obsession with the transcendence of the future ignores the transcendence in the ‘here and now,’ with the female lover and the possibilities for re-birth, renewal and regeneration she signals.

Irigaray (ibid., p.140) would rather define the erotic act as

an in-dwelling. Dwelling with the self, and with the other – while letting the other go. Remembering while letting the other be, and with the world. Remembering the act not as a simple discharge of energy but for its characteristic intensity, sensation, colour, and rhythm. The intensity would be or would constitute the

dimensions of the dwelling, which is always in process. Never complete. Unfolding itself during and between the schedule of encounters.

As such, the erotic relation between man and woman is one that extends beyond the bedroom. It is a continuous cycle of revisiting the sexual other and allowing such visitations to renew and regenerate subjectivities. The memory of one encounter would not simply be one of an implicitly shameful exorbitant satisfaction of need. Rather each encounter would be a unique instance in a series constituting a process of relation with the sexual other. Eros would thus not simply refer to the night of passion, but indeed to the very moments between each night and how subjectivities grow and develop ‘during and between scheduled encounters’.

Eros would therefore be the dwelling with the self and the other from a disposition of wonder, one for the other. As such, the transcendental would acquire its ‘material texture,’ and hence Irigaray would consider eros divine. This is illustrated in the caress, which is necessarily contingent upon the presence of the other to be figured as such. But

The caress would begin at a distance. Tact that informs the sense of touch, attracts, and comes to rest on the threshold of the approach. Without paralysis or violence, the lovers would beckon to each other, at first from far away. A salutation that means the crossing of a threshold. Pointing out the space of a love that has not yet been made profane. The entrance into the dwelling, or the temple, where each would invite the other, and themselves, to come in, also into the divine. (Irigaray 2001:136)

Thus even the non-tactile dimensions of the relation between man and woman acquire the status of the caress. The divine nature of eros is thus also alluded to beyond the carnal encounter of the flesh. When lover’s steal each other’s glances, they seemingly already understand each other’s radical difference as sexual beings.

Thus, Irigaray accords eros prime importance. It would be the situation where lovers would be

The one for the other, messengers of a future that is still to be built and contemplated. The one for the other, already known and still unknown. The one for the other, mediators of a secret, a force, and an order that also touches on the divine. (Irigaray *ibid.*, p.130)

Irigaray considers eros therefore as the relation *par excellence* which mediates the most radical difference. It has a divine force, bringing the divine into the very materiality of lover’s bodies.

But what is this divine that Irigaray consistently alludes to? Before this can become clear, it is necessary to elaborate upon eros as the crossing of the threshold. In discussing the ‘interval’ Irigaray (1993:48) states

Overcoming the interval is the aim of [sexual³²] desire, the cause of locomotion. The interval approaches zero when skins come into contact. It goes beyond zero when a passage occurs to the mucous. Or a transgression of touch through the skin. Given that the problem of desire is to suppress the interval without suppressing the other. Since desire can eat up place, either by regressing into the other on the intrauterine model or annihilating the existence of the other in one way or another. If desire is to subsist, a double place is necessary, a double envelope. Or else God as subtending the interval, pushing the interval toward and into infinity. The irreducible. Opening up the universe and all beyond it. In this sense, the interval would produce place.

The interval is therefore that which Irigaray would argue to be the origin of thought, inasmuch as it is the interval wherein desire is located. The interval is the space between two radically differing *places*, namely of man and woman (who, incidentally, would also be places for the other, not in the sense of substitution, but in the sense of desire). If the threshold (which would be the frontier of the ‘passage to the mucous’) of the interval is traversed in *eros*, and if desire ‘goes beyond zero’ it is possible to construe *eros* as a *sharing* of desire.³³ The lovers’ desire overlaps in the place that is the feminine; it neither ‘fuses’ nor is the masculine ‘implanting’ his desire in a place reserved for it. A fusion would not imply a sharing – since sharing implies a giving of what is mine to you for that specific time, not an assimilation of you into me (or vice versa). This corresponds with the chiasmic relationship that would define a proper ethics of sexual difference, according each sexuate position a possibility to “go toward the other and come back to itself” (Irigaray 1993:9). At this point of overlap, the radical alterity of the Other would authenticate the lovers’ subjectivities because of the encounter with a desire that would hitherto have been impossible to formulate within the coordinates of an isolated or privileged (male) subject. I abandon myself (my desire) to her desire, and she to mine, thus unveiling inaccessible points of mystery which demarcate ‘me’ as distinct from the she (or perhaps he) who is ‘Other.’

Within the space of the interval, something like ‘God’ would have to subtend it in order to allow the relationship between man and woman to be the infinite spring of novelty in thought. This again links with the sensible transcendental, and consistent allusions Irigaray makes to the divine status of *eros*. Irigaray maintains that God is denied a relationship with the feminine by patriarchal discourse, inasmuch as the feminine is necessarily associated with the carnal and the flesh and in that discourse God is most definitely not (Tilghman 2009:42-43). Thus since Irigaray does not suggest that women

³² The psychoanalytic trend in Irigaray’s thinking here corresponds with the notion that all human activity is the result of sublimated sexuality (Irigaray 1993:43).

³³ In her talk “Perhaps Cultivating Eros Could Provide For Our Safety” given at the 2010 Human Condition Series conference, Irigaray referred to *eros* as the “sharing of desire”.

ought to abandon their associations with the body,³⁴ she suggests that women's relation to the divine must be mediated by a physical experience. Irigaray therefore eroticises God to encourage a notion of God undivorced from the flesh. Furthermore, that which mediates between man and woman would have to be something infinite in order to inspire a sense of wonder and the lure of sublime beauty. Reserving God for a solemn realm of the transcendent detached from the carnal, in Irigaray's (1993:205) eyes, would "obliterate respect for the other as other." It is necessary to connote God with eros in order to maintain the sense of wonder, the sensible transcendental, and so forth, which allow an ethical relationship between the sexes. God must be the fecundity of the lovers (prior to a child) and this fecundity grants the lovers the power to become "creators of new worlds" (Irigaray 1993:205).

Furthermore, Irigaray critiques what is in her view, Levinas's denial of pleasurable communion. For Irigaray, the actual encounter of mucous membranes within each other, where fluids meet and mix, represents the communion of a created pleasure in sexual ecstasy. And this communion is a direct result of sexual difference. Thus, the two lovers do cross over for Irigaray, but they do not fuse, since the mucous represents another form of the irreducible mediation between masculine and feminine. The pleasure of eros is, maintains Irigaray (1991:181)

engendering in us and between us, an engendering associated with the world and the universe, with which the work [*oeuvre*] of the flesh is never unconnected ... it is a unique and definitive creation. In this sense, it is time. It is ineffaceable, unrepeatable, even by the child.

Eros is an act which involves the whole body, wherein neither person can be substituted for the other. The radical alterity of gender remains an impossibility of substituting one for the other, as this would eradicate the difference between the two (although this point does lead us to a critique of Irigaray since it does by implication deny the possibility of homosexual love, as we shall discuss later). Furthermore, eros is a creative act fundamental to our situatedness in this world. It is time in that it is unique and unrepeatable, it is not assimilable into the marching on of chronological time. The caress is forgotten by the flesh as soon as it takes place, but the significance of a night of passion might change a person forever. Hence it makes us aware of time as such, being so ephemeral in its instance but so persistent in its memory (Irigaray 1993:191).

The erotic relationship is seemingly salvaged by Irigaray to include both the subjectivity and alterity of each party in love. No longer could we simply say that the one projects his/her own desires onto the other to reconcile the impossibility of a sexual connection, because the fecundity that underpins the

³⁴ This would clearly simply be in imitation of the masculine, thereby serving as the continuance of patriarchal views (see aforementioned).

erotic relationship is primary and prior to the relationship. Fecundity serves as a platform from which lovers can mutually engage with each other and engender one another together (Irigaray 1993:190). Furthermore, fecundity is revealed in the caress, where lovers will touch each other, and glimpse the radical alterity that for Irigaray can only be in the other who is different sexually (Irigaray 1993:13). Irigaray (1993:9) thus posits love as the “double desire,” a “chiasmus or double loop in which each can go toward the other and come back to itself.”

5.6. The Lady Doth Protest Too Much Methinks: Evaluating Irigaray’s Critique of Levinas

It is therefore clear that Irigaray’s view on eros is almost the opposite of the one Levinas gives, as discussed in the previous chapter. Where for Levinas, eros is the equivocal presentation of need and desire, for Irigaray (2001:130) “the simultaneity of desire and transcendence is traditionally represented by the angel – the divine messenger.” This angel would be a cupid: eros as the daimonic traveller between the binary pairs that traditionally separate ‘man’ and ‘woman,’ as Irigaray discusses in her analysis of Diotima’s speech in the *Symposium*. Thus whereas real transcendence manifests itself in the son for Levinas, for Irigaray it is in eros where the two realms of the transcendent and the corporeal can come together inasmuch as eros is the meeting place of male and female, each radically other to the other.

It seems strange, however, that Irigaray adopts the entire discourse Levinas invented when she speaks about the relationship between men and women in terms of radical alterity, yet at the same time she remains highly critical of Levinas. If we recall that in Levinas we find the introduction of the feminine serves to ‘carve up’ the unity of Being proclaimed by Parmenides, and that in his earlier work sexual difference is the marker of radical alterity, Levinas and Irigaray may be understood as taking up a common point of departure. But the two thinkers deviate in thinking eros. Where Levinas holds that the corporeal intensity of sexual pleasure detracts from the possibility of realising the transcendence of the Other, Irigaray maintains that erotic sensuality testifies to the feminine as other.

Irigaray nevertheless adopts the concept of ethics as based on otherness, without necessarily going through the rigorous phenomenological analyses which Levinas develops to attest to that otherness. Levinas’s project, however, is aimed at establishing ethics as first philosophy; that is to show that before asking the question of Being one has to justify one’s being in the face of the Other. Irigaray’s contention is that one cannot refer to ‘the Other’ and assume the word applies equally to a masculine and feminine subject. Considering the other in any terms other than sexual difference, for Irigaray (1995:8), simply understands the other as “the other of the same.” Irigaray (1995:8) states

The question of the other has been poorly formulated in the Western tradition, for the other is always seen as the other of the same, the other of the subject itself,

rather than an/other subject, irreducible to the masculine subject and sharing equivalent dignity. It all comes down to the same thing: in our tradition there has never really been an other of the philosophical subject, or, more generally, of the cultural and political subject.

One can question whether this is a legitimate critique of Levinas's formulation of the Other, since one can argue that he is precisely trying to show that the Other is 'irreducible' to any subject whatsoever. Levinas's phenomenology may be that of a masculine subject, Levinas being a man, but the entire point of his phenomenological analyses is an effort to show the limits of phenomenology in accounting for the Other. Levinas's work more often alludes to the Other than ever describing it in itself, since to do so would be precisely the reduction of the Other to the same. Yet, Irigaray seems to believe that despite Levinas's struggle with articulating the relation to the Other, he nevertheless conceives of the Other as 'the other of the same,' or an other who is ranked in a hierarchy under one conception of subjectivity. Irigaray (1995:11) says that even in Levinas's privileging "of the *you* over the *I*...we just end up with a stand-in model of the one and the many, the one and the same, in which a singular subject inflects one meaning rather than another". It seems then that Irigaray is critiquing what she identifies as an assumption in Levinas's work which characterises the subject in his work as masculine. Furthermore, in doing this, Levinas fails to grasp what Irigaray considers to be the true paradigm of otherness, namely that it is in sexual difference in which we can find the example of otherness *par excellence*.

But is this a fair assessment of Levinas? To be sure, Levinas is deeply concerned with problems revolving around transcendence and transcendence is identified by Irigaray as a particularly masculine obsession. But in opposition to traditional unitary picture of Being which in its 'oneness' belies a particularly masculine perspective, Levinas uses the feminine precisely to show that Being is multiple. As quoted in the previous chapter, Levinas (1987:85) claims that the "difference between the sexes is a formal structure, but one that carves up reality in another sense and conditions the very possibility of reality as multiple, against the unity of being proclaimed by Parmenides." Whitford (1991a:23), however, comments that the concept of multiplicity is used by male philosophers in such a way that despite their claims to the contrary, it nevertheless still occludes the status of the feminine. In contrast, however, Irigaray's conceptualisation of multiplicity would emphasise sexual difference as the constituent of multiplicity, and if sexual difference is to be taken as the site of otherness, then multiplicity considered thusly would reinforce her feminist project. But I think such a claim is vastly unjustified. Whitford (1991a:82-84) claims that when the concept 'multiplicity' is used by male philosophers, including those who lie in the 'postmodern' tradition, their versions of multiplicity never 'rearticulate' sexual difference, but rather they bypass it. That is to say that the concept of multiplicity, when used by said male philosophers, remains an abstract concept which includes sexual difference simply as one of many different examples of multiplicity, rather than emphasising that the

very possibility of multiplicity stems from sexual difference. As an example, Whitford cites one of Derrida's responses to the feminist project. Yet, I think it quite unscholarly to lump 'all male postmodernists' into the same category as Derrida – as if all male postmodernists are necessarily Derridean. What Whitford (1991a:84) believes to be imperative when considering multiplicity (and something which she sees Derrida as failing to achieve) is that multiplicity should only be “celebrated...*after* sexual difference.” But is this not exactly what Levinas has asserted (categorising Levinas as a ‘postmodernist male philosopher’ notwithstanding)? For Levinas it is clear that sexual difference is the condition of multiplicity, and not the other way around (the position which Irigaray via Whitford cautions against). Therefore, I think that Irigaray can be understood to explore the possibility of ‘reality as multiple’ introduced by Levinas, although she avoids overt acknowledgement of Levinas's contribution. In other words, this shows that despite Irigaray's harsh critique of Levinas's concept of alterity, her own views on multiplicity are nevertheless more akin to Levinas's than Irigaray, or her primary English-speaking commentator, are prepared to admit. And if Levinas's concept of alterity is intimately bound up with carving up reality as multiple, and this is achieved only through sexual difference, then can we not consider Irigaray's critique of Levinas overstep the bounds of a justified critique?

Irigaray consistently makes reference to a ‘masculine economy of the same,’ the reduction to which is the mistake par excellence of ignoring the reality of sexual difference. Yet, when Levinas (1987:85) says that the feminine is the “absolutely contrary contrary [*le contraire absolument contraire*], whose contrariety in is in no way affected by the relationship that can be established between it and its correlative, the contrariety that permits its terms to remain absolutely other,” is he not precisely affirming the reality of sexual difference as the relation with something which is altogether other? Levinas's statement was taken up by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1949) as an example of the kind of thinking which always postulates woman as the secondary derived other of the masculine. De Beauvoir work is primarily aimed at establishing the notion that woman is equal to man. But Irigaray is critical of de Beauvoir, saying that her “refusal to consider the question of woman as “other” represents, philosophically and even politically, a significant regression” (Irigaray 1995:8). The feminine, for Irigaray, must be thought of in terms of otherness rather than as equal to man; since doing this would amount to considering the feminine in terms of the masculine economy of the same. But it seems that Levinas's Other is either ‘too other’ or ‘not other enough’ for Irigaray, since his work applies the concept as easily to both men and women. Irigaray (1996:61) criticises discourses on alterity for their “lack of definition” regarding otherness. She (ibid.) identifies this as a risky manoeuvre, resulting in an other who

is only an other me, not real others: the other may then be *more* or *less* than I am, might have *more* or *less* than me. And so it may represent (my) absolute perfection

or greatness, the Other: God, Master, *logos*; it might denote the most insignificant or the most destitute: children, the ill, the poor, the outside; it might name the one I consider to be my equal. It is not the other we are really dealing with but the same: inferior, superior, or equal to me.

Levinas's 'Other' (*autrui*) is therefore considered by Irigaray to be a projection of his version of 'absolute perfection or greatness,' and it is hence unsurprising for her that he equates the Other with God. A real otherness is required, she insists, which would be the otherness between man and woman, which is testified to by their biological differences from each-other and their mothers (for despite a daughter resembling her mother's gender, she nevertheless appears different to her mother). Perhaps it is the fact that Levinas moved away from sexual difference as otherness in works after *Totality and Infinity* which causes Irigaray to gloss over how Levinas indeed does consider sexual difference to be the mark of alterity in his earlier work. Or perhaps it is Levinas's lack of emphasis on the biological differences between men and women that Irigaray takes as faulty in his work.

Yet the fact that Irigaray not once acknowledges something good in Levinas's work on alterity taints her own work with the stain of ingratitude. Reducing the other to the same is the unethical gesture *par excellence* in Levinas, and Irigaray's entire ethics of sexual difference is predicated upon the fact that reducing the *feminine* other to the *masculine* economy of the same is the unethical gesture *par excellence*. Does her addition of the adjectives 'masculine' and 'feminine' espouse a move of such creative genius that no debt to Levinas need be considered? Perhaps the attempt to formulate sameness and otherness by grounding them in empirical reality through the markers of sexual difference is a commendable philosophical insight, but it is surely not fair on Levinas to damn him to the depths of an apparent ignorance simply on the basis of him being a man. Irigaray's entire discourse on ethics is deeply indebted to Levinas inasmuch as she bases her conception of ethics as the just relation between a difference which constitutes alterity, and it is Levinas who makes the primary rigorous attempt to found ethics on alterity. Hence, although I find Irigaray's work insightful, especially with regards to understanding eros as a possible situation of ethical worth, there are definitely more similarities between her work and Levinas's than she acknowledges. Perhaps her work would embody more of the 'creative exchange between the sexes' if she were to engage with Levinas in explicit and appreciative terms, rather than only seek out the flaws she sees arising from his masculine prejudices.

Nevertheless, Irigaray does address an inherent problem in Levinas's formulation of the feminine, inasmuch as confusion arises when Levinas's feminine is related to the empirical experience of real women. Although Levinas insists that his metaphysics of sexual difference is precisely not meant to

correspond to biological categories,³⁵ this insistence can become problematic if it has *no* relation to empirical sexual difference. Thus Irigaray's adoption of 'masculine' and 'feminine' as the poles of radical alterity, coupled with her re-reading of Levinas, does arguably offer a more realistic application of gender than Levinas does. Irigaray's reading of Levinas therefore poses a significant challenge to his thought regarding eros, inasmuch as she sees it as a situation in which transcendence is not lost from a fall-back to this side of need, but is precisely achievable because of the sexual nature of otherness.

If we recall the formal problem with transcendence which Levinas proposes to solve through paternity,³⁶ it is the paradox that transcendence is not authentic if the 'I' either remains itself or is "swept away in its transcendence" (Levinas 1979:274). For Levinas, eros does not suffice as a solution to this problem inasmuch as it falls back too heavily on the 'this side' of need. However, in Irigaray's reconceptualisation of eros it becomes possible to think transcendence as possible, since what would be the 'this side' of need is inherently sexed and as such is dependent on its other to be genuine. In other words, the transcendence of eros is illustrated in the fact that the intensity of sexual pleasure demarcates one's sexed body so thoroughly that it implicitly denotes its limit. This limit would thus indicate that it is what lies beyond, the sexual other, which permits the possibility of grasping the fact that one stands within the bounds of one's own body. Erotic pleasure, for Irigaray, demarcates 'the empire of one's own ego,' and as such points to the radical alterity beyond it. Hence eros serves to emphasise the other, rather than profane her (or him?), since it is precisely the nature of the other as a sexual other which comes to light in eros.

5.6.1. Irigaray's Homophobia

Yet Irigaray's emphasis on the real sexual difference between men and women does become problematic. If we take, for example, the possibility of eros between two people of the same gender, we can consider it possible in Levinas since he supposes that masculine and feminine are two elements in which all persons participate, then love between members of the same biological gender is possible. But in Irigaray one must take her account of sexual difference very liberally to reach that same conclusion. Indeed, some of her writing implies a somewhat negative view of men and women identifying with the other gender. Irigaray (1996:61-62) states,

Some of our prosperous or naive contemporaries, women and men, would like to wipe out this difference by resorting to monosexuality, to the unisex and to what is called identification: even if I am bodily a man or woman, I can identify with, and

³⁵ See Chapter 2, Section 7 "Woman and the Feminine".

³⁶ See Chapter 2, Section 4 "The Transcendence of the Future – Fecundity and Paternity".

so be, the other sex. This new opium of the people annihilates the other in the illusion of a reduction to identity, equality and sameness, especially between man and woman, the ultimate anchorage of real alterity.

This passing dismissal of those who would perhaps label themselves ‘transgendered,’ ‘transsexual,’ ‘otherly gendered,’ ‘intersexed’, and perhaps even ‘effeminate men’ or ‘masculine women’, destabilises the fruitfulness of Irigaray’s conception of eros. One might argue that Irigaray’s conceptions of the feminine are geared towards a symbolic re-organisation through which the feminine as a concept can be strengthened and thereby strengthen the subjectivity of those who associate themselves with it. Indeed, such a defence of Irigaray would herald itself as a defence of Irigaray’s ‘strategic essentialism,’ and is something which thinkers in queer theory do make use of (Judith Butler, for example, in *Bodies That Matter* (1993)). Such a view would imply that men who associated with the feminine indeed benefit from Irigaray’s project. Irigaray’s emphasis, however, seems to be placed too rigorously upon the biological as the marker of sexual difference, and reading Irigaray as supportive of ‘homosexual’ love requires a blindness to much of her work, rendering an interpretation thereof unsystematic and perhaps even specious. Thus despite Irigaray’s formidable reworking of Levinasian concepts, and her praiseworthy salvation of eros from the damnation of the profane, I think that her thought does marginalise that proportion of people who do not consider themselves wholly masculine, wholly feminine, aligned with the biological sex of their bodies, or indeed heterosexual.

We therefore arrive at an impasse between Levinas and Irigaray. Where Levinas claims that eros lapses too far on the hither side of need to be considered ethical, Irigaray lauds eros as the moment *par excellence* of a sensible transcendence. But where Levinas allows all people to ‘participate’ in both the masculine and the feminine, Irigaray seemingly emphasises the biological reality of gender so much so that only heterosexual love seems worthy of consideration. Yet one might critique Levinas for his assertion that everyone participates in ‘the masculine’ and ‘the feminine’ since if coupled with the subtle implication in his works that the economy of the same is ‘coded as masculine’ then it implies that need (and hence sexual pleasure) is inherently masculine. This denies feminine sexuality, and thus one might want to align with Irigaray’s views on Levinas. Indeed, Irigaray would hold that such a move by Levinas postulates the other as ‘Other,’ or as a grand projection of the absolute greatness inasmuch as it stands in relation to the same. But to align oneself with Irigaray necessarily means that ‘man’ and ‘woman’ are rigid biological inevitabilities to which men and women should own up lest we lead ourselves to “a whole set of delusions, to endless and unresolvable conflicts, to a war of images or reflections and to powers being accredited to somebody or other more for imaginary or narcissistic reasons than for their actual abilities” (Irigaray 1996:62). Is there a possible way to think eros without on the one hand designating the feminine as such an impossibly other ‘Other’ that

she is accorded no possibility of pleasure, and on the other hand, understanding that masculine and feminine are not the rigid dichotomy of genital configuration?

The impasse between Levinas and Irigaray rests on the assumption that lovers are subjects in a relation, where as we shall see for Nancy, love is a relation which makes subjects ‘subjects.’ For Levinas (implicitly) and for Irigaray (more explicitly), love allows for a relation between two subjects (whether that relation is profane or ethical, it nevertheless supposes that both parties are in fact subjects). Despite the fact that for both Levinas and Irigaray the relation with the Other/feminine other is fundamental in understanding the subject as such, for both a measure of subjectivity is necessary to consider such a relation. Both Irigaray and Levinas consider the Other (Levinas) or feminine other (Irigaray) as embodied in another person, although they diverge in their views on the best forms which such a relation can take. Nancy, however, shows that this view is necessarily dialectical (despite the critical approach to dialectics both Levinas and Irigaray adopt), and results in a hierarchical structure of love. We can see this hierarchy in both Levinas and Irigaray, since where Levinas subordinates erotic love to paternal love, Irigaray elevates erotic love to the most important love inasmuch as it mediates the relation between the sexes. As we shall see, Nancy’s thinking on love shows that to rank love in any way denies the absolute particularity of love in whatever form it takes. For Nancy, love is rather the relation *par excellence* which makes subjects ‘incomplete’ and hence capable of relation as such. Furthermore, as we shall see, the issue of plurality is an important point of connection between all three thinkers, since Nancy considers the very nature of Being as both singular and plural. In Nancy, as we shall see in the following chapter, love is the condition of multiplicity, and there are thus strong parallels between Irigaray and Nancy. Moreover, Nancy’s conceptualisation of the body as a fragmented and disjunctive matrix of differences allows him to consider biological sex as unique to each individual, or simply as a point upon a polymorphous swerve. Thus the masculine and the feminine are neither abstract elements in which all can participate, but neither is masculine and feminine restricted to the ultimate anchor of biological sex.

6. I Love You To Death: But My Death Or Yours?

Irigaray’s critique of the masculine subject entails a particular psychoanalysis of the masculine subject’s relationship with death. The following quote describes how the feminine may be instrumental in man’s denial of his mortality if the feminine is unjustly considered as the reverse or inverse of the masculine. Moreover, the notion that sex is teleologically orientated towards reproduction (a move which Irigaray identifies in Levinas as discussed in the aforementioned) illustrates the bypassing of feminine subjectivity in favour of reproducing a masculine sameness in the disavowal of man’s own finitude. Irigaray (1985a:27) states:

death will be the only representative of an outside, of a heterogeneity, of an other: woman will assume the function of representing death (of sex/organ), castration, and man will be sure as far as possible of achieving mastery, subjugation, by triumphing over the anguish (of death) through intercourse, by sustaining sexual pleasure despite, or thanks to, the horror of closeness to that absence of sex/penis, that mortification of sex that is evoked by woman; the trial of intercourse will have, moreover, as teleological parameter the challenge of an indefinite regeneration, of a reproduction of the *same* that defies death, in the procreation of the *son*, this same of the procreating father. As testimony, for self and others, of his imperishable character, and warranty of a new generation of self-identity for the male seed.

What Irigaray means by this is that man's fear of death is often replaced by something else which is also unthinkable – the unthinkable alterity that is woman (Whitford 1991a:115). In doing so, man can position himself in an illusion of immortality through the control of woman. A consequence of granting woman her place of subjectivity would be man's coming to terms with his own finitude. Since eros allows the male lover to “leave the woman her face, and even...assist her to discover it and keep it”³⁷ (Irigaray 1991:184), it thus accords the masculine and the feminine each positions of subjectivity in relation to one another. Thus when a man loves a woman in the sense that she were acknowledged as her own, he would then have to face death because he is no longer using woman to distract him from his unfathomable end. No longer would he be able to objectify women as objects of pleasure, he would rather be impelled by the loving relation with her to accept his mortal fate and thus love her as truly as possible. This is both a parallel between Irigaray and Levinas and a point of critique which the feminist might level against him, since if we recall Levinas's thought on the relation between love and death, it is not my own death which is my concern but the death of the beloved other.³⁸ Yet, in *Time and the Other* (1947), Levinas's motivation for exploring eros is rooted in the idea that death is not my concern because it does not actually happen *to me*. The mystery of death can therefore not serve as a possible relation to a mystery, but rather eros can since it is the profane relation with an absolute alterity in the feminine.

But although Levinas here considers the absolute alterity as embodied in the feminine, he nevertheless looks forward to ‘the son’ as the salvation of the profane erotic relation. Hence one can read Irigaray's psychoanalytic critique into such a move, since if death is a mystery which the (implicitly masculine) subject cannot come to terms with, then the feminine is a mystery which is profaned towards the end of producing a son; thereby offering a chance to master the mystery of the feminine and thus alleviate the anxiety instilled by the impossibility of relating to death. Yet, we have also noted that for Levinas

³⁷ Perhaps this ethical imperative of true love would demand that the woman does this for the man too, even though Irigaray's purpose in writing the above words is merely to balance out the value accorded to a masculine subject in philosophical discourse.

³⁸ See Chapter 2, Section 5 “5. Love Eternal: Love and Death”

it is the death of the beloved other which is my concern, and after whose death the love for whom nevertheless lingers on. The death of the beloved feminine would therefore be of greater significance than the death of the self (i.e. the masculine lover) and hence the anxiety surrounding death nevertheless remains but revolves around the death of the beloved other rather than the self, thus emphasising alterity. What survives death then, is not the same but the character of the relation with the beloved other; and hence Levinas (1987:76) recalls Solomon in saying the “Love is as powerful as death” (Song of Songs 8:6, Today’s English Version). However, if we take note of the aforementioned critique of Levinas’s Other as the projection of an absolute belonging to the same, then Irigaray would nevertheless find fault in Levinas’s consideration that the death of the beloved other is of more concern than the death of the self. We could thus speculate that Irigaray would rather consider the authentic love of the feminine other as resulting in the masculine subject coming to terms with the fact of his own mortality. This in turn might spur him to acknowledge the limits of his subjectivity and thence appreciate the feminine other’s radical alterity. Moreover, this might serve to emphasise the loving relationship with the feminine other inasmuch as the acknowledgement of death may impel the masculine (and perhaps also the feminine) subject to appreciate love inasmuch as the instances of love would be limited by the fact of mortality. But Irigaray does not offer enough to resolve the Levinasian (also Epicurean) paradox that ‘death does not happen to me,’ and hence her argument may be subject to a criticism based upon it. In other words, the idea that death is a limit is something which can never truly be appreciated by a subject (be they masculine or feminine) since at the moment death arrives the subject is no longer. Therefore an impasse is reached once again, and something more is needed if there is to be a chance to bridge these two views.

What would be needed for such a synthesis would be a notion of death encapsulating both the finitude of the subject and of the beloved other. This may allow both a just relation between the masculine and the feminine which through according the feminine a position of subjectivity forces man to face his mortality; but simultaneously the inevitability of the beloved’s death would account for the power of love which might equate death but cannot defeat it. In other words, we might thus be able to consider that both the inevitability of my own death and the death of my lover impels me to make the most of my love whilst I still can. Because in such a relationship where radically different beings meet (if done in the way Irigaray prescribes) each lover would be able to cultivate the other as a subject – glimpsing the rejuvenating possibility that love offers eternally. But because each lover’s life is finite, they cannot embody the infinity of love. Rather, they ought to cultivate their relationship in lieu of the fact that without the finitude of each subject, they would no longer belong to themselves and with each other in the promise of love. Life is finite, but love is eternal. Love can thus not conquer death, but is equally as strong. In fact, death serves to authenticate love, inasmuch as both my death and my lover’s death compel me towards cultivating our love with all that we are. Thus, we shall turn to the

work of Jean-Luc Nancy in the following chapter, since in his analysis of love he finds that it ‘unveils finitude’ inasmuch as it ruptures subjectivity open and thereby shows the subject his/her limits. The affair between love and death thus offers an opportunity to connect the thoughts of all three thinkers regarding the nature of finitude as it relates to love.

7. Conclusion

Within the greater context of Irigaray’s deconstructive and psychoanalytic project which aims to resuscitate the possibility of feminine subjectivity, eros does offer potentially fruitful ways in which to imagine the feminine as independent from the masculine for her definition. By re-reading various philosophical texts, Irigaray shows that feminine subjectivity is possible to imagine in the positive, rather than as the negative of the masculine. This would be achieved through the creative re-imagining of the feminine in her own terms, terms such as ‘the lips,’ which allude to the plurality that women embody as opposed to the unity embodied in the masculine principle. But to achieve such a positive subjectivity for the feminine, sexual difference must be taken as the axiom upon which to build all discourse from ethics, to metaphysics, to politics and theology. This would, in Irigaray’s view, facilitate a creative exchange between the poles of sexual difference, and this exchange is in turn idealised in the erotic.

To establish the axiom of sexual difference, Irigaray identifies psychoanalysis as the discourse *par excellence* for discussing sexuality. But Irigaray positions psychoanalysis as more philosophical than it might pretend because it formulates the structures of sexual difference, and as such she renders it vulnerable to her deconstructive analyses. Irigaray therefore reformulates much of psychoanalysis to at once articulate a positive notion of feminine subjectivity and to use psychoanalysis as a resource with which to critique other discourses. With regards to this second purpose, Irigaray adopts a Lacanian framework in order to describe her re-formulation of feminine subjectivity as the re-ordering of symbols in the Symbolic order which informs the subjectivity of real women, and their self-understanding (and perhaps the way in which men understand women as independent to the masculine). Central to Irigaray’s psychoanalytic approach is her emphasis on the maternal-feminine as the condition for all subjectivity, and thereby Irigaray’s emphasis of a matrilineal genealogy serves to complement her resuscitation of feminine subjectivity.

Irigaray’s primary critique of patriarchy revolves around the assumption that the universal transcendental subject applies equally to men and women, when it in fact is generally masculine. This assumption results in the phallogocentric bias which relegates transcendence to the masculine and the carnal to the feminine, and as such divorces ethics from eros. Moreover, Irigaray exposes phallogocentrism by identifying the fact that works of the imagination take on the morphological

features of gender. Thus masculine discourses are linear, unitary, and teleological, where feminine discourses are fluid, non-linear and cyclical. Irigaray therefore emphasises particular ideas which reinforce the feminine imaginary, such as the lips. The lips, as emblematic of plurality, offer the chance for feminine auto-affection, and demonstrate the activity of the passivity generally associated with the feminine (as exemplified in the lips touching when one is listening to someone else in silence).

Thus to posit a concept of feminine subjectivity as radically different and ‘for itself,’ the implication for eros is that it is a chiasmic overlap of the two poles of subjectivity. As such eros is ethical inasmuch as it offers the possibility for those who are sexually other to each other to share desire, and generate new possibilities of self-understanding and action. Eros is therefore central to Irigaray’s project of an ethics of sexual difference inasmuch as eros offers her an irreducible intermediary between the poles of sexual difference. Irigaray’s re-articulation of Diotima’s voice in Plato’s *Symposium* emphasises this mediating role of eros between the terms generally considered separate due to phallogocentric biases. Eros is therefore that which ‘puts everything in touch with itself,’ and thus serves as the connection between all the various elements of a reality Irigaray considers divided into masculine and feminine. As the mediator *par excellence*, eros facilitates becoming and thus spurs the creativity and infinite possibility of the relation between the sexes. Moreover, eros denotes a fecundity of body and spirit, and thus assists in the growth of sexual subjectivity. The intermediary nature of eros connects the transcendent with the immanent, and this is testified to by the beautiful.

Beauty is thus not only material, but also transcendent. This therefore leads Irigaray to develop the central notion of the sensible transcendental, which emphasises the embodied nature of transcendence. As such, Irigaray considers transcendence to be predicated upon ‘enstasy’ rather than ecstasy, that is, transcendence is alluded to by acknowledging the limits of subjectivity rather than striving to reach beyond it. In eros then, the intensity of sexual pleasure thus demarcates the limits of the body, and since this pleasure is contingent upon the sexual other it also testifies to the transcendence of alterity. The appropriate disposition towards the sexual other is thus wonder, since wonder acknowledges the limits of understanding inasmuch as it is consistently surprised at what lies beyond those limits. This in turn testifies to the limit of the threshold, which Irigaray develops as the permeable limit of subjectivity. That which mediates across the threshold is the mucous, inasmuch as it symbolises the possibility of exchange between the sexes. This exchange is testified to by the role the mucous plays in breathing and hence language, but also in sexual intercourse and hence in eros. Thus between the limits of subjectivity, eros and the mucous allow for the crossing of the threshold, and thus the creative exchange between sexually different subjects through the sharing of the desire which fuels subjectivity itself.

But eros considered thus is clearly distinct from the picture of eros which Levinas develops. In Irigaray's critique of Levinas, she identifies his mistake as the assumption of an undivided subjectivity whilst nevertheless asserting the feminine as the other. But for Irigaray, this amounts to the same phallogocentric bias in other discourses since the feminine considered thus is only the negative of the masculine. Levinas's concept of transcendence is therefore identified as 'autistic' by Irigaray, and the feminine is relegated to the realms of animality, infancy and the darkness of the abyss.

Irigaray figures Levinas's picture of eros as teleologically orientated towards reproduction, and as such it promotes a patriarchal genealogy. This is also thus geared towards the transcendence of time and absolute futurity, which Irigaray finds is necessarily dependant upon the feminine. In contrast, should the feminine be accorded a just position in eros, the cyclical nature of feminine time would show how the night of the erotic is one in a cycle that defines the relation between man and woman, and this cycle in turn serves to nourish and rejuvenate the subjectivities of the sexual subjects in the erotic relation. By reversing the priority of sight over touch, Irigaray shows that the tactile nature of the erotic confuses the distinction of active and passive, and hence eros need not be considered the profane relation with an ungraspable sacred 'Other.' The caress, rather than account for a carnal failure of eros to recognise the other as other, does precisely demarcates the subject through the body and hence offers new possibilities of self-understanding and relating to the sexed other. Moreover, the fecundity of eros is emphasised as between the lovers, rather towards the end of the transcendence encapsulated in the son. Irigaray sees the erotic relation as one of infinite potential, since it is a relation between the subjects of a radical difference. As such then, the interval between sexed subjects holds infinite possibility and thus a relation between eros and the divine can be established. In doing this, eros would eroticise God so that the feminine has the chance for communion with the divine without sacrificing her feminine subjectivity. Moreover, eros holds creative possibilities associated with the divine since it grants lovers the power to create new worlds with and for each other.

Despite the beauty of Irigaray's idealisation of eros, her critique of Levinas is perhaps too hasty. Indeed, Irigaray operates from within a primarily Levinasian framework, inasmuch as she consistently associates the reduction to the same as the supremely unethical gesture, and the recognition of the other as the ethical gesture *par excellence*. Nevertheless, Irigaray's critique of Levinas does offer a new way to reconcile the problem of transcendence inasmuch as Irigaray considers transcendence to be an embodied experience which denotes the limits of the body and subjectivity. However, Irigaray's gender dichotomy becomes problematic if one wishes to think love in terms less rigid than the masculine/feminine divide. Indeed, the feminist implies that men can only ever be men and women only ever women. Levinas, on the other hand, supposes that the masculine and the feminine are two natures in which anyone can participate. Moreover, where Levinas considers the death of the beloved

other as the death which is the primary concern, Irigaray would identify Levinas's use of the feminine as substituting 'woman' for another unthinkable term 'death.' Thus where Irigaray would understand an ethical love between the sexes as part and parcel of coming to terms with one's own mortality, Levinas would postulate that the mortality of the other person is of more significance due to the paradox 'death does not happen to me.'

We therefore arrive at an impasse when placing Levinas and Irigaray alongside one another regarding their thought on eros. This impasse revolves around their respective conceptions of alterity, transcendence, love's relation with death and the nature of gender. Both thinkers offer interesting insight into the nature of eros, but in order to overcome the impasse between them something else is necessary. The damnable nature of eros in Levinas and his problematic understanding of the feminine mean that his view cannot be taken in its entirety. On the other hand, Irigaray's rigid gender definition and the somewhat contemptuous demeanour she adopts to the identification of a biologically sexed individual with the features of the opposite sex make her thought on eros restrictive and heterosexist. It appears, however, that should we consider eros not as a relation between subjects, but a relation which makes subjects, we may be able to salvage the best of both thinkers. With this goal in mind, this dissertation turns to the work of Jean-Luc Nancy.

Chapter 4 – Naked and Exposed: Using Nancy to Extrapolate Eros as the Exposure of the Self as an Erotic Body

1. Introduction

We have seen that by placing Levinas and Irigaray alongside one another, their thought on eros arrives at an impasse. This impasse is rooted in the fact that Levinas thinks that eros originates in the subject, whereas for Irigaray eros is an irreducible intermediary between subjects. But both views make assumptions about subjectivity and its relation to love, assumptions which a particular reading of Nancy will call into question. Nancy's thinks of love as that which opens the subject up to the possibility of relation, and this perspective may offer a means to overcome the impasse between Levinas and Irigaray. If we wish to salvage the insights offered by Levinas and Irigaray regarding eros, but without lapsing into the insufficiencies of their respective thought on eros, in this chapter I argue that Nancy provides us with the chance to fulfil such a wish. But before we can explore the depth of Nancy's thought, some of Levinas's and Irigaray's particularly important insights are recounted here for the sake of clarity.

We have already noted how the feminine in Levinas is deconstructed by Irigaray, and therefore Levinas's view is shown to marginalise the possibility of feminine subjectivity. But we have also seen that Irigaray's insistence upon feminine subjectivity in terms of a strict duality becomes problematic with regard to those who do not wholly identify with 'the masculine' or 'the feminine.' For all the emphasis Irigaray places upon the need for a concept of otherness which bears relation to lived life of empirical men and women, her understanding of these two poles of sexual alterity ends up being too rigid. Levinas, on the other hand, acknowledges the masculine and the feminine as two natures in which all people might participate, and thus a more nuanced economy of erotic pleasure can be inferred from this.¹ Yet there is nevertheless something amiss in the way Levinas understands eros. For Levinas, the carnality of eros renders it profane, and thus an implicitly better template for the relation with the Other is found in paternity. Irigaray's objection is thus a palatable one, which not only seeks to affirm maternal relations as significant, but also establishes the erotic relation as worthy of consideration in itself.

Nancy, however, thinks love in such a way that eros is not subordinate to other, 'higher,' forms of love. In addition, Nancy considers sexual difference in terms less rigid than an Irigarayan dichotomy. At the centre of Nancy's thinking is the priority he accords to the concept of 'the relation.' It is tempting to say that 'the relation' is the core of Nancy's thought, but to do so would obscure the very

¹ See Chapter 2, section 7 "Woman and the Feminine".

character of a relation since a relation cannot be at a core or a centre. It is therefore difficult to dissect Nancy's work into various themes which can be analysed independently of the others. Indeed, since the relation is such a priority in Nancy's thought, every concept which he develops stands in relation to every other concept. Thus an exposition of his work exposes layers of relations between concepts, rather than move step by step from a 'beginning' to an 'end.'

This makes an analysis of Nancy's work somewhat difficult. But the most prudent way to approach his thinking for the sake of this dissertation is to begin with his critique of Levinas's conception of alterity in terms of 'same' and 'Other.' Of prime importance to this critique is Nancy's notion of 'Being²-singular-plural.' Where Levinas assigns himself the task of proving plurality against the unity of Being proclaimed by Parmenides, Nancy thinks plurality pre-exists any such unity. One may point out that the Levinasian idea is an attempt to show that it is more correct to understand existence as plural, inasmuch as the reduction of the Other to the same is an illusory (and dangerously unethical) philosophical endeavour. Be that as it may, Nancy disputes Levinas's method inasmuch as the former argues that to premise an argument upon the idea that 'Being' were ever the Parmenidean unity is to overlook the simultaneity of plurality with singularity. Nancy thus claims that Levinas's thought is haunted by the shadow of dialectics (despite Levinas's aversion to Hegelian dialectics). The significance of this for eros lies in the fact that in Levinas, eros consistently falls back to the 'this side' of need and hence the economy of the same, where for Nancy, love (in all senses and thus including eros) *exposes* the self to the fact of its relational condition.

Once the basics of Nancy's ontology have been explored, the chapter moves through Nancy's essay entitled *Shattered Love* (1986). The first principle which Nancy establishes here is that thinking *is* love. The implication of this is that philosophy has consistently failed to capture an essence of love due to the fact that it has not (until Nancy) realised that thinking and love are the same. By making reference to Plato's *Symposium*, the limits of thinking, and to finitude, Nancy connects love and thinking in such a way as to show that philosophy has missed something about love by subjecting it to the dialectic.

Thus Nancy moves on to deconstruct the dialectic and expose love 'at the heart of Being.' In dialectical terms, love cannot reach completion since its object is itself. In other words, by supposing that love cannot be directed towards achieving a goal or else love would end, Nancy shows that love rather mimics the interaction of the Absolute with itself. But without the Absolute, and without

²For the purposes of this dissertation, and especially this chapter, Being is capitalised when it refers to an abstract Being as such, or *Sein*. If not capitalised, being rather refers to the particular entity in question or *seinde*. However, the quotes may not always reflect this distinction, and have been left unaltered.

‘Being-in-general,’ Nancy suggests that we cannot think love lies at the heart of Being, but only in the heart of a subject. Furthermore, even if a ‘subject’ is formed in terms of the dialectic, Nancy insists that love, and the heart, do something else. The image of the heart serves Nancy well, since it allows him to consider love as exposure rather than as a dialectical operation of subjectivity. A heart cannot beat beyond itself, and in a similar way the dialectic is suspended by the exposing heart-throb of love. Thus rather than pass over the other to reinforce the self (as a dialectical movement would) Nancy argues that the heart presents the subject to the other *before and after* the dialectic. Nancy therefore considers the truth of love to be exposure, and exposure is epitomised in the words of the promise: “I love you”. The theme of exposure allows Nancy to consider the relation with the other, or ‘being-with,’ before the Levinasian signification of the face. Although Levinas ultimately does consider the Other as always already in the self, and hence also ‘before the signification of the face,’ Nancy emphasises that by route of the theme of exposure we are able to consider this fundamental relatedness in terms of love. Hence I argue that Nancy’s view on love diverges from Levinas’s, but does so in order to affirm alterity without prioritising any particular form of love.

Nancy’s critique of Levinas coincides with his general critique of philosophical investigations of love. His critique rests upon his insistence that it is a misconception to suppose that the other in love cannot be distinguished from a projection of the loving self. But Nancy argues that to consider love in such dialectical terms is to reduce love to self-love, or pride. Hence Nancy exposes the problem of narcissism in love as a philosophical misnomer. If love is that which exposes, then when I love I am not projecting my own properties onto the other, but I expose those properties to something which exceeds me. This radical assertion leads to a view which considers *Dasein* as fundamentally constituted by love inasmuch as love permits the possibility of relation. And since Nancy takes ‘being-with’ as axiomatic, that is, there is no *Dasein* who is not also already *Mitsein*; all beings are ‘with’ others because of love opens them up to this possibility. Hence Nancy turns the image of the heart into a *broken* heart to show that love is the breaking of what may appear to be a monadic subject in order for it to stand in the relations necessary for its existence. In considering the heart thus, Nancy dissolves the final dialectical tension which has generally haunted philosophical investigations of love. This tension is that of the love in which the self moves beyond itself and the love in which it returns to itself. In rejecting this dichotomy, Nancy deviates from the thought that love originates in the subject (a somewhat counter-intuitive move, but one which I believe holds if we consider love as exposure). Rather he supposes that love is the exteriority of the relational ‘being-with,’ and the necessity of this relation breaks the subject open to the very finite possibilities of being in relation.

Thus Nancy makes an attempt to think the transcendence of love in terms quite different to Irigaray and Levinas. Rather than consider transcendence as the self surpassing itself, or as the self realising

itself in the encounter with an other (either the Other as it would be for Levinas, or the sexual other as it would be for Irigaray), Nancy supposes that the transcendence of love hinges upon the ‘breaking’ of the subject’s heart. Love exposes the subject as incomplete, and Nancy argues that it is this incompleteness which attests to transcendence of love. Moreover, Nancy imagines love arrives to create this break, but in the very same instant it departs. We could therefore consider Nancy to think love as the ‘ephemeral *par excellence*’ rather than the equivocal *par excellence*. The image of the heart reinforces the notion of the breaking of the self by love inasmuch as a living heart must beat across a break; else it does not beat at all.

This leads Nancy to establish a particular connection between love and finitude, which in turn testifies to love as exposure rather than selfish pride. By equating love with Heidegger’s notion of concern (*Fürsorge*), and by insisting that Heidegger’s thought be re-evaluated by taking ‘being-with’ as primary, Nancy offers a solution to the discrepancy which arises between Irigaray’s and Levinas’s respective conceptualisations of love’s connection with death. Where Levinas considers the death of the beloved Other to be more worthy of concern than the death of the subject, Irigaray thinks that establishing a genuinely loving relation between the sexes implies that each might be able to come to terms with their own death. But I find that Nancy’s view synthesises these two views because he implies that love unveils the self’s finitude by unveiling the finitude of the other.

The idea that love exposes finitude, for Nancy, distinguishes love from desire. As we shall see, desire, as understood by Nancy, is directed towards an end, although achievement of this end simply redirects desire towards something else. Desire thus operates in a dialectical fashion not unlike self-love or pride. Hence Nancy critiques any views which suppose that love amounts to nothing more than a sophisticated form of desire. But if Nancy is correct that love pre-exists the self, exposing it to the relations which condition its existence, then desire is an insufficient model for eros. But this separation of love from desire poses a challenge to understanding eros since eros is traditionally associated with sexual desire.

In order to extrapolate something about eros in Nancy’s thought I must examine the ‘shattered’ conception of love which Nancy develops. Nancy insists that whilst there is an innumerable amount of different kinds of love, each one implies all the rest despite it also being radically particular (once again, this reflects Nancy’s relational ontology). But Nancy’s *Shattered Love* (1986) is strewn with various subtle, and some more explicit, erotic undertones. Thus Nancy’s exploded version of love must include eros as one of its ‘shatters,’ but it is difficult to say much more about eros other than this since each instance of it is considered unique (as Nancy indeed considers all instances of love to be unique).

Hence I continue this chapter by assessing the reasons why Nancy claims that we find the ‘true name’ of love in the words of love, “I love you.” This clichéd phrase is particularly interesting because it implies a promise which cannot be kept. Indeed, Nancy considers this lack of love’s guarantee to be another characteristic of love itself. Moreover, this is why Nancy declares his love to the reader of his text, rather than make the attempt to isolate it, because love for him is nothing more than its shattered plurality. But the erotic nevertheless plays a vital role in his exposition of love, as the next section of this chapter explores how Nancy uses the image of a joyful orgasm as emblematic of the how love attests to the relation. Although ‘orgasm’ is an insufficient word because it implies completion, Nancy nevertheless alludes to the ephemeral climax of erotic pleasure as significant when considering identity as ‘syncopated.’ But Nancy affirms his earlier contention that love is not desire, and thus the joy of eros is something other than the dialectical movement of desire. By way of the neologism ‘to joy,’ Nancy reconfigures erotic love as the epitome of ‘being-with,’ and hence Nancy concludes *Shattered Love* with the notion that love obliges us to think Being itself.

But in order to derive something more solid regarding eros, it is imperative that I examine something of how Nancy understands the body. Moreover, in doing this it is possible to critique Irigaray’s formulation of sex. As we shall see, Nancy’s thought on love stands up to the possibility of an Irigarayan feminist critique, and moreover offers a more nuanced account of sex and gender. Through Nancy’s chiasmic understanding of touch, he accounts both for the erotic re-imagining that Irigaray develops in her critique of Levinas, and he offers us the means to overcome the limitations I have identified in her thinking. Nancy regards biological sex as a singular and unique configuration of a body, but this unique sex is indexed under ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine’ for the mere sake of convenience. Thus not only are ‘Being’ and ‘love’ both ‘singular and plural,’ but so too is Nancy’s figuration of sexuality. In addition, Nancy dissolves the idea that the body is divided into an interior and exterior, claiming that there is really no such thing as a body’s ‘interior.’ Thus Nancy rejects the very idea of ‘penetration’; all sex really amounts to is a particular form of touching. But by way of what Derrida identifies as ‘the law of tact’, we can then understand that even the meeting of eyes is erotic in some sense. In addition to this law, Nancy himself derives four laws from the sexed nature of the body, laws, which if considered together with Nancy’s thought on love, imply that all love is complicit in sex and sex in love. Hence I can conclude that eros is connected with each instance of love’s ‘shatters’ inasmuch as love is that which exposes the body. Thus if love is the exposure of the body and the self to the possibility of being in relation, then the only self that exists is an erotic one.

2. Sidestepping Parmenides: Nancy's Critique of Alterity in Levinas

We have already noted that for Levinas, the concept of plurality is derived from the need to 'escape' the horror of the anonymous *il y a* which underscores the economy of the same.³ The dimension of the same is encapsulated in the view of Being propagated by Parmenides: Being is as an unchanging unity circumscribing all reality. For Levinas, it is absolute alterity which undermines this view inasmuch as his phenomenological analyses show that the egoism of subjectivity resembles Parmenides's Being, rather than reality itself. As such, the Other revealed in the epiphany of the face ruptures the unity of Being, and the early Levinas uses sexual difference to exemplify this rupture (although it is the face, not sexual difference, which ultimately accounts for it). Thus Levinas would maintain that plurality is the fact of Being, rather than the simple Parmenidean unity. In other words, the Parmenidean unity is an oversight which does not account for the fact that Being is in fact always already a plurality. And inasmuch as this plurality is testified to by the Other, the ethical question becomes, for Levinas, the question of first philosophy.⁴

Although Levinas therefore asserts plurality as the primary characteristic of human existence, and this view is very similar to Nancy's own, Nancy problematises Levinas's approach in reaching this conclusion. Nancy sidesteps Parmenides unified concept of Being rather than attempt to disprove it as Levinas does. And as we shall see, Nancy considers love to unveil plurality *prior to* signification and the face (Abbot 2011:148). Plurality, for Nancy, is inextricably connected to both singularity and the being thereof, and hence he formulates Being as necessarily 'being-singular-plural.'

To clarify this concept, a detour must be made through some Heideggerian terminology which subtends it. Indeed Nancy's rather ambitious project in *Being Singular Plural* (1996) is to rewrite Heidegger's *Being and Time*, but from a point of view where *Mitsein* (being-with) is accorded much more priority than one might find in Heidegger himself (Critchley 1999:54). Heidegger formulated the idea that 'to be' is always necessarily 'to be there,' and 'being there' refers to the only access human beings have to 'being-in-the-world.' This 'being there' Heidegger names: *Dasein*.⁵ But *Dasein* does not refer to an inherent human essence or substance. *Dasein* refers not to *what* human beings are, but to *how* they are: it is a human being's mode of being in the world. Inasmuch as this is a reference to how human beings are, *Dasein* therefore refers to the individual or singular existence of a human being since 'being there' is always a unique instance of the verb 'to be'. In Heidegger, *Dasein* is

³ See Chapter 2, Section 2.1 "The Other".

⁴ See Chapter 2, Section 2.3 "Ethics is First Philosophy".

⁵ A combination of the German 'zu sein' (to be) and 'da' (there) (Atkins 2005:114).

necessarily concerned with its own being; the fact of ‘being there’ is a calling to be self-reflective, to distinguish oneself from the unreflective herd that is ‘*das Man*’ (Atkins 2005:115). Although ‘*das Man*’ refers to the temptation of an unreflective existence by conforming to the predetermined norms and values spread by social being, *Dasein* cannot exist without other people. Thus *Dasein* is always also ‘*Mitsein*’ or ‘being with’ others (who exist also as their own *Dasein*).

But Nancy adopts an underdeveloped concept in Heidegger where *Dasein* and *Mitsein* are joined in one concept: ‘*Mitdasein*’ (Nancy 2008b:2). This concept implies that to ‘be there,’ one must necessarily also ‘be with.’ Nancy (ibid.) notes that Heidegger fails (in *Being and Time* as well as in his other work) to think this concept through thoroughly, and Heidegger’s project is therefore haunted by an individualism which *Mitdasein* takes to task. But since Heidegger does not offer much in terms of an analysis of *Mitdasein*, it could mean a number of things. The first, suggests Nancy, would be to suppose that *Mitdasein* refers to the ‘being-with’ of more than one *Dasein*, “where each opens its own *da* [there] for itself” (Nancy 200b:4). This first view implies that *Dasein* is an individual who exists as *Mitsein* through a conscious decision to be open. The second possible view, says Nancy (ibid.), “would require that the openings intersect each other in some way, that they cross, mix, or let their properties interfere with one another, but without merging into a unique *Dasein*”. This second view implies a *Dasein* whose ‘there’ would be inextricably intertwined with the ‘there’ of others, but not in such a way that there would be an absolute commonality that each shares. And the third would suppose “a common relation to a *there* that would be beyond the singulars” (ibid.). This third view implies a transcendental place in which all *Dasein* share their ‘theres.’ Nancy (2008b) analyses how the first and third views hold risky political implications. Thus the second interpretation is, for Nancy, the most fruitful one. What interests us is that *Mitdasein* would be the fact that the openness of the ‘there’ in ‘being-there’ criss-crosses with the ‘theres’ of others, but does not coincide with them, which would unify the *Dasein* into the kind of group which might resemble *Das Man*. But what is also important to note is that for Nancy (2008b:3), the “*da* of *sein* is its exposition”. In other words, to ‘be there’ is to be exposed to the ‘there’ of another *Dasein*. This exposure of being through the opening of ‘the there’ already alludes to Nancy’s picture of the self. Nancy considers the self as exposed⁶ and open, fundamentally constituted not only by being exposed as one individual, but also of the fact that this exposure testifies to ‘being-with’, that is being one among many. I understand Nancy

⁶ As we shall later discover, the concept of exposure is an important theme which connects to the body, to love and therefore also to eros. Moreover, the concept of exposure is intimately connected with Nancy’s critique of dialectics. What is exposed, as we shall see, is exposed before and after the dialectic. The body is *exposed* before and after it has an ‘interior;’ and love is the movement which ‘breaks the heart’ and *exposes* the self as the relation. The priority of exposure in Nancy thus testifies to the manner in which he layers concepts so thinly upon one another, which in turn accentuates the priority of the relation in his thinking.

as making the argument that authentic being-in-the-world is not a matter of being self-reflective as an individual, but is rather to be found in being self-reflective as a *social* individual. Simply put, the ‘there’ and the ‘with’ allow the decision⁷ to be-in-the-world (as opposed to the first view, which implies that ‘being there’ and ‘being-in-the-world’ allow the decision to ‘be with’). As such, both the ‘there’ and the ‘with’ are superimposed upon one another: they are inextricably connected. Nancy’s concept of ‘being-singular-plural’ is thus Heideggerian at the core, but it is based upon a nuanced and particular extrapolation of something which Heidegger himself was unable to fully develop (Critchley 1999:54).

The following will illuminate a Nancean critique of Levinas’s conceptualisation of same and Other as they pertain to the self. But it is important to note that Levinas’s position on self and Other in *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence* (1974) is in fact much more similar to Nancy’s own position than the critique I offer below may imply. Furthermore, many of the themes that can be identified in Levinas’s later work could quite easily be traced in Nancy’s essay *Shattered Love* (1986). An example of such a theme in *Otherwise Than Being* includes, *inter alia*, the reformulation of transcendence as an immanence; where the Other is identified as always already *in* the same even before the approach of the Other as an “untotalizable exteriority” can be considered (Bergo 2011:sp). Thus Nancy’s critique of the distinction between same and Other, as presented in the following, could perhaps be read parallel to Levinas’s own critical self-reflection in his more mature *Otherwise than Being*. Indeed, perhaps this is also why Nancy claims, in *Shattered Love* (2003:269), that “every philosophical inquiry on love today carries an obvious debt to Levinas, as well as points of proximity, such as are *easily detected here* [i.e. in Nancy’s essay, my emphasis].” That being said, however, this dissertation’s focus is primarily on the status of *eros* in the selected French thinkers, and as such Levinas’s *Totality and Infinity* (1961) must be the primary source illuminating the status of *eros* in his work, since it deals with it explicitly, unlike *Otherwise Than Being*. Thus, the critique of Levinas found in the following is more pointedly a critique of the Levinas in *Totality and Infinity*. And while Nancy’s critique, as summarily offered here, may overlap with Levinas’s own critical self-reflections, the details of such an overlap can unfortunately not be explored in this dissertation for the sake of brevity.

Nancy’s prioritisation of ‘being-singular-plural’ can be argued to dissolve the Levinasian distinction between the same and the Other as understood in his works up to and including *Totality and Infinity*

⁷ Nancy (2008b:3) states “Let/decide: two faces, two possibilities or two aspects of the same exposition”. In other words, ‘being-in-the-world’ is a decision taken by *Dasein* because *Dasein* is *Mitsein*, which goes against Heidegger’s insistence upon the fact that *Dasein* is always already thrown into the world. It is not a decision; it is a condition of possibility of being human.

(1961). If Nancy's critique of Levinas on this point is justified, then it demands that we must consider eros in a new light. If, as Nancy maintains, plurality is an irreducible condition of being (being-there is always also being-with), then being human is never even 'the same' (Watkins 2007:51). What I understand this to mean, in light of Nancy's emphasis on a relational concept of the self, would be that to attempt to isolate a domain of 'the same' would inevitably amount to isolating but one relation, which could be deferred to any number of other relations. But if a singular sameness cannot be isolated in this way, then eros does not lapse onto the hither side of need because need is precisely restricted to the boundaries of sameness (the full extent of this implication is discussed later in this chapter).

For Nancy (2000:3) there is no such thing as the *il y a*, "no desperately poor *there is*." It is true that Levinas (1987:46) admits that "existing does not exist" *per se*. That is to say that only beings (*seindes*) can exist, whereas Being (*Sein*) divorced from beings is mere abstraction. But the difference between Nancy and Levinas lies in the how the latter develops the concept of an intersubjective relationship as constituting the self. As will be recalled,⁸ Levinas does this by supposing that the character of Being as such is at once that which 'allows beings to be,' but also presses down upon human beings as an existential weight of solitude; that is to say the sheer all encompassing character of the *il y a*. The *il y a*, as the dark side of Being which can only be conceived in what remains should we imagine all beings slipping into nonexistence, is thus that which shows that to simply exist is an insufficient *raison d'être*, particularly for *human* beings. Hence it is only through an encounter with the Other, whose exteriority forces me to question whether my being is justified, that existing in a truly *meaningful* sense becomes possible.

For Nancy (2003:270), however, the validity of such a thought experiment is called into question by the "*es gibt* ('it gives [itself]) of Being." Being (*Sein*) is 'given' inasmuch as it can only ever be contemplated by a being, always there in his or her specificity. Hence Nancy (ibid.) claims that Levinas's *il y a* "does not give itself...there is always being, precise and hard, the theft of generality." What Nancy means here, I think, is that when Levinas asks us to imagine all beings slipping away, and that in such an imagining we would still hear an anonymous 'there is' murmuring in the darkness, such an image pre-supposes being *there* (either listening to the murmur or closing one's eyes and imagining it). Moreover, as we have discussed in the aforementioned, Nancy maintains that we must never consider *Dasein* without *Mitsein*. Thus, to be there (listening to the anonymous murmur of Being) is also necessarily to be *with*. Even the solitude⁹ of an ego 'chained to itself' pre-supposes, and

⁸ See Chapter 2, Section 2 "Key Concepts in Levinas's Work"

⁹ See Chapter 2, Section 2 "Key Concepts In Levinas's Work".

is pre-empted by, being-with. Although Nancy (ibid.) credits Levinas, “before anyone,” with a significant understanding of the fact of ‘being-with,’ the shattered (*éclats*) fragmentation of Being is jeopardised by the move from an anonymous existence to the signification of the face. The ‘shatter’ is something to which we will consistently return over the course of this chapter, since Nancy identifies love as that which exposes Being as shattered (and thereby assists the argument against Levinas presented here). For now, however, we should note Nancy’s (2003:270) assertion that “before the face and signification...on another level”, Being is not a anonymous rumbling experienced as solitude, but is rather already plural inasmuch as being-with must always be pre-supposed.

Nancy therefore does not consider Being as an initial unified whole which is shattered or broken into plurality thereafter (Abbott 2011:149). For Nancy, the part (being-there, or *Dasein*) does not even resemble the whole (the ‘being’ in the compound word ‘being-there’), because there is no whole to begin with.¹⁰ Abbott (ibid.) quotes Nancy’s (1997b:23) *The Sense of the World*: “That which, for itself, depends on nothing is an *absolute*. That which nothing completes in itself is a *fragment*. Being or existence is an absolute fragment”. Nancy therefore suggests a fragmented or fractal picture of Being, but not one which can be apprehended as the gestalt composition of its parts. Rather, only the fragments exist, and despite the fact that they are necessarily in relation, there is no totality up to which they can be added. Abbott (ibid.) therefore explains that “multiplicity is not the result of [Being] lacking unity; it is absolute in its plurality, *completely* incomplete. Existence is ‘infinitely finite’”. If such a view underscores Nancy’s very conceptual core, then Levinas’s progression from a static unified *il y a* is obviously something with which Nancy finds fault. A disunified plurality must be absolute, and the implication is that, for Nancy, taking anything else as axiomatic would lead to false conclusions.

But if Nancy deviates from Levinas’s proof of plurality – which rests upon the subject’s desire to escape the anonymity of Being via an epiphanic encounter with the Other – how does Nancy justify his principle assertion that Being is fundamentally both singular and plural? This will become clear through an exposition of Nancy’s view of the self (*soi*). In Nancy’s framework, developing a concept of the self is not possible through understanding the difference between the ‘I’ and the ‘you’ (and thus ‘the same’ and ‘the other’) (Watkins 2007:54). Moreover, it is important for Nancy that the self is not considered a self-enclosed individual. Where Levinas argues that the distinction between the self and the ego arises from the relation with the Other, and this relation in turn grants the self an authentic

¹⁰ It is legitimate to speak of ‘Being’ despite its technical non-existence because by analysing the conceptual relations between ‘being,’ ‘being-there,’ and ‘being-with,’ Nancy aims to demonstrate the impossibility of these three concepts being de-interlaced from one another. I think that this is the essence of Nancy’s early deconstructive project.

inter-subjectivity denied to the ego;¹¹ Nancy supposes that the ego (*moi*) takes place in an “element” (Nancy 2000:119) which is already the self. The self, for Nancy, exists before and after the ego (or the ‘me’) and indeed all other pronouns (‘we,’ ‘you,’ ‘they,’ and so forth) (*ibid.*). The self is the *exposure* to these possible pronouns (Watkins 2007:54). But the self is also a direct correlate of *Mitdasein*, and thus for Nancy, as it is for Levinas, it is the relation which constitutes the self (*ibid.*). But where Levinas develops the concept of the self via the ego’s relation with the Other, Nancy asserts that the self already exists as the relation with others before the ego even exists. The difference between the two is therefore subtle, but the implications of this difference are vast.

One such implication is the notion of “selves likeness”, which a Levinasian might identify as the reduction of the Other to the same (Watkins 2007:61). Selves (*les soi*), for Nancy, are essentially ‘together’ (*ensemble*) inasmuch as they are ‘alike’ (*semblable*), but Nancy insists that ‘to be alike’ is not to be ‘the same’ (Watkins 2007:61). The word play works well in French,¹² but it does beg the question, ‘how can selves be alike but not be the same?’ Selves are alike, Nancy claims, because they *have* nothing in common. This paradox refers to the idea that it is the very absence of a common property between selves which precisely allows them to *be* in common (Nancy 2001:sp). The idea of being-singular-plural should become clearer thus: each self is singular inasmuch as the lack of a common property makes it unique, but at the same time each self is identical with every other one in their uniqueness, thus making them plural too (Watkins 2007:57). Therefore the self, in its being, is simultaneously unique and together with others; each *is* singular-plural. The self literally *is* in-common because each self *has* nothing in-common with other selves. Moreover, this connotes with *Mitdasein* inasmuch as the only essence which Being prescribes is a non-essence (being-there is not

¹¹ Levinas’s understanding of subjectivity is not dealt with in depth in this dissertation, but a summarised view of it is provided here. For Levinas the composite of the Ego (*moi*) is *arche* which refers to the fact that the Ego is founded, riveted and grounded in existence. In turn it is inseparable from itself and the ego comes into existence in hypostasis (see Chapter 2, section 2.1 “The Other”). Thus when Levinas (1968:80) describes conscious subjectivity as “the rediscovery of being on the basis of an ideal principle or *arche* in its thematic exposition,” he means that consciousness forms a world in accordance with an ideal foundation, which at its simplest will be the *logos* (i.e. the rational, the linguistic, and the logical – in other words the ordered structure of a knowledge) (*ibid.*). However, when one encounters the altogether other in the face of the Other, there is no possibility of incorporating the other’s consciousness into one’s own. In this epiphany of the face, the Ego is at once humbled and transcended, losing its *arche* (its foundation). The ego thus relates to the Other from an *an-archy*. This means that the consciousness defining the Ego loses its fundamentality, and the Ego becomes responsible for that which it can never *know* (in the sense of traditional formal knowledge). Thus, the self (*soi*) is *summoned* by the Other. The authentic self is a relational self, an inter-subjectivity.

¹² In English we might say that ‘selves are assembled together due to the semblance each one has of the other.’ But such a re-formulation might be misleading, and thus likeness and togetherness are retained.

an essence). But insofar as this lack of an essence is shared, all selves are not only ‘being there’ but also ‘being-with’.¹³

Nancy is therefore “labouring to elaborate a thought more fundamental than the same/other dichotomy” (Watkins 2007:61). Inasmuch as each self is unique, it is other than other selves; all selves are radically different from one another. But at the same time, each self is ‘the semblance of’ each other self since they are all unique, rendering them alike. Nancy’s thought therefore yields alterity as the incommensurability of particular selves. But at the same time all selves are in common because of their incommensurability. Nancy therefore sidesteps the Parmenidean ‘One’ inasmuch as he collapses the binaries of self/other, and the one/many, through his notion of being-singular-plural. For Nancy, it is impossible to isolate ‘Being,’ whether as a common property or as an anonymous rumbling existence. There are only beings. And inasmuch as these beings are always in relation due to their lack of essence, such beings are always both singular and plural.

Nancy’s critique of Levinas’s concept of alterity partially foreshadows the contrast between Nancy and Irigaray. Irigaray’s critique of Levinas is similar to Nancy’s since she identifies the Levinasian subject as implicitly masculine, and as such Levinas neglects to account for the fact that Being is always already divided in two. Although Irigaray’s axiomatic assertion of sexual difference is similar to Nancy’s own formulation of being-singular-plural inasmuch as Irigaray would hold that ‘to be’ is always ‘to be two,’ Nancy’s thought may actually afford more room for sexual difference than Irigaray. As we shall later see, Nancy’s understanding of singular plurality can be applied to the sexual composition of bodies, and this renders sexual difference far more fragmentary than it might be configured in the utopian imaginings of Irigaray. But before we get ahead of ourselves, it is necessary that we work through Nancy’s complex deconstructive thought on love, so that we might understand how his thinking differs from Levinas’s and Irigaray’s, and thus derive what his concept of eros might be.

3. Thinking is Love

Nancy (2003:246) maintains that all the different kinds of love are equal, but at the same time they are radically particular. We can thus not assert eros as less significant than agape, nor could we reverse that formulation. Just as Nancy claims that we cannot separate the word ‘being’ from both ‘singular’

¹³Even the word *Mitdasein* is insufficient, since the ‘*mit*’ and the ‘*da*’ imply each other for Nancy. As such, it is as if the two should be superimposed upon one another since even to put the ‘*mit*’ before the ‘*da*’ might construe priority to one or the other. The word ‘*Mitdasein*’ is actually a “stammering tautology” (Nancy in Watkins 2007:56), or an awkward but unavoidable repetition of two things that necessarily imply each other.

and ‘plural,’ the word ‘love’ refers to an indefinite multiplicity of unique instances where a singular being is exposed to plurality. Nancy (2003:246) maintains that

all the loves possible are in fact possibilities of love, its voices or its characteristics, which are impossible to confuse and yet ineluctably entangled... To think love would thus demand a boundless generosity toward all these possibilities, and it is this generosity that would command reticence: the generosity not to choose between loves, not to privilege, not to hierarchize, not to exclude. Because love is not their substance or their common concept, is not something one can extricate and contemplate at a distance. Love in its singularity, when it is grasped absolutely, is itself perhaps nothing but the indefinite abundance of all possible loves, and an abandonment to their dissemination, indeed to the disorder of these explosions. The thinking of love should learn to yield to this abandon: to receive the prodigality, the collisions, and the contradictions of love, without submitting them to an order they essentially defy.

The sheer number of possible meanings to which the word ‘love’ can refer therefore instils anyone posed with the question, ‘what is love?’ with certain reticence, or a hesitant silence regarding the truth about love. The multiplicity of different kinds, different expressions, different perspectives, and different instances of love imply that an extreme generosity is necessary in order to think love, at least if one desires to understand it without subjecting love to a scheme which inevitably fails to account for love’s plurality. Love can therefore never be subject to an exhaustive analysis since it is a contradictory explosion of possibilities. In the above quote the ‘shattered’ nature of love rises to the surface. Or as Abbott (2011:142) puts it, “the extreme multiplicity...that marks love *is* its essential principle.” The implication is that no two instances of love are the same, just as no two singular beings are the same (where it is their dissimilarity which makes them alike). Hence Nancy defines love as an ‘indefinite abundance of all possible loves’. Love is thus at once absolutely ‘singular’ and indefinitely ‘plural.’¹⁴ But might not love’s paradoxically multifarious nature imply that we should avoid thinking it at all?

Nancy (2003:246) claims that we avoid speaking of love, not out of reverence for it, as if speaking of love somehow profaned its innocence or purity. Love, rather than being something which thinking will unveil, “invites us to thinking as such” (Nancy 2003:247). Nancy (ibid.) says:

Thinking rejects abstraction and conceptualisation as these are recognized by understanding. Thinking does not produce the operators of a knowledge; it undergoes an experience, and lets the experience inscribe itself...Love does not

¹⁴ As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, it is now evident that Nancy’s thought is comprised of layer upon layer of conceptual relations, rather than an attempt to distinguish concepts from one another by isolating them.

call for a certain kind of thinking, or for a thinking of love, but for thinking in essence and in its totality. And this is because thinking, most properly speaking, is love. It is the love for that which reaches experience; that is to say, for that aspect of being that gives itself to be welcomed.

Nancy sets a difficult task here for himself. What the above quote implies is that in order to think love Nancy actually has to enact love, at least if thinking *is* love. Nancy must love through the text he writes in order to think love. Abbott (2011:142) observes that by equating thinking to love, Nancy acknowledges that “thought does not master its object” (ibid.), and thus Nancy “links the practice of thought with acceptance and receptivity” (ibid.). Thinking and love are both receptive because they ‘welcome’ something which exceeds the thinker/lover. What we shall later see is that both thinking and loving expose a limit, and therefore teach us something about the finite character of Being.

But to say that ‘thinking is love’ is not simply to unite the two concepts in an “orgiastic doctrine of thinking” (Nancy 2003:247). Nancy purposefully explains that to say ‘thinking is love’ would be an existential statement, rather than a categorical one (Nancy 2003:248). Nancy nevertheless does not claim that simply because both love and thinking involve exposure, this means that they are the same thing. On the contrary, Nancy argues (as we shall later see) that the being of a thinking being is pre-conditioned by love. In this sense, thinking is love because love underscores the opportunity to think inasmuch as in order ‘to think,’ one needs also ‘to be.’ Therefore to say that thinking is love is also to say something about philosophy as ‘the love of wisdom’.

Following this line of thought, Nancy defines philosophy as the “love of thinking, since thinking is love” (ibid.). Plato’s *Symposium* is a case in point, because it is in that text where Nancy believes philosophy made its most genuine attempt to reach the conclusion that thinking is love. But in Nancy’s eyes, Plato nevertheless failed to come to this conclusion despite having the chance to do so. Nancy’s respect for Plato’s *Symposium* lies in the fact that he believes that the work “opens thought to love as to its own essence” (ibid.). A crude summary of Plato’s *Symposium* would say that it specifically deals with the move from the love of bodies to the love of wisdom. Plato thus links love to thought, but mistakenly supposes that love is merely a step towards contemplation, and not also contemplation itself. Nancy (ibid.) thus identifies a certain “reticence or reserve” in Plato’s thinking, inasmuch as the *Symposium* admits that love leads to thought.

Furthermore, since Nancy’s view of love is pluralistic, he praises Plato for allowing different perspectives on love to be welcomed as the party-goers of the *Symposium* drink and discuss the question of love (ibid.). Nancy (ibid.) maintains that “the love that is finally exhibited as true love, philosophical Eros, does not only present itself with the mastery of a triumphant doctrine; it also appears in a state of deprivation and weakness, which allows the experience of the limit, where

thought takes place, to be recognized.” What this means, as we shall see, is that thinking and loving indicate the finitude of being. But before we can understand the connection of love to finitude, we must examine what it means to connect thinking and loving to the limit.

In French, the words ‘thinking’ and ‘weighing’ are ‘*pensée*’ and ‘*pesée*’ respectively. The etymological similarity is evident, even to a non French speaker. Nancy explores this in a short but dense book, *The Gravity of Thought* (1997a). Nancy shows how thinking is a weighty endeavour because it plunges to the limit at the depth of meaning (Nancy 1997a:76). Nancy claims that thinking is “the very weighing of the world, of things, of the *real* as *meaning*.” Just as the weight of something is the limit of its mass, thinking would be the limit of possible meanings – of the ‘real as meaning.’¹⁵ Indeed, Nancy contends that it is possible to experience the gravity of a thought; to feel how it “affects us with a perceptible pressure or inclination, a palpable curve – and even, with the impact of a fall (if only the falling of one’s head into one’s hands)” (Nancy 1997a:76). Perhaps when philosophy is referred to as a ‘heavy’ discipline, it is something of a reference to this weighty quality of thought.

The idea that ‘thought’ and ‘thinking’ are ‘weight’ and ‘weighing’ leads Nancy to connect thinking to finitude. This finitude is not an opposition to infinity, for to oppose the two would inevitably lead to a dialectic opposition between the two terms (something which Nancy would have us avoid) (Nancy 1997a:77). Rather, Nancy conceives of finitude as being open *to* in such a manner that would imply a limit. If we had no limit, no finitude, then we need never be open to anything but ourselves (ibid., pp. 78-79). In other words, the absence of a limit to being would imply either solipsism or a hive mind; that is to say that the fact that being is limited implies that there is more than one way to be, and indeed to think. Therefore Nancy claims that finitude and the limit are constituents of thinking. If thought is necessarily finite, then it can never completely grasp or conceptualise something in its totality. This is another element where love and thinking are the same. As we shall later discover, Nancy rethinks love as that which opens the subject to the other. This openness brought on by love would be an ‘exposing *to*,’ and hence it is the same as thinking inasmuch as thinking is also an exposing *to* the limit of thought itself. Moreover, we shall examine how Nancy argues that love unveils finitude, and thus a more explicit understanding of what finitude actually is will be provided later in this chapter. For now, however, it is sufficient to note Nancy’s insistence on the finite nature of thinking, inasmuch as this indicates that to think means that we cannot think everything.

¹⁵ In Chapter 3, Section 3.1 “Madness and its Method: Irigaray’s Psychoanalysis,” the Lacanian concept of the Real was discussed in brief. I think that when Nancy claims that thinking is the ‘weighing up’ of the real as meaning, the ‘real’ in this context refers to the Lacanian concept of the real as that which is unsymbolised. In other words, to say that thinking is testing the possible meaning of the real is to say that thinking is the symbolisation of the Lacanian ‘Real.’

To think finitely is necessary to think sense. It is important to note that the word ‘sense’ is a very important word in many of Nancy’s works. It is deliberately ambiguous, carrying the possible meanings: ‘direction’, ‘meaning,’ ‘sensation’ (that is, ‘sight’, ‘hearing,’ ‘taste’, ‘smell’, and most importantly ‘touch’). But it is also opposed to any idea of a transcendental ‘beyond’. As Hutchens (2005:33) comments,

sense always collapses into an open, reticulated immanence without recourse to transcendent (or transcendental) sources of meaning...there is nothing but “the world”, an exposed and exposing sense of the world, a world that just is sense, nothing else.

Furthermore, Hutchens (ibid., p. 168) defines sense as the “condition of truth and meaning that circulates through existence and its discourses without being commensurate with the conventional visions of either”. Thus, the task of a ‘finite thinking’ would be to think the world without looking beyond for immobile, transcendental or metaphysical points of reference. Nor would Nancy advocate seeking a source, foundation or origin of sense in the world, since to do so would once again disrupt the fluidity of sense itself. Thinking must therefore admit its finitude, which would be the acknowledgement of its limitations. This would be the same as love since, as we shall see, love also exposes the same limit to which thinking is subject.

Thus Nancy identifies reticence in Plato’s *Symposium*. Its conclusive points discern nothing about the nature of love itself, but rather show that “it is love that receives and deploys the experience of thinking” (Nancy 2003:249). Plato thus realises that on some level, one has to love in order to think. Still, Nancy maintains that Plato’s view on love is mistaken. As Nancy (2003:249) states, “in Plato, thinking will have said and will have failed to say that it is love – or to explain what this means”. In Plato’s idealisation of love, he set the stage for a trap into which subsequent attempts to articulate love fall – namely the trap of a contradiction. Nancy (2003:249) claims that in all philosophy,

love occupies a place that is at once evident and dissimulated (as in Descartes, between the theory of union and that of admiration), or embarrassed and decisive (as, in Kant, in the theory of sublime reason), or essential and subordinate (as, in Hegel, in the theory of the State).

It is the constancy in which love occupies a place between the poles of a contradiction which serves as testimony to the reticence we feel when articulating it. Nancy (2003:249) claims that this is the “price” paid by love; that it is precisely between the two poles of a contradiction, that love must necessarily be placed if it is separated from the thought that makes the attempt to think it.

This separation of love and thought is, for Nancy, the difficulty faced by philosophy when trying to think love. I think that Nancy’s equation of thinking and love can be understood as analogous to

Heidegger's critique of traditional ontology that he provides in *Being and Time* (1927). For Heidegger, the attempt to think Being (*Sein*) divorced from the being (*seinde*) who thinks it (i.e. *Dasein*) is to forget a crucial dimension of the question of Being. Likewise, Nancy claims that if love is that which constitutes the very possibility of thinking 'love,' then one cannot divorce the abstracted concept of love from the Being of that being who thinks it. In other words, since (as we shall explore in more detail later) 'to be' is 'to love,' we have to accept that a transparent thinking of love must admit its indebtedness to love itself, which is to say that 'thinking *is* love.' Nancy does not mean to say that all thought on love hitherto need be rendered as naught. But Nancy does mean to emphasise the impossibility for love to be captured in its entirety by thought.

This is why, as we later discuss, Nancy identifies the promise of love (in the words 'I love you') as the true name of love, whilst at the same time that very promise is not one which directly implies its keeping. As Abbott (2011:141) states "the fact that love cannot be proven or guaranteed [is] actually a condition of its possibility". Therefore, if thinking is love inasmuch as thinking is initiated by love, then any attempt to think love itself becomes a particularly tricky affair for thinking which claims to be separate from love. Thinking and love are complicit, but love can never be articulated exhaustively solely as the expression of thought, which is to say through speaking *about* it. Love is best expressed in acts of love, not in reflections upon it. Hence love's existential status must be emphasised instead of a categorical formulation thereof, since such a formulation falls prey to a false dialectic (which we explore below). The reticence we feel when posed the question of love is therefore made more clear, since to admit thinking's contingency on love is to admit the vulnerability associated with our own experience of love. If love is exposure, then to admit thinking's complicity with love is to acknowledge the openness of our exposed existential condition, which is something hitherto denied in the tradition of philosophy. Thus, if something different is to be said of love, Nancy urges us thus to find a way to summon love without coldly making the attempt to contemplate it.

This is why at the outset of *Shattered Love* (1986), Nancy declares love to his readers. The text is not only a meditation upon love, but is "at the same time a communication of love, a letter, a missive, since love sends itself as much as it enunciates itself" (Nancy 2003:245). It may seem somewhat strange that Nancy tells his readers that he loves them. But I suspect that Nancy does this in order to avoid the trap which he argues Plato set up by separating love and thought. Ultimately, Nancy insists that love must be understood in terms of exposure, and indeed, by declaring his love Nancy exposes himself to us more overtly in his text. But before I outline the implications of calling love 'exposure', it is prudent to analyse Nancy's problematisation of the philosophical tradition which, since Plato, has

been confounded by the contradictory character of love. And indeed, when contradictions become the core of a philosophical project, that project is most likely one that resembles the Hegelian dialectic.¹⁶

4. Shattering the Dialectic

In *Shattered Love* (2003:245-274), Nancy deconstructs the dialectic to show at least four things. Firstly, love exposes Being before and after the dialectic, and as such the dialectic says less about Being than love does. Inasmuch as love mimics the movement of the Absolute, the dialectic cannot circumscribe the knowledge of love. Nancy identifies this movement of love in the beating heart, and thus the second thing he unveils is that the dialectic is neither an over-arching mechanism of an absolute reality, nor the logic by which Absolute Spirit realises itself objectively through history. If the dialectic is put into play at all, it is put into play in a subject. Nancy therefore accepts the dialectic as a subjective operation, but not one grounded in a transcendental reality. The role of love, he argues, is to expose the self to the possibility of its dialectical operations. The third thing Nancy therefore discovers in his critique of dialectics is that much philosophical understanding of love (including Levinas and perhaps also Irigaray) has mistaken love for self-love or pride. Finally, by developing an image of the broken heart, Nancy challenges the thinking of a love reduced to pride, and through this image he leads us to a new way of thinking transcendence in love.

4.1. Challenging the Dialectic

Nancy (2003:249) offers a ‘formula’ by which we can schematise love in accord with thinking it from a dialectical perspective, but in such a scheme no ‘dialectical synthesis’ is possible. He states that “love is the extreme movement, beyond the self, of a being reaching its completion” (ibid.). But if such a completion were ever accomplished, it would mean the end of love. In other words, a complete being (perhaps Aristophanes’ originary eight limbed creature) would feel no love. Therefore, in the movement of love beyond the self to its completion, love returns to itself; otherwise love would end itself. Indeed, for Nancy (2003:251), “love is the living hypothesis of a dialectic, which formulates the law of its process by way of a *return* [emphasis added]”. We can already see that by postulating love’s return, the dialectical process in which love is complicit can repeat itself (although, as we shall see, Nancy is trying to show the limitations of thinking love in dialectical terms). The operation of love, if

¹⁶ Simon Blackburn (2005:99) provides a definition of dialectics which is chosen for the sake of its brevity: “Most fundamentally, [the dialectic is] the process of reasoning to obtain truth and knowledge on any topic...In Hegel, dialectic refers to the necessary process that makes up progress in both thought and the world...The process is one of overcoming the contradiction between thesis and antithesis, by means of synthesis; the synthesis in turn becomes contradicted and the process repeats itself until final perfection is reached”.

conceived dialectically, thus indicates the general logic of dialectics itself.¹⁷ But at the same time, love achieves no synthesis. Therefore, to think love teleologically, as if love was geared towards an end or a goal, would in fact negate the possibility of love's existence whilst at once claiming it to be necessary.

For Nancy (*ibid*), the (non-)dialectical nature of love is summed up in a verse selected from the French poet René Char: "The poem is the fulfilled love of desire remaining desire." What this enigmatic phrase indicates to us, argues Nancy (2003:251), is that love operates dialectically in such a way that it is "the highest truth for us: the contradiction (desire) opposed to the noncontradiction (love) and reconciled with it ("remaining desire")." In other words, love consistently operates between the tensions of its accompanying desire, yet it reconstitutes itself by the desire which remains behind. This is not a progressive synthesis, but rather a *return* inasmuch as it is a "resolution of a contradiction that remains a contradiction" (*ibid.*). Love is therefore more akin to an oscillation, a movement to and fro, than it is to a directed progression from one state to another. This indicates the truth of Hegel's dialectic as such, inasmuch as the dialectic in Hegel is the process of the Absolute engaging with itself to realise itself.¹⁸ But if the Absolute is realised upon the impossibility for the dialectic to progress further, then love exemplifies this because love conceived in dialectical terms consists of the aforementioned oscillating return to itself. As Nancy (*ibid.*) puts it, "[t]he Absolute loves us – and the Absolute dialectizes itself. Love is at the heart of being". For Nancy (*ibid.*), the dialectic law of love's operation is the same as the "logic of [B]eing in general" (although as we have already noted in the aforementioned critique of Levinas, Nancy deviates from this very notion of '[B]eing in general'). Love and Being are equivalent inasmuch as the logic of love is the same as the logic of Being. Thus, the dialectic of being-nothingness-becoming (which, for Hegel, would be the dialectical triad subtending existence) is encapsulated by the dialectic of love. So much does the movement of the dialectic resemble the movement of love that Nancy imagines Being to have a heart which 'beats' the rhythm of existence: "being-nothingness-becoming, as an infinite pulsation" (Nancy

¹⁷ In other words, the synthesis achieved by the dialectical tension between thesis and antithesis becomes the thesis of the next dialectical move.

¹⁸ For Hegel, 'reality' is engaged in a dialectical process through which an Absolute (or God) comes to actualise itself. The Absolute is at once the ground of reality and its ultimate purpose (the *alpha* and *omega* serve as a nice metaphor for this). Throughout history, the dialectic has been engaged in this progress towards the Absolute, and finally culminates in Hegel's liberal democracy and humankind's rational understanding of Nature. Since the Absolute is inherently rational, inasmuch as it follows the process of a dialectical progression, humankind is privileged with the possibility to come to know the Absolute through the practise of reasoned thought. Because the Absolute is the entirety of reality, we can come to understand it by moving from art, through religion (Christianity) and finally to philosophy. In other words, for Hegel, the Absolute ultimately realises its own self-consciousness in human philosophical understanding (Stumpf 1975:323-339).

2003:252). If the dialectic is the logic of '[B]eing as such,' then the "idea of love is in the dialectic, and the idea of the dialectic is in love" (ibid.).

But Nancy would not accept the premise that there is a self-realising ultimate 'Absolute' (which in Hegel is equivalent to God). Nancy's thought is expressly atheist.¹⁹ This corresponds to the fact that there is no '[B]eing in general,' only beings which are singularly plural (as exposed in the aforementioned). Neither can we assume that '[B]eing loves,' for to do so would be to assume a metaphysical absolute 'Being' comparable to something which loves (such as God, for example). Thus Nancy deconstructs Hegel's figure of the Absolute by making the claim that love lies at 'the heart of being.' For Nancy (2003:252)

'The heart of being' means nothing but the being of being, that by virtue of which it is being. To suppose that 'the being of being,' or 'the essence of being,' is an expression endowed with meaning, it would be necessary to suppose that the essence of being is something like a heart – that is to say: that which alone is capable of love.

But it would be absurd to think that an abstract 'being' actually has a heart. Therefore, the "heart of being is not a heart, and it does not beat from the throbbing of love" (Nancy 2003:252). It seems that we cannot assume that '[B]eing as such' actually has being. Therefore "love is missing from the very place where it is prescribed...where this dialectical law operates – the law that we have had to recognize as the law of love" (ibid.). How can this law of love (its dialectical resolution by way of return to itself) be derived if it is absent from the place where it supposedly operates?

It is the *subject* which "has the power of the dialectic" (ibid.) not the abstracted '[B]eing as such.' But Nancy does not seek refuge in a dialectical rendering of subjectivity.²⁰ Indeed, in another fell swoop

¹⁹ More precisely, Nancy promotes a philosophy of 'absentheism,' which connects with his deconstruction of Christianity and his discipleship to Nietzsche's 'death of God.' See Caygill, H. 2005. "Bearing Witness to The Infinite: Nancy and Levinas." *Journal for Cultural Research* 9(4): 351-357; Franke, W. 2006. "Apophysis and the Turn of Philosophy to Religion: From Neoplatonic Negative Theology to Postmodern Negation of Theology." *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 60(1): 61-76; and; Nancy, JL. 2007. *The Creation of the World or Globalization*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

²⁰ Hegel considers subjectivity in this way. For Hegel, self-consciousness arises through the realisation that another person is conscious also, because according to him consciousness in itself can only be understood as what it is not conscious of. Consciousness thus cannot be conscious of itself, but it can recognise that another consciousness is conscious inasmuch as the other person can be something which consciousness can be conscious of (I cannot be conscious of my own consciousness, but I can be conscious of another person as a conscious being, and vice versa). At the same time, the recognition of another's self-consciousness creates a dialectical tension in a struggle for recognition because the realisation of consciousness as outside of itself threatens the certainty of oneself as oneself. This leads to Hegel's 'master-slave' dialectic which is a speculative account of the origin of self-aware and moral society (Atkins 2005: 61-62).

of his pen, the ‘subject’ (synthesis) as the dialectical subsuming of the ‘for-itself’ (exterior antithesis) by the interior ‘in-itself’ (thesis) is shown by Nancy to be incomplete because of the ‘law of love’. If love is the movement towards a completion, but a completion which would annul love if reached, then the subject who loves must be incomplete. By Nancy’s likening of love to the heart, he proposes that there is no heart at the heart of Being. A heart beats rather in the breast of a subject. And if we are to understand Nancy that all beings are composed of love (indeed, all *Dasein* must have hearts), then they are necessarily always incomplete. Understanding why this is the case is the key to understanding what Nancy means when he speaks of the heart.

4.2. The Heart Exposed

The heart does not beat beyond itself, and hence Nancy sees it as the “place where the dialectical power is suspended (or perhaps shattered)” (ibid.). In contrast, the dialectic of subjectivity reaches beyond the self, “traversing the other [person]” (Nancy 2003:253), only to reaffirm itself as a subject (the Hegelian master/slave dialectic). But a heart cannot reach beyond itself, rather it *exposes* the subject both before and after this dialectical process of subjectivity takes place (ibid.). If the heart resembles the infinite pulsation reserved (in Hegel) for the Absolute, then it is the very thing which grants the subject the power to employ the dialectic. But the heart does not operate like the dialectic since it cannot move beyond itself. Thus the heart exposes the dialectical subject before and after it has the chance to traverse the other in order to assert itself as a subject. And if the dialectic is subtended by love and the beating heart, then the overarching power of the dialectic is shattered into multiple singular occurrences of its operation because a heart beats within each subject. But why does Nancy consider love as exposure, rather than as the dialectical movement which ‘traverses the other?’

Love exposes the subject, because I cannot simply say ‘I love’ in order to experience love. I have to say, ‘I love *you*.’ This promise of love is a “declaration where ‘I’ is posed only as being *exposed* [emphasis added] to ‘you’” (ibid.). Exposure is neither affirmation of the same nor negation of the other. Exposure is rather “when the affirmation ‘I love you’ is given over to that which is neither contradictory nor noncontradictory with it: the risk that the other does not love me, or the risk that I do not keep my promise of love” (ibid.). In other words, the other is not the dialectical *object* of love. You are not appropriated when I declare my love. Rather, my declaration of love is the presentation of myself, but as exposed and incomplete since the promise of my love is only true inasmuch as it rests upon its own uncertainty. We shall return to the theme of love’s promise later in this chapter. For now, we must focus on how exposure, for Nancy (ibid.), shows that the subject of the dialectical process “is not completed by this process, and it ‘incompletes itself’ to the outside; it is presented, offered to something that is not it nor its proper becoming”. Nancy therefore claims that even if a subject should be formed by the semblance of a dialectical process, its real existence is not simply the

result of this process. Rather, the self is that which is exposed, that which exceeds and subtends any possibilities of dialectical operations. This exposure, in turn reveals the ‘I’ as incomplete since its dialectical process is at once exceeded and subtended by exposition. It seems to me that Nancy considers the ‘heart of [B]eing’ as a template for *our* very being, inasmuch as we must necessarily be exposed to others in order *to be at all*. Recalling Nancy’s ontology of ‘being-singular-plural,’ the exposure to the other bears remarkable resemblance to the *Mitsein*, or being-with, of *Dasein*. In other words, in order to be *Mitdasein*, one has to be exposed to others. And what Nancy certainly implies, is that this exposure is nothing other than love. If we are attentive, we can already detect that Nancy is foreshadowing the inextricable connection of love with finitude, since if we consider the dialectical subject as incomplete this is precisely to say that it is *limited*. But before we get ahead of ourselves, let us consider briefly how Nancy identifies traces of the dialectic in Levinas’s conception of eros.

Levinas’s formulation of eros is both very similar to and very different from Nancy’s exposition of love. Indeed, Levinas argues that the Hegelian dialectic of master and slave is not appropriate to eros due to the impossibility of subsuming the radical alterity of the feminine within the dimension of the same (Levinas 1987:87). Thus the feminine absolute alterity ‘slips away from the light’ (ibid.). And if this is the light of consciousness, then the conscious dialectic *fails* in eros. But Levinas still considers consciousness to attempt its dialectical machinations in the erotic encounter – the sensuality of need resembles closely what in Nancy’s terms would be the dialectical ‘traversing of the other to return to the self.’ But for Nancy, love is the exposure of the self before and after the ego can make this dialectical attempt at appropriation, it is not the appropriating attempt itself.

Moreover, Nancy (2003:270) identifies “certain traits of a dialectical moment” in Levinas’s phenomenology of eros.²¹ Levinas’s formulation of eros and paternity, for Nancy (2003:270)

hierarchizes [the different kinds of love] and prescribes them to a teleology. This teleology proceeds from the first given of his thought, ‘the epiphany of the face’: love is the movement stressed by this epiphany, a movement that transcends in order to reach, beyond the face, beyond vision and the ‘you,’ the ‘hidden – never hidden enough – absolutely ungraspable.’ From this ‘vertigo that no signification any longer clarifies’ (that of the Eros), the fraternity of children, lifting its equivocation, can emerge, the fraternity of children in which, again, the epiphany of the face is produced.

²¹ Indeed, Nancy’s entire critique of Levinas in *Shattered Love* (1986) occurs as parenthesis. At the beginning of the parenthesis, Nancy promises that an in-depth exploration of Levinas’s work deserves more careful time and attention, and is thus reserved for a later project (Nancy 2003:270). At the time of the writing of this dissertation, such a project has not yet been realised.

A semblance of dialectical logic is therefore apparent in Levinas's phenomenology of eros inasmuch as that which initiates signification (through the epiphany of the face) is obfuscated by the carnality of eros, and the face only returns as the effect of fecundity. Nancy identifies the source of this 'dialectical moment' to lie in Levinas's development of plurality (or being-with) as the goal to which the ego strives upon its experience of solitude and the horror of the *il y a*. But for Nancy, being-with precedes the ego; Being is shattered by love and poses us all as being-with "before the face and signification...on another level: *at the heart* of [a] being" (Nancy 2003:270). Like Levinas, Nancy considers the dialectic to fail in any attempt to complete a subject. And, as noted in the aforementioned, Nancy does not deny that alterity exists. But the difference between Levinas and Nancy lies in the fact that the latter asserts love as more fundamental than the dichotomy between 'the same' and 'the Other.' Love already 'incompletes' the self by exposing it to that over which the dialectic has no power, which is the relation with the other. But how are we to understand this incompleteness? Indeed, how are we supposed to understand love as that which accomplishes it?

4.3. Self Love: Pride

If we acknowledge that love can never accomplish completion inasmuch as this would annul love, then Nancy (2003:256) postulates that an alternative could be

to deal only with a moment of contact between beings, a light, cutting and delicious moment of contact, at once eternal and fleeting. In its philosophical assignation, love seems to skirt this touch of the heart that would not complete anything, that would go nowhere, graceful and casual, the joy of the soul and the pleasure of the skin, simple luminous flashes of love freed from itself (ibid.).

In other words, love has two sides. On the one hand, there is that grandiose promise of fulfilment or completeness, and on the other hand, there is the ephemeral encounter that actively denounces the promise of completion. Before love is connoted with 'charity,' the 'caress,' or indeed 'erotic passion', one would have to acknowledge the 'skirting touch' of love on the heart as it is sensed on the skin and in the soul alike.

Nancy maintains it would therefore be prudent to begin by defining love as "*that which is not self-love*" (Nancy 2003:258). This is not to say that love of the self is not really love at all. But there is a particular breed of self-love which would *close* the subject off from the possibility of relation, and this would thus imply a whole subject, complete and 'unshattered' by love. Thus Nancy says (after Fénelon) that self-love as *pride* would be the love of "one's own excellence *insofar as it is one's own*" (Nancy quotes Fénelon 2003:258). For Nancy (2003:259), this proud 'self-love' would be the "love of the self as *property* [emphasis added]." What Nancy is alluding to is that hitherto philosophy consistently thinks love as the egoistic love of self, perhaps as projected on another (as in Levinas's

understanding of erotic need). But we must recall that for Nancy, the self exists prior to the ego, and hence it is a mistake to ‘theorise’ love only in this sense.

It is possible to explain this egoistic self-love as love in Hegelian terms. Indeed, Nancy explains this through the idea of the ‘love of the self as property’. For Hegel (quoted in Nancy 2003:259), “[m]atter, for itself, is not proper to itself.” In other words, the material world does not ‘own itself,’ only human subjects can ‘take possession’ of matter. In taking possession of something, that thing will become my ‘property.’ But the difference between ‘property’ and ‘possession’ must be made clear. To own a possession is simply to have it, but for it to be my *property*, I must invest something of my very subjectivity in it. To call something ‘*mine*’ means to project my ego onto it. Thus to love my property is in fact to love myself as I invest myself in one of my possessions. ‘Property’, according to Nancy, is thus opposed to ‘possession’, which makes it “an ontological determination” (Nancy 2003:259). In other words, our ‘properties’ thus say something about *our* being more so than they do about the specific being of the possession in question. What this means, according to Nancy (2003:259), is that property “does not designate the object possessed, but the subject in the object”. What is proper to itself would thus be the subject, and *not* the object. To become proper to itself, the subject has to realize its subjectivity – its will, desires, needs, and as I later will argue, its *gender* – in the object possessed, that is in the object outside of the subject. Property would thus be the exteriorisation of the subjectivity I know myself to be, and which I have already formed by ‘traversing the other’ in the dialectical formation of subjectivity (see aforementioned). Thus for Hegel (quoted in Nancy 2003:259), this exteriorisation of my subjectivity beyond the limits of myself is “the first existence of freedom.” Hence, “property is the attestation and the assurance of the self in the actuality of the world” (ibid.). This can be compared to the way in which Levinas indeed understands need.²² Just as Levinas understands the satisfaction of need as appropriating what is other (*autre*) into the realm of the same, an appropriation which in turn ‘carves out the space’ for the ego’s existence in enjoyment; the Hegelian love of the self as property is the appropriation of the object and investing my subjectivity in it granting the subject its first instance of freedom. Thus to love my property amounts to what, in Levinasian terms, is the love of the same. To love myself in these terms would be to affirm all of the properties I assemble under the name of ‘*me*’, that is to say my ego. In doing so, the subject presents itself to an outside world. Ultimately (but still from the Hegelian perspective),

The self presents itself there outside itself, but in this presentation it is itself that it posits. Self-love is the desire and the affirmation of this autoposition: outside itself, in objectivity and in exteriority, the subject has the moment of its authenticity and the truth of its fulfilment (Nancy 2003:259).

²² See Chapter 2, Section 3.2.1. “Need and Desire – Enjoyment and Transcendence”

Yet if we mistakenly assume that love is actually self-love, explained in these Hegelian terms, then it leads to the suspicion with which many philosophers treat love. Nancy includes Levinas amongst these philosophers, and indeed rightly so if eros in Levinas's *Totality and Infinity* (1961) is structured as the simultaneity of need and desire, but is nevertheless always stained by the return to self characterised in need. If love amounts to self-love, inasmuch as it is the 'auto-positing' of the subject outside itself, then love is always reduced to narcissism. But to consider love in terms of the self positing itself - through a dialectic of projecting itself outwards and then appropriating itself - is to place *pride* at the "heart of love" (Nancy 2003:259). To consider love thus, for Nancy, mimics the economy of capitalism. This is evinced in the sense that the self is valued in terms of its own excess (by loving its self-projection), just as capitalism values surplus value (ibid.). In other words, who or what I love is but the projection of my own will, desires and needs; and I only love who or what I do inasmuch as they accomplish my own will, desires and needs. A traditional problem of love arises from the assumption that self-love is at the heart of love, inasmuch as all love must inevitably be reduced to what is actually pride. In this way, love collapses into nothing more than auto-eroticism. If love were rooted only in the desire for subjectivities to project themselves upon others, then nothing more could be said of love other than it inspires a clashing of subjects who desire only themselves, perhaps even 'to be themselves'.

Thus Nancy maintains that in pride, love is in fact 'absent from its heart' (ibid.). This is why Levinas (quoted by Nancy 2003:259) claims that "to love is to love oneself within love and thus return to oneself".²³ As we have noted extensively in previous chapters, Levinas considers the failure of eros as its inevitable lapse onto the hither side of need. We can therefore see that Levinas makes this assumption that love (as eros) is little more than what Nancy identifies as self-love or pride. Perhaps it is understandable then that Levinas regards eros with a measure of disdain, for the proud lover unknowingly negates his/her lover's otherness by projecting erotic pleasure onto him/her. It is thus unsurprising that Levinas identifies paternity as the salvation of eros (Irigaray's feminist critique of this move notwithstanding). But Nancy's thought implies that Levinas has conflated love with pride. Thus whilst it remains to be seen how Nancy can really consider eros to be something other than self love, his deviation from Levinas's perspective is now clear.

Other philosophers have also run into this mistaken conflation of love with self-love. Examples could include Nietzsche's "refined parasitism", Aristotle's *philautia* and Saint Augustine's question whether "man, by nature, is capable of loving God more than himself" (all quoted by Nancy 2003:259). It is no wonder then that hitherto love has been looked upon with suspicion and contempt if love amounts to

²³ See also Chapter 2, Section 3.2.2. "A Voluptuous Meditation".

nothing more than self-love but under the guise of loving another. Indeed, this is why Levinas seeks refuge in the face of the Other, and it may perhaps account for why Irigaray seeks refuge in the gendered body that is different (but we shall return to Irigaray soon enough). Nancy maintains, however, that this is simply a substitution for really thinking love itself. Having exposed this Hegelian problem thus, Nancy formulates a way to evade this problem, by considering the character of a broken heart.

4.4. Broken Heart

For Nancy (2003:260), an account of love as pride is “too slight”. Pride fails to account for the fact that authentic love dissolves the “dichotomy between the love in which I lose myself without reserve and the love in which I recuperate myself” (Nancy 2003:260). Nancy therefore identifies a characteristic of love which is diametrically opposed to the proud love of one’s own properties projected upon another. In love, Nancy maintains, it is possible for one to lose oneself. Hence what one loves is not oneself, since something of the self is absent. But at the same time, Nancy maintains that love must also be a site of possible ‘recuperation’, where one can recover from the loss of self which love must involve. In other words, when love is the “act of a singular being, of a body, of a heart, of a thinking” (Nancy 2003:260), it brings an end to the notion that love is either the projection of an already established subject, or the subsumption of the other under the same (as Levinas might think that ‘to love would be to love oneself in the other’).

Thus when Levinas identifies eros as the simultaneity of need and desire,²⁴ Nancy would dispute that love amounts to the equivocal enmeshment of these two dispositions. Desire, for Levinas, is the desire for the Other and as such it results in the problem of transcendence. This problem could be summed up as the possibility that the ‘I’ might be overwhelmed by the ‘you’ and thus not truly transcend.²⁵ But Nancy identifies a loss (at minimum a partial loss) of the ‘I’ as characteristic of love. And where Levinas distinguishes need from desire, and need’s satisfaction represents the enjoyment characteristic of happiness,²⁶ Nancy claims that any recuperation of self would still be a characteristic of love. Nancy maintains that love dissolves this dichotomy of losing oneself (Levinas’s transcendent desire) and recuperating oneself (Levinas’s satisfaction of need). Indeed, Levinas claims that the simultaneity of need and desire is eros, and therefore eros is a particular kind of love. There is thus a close parallel between Nancy and Levinas, since Nancy claims that love is itself the simultaneity of

²⁴ See Chapter 2, Section 3.1.1. “Need and Desire – Enjoyment and Transcendence”.

²⁵ See Chapter 2, Section 4 “The Transcendence of the Future – Fecundity and Paternity”.

²⁶ See Chapter 2, Section 6 “Rich in Poverty, Poor in Wealth – Levinas’s Critique of Platonic Eros”.

‘losing oneself without reserve’ and ‘recuperating oneself.’ But Nancy seems to think that analysing this dichotomy in terms of anything other than love (such as need and desire) would be to subject love to the dialectical logic which fails to say love is exposure. But is this really a legitimate claim? We will have to reserve judgement on this for the time being. For now, let us examine what Nancy considers the implications of dissolving this dichotomy would be.

Nancy (2003:260) maintains that the notion of a return to the self ‘*from*’ love is far too simplistic a construction. Rather, we must think of the subject as a being *within* love. As such, the subject does not love another through a dialectical opposition between subject and love (as if the subject moves from its subjectivity, to love, and returns as a ‘loving subject’). Rather, love surrounds the subject and the ‘object’ of love. Thus, when a subject loves, she does not ‘return’ from love to the self-same subject which she supposedly ‘left’ in order to love. In fact, Nancy claims that the ‘I’ or the ‘subject’ does not ‘return’ at all. If the image of returning is the best way to describe the movement between self and other in love, then the self does not ‘return’ complete. According to Nancy (2003:260-261),

something of *I* is definitively lost or dissociated in its act of loving... *I* return broken: I come back to myself, or I come out of it, broken. The “return” does not annul the break; it neither repairs it nor sublates it, for the return in fact takes place only across the break itself, keeping it open. Love represents *I* to itself broken (and this is not a representation). It presents this to it: he, this subject, was touched, broken into, in his subjectivity, and he *is* from then on, for the time of love, opened by this slice, broken or fractured, even if only slightly. He *is*, which is to say that the break or the wound is not an accident, and neither is it a property that the subject could relate to himself. For the break is a break in his self-possession as subject; it is, essentially, an interruption of the process of relating oneself to oneself outside of oneself. From then on, *I* is *constituted broken*. As soon as there is love, the slightest act of love, the slightest spark, there is this ontological fissure that cuts across and that disconnects the elements of the subject proper – the fibers of its heart.

Love, rather than affirming the subject outside herself, ‘interrupts’ any attempt at such a process. Love is hence strictly opposed to pride. Love comes from the exterior in the sense that it joins the subject of love to the ‘object’ of love, not by extending subjectivity into the supposed object of love, but rather by a gap, or a break, in the subject’s very subjectivity. In so doing, the subject’s self-possession and its ensuing sense of security is called into question by the fact that she loves. Pride as defined above is thus annulled by love if love ‘breaks self-possession’. Love interrupts the egoistic subject’s illusory projection: that the object of his or her love is nothing more than the projection of the self. Moreover (and we shall return to this in greater detail later), if love is exposure of the self, and if the other loves me, then her exposure rends any proud projections of my ego apart, and I am struck by a wondrous excess beyond the wildest imaginings of my little ego. This might explain the

sense of wonder one feels for one's beloved(s), but also the sense of helplessness experienced when one is moved by love. If will belongs to the realm of self-possession, that is, as the property of the self, then love runs contrary to will. Think, for example, of when one finds oneself loving someone (be it a child, a family member, a spouse, a friend or even a stranger) unwittingly. Love is not subordinate to will; rather it breaks open pride. In a sense, love is not chosen, but one is chosen by love.

Thus Nancy might be legitimate in his deviation from Levinas. It is possible for Nancy that in love 'I can lose myself without reserve' because if I return to myself, I must return broken. But at the same time, I still return to myself, and hence I might 'recuperate' to some extent. We shall explore the real significance of this for eros when we examine Nancy's linking of joy and concern. For now however, we should note that upon reflection, perhaps the rigour with which Levinas analyses the distinction between need and desire is threatened by Nancy's refusal to think in terms of such distinctions.

If Nancy's thinking here is different to Levinas's, thinking love in these terms may not be too far off Irigaray's mark. But Nancy might still find something amiss in Irigaray (although this will have to be understood by way of comparison since Nancy does not make any reference to Irigaray's work). If we recall, Irigaray devises eros as that which mediates between the poles of gendered subjectivity and thus eros facilitates the sharing of a desire which is testified to by the crossing of the threshold.²⁷ This allows for a fecund relation between gendered subjectivities, spurring them on to new possibilities of self-understanding. But despite the value Irigaray places on eros, since eros mediates across the threshold of an already established subjectivity, her figure of eros may still resemble the Hegelian 'pride.' Even if subjectivities 'overlap' in the sharing of desire, we can still detect in Irigaray something of pride's mechanism of self-positing. If we suppose that the gendered subject's gender is its property (that is, its ontological determination, which Irigaray indeed seems to imply), and that eros consists in posing oneself as gendered to the gendered other, then could we perhaps detect a dialectical move in Irigaray? Indeed, Irigaray aims to show that if we do not recognise the feminine as radically other, this amounts to the dialectical subsumption of the feminine into the masculine economy of the same.²⁸ Thus she would necessarily object to the accusation that her thought is haunted by the shadow of the dialectic. But if we recall her 'enstatic' concept of transcendence²⁹ it may resemble what Nancy calls pride. If, as Irigaray claims, transcendence is becoming aware of the

²⁷ See Chapter 3, Section "The Threshold" & Section "The Fecund Touch of Lovers"

²⁸ See Chapter 3, Section 3. "The Feminine Fundamentals: The Basic Tenets of Irigaray's Deconstructive Thought".

²⁹ See Chapter 3, Section 4.2.1. "The Sensible Transcendental".

limits of one's 'ego-empire,' then can we really understand this as something other than the self positing itself to itself against the backdrop of the gendered other? It is the gendered other, as a sensible and sensual other, who 'gives me the borders of my own body' in eros.³⁰ Eros could thus be an encounter with the feminine other which allows me to love myself through loving her. Love could therefore be understood as affirming one's self-possession, rather than breaking it open.

This account of Irigaray might be uncharitable, since her aim is to show that eros can be an encounter which emphasises the otherness of alterity, rather than the sameness of subjectivity. Indeed, her concept of 'enstatic transcendence' could be argued to serve the same purpose of being exposed to the excess that is the other. But her thinking is caught up in the affirmation of gendered subjectivity, and thus bears the trace of thinking a subject whose love consists in positing itself (i.e. as *gendered*) outside itself. The mucous, whilst providing an interesting medium to understand the interaction of two sexual beings radically other to each-other, nevertheless fails to give a rigorous account of how such an interaction would actually accomplish the 'rebirth' and 'regeneration' of gendered subjectivities.³¹ In Irigaray, the 'I does not return broken.' It returns 'reborn' and 'rejuvenated'. It seems Irigaray's account of erotic love is too heavily weighted on the side of what Nancy calls 'recuperation' to account for the severity with which love shatters pride.

Thus Irigaray's eros does not suggest a love in which I can lose myself, unless we consider this 'rebirth' of subjectivity to include the shedding of old ways of being. But a tension arises between Irigaray and Nancy, despite an effort to reconcile them with one another, because 'rebirth' and 'renewal' inherently stand opposed to being broken. Even though something like 'rebirth' connotes with a breaking away from previous ways of being, it nevertheless also connotes with a renewed chance at wholeness. To be 'reborn' through eros would mean to have a second chance at affirming the self, rather than affirming the breaking open of self. Irigaray's terms, if anything, imply the *healing* of a break. We could imagine that for Nancy, instead of supposing that eros is the meeting of already established gendered subjects, it rather induces the *disassembly* of one's self-possession, including as a gendered subject. In other words, what I may think it means for me to be a 'man' may be broken by a loving encounter with another. The consequences of such view mean that gender must be more fluid than Irigaray suggests, and that love challenges one's self-understanding as gendered rather than cements it as either masculine or feminine. The theme of gender is one to which we shall return when this chapter analyses Nancy's philosophy regarding the body. For the time being, it is sufficient to consider that although both Irigaray and Nancy might think that love exposes the self to

³⁰ See Chapter 3, Section 5.4. "The Fecundity of the Caress".

³¹ See Chapter 3, Section 5.4. "The Fecundity of the Caress".

something which exceeds it, for Nancy this occurs as the breaking of the subject, rather than an encounter with a gendered other. Nancy's formulation of love thus accounts for the (re)generative capacity of eros identified by Irigaray because the 'I' at once loses *and* recuperates itself. But Nancy moves beyond Irigaray because he does not predicate love upon sexual difference (as we shall later discover, Nancy argues the opposite to be the case). Love is rather a rupture of any self-enclosed subjectivity (gendered or otherwise). We shall have occasion to return to a comparison between Irigaray and Nancy. But before such a comparison can be made, we must understand what the full implications of this rupture are? Can Nancy offer an account of transcendence in light of it?

5. The Transcendence of Love

Nancy (2003:261) defines the "love break" thus: "I can no longer, whatever presence to myself I may maintain or that sustains me, pro-pose myself to myself (nor im-pose myself on another) without remains, without something of me *remaining*, outside of me." This, for Nancy (ibid.) is "transcendence" inasmuch as the immanence of the subject is "is opened up," and "broken into." A theory of subjectivity which posits love either as the subsumption of the Other (such as Levinas's formulation of need in eros), or as a chiasmic encounter with the gendered other (such as Irigaray's understanding of eros as exemplary of an ethics of sexual difference), does not account for the breaking of the subject by love. When someone loves, they 'leave a part of themselves in the other'. This is reminiscent of a common phenomenon when love ends, as people might say something like 'a part of me died when she (or he) left me'. But the corollary of this is that when in love, part of the subject belongs to the other, and the dialectical notion of subsumption may be considered inverted. Whereas traditionally, love would imply the subsumption of the other, Nancy (ibid.) constructs it as inverted – the other rends the subject open and broken because of love. When Nancy (ibid.) calls love 'transcendence,' he therefore does not mean it in the sense of a overcoming or surpassing of the self. Rather, love is transcendence inasmuch as it is "the disimplication of the immanence that can come to [the self] only from the outside" (ibid.).

The transcendence of love, for Nancy (ibid.) "is not the one that passes into – and through – an exteriority or an alterity in order to reflect itself in it and to reconstitute in it the interior and identical." By this Nancy reconfigures the problem of transcendence as Levinas formulates it.³² But love does not come from *another subject* through an exterior. In other words the movement of love does not originate in a subject, passing to an outside, and then only breaking into another subject (ibid.). To construe love thus would posit it once again in terms of assimilation, albeit considered from the perspective of the other rather than the subject (as if this were even possible). In thinking

³² See Chapter 2, Section 4 "The Transcendence of the Future – Fecundity and Paternity"

love thus, one would posit that love originates in *a* subject, thereby being its property, and enters into another subject, effectively ‘colonising’ it. It is not difficult to see this as problematic in the sense of the assimilation or subsumption of the other. As soon as one tries to theorise from the perspective of the other, the other necessarily becomes the subject and the dialectic simply swaps places. This is not the claim Nancy makes. In simple terms, Nancy suggests that the other literally ‘incompletes’ the subject by exposing it as broken. This might be compared with Levinas’s (1979:256) first line of the phenomenology of eros: “Love aims at the Other; it aims at him in his frailty”. But rather than love originating in the subject and moving towards the Other’s frailty, it is precisely love which reveals us as frail – incomplete, imperfect and exposed.

Nancy (2003:261) thus thinks that love “*is* this outside itself, the other, each time singular, a blade thrust in me, and that I do not rejoin, because it disjoins me (it does not wound, properly speaking: it is something else, foreign to a certain dramatics of love)”. By disjoining a single subject, love allows for that subject to be bound in love to another. But its site as the outside is paradoxically that which allows it to sustain itself. The movement of love is the fluttering dance which always makes the other beyond the reach of the same. Furthermore, this is the self-sustaining power of love (at least inasmuch as one is ‘open’ to it). As Nancy (2003:262) states

In the other it is this movement that makes it other and which is always other than “itself” in its identity; that is what transcends “in me”. This transcendence thus fulfils nothing: it cuts, it breaks, and it exposes so that there is no domain or instance of being where love would fulfil itself.

If we recall Nancy’s definition of love as the ‘extreme movement beyond the self of a being reaching its completion’, this will help to demonstrate what he means here. In thinking love, philosophy must admit that love “fulfils itself only by depriving itself of itself” (Nancy 2003:250). In this sense, love has no end since the achievement of such would signal the cessation of love. The break that love instils in the subject is therefore the exposure to the impossibility of love’s completion. And this characterises the transcendence of love: it is always possible for *more* love, for *more* exposure, *more* heartbreak, etc. Love’s movement ushers in transcendence not by carrying the subject to a higher level, as might be traditionally considered. Nor is the transcendence of love to be found in paternity, whereby the egoism of eros is atoned. Love rather lures the subject into its movements by breaking the subject open and exposing him or her to the incompleteness which is instilled in that subject by love itself.

Furthermore, Nancy (2003:262) asserts that this understanding of transcendence is not simply a “negative presentation”. This would entail the presentation of a void, for example. But this is not the case with love, because love actually *happens*. Indeed, for Nancy (ibid.) “it happens endlessly in the

withdrawal of its own presentation. It is an offering, which is to say that love is always proposed, addressed, suspended in its arrival, and not presented, imposed, already having reached its end”. Love proposes itself without cementing itself, it is always accompanied by an anxious uncertainty as to whether it will last. But that uncertainty is the very character of love – if love were certain it would have reached its end (we shall return to this in the discussion on the promise of love, later in this chapter).

Nancy (ibid.) muses ever so poetically, “[l]ove arrives, it comes, or else it is not love. But it is thus that it endlessly goes elsewhere than to ‘me’ who would receive it: its coming is only a departure for the other, its departure only the coming of the other”. A paradoxically double nature is revealed here, recalling Levinas’s conception of love as “equivocation *par excellence*”.³³ But in Levinas this refers to the simultaneity of need and desire, and their consequent implications on the signification of the face. The equivocation of eros lies in the ambiguity of the double presentation of the face which inspires the signifyingness of language and the lustful silence of the carnal.³⁴ Thus in Levinas, it is ambiguous as to whether love actually reaches the Other, or whether it is only the same projected upon the other person. The ambiguity of love for Nancy, in contrast, is the simultaneity of love’s arrival and departure – it might perhaps be better to call love the ‘ephemeral *par excellence*’.

The simultaneous arrival and departure of the other is signalled by all different kinds of love. It is not the traversing of subjectivities, it “does not stop or fix itself anywhere, neither in ‘him’, nor in ‘me’ because it is nothing other than the coming-and-going” (Nancy 2003:262). It is neither a movement from the other to the self, nor to the other from the self. Love is the movement itself, the “coming-and-going” which “breaks the heart” (ibid.). The image of heartbreak is an appropriate one, because the broken heart resembles the beating of a real heart. The heart beats across a break, or a pause, which would be diastolic moment of rest between the systolic contractions. It is well for us to note that Nancy asserts that love is a necessary condition for being-there, and being-with. And if the only time ‘being-there-with’ ceases is in death, then it is vital that the heart is broken, beating across the crack between diastole and systole. The coming and going of love can be likened to this heartbeat. Love might arrive in the systole (the contraction) and depart in the diastole (when the heart rests between beats). But its arrival signals its departure inasmuch as the systole signals the diastole, and its departure signals its arrival inasmuch as the diastole pre-empts the systole. The heart, moreover, implies mortality; no heart can beat forever. And thus the connection between love and finitude is already suggested in this image.

³³ See Chapter 2, Section 3.3. “Eros as Equivocation”.

³⁴ See Chapter 2, Section 3.2.3. “Shut Up and Kiss Me: The Non-Signifyingness of Nudity”.

5.1. Love Unveils Finitude

If transcendence is “better named the crossing of love” (ibid.), and the crossing of love is that which renders the subject broken, then the subject’s finite nature is revealed through transcendence. “Finitude”, says Nancy (ibid.) “is the being of that which is infinitely inappropriable, not having the consistency of its essence either in itself or in a dialectical sublation of the self.” It seems as if Nancy would assert that the broken hearted subject, through its return to a loss of self, is thus exposed to an ‘infinitely inappropriable’ excess. This excess denotes a limit which, in turn, implies the recognition of finitude. But this is a very dense formulation. What is finitude? How does *love*, rather than the mortal heart, attest to it? And how does Nancy connect finitude with ‘being-with’?

Since Nancy’s project is an explicit reformulation of Heidegger, perhaps a brief account of finitude in Heidegger’s philosophy would make it easier to clarify what finitude means for Nancy. Death, for Heidegger, is not simply demise, since demise is simply the “cessation of life” (Nancy 2008b:8). If *Dasein* is the “the being in which Being is put into play” (Nancy 2003:267), then *Dasein*’s ‘being-toward-death’ (*zum Tote*) is the temporal limit on the putting into play of Being. In simple terms, the fact that *Dasein* is necessarily going to die induces the realisation that *Dasein* must make the most of the opportunity it has to express its unique existence. In the standard interpretation of Heidegger, death is an individualising force because the knowledge “that I am going to ‘die’ brings with it awareness that my life is mine, and that only I die with me” (Atkins 2005:115). As such, the awareness of death makes *Dasein* realise the limitations on its possibilities of putting Being into play, and thus death serves to usher *Dasein* into an authentic self-determined existence (ibid.). But inasmuch as Nancy deviates from Heidegger by claiming that Heidegger did not think ‘being-with’ through properly, Nancy hopes to show that death, rather than being *individualising*, is the precise opposite. That is to say that death constitutes ‘being-with,’ rather than an individual ‘being-there’ (Nancy 2008b:13).

What Heidegger does not make explicit, claims Nancy (2003:269), is that the Heideggerian formulation of ‘concern’ (*Fürsorge*) is actually *love* (the full argument for which is addressed later in this chapter). But a tension arises in the idea that ‘being-toward-death’ makes *Dasein* individual inasmuch as for Heidegger “death is ownmost and no one can substitute herself for my death” (Nancy 2008b:8). If death is ‘ownmost’ then it places a limit on concern, and concern for the other must be understood as limited by a “handing her over to her own death” (ibid.). But Nancy would have us re-interpret ‘concern’ as love, and in doing so it is love (and hence ‘being-with’) which unveils the limit that is death. What Nancy urges us to accept is, as Abbot (2011:150) notes, that “lovers share their finitude...[as] the sharing of an exposure to something excessive, absolutely inappropriable.” Death is therefore not confronted by an individual *Dasein* as the isolated realisation of mortality. Rather, it is

in the loving concern of *Mitdasein* that finitude becomes apparent, because death limits not only the potential to ‘be-there’ but also the potential to ‘be-with.’ For the sake of this dissertation’s argument, and perhaps for the sake of clarity, it is possible to understand Nancy’s move as a synthesis of Levinas’s, Irigaray’s and Heidegger’s respective thought on love and death.

If we recall Levinas,³⁵ he supposes that it is not our own death which is our concern, but the death of the beloved Other. For Levinas, the paradox of death is that it does not happen to ‘me’ because the moment death arrives, ‘I’ am no longer. Love is thus as powerful as death, since my love lingers on despite my beloved’s passing. This contrasts to Irigaray’s view which, if we recall,³⁶ suggests that if an authentic and just love for the feminine other is maintained, this would force the masculine lover to face his own mortality. This arises from the fact that Irigaray identifies the substitution of ‘woman’ for an equally unthinkable term, ‘death,’ as a move which underpins the mechanism of patriarchy (and thus the subordination of the feminine other). If we can call Heidegger’s ‘concern’ love, then Irigaray’s view is implicitly the Heideggerian ‘handing the other over to her own death,’ as described above. For Nancy, however, it is *both* my own death and my beloved’s which are unveiled by our love. The fact that the beloved other is being-toward-death, and that I love him *or* her, indicates to me that I am also finite. Thus, like Levinas, Nancy agrees that the death of the beloved other is my concern, but this is the case because his/her finitude reveals my own. Moreover, what death thus signals is not that I must make my life radically individual (as a certain reading of Heidegger might imply), but that I only have one life in which to love the other. Thus finitude is not only the authenticating limit of the individual *Dasein* (being-there), but also simultaneously authenticates *Mitsein* (being-with). Thus both Heidegger’s and Irigaray’s figure of death - as the limit of individual subjectivity - is simultaneously encompassed and surpassed by Nancy’s formulation thereof. Hence, I would argue that Nancy’s understanding of love’s affair with death synthesises the views of Levinas, Irigaray and Heidegger.

Love presents finitude in a glamorous fashion (Nancy 2003:264). Indeed, in this context Nancy defines glamour³⁷ as “love’s preparations and promises”. Could we then understand Nancy as saying that it is love which compensates for death? This once more reminds me not only of Irigaray’s authenticating power of love, but also of Levinas’s transcendence of eros in the son. For Levinas, it is

³⁵ See Chapter 2, Section 5 “Love Eternal: Love and Death”.

³⁶ See Chapter 3, Section “I Love You To Death: But My Death Or Yours?”.

³⁷ It is worth noting that Nancy writes ‘glamour’ in English even in the original French text. The reason for this, one can assume, is to place the emphasis on the resemblance the English word ‘glamour’ has to the French word for love: ‘*amour*.’

the ‘future I’ in the son who redeems the equivocal and profane nature of eros. Thus, perhaps Nancy might agree, that love, despite revealing finitude, promises a ‘beyond’ this finitude. Hence, despite the fact that being finite may scare me, love’s ‘dazzling’ presentation of finitude may relieve such fear inasmuch as I know that even should I die love may in a sense ‘live on’. Nancy is thus different from Levinas, since for Levinas the relationships of paternity and fraternity salvage the inability of eros to allow transcendence. But for Nancy, it is love itself which compensates for the finitude it reveals, through its dazzling presentation of this finitude.

But the glamour of love may be misleading, since love remains in its state of “coming and going, never being simply present” (Nancy 2003:264). This is why we feel the need to qualify love by calling it ‘sublime’, ‘unrequited’, ‘true’, ‘brotherly’, and perhaps even ‘erotic’. Nancy (ibid.) thus quotes Nietzsche’s Zarathustra who says, “Great loves do not want love – they want more”. If Nietzsche is correct, and ‘great loves always want more,’ love wants more precisely because it reveals the impossibility of loving everything, or everyone. In this sense, love reveals finitude because it is the exposure to that which exceeds a singular self. As such, love presents the limit of the self in a glamorous fashion, as opposed to the terror of knowing one’s mortality. Love is thus tightly bound to finitude, and if love amounts to being exposed, then love is also finite. It is on this point (love’s finitude) that Nancy makes a distinction between love and desire.

6. Love and Desire

If we are to extrapolate something about eros from Nancy’s work we must make the distinction between love and desire, because eros might pose a challenge to love inasmuch as its sexual dimension is something we cannot ignore. Although *Shattered Love* is an attempt to articulate something regarding all different loves (that is love itself), if eros is but one of an indefinite number of love’s shatters then it must also bear resemblance to the universal character of love which Nancy describes. Since eros is necessarily aligned with sexuality, it is necessary to understand Nancy’s view on sexuality also. But before this can be done, it is prudent to make explicit how Nancy separates love from desire.

The dialectic is shown to be inoperative in love because “neither the other nor love nor I can appropriate itself nor be appropriated” (Nancy 2003:263). Thus love is not desire, since desire would operate in a dialectical fashion. The difference between love and desire is therefore exemplified in the finitude unveiled by love. This is so because desire is rooted in *lack*. If we desire something, we desire it because we do not have it. Thus desire itself is predicated on lacking its object. But we also know that desire does not stop once it reaches its object, desire will just shift to a new object. Desire is therefore a mechanism which continuously strives to fill an insatiable lack within the subject. Desire

works by appropriation, despite the fact that no appropriation can fulfil the lack which drives it. In this sense, “desire is self extending toward its end” (Nancy 2003:263). All that appropriating an object of desire³⁸ achieves is the reconstituting of desire in another form.

But Nancy insists that love is not desire in the aforementioned sense. For Nancy (2003:263) love does not extend itself towards an end as desire would. The only means by which love is extended is “by an upheaval of the other in me” (ibid.), as in those moments when one is ‘swept away’ by the love one feels for another. Whether or not Nancy is here referring to the ‘Other-in-the-same’ that Levinas configures in *Otherwise Than Being* (1974), as discussed in the aforementioned, it is not clear. Despite the possibility that many parallels may be drawn between the two works, I must emphasise here that this is not the project of this dissertation. What I understand Nancy to mean by an ‘upheaval of the other in me’ is that sense of quasi-nauseas surging forth of love inspired by the very thought of my beloved. To reiterate, it is the openness that love creates which acts as the mechanism of its extension – for should there be an ‘upheaval of the other in me’ this would be the surging forth towards the break created by love. Love is the continuous exposure of the self, until that self ends. This might be exemplified in those moments of erotic passion where even the tearing off of one’s shirt feels insufficient to expose oneself to one’s beloved, and indeed the motion of doing so alludes to an attempt even to expose one’s beating heart.

“Desire”, Nancy (2003:263) claims in contrast, “is unhappiness without end: it is the subjectivist reverse of the exposition of finitude”. Since love is the exposition of finitude, but desire is infinitely insatiable, the difference between the two becomes clear. Desire rejects the exposure to finitude inasmuch as desire is infinitely unappeased. The heart, on the other hand, is “no more unhappy than it is happy” says Nancy (ibid.), because it lies between the limits of the two. The limit exposes the finitude of the heart, and illustrates how “the heart does not belong to itself” (ibid.). In other words, to have a heart at all, Nancy claims, is to recognise that it breaks the self so that it cannot be entirely self-possessed (the appearance of being self-possessed would be pride). This once more resonates with Nancy’s ‘big idea’ of ‘being-singular-plural’. If the heart of any subject does not wholly belong to itself, it is only because the very being of that subject is constituted by its relation *with*.

In this sense love and concern (Heidegger’s *Fürsorge*) are thus evinced as equivalent. If concern is “the structure and the thrust of the existent that is offered-to, ahead of itself” (Nancy 2003:268), then this offering can be understood as the exposure of the heart and the crossing of love. And if “[t]he originary sharing of the world is the sharing of Being, and the Being of Dasein is nothing other than

³⁸ This object of desire may perhaps be another subject, as it would be in lust.

the Being of this sharing” (ibid.), then this necessarily espouses concern and thus love. Love is thus an inevitable consequence of being-with, which in turn is constitutive of ‘being-in-the-world’.

Indeed, the ‘heart’ only exists inasmuch as it is a heart broken by love. To ‘have a heart’ then, would mean that one necessarily would have to have loved, or experienced love in some way. It would be worth noting that for Nancy (2003:263),

the heart is not an organ, and neither is it a faculty. It is: that I is broken and traversed by the other where its presence is most intimate and its life most open. The beating of the heart – rhythm of the partition of being, syncope of the sharing of singularity – cuts across presence, life, consciousness. That is why thinking – which is nothing other than the *weighing* or testing of the limits, the ends, of presence, of life, of consciousness – thinking itself is love.

Love would thus be the medium by which the other ‘traverses’ the most personal intimate place of the ‘I’. Love mediates the divide between singular beings and constitutes them as ‘together in likeness’ rather than as the same. In this sense, thinking is love, for it also operates to test this divide, or to gain a sense of the gravity³⁹ of the limit of being (finitude).

“Love cuts across finitude, always from the other to the other, which never returns to the same – and all loves, so humbly alike, are superbly singular,” says Nancy (2003:264). Just as every self is unique, and this uniqueness means that all selves are alike, each instance of love is unique and this uniqueness makes these different kinds of love⁴⁰ alike. No two examples of eros (or any other form of love for that matter) can therefore be exactly the same, and hence the difficulty faced when trying to figure eros. What we shall later discover, however, is that the exposure of the body is what constitutes eros, although at the same time this exposure takes on as many different forms as the contexts in which it necessarily occurs.

A certain problem is raised here. If love is not desire, if love is not libido, how can we understand eros which is traditionally/generally associated precisely with libido and desire? Nancy has said much about love: love breaks the dialectical subject open, at its heart, and thus the singular subject is exposed always as being-with. In breaking the heart, love shows the subject that it cannot appropriate the other, because love has no object which would signal its completion. Pride would be the projection of the subject onto another, where by positing itself outside itself the subject can love itself

³⁹ See Section 3, “Thinking is Love” in the aforementioned.

⁴⁰ Hence Nancy refrains from schematising love according to the four traditional Greek forms of love: *agape*, *phileo*, *storge*, and *eros*. Indeed the implication of Nancy’s thought is that such a scheme ultimately does love itself an injustice by divorcing it from the unique context in which each instance of it plays out. Thus to extrapolate something specifically regarding eros becomes complicated.

as property. As such, pride and desire are similar inasmuch as they are both dialectical. Desire is ‘unhappiness without end,’ because the object of desire can never fulfil the lack which is at its root. But Nancy insists that love is not desire, and thus love is not libido. But eros must include sexuality, otherwise it is not erotic. Love without sexuality is something else; perhaps friendship (if one can be friends without some measure of erotic desire). Indeed, Nancy has defined love as the “indefinite abundance” (Nancy 2003:246) of its shatters, and thus love is always unique to its context but at the same time indefinitely multiple. But how does eros fit in here, if at all? Is Nancy suggesting that we do not think the erotic in terms of love? Or is love simply something subtending the erotic encounter but not really what the erotic encounter is? These are pertinent questions that may be partially answered by evaluating the status of love as ‘shattered’ in Nancy’s thought.

7. Shattered Eros: The Plurality of Love has Erotic Undertones

The experience of a singular instance of love, Nancy (2003:266) claims, implies all its of other forms. Hence we must suppose Nancy’s thought on love is relevant to understanding eros. Love, claims Nancy (ibid.), “is projected in all its shatters”. This is not to say that love is simply ‘polymorphous’. Nancy (ibid., p. 267) maintains that “[love] does not withhold its identity behind its shatters: it *is* itself the eruption of their multiplicity, it is itself their multiplication in one single act of love”. Such ‘shatters’ would be infinite in number, and thus love itself would be the shattering of Being itself into the singular plurality of beings who love. But it would be incorrect to read Nancy as supposing that the Being of any being is whole before love arrives. As Abbott (2011:149) notes, “this shattering has to be understood as originary: [B]eing is always already shattered; to put it a little awkwardly, we might say that the shard *precedes* the break”. This recalls Nancy’s critique of Levinas’s *il y a*, where Nancy asserts Being as already plural prior to any meditation upon an existence without existents (even as a thought experiment). Love itself is the indefinite plurality of Being, which is to say that it is the necessary pre-condition for the pluralistic being-with of *Mitdasein*. In other words, Nancy considers all *Dasein* to already have ‘broken hearts,’ to already be exposed to their finitude and thus to be unique singular instances of *Mitsein*.

If love is the infinite plurality of different loves, there is thus no means by which all the ‘shatters’ of love can be subsumed under a single representation. This is the reason why, according to Nancy (2003:267), philosophy and poetry are saturated with the subject while they nevertheless fail to capture its essence. But Nancy essentially resists any taxonomy of love. Love, says Nancy (ibid.), “comes *across* and never simply *comes* to its place or to term, that it comes across itself and overtakes itself, being the finite touch of the infinite crossing of the other”. Hence the transcendence of love, unveiling finitude with the other’s infinite crossing. And given the image of the heart, an end to/of

love's 'crossings' implies death, just as an end of the heart's beating means organic death, the end of existence.

The infinite nature of love is, for Nancy, emphasised in Plato's recognition of Eros as the child of *Poros* (plenty) and *Penia* (poverty). Nancy (ibid.) interprets this as the ability of love to "[multiply] itself to infinity, offering nothing other than its poverty of substance and of property". Love is poor inasmuch as its arrival is also its departure, it signifies almost nothing. Yet, love is plentiful in its manifestations, as we have discussed its proliferating 'shatters' Poverty and plenty thus indicate yet another dual nature of love: it lacks an essence since all loves are superbly singular, yet (and perhaps because of this) love sprouts forth in an indefinite multitude of manifestations.

But this implies that to name eros 'eros' when trying to think the confluence of love and sexuality is a fool's task. For if love is infinite inasmuch as it is unique and singular, then each instance of what we might want to name eros is in fact just one unique shatter in the plurality of loves. Yet throughout his text on love, Nancy makes many allusions to mythological or literary instances of romantic love, and hence the erotic association with them. From the tragic romance of Tristan and Isolde to Don Juan's cataloguing of his erotic conquests, Nancy (2003:256) does not neglect to allude to eros. But Nancy maintains that it is precisely the impossibility of seizing love that allows us to recast stories about it. Despite the differences between the tragic love of Tristan and Isolde and Don Juan's promiscuous tom-foolery, all literary figures of love "are neither the types of a genre nor the metaphors of a unique reality, but rather so many bursts of love, which reflect love in its entirety each time without ever imprisoning it or holding it back" (ibid., p. 265).

Indeed, it is the parentage of the daimon named Eros, as recounted by Diotima in the *Symposium*, which allows Nancy to formulate love as infinite despite its lack of essence. Moreover, he critiques Levinas's eros for not realising the apparent truth of love as the breaking of the heart, and the shattering of Being. It seems that even though Nancy uses eros as some of his examples of love (amongst others such as the love of God), and he identifies love in eros (by critiquing Levinas and interpreting Plato), "we will have to maintain that love is always present and never recognized in anything that we name 'love'" (Nancy 2003:257). Love is impossible to grasp in one particular sense or another, because love only plays out in uniquely particular instances. This is why the love between Tristan and Isolde is exactly the same as Don Juan's sexual conquests, but is simultaneously absolutely different. The question of sexuality remains unanswered though, but we shall have occasion to return to it later. For now, we must address another problem. How are we to come to a definition of love? Doing this may offer a means to extrapolate something about eros from Nancy's thought, and thereby solve the apparent impasse between Irigaray and Levinas. Our first step upon such an undertaking would be to examine Nancy's thought on love as the promise.

7.1. Love's True Name: The Promise

Love is impossible for Nancy (2003:264) inasmuch as “it does not arrive, or it arrives only at the limit, while crossing.” It is ultimately impossible to say much about love itself, without deferring to something else. Thus, Nancy labels the ‘true name of love’ as the utterance, “I love you” (ibid., p. 265).

Nancy (ibid.) states, “love’s name is not ‘love,’ which would be a substance or faculty, but it is this sentence, the ‘I love you,’ just as one says ‘the cogito’”. This sentence exemplifies the paradoxical nature of love and its promise. To say ‘I love you’ is a promise, but it is not the keeping of that promise (ibid.). The difficulty with the promise of love is that there is nothing that could testify to it having been kept. And since, as discussed above, love has no purposive end towards which it strives (since that would entail the end of love itself), love appears as this unfulfillable promise. The promise is neither performative, nor descriptive, nor prescriptive (Nancy 2003:264). In saying “I love you,” I am not declaring an action, since there is no absolutely singular action to which all loving refers. Nor am I describing a state of affairs, for what could this be if love is indefinitely plural and unique? Nor am I asserting that I ought to love you, for how can we determine the conditions that justify such a prescription? Rather to say “I love you” is to allow the emergence of the law by virtue of which love arrives and hence also departs (ibid., p. 265).

Whether or not the love lasts is beside the point. For Nancy (ibid.)

The promise does not anticipate or assure the future: it is possible that one day I will no longer love you, and this possibility cannot be taken away from love – it belongs to it. It is against this possibility, but also *with* it, that the promise is made, the word given. Love is its own promised eternity, its own eternity unveiled as law.

The eternal nature of love is revealed in the law which demands its arrival. But its arrival may not necessarily be eternally recurring. “Love”, says Nancy (ibid.), “is only faithful to itself”. Thus love is not both the making and the keeping of the promise. It is simply the promise itself. The keeping of the promise of love is not achieved by verifying it (as in taking vows before God in marriage) or justifying it (to say “I love you because we have children together ”or,“ because we both like the same things”). “Perhaps,” muses Nancy (ibid.), “unlike all other promises, one must keep only the promise itself: not its ‘contents’ (‘love’), but its utterance (‘I love you’).” Thus to keep the promise of love is to repeat its true name, constantly calling upon its eternal law to arrive even as it departs. Abbott (2011:152) interprets the significance of this quite succinctly: “[‘I love you’] is a promise on which I am, in a certain fundamental sense, unable to fully make good (for what would consist in its having been kept?)...A lack of guarantee thus marks the promise of love”. In a certain sense, it is impossible

to make good on the promise of love because of the limit of finitude. But at the same time, this impossibility is what defines love. The image of love's coming and going, or its arriving as it departs, therefore closely correlates with love as the promise which cannot be kept. Love is therefore the exposure to an excess predicated upon the finite character of Being. To say "I love you" is apparently the only possible truth of love, but it paradoxically is truth which cannot be guaranteed. This is why Nancy declares love at the outset of his essay on love, because he wants to show us that it is impossible to say much about love other than that it is precisely this promise which cannot be kept. Nancy (2003:265-6) therefore says:

Love does not fulfil itself, it always arrives in the promise and as the promise. For one does not know what one says when one says "I love you," and one does not say anything, but one knows that one says it and that it is law, absolutely: instantly one is shared and traversed by that which does not fix itself in any subject or in any signification.

Thus, saying "I love you" could even be the implication of an unexpressed love despite it being kept silent. To say "I love you" is to allow its law to touch oneself. Even in hearing the words, we cannot help but be touched. For example, even if we do not return the love proclaimed by another, "it cannot be that one is not traversed by something that, while not love itself, is nonetheless the way in which its promise touches us". This is perhaps what gives the words such power – despite their prolific, clichéd and often kitsch repetitions. Even to hear another's declaration of love is to feel the arrival of its promise. But since this promise is unfixed in any 'subject or signification', it appears then that the words necessarily are not only a promise, but also a risk. This again exemplifies the unveiling of finitude by love. Love risks its end in being told, but at the same time untold love would be a futile attempt to keep a heart from breaking. I imagine someone pining to tell their love of their love, with chest pains due to keeping back their breath. The uneasiness which may accompany the words (although this is not always felt, but is always a possibility) serves as testimony to this. To say "I love you", if we take it as the arrival of the promise, would then always be the risk of hearing the reply "I do not love you".

In *Shattered Love*, Nancy (2003:267) maintains

Love does not simply cut across, it cuts itself across itself, it arrives and arrives at itself as that by which nothing arrives, except that there is "arriving," arrival and departure: of the other, always of the other, so much *other* that it is never *made*, or done (one makes love, because it is never *made*) and so much other that it is never *my* love (if I say to the other "my love", it is of the other, precisely, that I speak, and nothing is "mine").

This emphasises the ‘shattered’ vision of love which Nancy imagines. The arrival of love is that which differentiates one instance of love from the next, but at the same time love is this arrival itself. If love is the arrival of a ‘radical’ other, then love cannot be the realm of possession, jealousy, or assimilation. To call another ‘my love’ can only have meaning if said to an other, as love is the infinite arrival of that other. Love is not made, as if it were an edifice built over time. Love can never be completed, since this would already mean love had ended. Rather, one makes love as a promise of something always yet to come. And if love ever ‘comes,’ at that very moment it departs, perhaps only to return in that departure. The resistance which love poses to thinking is therefore evinced in the contradictory and paradoxical nature of the preceding sentence. But Nancy clearly maintains that this is precisely the only way to think love.

It is therefore difficult to extract a clear and distinct formulation of eros from this resistance. But we can assume, due to the somewhat erotic subtext of the essay *Shattered Love* that Nancy does not preclude the erotic from his exposition of love. This is evinced in its concluding section, entitled ‘Joy and Concern’ to which we shall turn in the following section.

8. Orgasmic Joy, Love and Concern

We are exposed by concern – not that which ‘we’ ‘hold’ for the other, but by this concern, this solicitude, this consideration, and this renunciation for the other that cuts across us and does not come back to us, that comes and goes incessantly, as the being-other of the other inscribed in being itself: at the *heart* of being, or as the *promise* of being (Nancy 2003:270).

Nancy finishes his meditation on love with joy and concern. But it is important to note that ‘to joy’ is a neologism to capture the French *jouir* in its double meaning of ‘to enjoy’ but also the colloquial term ‘to come’ (in the sense of having an orgasm). It is the enjoyment of orgasm which exemplifies the ‘coming-and-going’ of love, the ‘cutting across’ of the other, the “formation of a shatter” (ibid., p. 271) and ultimately the “ontological necessity of love” (ibid., p. 273). The implication here is that love, at its base, is eros. But, as we shall see, it is neither carnal desire nor voluptuous need. Something significant about identity is unveiled in Nancy’s orgasmic pun.

‘To joy’ is akin to the ‘coming-and-going’ of love inasmuch as the enjoyment of orgasm is the ephemeral *par excellence*. It is neither “fulfilment, and it is not even an event”, says Nancy (ibid., p. 271). The peak of joy “arrives as it departs” (ibid.). In this sense, it seems that Nancy envisages ‘joying’ as the bodily pinnacle of love. Yet in ‘love-making’, ‘to joy’ would be the moment when “each one is the other for the other – but also for the self...one joys in the other for the self: to be passed to the other” (ibid.). But this would be neither the sharing of fluids nor the biological process of reproduction. This is emblematic of the aforementioned characteristic of love to dissolve the

dichotomy of losing oneself and returning to oneself. Nancy (ibid.) calls the moment of joy the “syncope of identity in singularity. A syncope: the step marked, in a suspense, from the other to me, neither confusion nor fading, clarity itself, the beating of the heart, the cadence and the cut of another heart within it”.

What could Nancy possibly mean here? ‘Syncope’ is an interesting word. In everyday language, ‘syncope’ generally refers to the shortening of a word by way of a contraction, but may also mean to faint or swoon. In music, ‘syncopation’ is understood as the “rhythmic displacement of the metrical pattern” (Forte 1979:24). In the musical sense, this is generally achieved by stressing what would usually be the unaccented beat of a musical measure, or stressing the moment between the beats of a measure (ibid.). When applied to ‘identity’ as Nancy does it here, an interesting analysis may be made. It could be the moment in identity when it ‘swoons’, it falls back, becoming ‘faint’ in the presence of the other. But it remains identity, simply differently ‘accented’ as it is identity for the other, perhaps? Or it could be the cutting open of singularity, the arrest of the self, cutting it open to be contracted, with a part of it taken away.

Thus ‘to joy’ is not simply a physical response. It is the ‘contraction of singular identity’. When we place an apostrophe in a word for the purposes of contraction, the punctuation mark takes the place of one or more letters. This is then likened to identity: when ‘joying’, identity contracts and ‘the other’ is like the apostrophe in a word’s contraction. Just as the apostrophe in the contracted word ‘takes the place’ of the missing letters, so does the other takes his/her rightful place in me where my incompleteness of self is most obvious. But it also leaves me with a broken heart, just as the apostrophe leaves the word ‘broken’. This comparison can be extended also to the beating of the heart. The rhythm of the heart’s beat is ‘punctuated’ by ‘joying’. In a sense, ‘to joy’ would accent a different beat, making it ‘syncopated’. The musical metaphor does not stop there, as the ‘cadence and cut of another heart’ indicates the ‘contrapuntal harmony’ of love. In music, a cadence indicates the end of a musical phrase or line; it belies a pause in the harmonic movement of a piece, if not the end of a phrase, line or the whole musical work. ‘Contrapuntal harmony’ would be the chord structures and movements indicated by two (or more) melodic lines. Thus, the cadence of the heart would be the counterpoint between two hearts as they reach a pause, a surging syncope, in their respective identities. Each heart cut by the crossing of love, the two lovers would ‘punctuate’ each other in their respective singular identities in a moment which would be the epitome of ‘being singular-plural’.

Nancy disagrees with Freud’s “vulgar” (Nancy 2003:271) conception of orgasm as “discharge”. For him, ‘to joy’ should be considered as “an acute insistence, the very formation of a shatter” (ibid.). Thus, ‘to joy’ would each time be a unique ‘shatter’ in the infinite plurality of love’s ‘shatters’. Indeed, this indicates why Nancy maintains that thought and poetry have both said too much and not

enough on the subject. The failure of poetry to capture love's essence is also the wellspring of love poetry.

But, as is perhaps well known, 'to joy' is not to know any satisfaction. Nancy's (2003:271-2) paradoxical turn of phrase conceptualises joy as "beyond desire or short of it"; "not appeasement, but a serenity without rest"; or "to joy is not to be satisfied – it is to be filled, overflowed". Joy would be the excess of its own deficiency; it circumscribes neither the joy felt nor the shadow of pain it casts. What then would 'joying' be? Nancy (*ibid.*, p. 271) would answer that it is

to face the extremity of being, which is to say at once its completion and its limit...The joy of joying does not come back to anyone, neither to me nor to you, for in each it opens the other. In the one and the other, and in the one by the other, joy offers being itself, it makes being felt, shared. Joy knows concern, and is known by it. Joy makes felt, *and* it lets go the very essence of the sharing that is being.

Just as the syncopated nature of 'joying' compresses identity in its incompleteness, so too does it complete itself at the limit of the Being of the loving being, inasmuch as Being is always a 'being-with' characterised by concern. But since 'concern' is actually 'love' (at least for Nancy), it is in a constant state of arrival and departure. Thus 'to joy' is not only knowing and known by concern, it is also its letting go.

What this means for identity is that it is at once "at its peak" (Nancy 2003:272), but at the same time the moment of its constitution as *with* the other. As Nancy (*ibid.*) states

joying opens up the enigma of that which, in the syncope of the subject, in the crossing of the other, affirms an absolute *self*. To joy poses without reserve the question of the singular being...It is the question of *that which remains 'self' when nothing returns to the self*: the very question of love, if love is always proffered ('I love you') and if joy, coming from the other, coming and going, is, however, always mine.

Again there is a debt to Levinas here, in his conception of 'voluptuousity'.⁴¹ However, Nancy takes his typically different, non-dialectical, approach to the topic. Whereas for Levinas, voluptuousity aims towards the Other but it is also the oversaturation of the self in itself, Nancy claims this is due to joy's opening up of the self. It is 'absolute self' inasmuch as we must ask what 'remains of the self when nothing returns to it'. For Levinas, the self returns to itself after glancing over the Other, but for Nancy it is the other which has traversed the self and opened it up. In Nancy's (2003:272) diction, the self is "only the presence of the reception of the other presence – and the latter cuts across... To joy,

⁴¹ See Chapter 2, Section 3.2.2. "A Voluptuous Meditation".

joy itself, is to receive the burst of a singular being: it is more than manifest presence, its seeming beyond all appearance – *ekphanestaton*, Plato said”. This ‘bedazzlement’ is also only experienced “*by oneself*” (Nancy 2003:273). But this ‘by-oneself-ness’ is only possible inasmuch as joy is shared. Thus the self is only a self inasmuch as it is a sharing of self through joy (ibid.).

Through ‘joying’ it is revealed that a singular being is “neither a subject nor an individual nor a communal being, but *that* – she or he - which cuts across, that which arrives and departs” (ibid.). We see here that Nancy enmeshes singularity and plurality. Being is “absolutely singular” (ibid.) when taken absolutely. But at the same time this is only possible through the plurality of beings inasmuch as the relation of love constitutes them.

Nancy (ibid.) thus concludes:

This constitution is buried at the heart of being, but it emerges in outbursts of joy. One could say: being joys. One would thus define an ontological necessity of love. But love is neither unique nor necessary. It comes, it is offered; it is not established as a structure of being or as its principle, and even less as its subjectivity. One would thus define a necessity without a law, or a law without necessity, thus: the heart of being within love, and love in surplus of being. One could say, at the limit, the fundamental ontology *and* the caprices of love. The correlation would neither be causal nor expressive nor essential nor existential nor of any other known genre. Perhaps it would no longer be necessary to speak of correlation. But there is this brilliant, shattering constitution of being. ‘Love’ does not define it, but it names it, and obliges us to think it.

Love therefore founds ontology because to think Being means that one is always already a locus of being-with and hence love. Being is plural inasmuch as it is the shattering effect at its heart. Again, Nancy’s writing is deceptive, as for him there is no totality of ‘Being’ but only ‘beings.’ There is no existence without existents. To apprehend ‘Being’ one has to be ‘be there’. But ‘being there’ means to be shattered, precisely to ‘be with’ or to ‘concern’. Through the example of joy, Nancy shows how love singularises the self as it shares itself and is rendered open by love. But it has no choice but to be so; to have a heart is to have a broken heart. It is only inasmuch as we are constituted by love that we are able to think: thinking is love. And to think is to weigh the limit of what is, i.e. of being there and being with. Hence love obliges us to think being inasmuch as it is love which carries the self to its limit in relation to the other in joy. This once more testifies to Nancy’s conflation of concepts; in showing that although they are multiple, they are also single. If Nancy’s ‘big idea’ is ‘being-singular-plural’ then this can be seen in the shattering of Being by love, but in its infinity of shatters ‘Being’ nevertheless remains singular. It is singular in the self but plural in the self’s constitution by the other through love.

9. Irigaray, Nancy, and the Body

If we bear in mind what we have understood Irigaray says about eros, we can see that her thought correlates quite closely with Nancy's thought (perhaps this is due to their deconstructive orientation). But at the same time, we find that Nancy's thought offers a way to simultaneously account for the good points Irigaray raises and to move beyond the rigidity of the masculine/feminine dichotomy in her thought, and the subsequent problems it entails. This is possibly primarily because where Irigaray (and indeed Levinas) think the feminine as the principle of plurality, Nancy assumes plurality before such a gendered subjectivity can be established. The result, as we shall see, is that whilst Nancy's thought may resemble Irigaray's in terms of love's mediating capacity, he also allows us to think love unburdened of the trappings of gendered subjectivity.

A feminist loyal to Irigaray's thought might make an attempt to show that Nancy's thought is another example of discourse which, through its neutral pronouns and overarching claims, necessarily occludes the debt to the maternal feminine and hence the difference that feminine subjectivity entails. Such a feminist may claim that Nancy's 'joying' is more akin to masculine sexual pleasure, or that his ontology forgets the debt to the maternal-feminine by reading the subjectivity he considers in his work as implicitly masculine and teleological. But to level such a critique against Nancy seems somewhat unjustified. 'To joy' for Nancy indicates the syncopated character of subjectivity: he essentially uses eros, like Irigaray does, to show that love mediates between the self and the other. But where Irigaray insists on this as the ethical relation between man and woman, Nancy does not resort to sexual difference. Thus, whilst Nancy's thought can apply to any sexual encounter, Irigaray's falls short inasmuch as she considers eros in exclusively heterosexual terms. A supposition that Nancy's work is teleological may make some sense if one claims that his discourse on love is orientated towards affirming his Heideggerian adaptation of the primacy of 'being-with' in his ontology of 'being-singular-plural'. But such a claim seems imprudent, since although this might be the case, Nancy's ontology is strictly opposed to teleology inasmuch as he emphasises finitude. If Being is always finite, then there is no single *purpose* to it although it comes to an end. Nancy's thinking of being-singular-plural is emphatically not teleological, let alone is his thinking on love. Indeed, Nancy critiques Levinas's phenomenology of eros on much the same grounds as Irigaray; they both identify and disagree with the teleological implication that paternal fecundity salvages love from the selfishness of erotic pleasure.

Just as Nancy can be interpreted to assert the same thing as Irigaray regarding the mediating power of love without relying on sexual difference, we may be able to apply his thought in such a way as to acknowledge the maternal-feminine debt. This could be achieved by recalling that for Nancy, to be a subject at all, one's heart must already be broken. The heart does not exist until it beats across the

break that divides its rhythm. Now if we imagine an unborn child in the mother's womb, we can also imagine its heart beating (generally speaking, an unborn child's heartbeat can be heard about six weeks into pregnancy). We are already broken by love in the womb. Thus, when in "The Fecundity of the Caress", Irigaray (2001:119) alludes to the maternal feminine as granting the possibility of eros (Roberts 2005:34), perhaps from a Nancean perspective we can read this as the idea that the unborn child is already marked by love inasmuch as its heart beats. We could therefore interpret that the first instance of love which breaks the heart might be the love of a mother for her unborn child.⁴²

Thus whilst Irigaray does raise interesting concerns regarding eros, it appears that Nancy might account for such concerns and in addition open eros beyond the limits set by Irigaray's feminist agenda. The following section therefore moves through Nancy's thought on touching and on the sexed character of the body, whilst at the same time playing these concepts off Irigaray's conceptual anchors for understanding eros.

9.1. Touching and the Body

The theme of touching permeates Nancy's work, and this theme shows the intimate nature of relations between selves and others. Derrida (2005) comments on this theme in Nancy's work in his book *On Touching – Jean-Luc Nancy*. Drawing upon Merleau-Ponty's notion of the chiasm⁴³, touching is also always 'self-touching.' Nancy uses touching to introduce alterity into his work, for the self is always touching the other, and with Merleau-Ponty's chiasm, the self is touching itself at the same time. Derrida names it 'self-touching-you,' which becomes a play on words which dominates the book.

Indeed, for Nancy, touching is the totality of sense. If we imagine the five senses, they can in fact all be conceptualised in terms of 'touch.' Sight is light *touching* the eyes, hearing is sound *touching* the ears, and so forth. The prevalence of touching throughout the work of Nancy is a testament to his focus on the immanence of the world. That is, the world is not a conceptual, immaterial, metaphysical thing. It is immanent, here and now.

⁴² Even in the tragic case that a mother hates her unborn child, hatred is considered by Nancy as another 'shatter' in the plurality of love, as we shall later take note of.

⁴³ The word 'chiasm' is one used to indicate the crossing over of lines, that is, in the form of an 'X'. Merleau-Ponty's chiasm is thus essentially the fact that there is a crossing over, of our capacity as body-subjects to touch, and be touched, to be seen, and to see, and ultimately by extension to experience the world, and to be experienced by the world. Merleau-Ponty (1987:123) asserts that the world is real in that our sensation of it "does not mean that there was a fusion or coinciding of me with it: on the contrary, this occurs because a sort of dehiscence opens my body in two, and because between my body looked at and my body looking, my body touched and my body touching, there is overlapping or encroachment, so that we may say that the things pass into us, as well as we into the things".

This is a point of close correlation between Nancy and Irigaray. As we have already noted⁴⁴, Irigaray formulates touch in a similar way. For her, the failure to recognise touch as fundamental perpetuates the dichotomy of active and passive. This failure, in turn, correlates to the phallogocentric bias where women are considered as passive objects upon which the masculine gaze may rest. Moreover, the subordination of touch to sight, for Irigaray, is one of the prime reasons she identifies a certain disdain for eros in Levinas's phenomenology. The prioritising sight would result in the masculine obsession with the transcendence of the future, ignoring the sensible transcendence of an immediate encounter with the sexual other in eros.⁴⁵ But such a disdain, Irigaray argues, comes at the expense of denying the ethical potential of eros, i.e. as the mediating situation par excellence between masculine and feminine subjects. Although Nancy does not explicitly connect touching with gendered subjectivity, their relation/the similarity seems fairly obvious. Inasmuch as touching is always the chiasmic 'self-touching-you,' the erotic touch might then resemble Irigaray's notion of an ethics of sexual difference as "chiasmus or double loop in which each can go toward the other and come back to itself" (Irigaray 1993:9). But, as we shall see, when Nancy's thought on touching is combined with his thought on the body and sexual difference, we might find a means to think beyond the somewhat simple dichotomy of masculine and feminine as found in Irigaray.

Derrida (2005:77) notes that what is touched always borders on the 'untouchable'. Derrida once again plays with words; letting Nancy's thought 'touch' upon Levinas's *Phenomenology of Eros*. If the other is untouchable, then this preserves the alterity of the gendered other but at the same time offers the chance of chiasmic crossing. Ultimately, Derrida derives a certain 'law of tact' which denotes the spacing between bodies (ibid., pp. 66-91). Touching is extended from the kiss and the caress to the meeting of gazes, when eyes touch they disrupt the monadic self-presence, drawing the self into a relation with another. Thus when Irigaray identifies eros as that which 'puts everything in touch with itself'⁴⁶, and eros is fundamentally comprised of the fecundity of touching, she aligns herself closely with Nancy's view. Indeed, Irigaray notes that the caress may begin from afar⁴⁷, and thus perhaps the meeting of gazes could therefore be considered erotic (perhaps this is why maintaining eye contact can become uncomfortable if too prolonged). But Irigaray's emphasis on sexual difference fails to encompass the broader scope of Nancy's concept of touching. For both thinkers, the other as such remains 'untouchable,' even in the closest moment of touch, namely eros. But for Nancy, even the

⁴⁴ See Chapter 3, Section 5.3. "Touch Made Visible: The Priority of Touch Over Sight"

⁴⁵ See Chapter 3, Section 5.2. "In The Name of The Mother: The Problem With Paternal Fecundity".

⁴⁶ See Chapter 3, Section 4.1. "Sorcerer Love".

⁴⁷ See Chapter 3, Section 5.5. "Divine Eros: Carnal Yet Transcendent".

briefest peering into another's eyes marks the heart with love, where for Irigaray the other must be considered as the sexual other. Whether a look passes between a man and a woman is of no significance for Nancy, although as we shall soon see, he nevertheless understands the crossing of love to say something of sexual difference. In terms of Nancy's *Shattered Love*, love would be the opening of the subject to be touched by any other, and this could be the case even if only through the glancing touch of a look. Thus, 'the law of tact' which Derrida meditates upon refers to the proximity of bodies, and the appropriateness of this proximity denotes the adjective⁴⁸ used to describe the love between them (fraternal, erotic, marital, competitive, scandalous, trivial, puppy, etc.). But love itself is nevertheless always present, even if refused.⁴⁹

While a detailed account of Derrida's commentary falls beyond the scope of my argument, it does serve to stress the significance of Nancy's thought on touching in relation to his thought on love. It is sufficient to note that touching is yet another one of Nancy's concepts which is enmeshed with his concept of love. Love is the opening of the subject, exposing it to the touch of the other. Love is hence at the 'heart of being' inasmuch as this heart always belongs to the/a subject who necessarily is constituted by 'being-with'.

Let us also recall how Irigaray deconstructs Levinas's concept of the caress⁵⁰ as the gesture "which weds without consum(mat)ing, which perfects while abiding by the outlines of the other" (Irigaray 2001:120). Moreover, she notes that the fecundity of such touching is "not foreign to the act of creating/procreating the world" (Irigaray 1993:195), and that fecundity is not only of body but also of spirit, that is of subjectivity.⁵¹ We can easily correlate this with Nancy's own thinking on love. If touch always borders on the untouchable, then to caress must 'abide by the other's outlines.' Whilst desire might objectify and dialectically 'consume' the other by turning him or her into a mere object of sexual pleasure, this is not the touch of love. Moreover, if Nancy considers 'the world' as the

⁴⁸ To consider eros as *profane* would thus be an inference based upon the contextual conditions which deem the appropriateness of tact. Rather than predicate profanity upon nudity and absolute alterity, we might rather consider it to apply as an adjective describing the proximity of lovers. A priest who violates his vow of chastity might be considered as engaging in profane eros, inasmuch as his sacred vows forbid him from such an act. Or an erotic act in a sacred space (such as a confessional or amongst funeral pyres – a practice amongst some followers of certain Tantric cults in India) might be considered profane, inasmuch as it violates the law of tact appropriate in such a space.

⁴⁹ This would be hatred, as Nancy (2003:266) explains: "there would not be a reversal from hate to love, but in hate I would be traversed by the love of another whom I deny in his alterity. Ultimately, I would be traversed by this negation. This would be the limit of love, but still its black glimmer".

⁵⁰ See Chapter 3, Section 5.4. "The Fecundity of The Caress".

⁵¹ See Chapter 3, Section 4.1. "Sorcerer Love".

shared world of being-with (Nancy 2003:268), and “the Being of the Dasein is nothing other than the Being of this sharing” (ibid.), then the loving touch is not foreign to ‘creating’ this world. Inasmuch as Nancy considers love as a necessary condition of being-with inasmuch as it breaks the subject open to such a possibility of relation, and that the proximity of touching denotes the adjective we apply to love, then the fecund erotic caress is that which facilitates the being-with of lovers. Moreover, the fecundity of spirit to which Irigaray alludes can be considered rather in terms of Nancy’s conceptualisation of the exposed subject. Love exposes the subject to the limit and to finitude, and as such authenticates the subject as ‘being-with’. Hence the fecundity of spirit could be understood as the finitude which authenticates the subject as both being-there and being-with. The creative exchange and interplay which Irigaray identifies in eros is thus affirmed in Nancy’s conception of love. Indeed, as noted in the aforementioned, Irigaray affirms love as that which mediates *everything* inasmuch as it puts it in touch with itself. In a similar vein, Nancy asserts the heart as existing only inasmuch as it is broken, and hence uses love to establish the necessity of ‘being-with’ which in turn establishes everything as ‘being-singular-plural’, which is to say a singular being is in touch with plurality. Where Irigaray meditates upon the daimonic eros as mediating between the depths and the heights,⁵² Nancy muses upon the coming and going of love. Nancy thus captures the mediating character of eros but without the mythological idealisation that Irigaray develops.

Furthermore, Irigaray’s insistence on the sensible transcendental,⁵³ or the immanence of transcendence is also accounted for in Nancy’s thinking. But rather than think transcendence as the internal demarcation of a limit established by one’s sexed nature, Nancy figures transcendence as the crossing of the heart. In other words, the fact that the subject is necessarily broken means that he or she is *exposed* to an excess. Transcendence for Nancy, like it is for Irigaray, would not be the surpassing of the self, but rather the exposure to the other, and to the limit. But Nancy differs from Irigaray inasmuch as transcendence is not bound up in the dichotomy of gender, but is rather the exposure of the self to its limit, and lover’s sharing this exposure through their love. For Nancy, this exposure to excess would be astonishment (Abbott 2011:153). This encompasses Irigaray’s formulation of wonder as the primary passion⁵⁴ since they both denote the recognition of a limit and that alterity lies beyond that limit. But again, where Irigaray predicates wonder upon sexual difference, Nancy predicates it upon the simple fact of finitude which love unveils. But what would sexual difference entail for Nancy? Is it possible to maintain a defence of feminine subjectivity in the

⁵² See Chapter 3, Section 4.1. “Sorcerer Love”.

⁵³ See Chapter 3, Section 4.2.1. “The Sensible Transcendental”.

⁵⁴ See Chapter 3, Section 4.2.2. “Wonder”.

context of his thinking? For these purposes, we might investigate what Nancy thinks about the body, and see whether he offers the opportunity to at once preserve the distinction between masculine and feminine but also allow us to move beyond a rigid fidelity to identification with only one of the two.

9.2. The body

In his essay, *Corpus* (2008a), Nancy deconstructs the notion of thinking ‘the body’ since the body is itself the origin of thought. Hutchens (2005:54) evaluates it thus: “Discourse cannot think singularities, especially the corporeity of the body from which discourse is evoked”. In other words, there can be no reified concept of *the body* since ‘no-body’ is the same. To recall, Nancy’s ontology asserts the impossibility of sameness because of the fundamentality of the relation, or ‘being-with’. Thus on the level of embodiment, sameness once again does not even exist. Even a single body is fragmentary, and since thinking and language originate in the body, it is not possible to (re)present all these fragments as a totalised whole. This reiterates one of Nancy’s fundamental points regarding Being, namely that Being is an absolute fragment.⁵⁵ The relevance of this for love, and specifically eros, lies in Nancy discussion of biological sex (i.e. the kind of body called either ‘female’ or ‘male’) under a section entitled ‘Thought’ (2008a:37).

Firstly, Nancy notes that ‘thinking about the body’ cannot itself “become a body” (2008a:37). Thought and the body are inseparably touching each other, “breaking down, and into, each other” (ibid.). In their touching of each other, “the limit and spacing of existence” (ibid.) comes to light as “joy” and “sorrow” or “pain”. Since, as we have already established, Nancy connects joy with love, love is thus pre-empted in this formulation. The spacing “signifies nothing, exposing instead the combination of these four terms: body-thought-joy-pain” (ibid.). These four terms are distributed on a “swerve” and in their combination a *unique* sex of a singular body is manifest. As strange as it may seem to posit that sex is unique, this notion will play into the greater context of Nancy’s thought quite well, as we shall soon see.

“Sex” names this combination of ‘body-thought-joy-pain’. But it only does this insofar as sex is a process of *exposition*. Another connection to love can be made here, since we should recall that love exposes the subject as incomplete, or broken hearted. Moreover, if the dialectic refers to the supposed enclosed subjectivity of consciousness, then being exposed before and after its operation would be as nothing other than a body. We have already alluded to exposure on numerous occasions in the aforementioned, but it is here that we can explore more vigorously what this means. If we break the word ‘exposition’ down, we have ‘ex’ and ‘position.’ What I interpret Nancy to be alluding to here is

⁵⁵ See the aforementioned in Section 1. “Sidestepping Parmenides: Nancy’s Critique of Alterity in Levinas”.

the “thrust of the existent that is offered-to, ahead of itself” (Nancy 2003:268). The structure of this thrusting is named by Nancy as ‘concern’ in Heidegger, but which is in fact love (as we have discussed above). Thus inasmuch as a being (in the sense of *Mitdasein*) is a body, the being of this body is thrust forward as the offering to the other inasmuch as Being is inherently shared. The body is therefore pure exposition which also indicates its movement through time. As the body moves in time, it consistently leaves its position and arrives at another (ex-position) (2008a:43). Like the coming and going of love, the body arrives as it departs and departs as it arrives. Therefore the body as ‘body-thought-joy-pain’ is the body as it is there, is in relation, is opened to the possibility of relation by love, and, is finite (i.e. it has a temporal limit).

But in order to appreciate what Nancy is getting at in full, we must understand that he deconstructs the very idea that a body has an ‘interior’ and an ‘exterior’. Although we shall soon discuss the exterior of the body as skin, it is important to note that “*exteriority goes all the way down*” (Abbott 2011:158). Abbot (ibid.) quotes Nancy (2010:18) in a footnote:

The body doesn’t contain anything, neither a spirit that couldn’t be contained nor an interiority specific to the body, since the body itself is nothing but the multiply folded surface of the ex-position or ek-sistence that it is...All the way down to its guts, in its muscle fiber and through its irrigation channels, the body exposes itself, it exposes to the outside the inside that keeps escaping farther away, farther down the abyss that it is.

Nancy is therefore questioning the everyday assumption that we make about bodies having a special, intangible interior or essence. This quote recalls what Nancy (2008a:19) says in *Corpus*: “The body’s neither substance, phenomenon, flesh, nor signification. Just being-exscribed.” The entire body, down to the ‘guts,’ perhaps even down to the strands of DNA and chromosomes, is Being excribing itself as being-there and being-with. We distinguish between interior and exterior, but this distinction is again a convenience. For Nancy, there is no inaccessible ‘inside’. Thus when Irigaray thinks of the threshold, or the body as an open or closed house,⁵⁶ Nancy would shy away from such views. Both of these conceptions imply that there is an interior space inside the body which belongs to that body alone. But for Nancy, the body is pure exteriority. He even makes the assertion that there is no such thing as penetration, and that the conception of sex as penetrative shows the limits of our current lexicon for love (Nancy 2001:sp). All that (what we call) penetration is, is in fact the chiasmic touching of bodies in perhaps an intimate or invisible space. But this is not to say that erotic intimacy is limited to sex. Again, the meeting of eyes or the holding of hands could be more erotically intimate than even the act of sex (depending on the context). Hence Nancy might agree with Irigaray to some

⁵⁶ See Chapter 3, Section 4.2.3. “The Threshold”.

extent regarding the intimacy of the erotic act, and its touching upon the invisible. But taking into account what we have already mentioned above, the erotic act would not only touch the invisible, but also the untouchable: sex remains the chiasmic self-touching-you Derrida identifies in Nancy's development of touch. The body, as pure exposure or exteriority, is hence more erotic than one might suppose.

One dimension, *inter alia*, of the body's exposition would be its sex, and thus Nancy acknowledges that all bodies are necessarily sexed. Nancy (2008a:37) states

'Sex' touches upon the untouchable. It's the body's *flash-name*⁵⁷, a name that only designates, to begin with, by spacing bodies according to the flashes of that supplementary aesthesia: *sexes*. We can neither number nor name those sexes in themselves. Here 'two' is only an index for a polymorphous swerve. 'My' sex isn't one thing throughout; it's a discrete, random, eventful contact of the zones of 'my' body, as much as of others – my body becoming other, by touching itself there, by being touched there, becoming thereby *the same*, more absolute, more separated than ever, more identified as a taking place of touching (of extension). From (a)phallic to (a)cephalic, a level, smooth, plural, zoned, shaded, touched body. We won't call it 'woman' or 'man': those names, for good or ill, leave us too much among fantasies and functions, when it is precisely not about them. Therefore let us instead say: that *one* indistinct/distinct, indiscrete/discrete body is a sexed body-flash, sliding from body to body, right at the intimacy – the flashing, in effect – of the limit at which they touch their swerve.

Thus we could infer a certain gender theory from Nancy's thought. For him, sex is not a coherent duality of male/female. Rather, it is a 'polymorphous swerve' which we refer to as male/female only for the sake of convenience. Thus Nancy's thought is inclusive of all genders; 'masculine', 'feminine', 'intersexed', 'otherly gendered', 'asexual', and so on. Indeed, the body itself is not coherently one gender. As the different parts of the body touch themselves and each-other in the same touch, they remain fragmented nevertheless. I could have feminine eyelashes, a masculine jaw line, an asexual elbow and bisexual hands. I might be called a 'man' for the sake of convenience, but ultimately my sex is the completely unique fragmentation of my body as it is the distribution of thought touching the body in joy and sorrow. As such, the plurality of bodies are 'flashes' (or indeed 'shatters') of the convenient 'index' male/female.

⁵⁷ In French: "*nom-éclat*." It is interesting that this word is used here in relation to sex, because the French title of the essay *Shattered Love* is "L'Amour éclats." The word '*éclat*' can mean "shatter, piece, splinter, glimmer, flash, spark, burst, outburst, explosion, brilliance, dazzle and splendor [sic]" (Translators Note in Nancy 2003:346). For Nancy, as a philosopher who is obviously extremely pedantic with the use of words, the fractal explosion of love's plurality is thus unquestionably similar to the fragmentary flashing of the body's sex (gender).

Hence Nancy's understanding of gendered subjectivity is vastly different from Irigaray's. For Nancy, there is no single feminine other just as there is no masculine same. Indeed, the sexes are indexed as masculine and feminine, but one's singular being is uniquely sexed. And sex is not a unified thing either, even in a singular being. An objection might be made in Irigaray's defence, namely that Irigaray's objective is not to accurately describe real bodies, but to provide symbolic and imaginary points of reference from which feminine subjectivity can be reinforced in the face of patriarchal biases.⁵⁸ But Irigaray does make consistent reference to biology as the marker of real alterity. And in doing so, she limits the possibilities of gender rather than opening them up, since men are expected only to be masculine, and women to be feminine.⁵⁹ By constituting sex as fragmentary flashes of different parts of the body, Nancy at once opens up new dimensions of gendered subjectivity as the unique combinations of body-parts, and he accounts for sexual difference as mediated by love. If love is what opens the subject up to the possibility of relation (a necessary possibility since Being is always already being-with), then love mediates across a vast array of sexual subjectivities, each 'indexed' as male or female (or perhaps even other names). We can thus rescue some of what Levinas claims about the masculine and the feminine, inasmuch as for Levinas all of us have the capacity to participate in both.⁶⁰ If a body's sex is, for Nancy, the unique interrelation of its fragments' sexual character, then it might shed some light on the enigmatic biblical verse Levinas cites, namely that "male and female created He them."

But what does this 'sex-flashing' nature of the body imply? Nancy uses it to explain certain "laws" (2008a:37-38). For example, there is the "law of least contact, or of winking as an already maximal intensity of pleasure" (ibid. p., 37). We can easily see the relation to the aforementioned 'law of tact' which Derrida develops in his commentary on Nancy. Even a wink is a moment of touching, and such a moment of touching would be the arrival/departure of the love which breaks the heart. Nancy identifies a second 'law', namely of "the highest superficiality, where the body counts absolutely as *skin*" (ibid.). This law determines how the body is so often understood purely as its outline. It might be summed up in the old adage, "beauty is skin deep". We hear it in everyday language in phrases like 'she has a gorgeous body'. The body here refers not to its inner workings, but purely its exterior form or its skin. Sex is not restricted to the form of the body, one's gender runs as deep as one's DNA. But

⁵⁸ See Chapter 3, Section 3.1. "Madness to its Method: Irigaray's Psychoanalysis".

⁵⁹ See Chapter 3, Section 5.6 "The Lady Dot Protest Too Much Methinks: Evaluating Irigaray's Critique of Levinas".

⁶⁰ See Chapter 2, Section 7 "Woman and the Feminine".

we recognise others as sexed purely from their skin. Thus understanding the body as sexed may sometimes be ‘superficial’ inasmuch as the skin is what counts.

The third ‘law’ Nancy (ibid.) derives is that there is no sex without love, nor is there love without sex. This law is duplicitous of meaning, as sex can refer both to the act and to ‘gender’. Nancy therefore claims that all acts of sex imply love (even if the love is “infinitesimal” or “willfully [sic] denied” (ibid.)). Nancy therefore claims that there is no such thing as a loveless sexual encounter.⁶¹ Conversely, all love implies sex (“even when imperceptible”, says Nancy (ibid.)). Could the meeting of eyes, the touching of hands, or a kiss on the cheek, therefore count as ‘imperceptible’ sex? Perhaps. If love exposes the self, and sex is exposure, then love is necessarily complicit with sexual desire. This once more affirms the erotic undertone of Nancy’s thought on love (despite the attempts he makes not to specify love as eros). But this third law is one of Nancy’s wordplays; we can read a different meaning of ‘sex’ into this ‘law’. It could also literally refer to gender. There is therefore also no love without sex in this sense. In other words, all subjects who are exposed by love, or whose hearts are broken, are *sexed* subjects. This is another point where Nancy’s thought ‘touches’ upon Irigaray’s but exceeds it. Where Irigaray understands love as eros to mediate between subjectivities *after* they are established as sexed, Nancy accounts for this but asserts that it is love as eros which in fact establishes sexed subjectivity. Thus, for Nancy, love, sex, and ‘gender’⁶² are complicit with one another due to embodiment. Sex is the figure of bringing two entities into relation, or into play, be they actual ‘persons’, ‘individuals’, skin and body, ‘inside’ and ‘outside’, or sites and zones of the body with others. But love is the rupture, or break, in the self which allows for the possibility of entering into relation.

Love would therefore be the very thing which accentuates sexual difference. Love, says Nancy (2003:266), “cuts across the sexes with another difference...that does not abolish them, but displaces their identities”. In other words, love does not fuse sexual difference, or subsume it within a dialectical opposition of masculine and feminine. Rather, it accentuates the difference between the sexes by opening sexual identity to its other. “Whatever my love is”, asserts Nancy (2003:266), “it cuts across my identity, my sexual property, that objectification by which I am a masculine or feminine subject”. Again Nancy calls traditional dialectical understanding into question. Rather than

⁶¹ Bearing in mind that hatred is considered as one of love’s shatters, then even something like rape could be considered by Nancy to be love. Perhaps this is a point of objection which could be raised against Nancy, but it is not one raised here.

⁶² I use ‘gender’ here to clarify the double meaning of the word ‘sex’. But I do not wish to open up the difference between the two concepts and explore that nebulous arena. I leave that task for another time and place, perhaps in dialogue with thinkers like Judith Butler.

being two opposing poles which are reconciled by love, masculine and feminine are shown to be ‘objectifications’ and are rendered incomplete by the crossing of love. Love would thus ‘in-complete’ the difference between masculine and feminine, rather than render an already separated gender pair as ‘complete’, i.e. as if masculine and feminine were two complimentary parts of a greater whole. Thus, Nancy contrasts to Irigaray’s search for a chiasmic overlap between the sexes. Although they both understand the chiasmic character of the caressing touch, love unmask sexual difference rather than mediating between its poles. The difference between the thinkers is subtle, but where Irigaray understands love in the more classical sense of originating in a subject and moving to its other, Nancy holds that love breaks this subject open to the possibility of ‘being-with’ the other. But in this break, love also unveils difference, which is to say that love unveils the impossibility of literally *being* the other.

Hence Nancy (2008a:19) says “the bodies of lovers: they do not give themselves over to transubstantiation, they touch one another, they renew one another’s spacing forever, they displace themselves, they address themselves (to) one another”. Erotic love would be the intimate exposure of the sexed body to the other. But it not a fusal ‘transubstantiation’: eros for Nancy preserves alterity. Hence we can see that Nancy aligns himself with Irigaray’s conclusion, namely that eros is the possible site of an ethical relation between poles of alterity. But, Nancy’s thought thinks more broadly than Irigaray’s, inasmuch as the poles of alterity are not restricted to somewhat unified concepts of sexual subjectivity (as ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’).

Nancy (2008a:39) derives a fourth and final ‘law’ thus:

sex as a law, an imperative to touch, to fuck – something that neither instinct nor ‘libido’ as such can account for. Because this imperative has no object as its aim – no adult, child, self, or infant – just the joy/pain of *self-touching*. (Or yet again: of remaining-oneself or becoming-oneself *without* coming back to oneself. An orgasm [*jouir*⁶³] is the diastole without systole at the *heart* of the dialectic: this heart is the body).

Thus, Nancy identifies that to have a body, or to be a body, is automatically to have a sex and to desire sex. But Nancy does not equate this ‘imperative’ with instinctual or libidinal drives. Such drives presuppose a telos, or an aim towards which sexual desire extends itself (such as pleasure,

⁶³ “*Jouir*” is translated as ‘to joy’ in the aforementioned section entitled “Orgasmic Joy, Love and Concern”, since it is the French colloquial equivalent to the English colloquialism ‘to come’ (i.e. ‘to have an orgasm’). But if translated as ‘orgasm’ it loses the connotations of enjoyment (“*jouissance*”). Indeed, the English colloquialism might connect quite aptly with the theme of the promise: love is always to come, and hence it always indicates an excess which cannot be appropriated because of finitude. Indeed, ‘orgasm’, is far too crude a word to capture what Nancy wishes to communicate, since ‘orgasm’ implies a sense of completion. For the sake of clarity, however, the word ‘orgasm’ has been used, but its limitations should be noted and understood.

recognition, power, procreation, propagating the genetic line, etc.). This therefore shows us that Nancy does not consider eros as the confluence of love and desire (as we alluded to in the aforementioned section entitled “Love and Desire”). This ‘imperative’ derives itself from the nature of the body as exposition, and the exposition of sex at that. The imperative is not even aimed at a ‘touching of the other’. Rather it is oneself-touching-oneself-touching-the-other. And it implies love inasmuch as in it we can identify the chief characteristic Nancy identifies of love: namely that love dissolves the dichotomy between the love in which I lose myself and the love in which I return to myself. The chiasm of erotic touching, and the syncope of the heart, are far more profound conceptualisations of the erotic encounter than the simplicity of libido or desire. To say that the heart *is* the body is simply Nancy’s way of affirming the enmeshment of sex and love. If the heart exposes the self ‘before and after the dialectic,’⁶⁴ then what is exposed is a sexed body which is also constituted by love. Hence, later in *Corpus*, Nancy (2008a:119) states

the delighted body delights [*le corps jouit jouit*] in itself insofar as this *self* is enjoyed (as delighting/being delighted [*que jouir/être joui*], touching/being touched, spacing/being spaced *make, here the essence of the being*). *Self* extended through and through in the coming, in the coming-and-going into the world.

Sex and love are thus tightly interwoven in the structure of *Mitdasein*, or being both there and with. For Nancy, the self is already sexed, already constituted by love, and is already *Mitdasein*, before the ego might appropriate the other. Hence his thinking on eros reverses the presuppositions of both Levinas and Irigaray who regard love as originating in already formed egoistic masculine or feminine subject. But Nancy understands the sex of a subject to be unveiled by love, and that due to the subject being sexed; they are erotic selves who delight in the chiasm of touching, and the syncopated identity of ‘joying’.

10. Nancy: A Brief Critical Reflection

While a full critical engagement with Nancy’s thought lies beyond the scope of this masters, one way in which such a critique could take place is adumbrated here for the sake of showing that while Nancy’s views definitely do offer possible solutions to those problems identified in Levinas and Irigaray, his thought is itself not necessarily flawless. To sum up Nancy’s position, we could say that his thought on love is the attempt to show that love, just like the Being of that being which interrogates its own Being, is pre-reflective. And in showing that love is pre-reflective, and constitutes *Dasein* as *Mitdasein*, love amounts not to the traditional contradictory narcissism that much Western philosophy finds in it. On this view, we have seen that eros can be considered as the bodily condition

⁶⁴ See Section “Challenging the Dialectic” above.

of always already being exposed, and as such constitutes the Being of all bodily relations. The specific particularity of each body, and thus each instance of love, means that love considered thusly resists all schematisation and hierarchies of love.

But to achieve this, Nancy must separate love from desire. But this seems to nevertheless be problematic for eros. Although Nancy maintains that his thought on love does not render previous philosophy of love as void, it does demand that the history of the philosophy of love would have to be re-evaluated in terms of his formulation. The question would then be, can Nancy's thought on love be reconciled with the history, especially since eros in most other thinkers is not distinguished from the sexual desires complicit in it? Indeed, if desire and libido can legitimately be separated from eros as love, then what is libido? If it is that desire stems from an insatiable lack, but love as eros is the exposure of the body, then whence does this lack arise? The answers to such questions, although beyond the scope of this dissertation, may prove challenging to Nancy's thought on love, and hence we cannot accept his views uncritically. Moreover, Nancy's insistence on the radically particular character of love may leave us with a concept of love which is too broad that it could be applied to anything. Love considered thus would imply that simply by being in proximity to others, I in fact love them. Now while it may be useful to consider love in this way, since it would in turn demand a re-evaluation of an ethics of proximity, it could also lead to complacency in love. If love itself does not guarantee its continuation, or at least by nature incentivise us to 'keep on loving' and consider our activity in terms of that which love demands of us, then we run the risk of letting love fall into little more than mere being. Should our capacity for right action not imply that love be considered in terms 'other' than merely being-there-with? Indeed, if answers to such questions be impossible to formulate, then it may call into question whether Nancy's thought on love is justified to serve the purpose it has in this dissertation; namely that of reconciling the impasse between Levinas and Irigaray on eros. Therefore, although Nancy's conceptualisation of love, and indeed eros, are particularly useful, they do perhaps demand an even more extensive interrogation of love than is offered in this dissertation. Such a project is one that I may then return to, and the outcome of which is left open for the time being.

11. Conclusion

The primary reason, then, that Nancy differs from both Levinas and Irigaray is grounded upon his ontology of 'being-singular-plural'. Plurality, rather than as attested to via an encounter with the Other, or being the chief characteristic of the feminine, pre-exists all Being. In Heideggerian terms, Nancy formulates Being always as *Mitdasein*, where the 'mit' and the 'da' are inextricably enmeshed. As such, being-with is indicative of the singular being's immersion in a plural network of relations, and thus Nancy would think love beginning from this axiom. Thus Nancy disagrees with Levinas on a

fundamental level concerning Being. For Levinas, plurality is derived through the thought experiment wherein the subject experiences the brutal and anonymous solitude of the *il y a*. Indeed, although Levinas admits that there is no existence without existents, Nancy believes that we must presuppose plurality, that is accept it *a priori*, rather than accept that it hinges upon the face-to-face encounter. In Nancy's philosophy, 'Being' must be considered as absolutely fragmented without imagining that these fragments form a complete whole. Thus the self is the exposure of the Being of a being, both as 'being-with' and 'being-there.' Moreover, the self forms the ground upon which the ego can form, rather than the ego becoming a self through an encounter with the Other. The distinction between same and Other is not disputed by Nancy, but he does insist that the self exists prior to the same/other dichotomy. The implication of Nancy's ontology with respect to thinking love is therefore that he will expose love as something which also exists prior to the same/other distinction, and in fact allows for such a distinction to be made. Hence Nancy 'side-steps' the argument laid out by Parmenides, rather than challenge him using eros as Levinas does.

Love, for Nancy, is a difficult subject when tasked to think it. Nancy hopes to imagine love in a manner which accounts for the plurality of its 'shatters' without ranking them in some or other essential order. Nancy asks that we think love with extreme generosity because love itself is indefinitely multiple, despite each instance of love being irreducibly singular. Nancy finds that thinking and love are in fact the same thing, inasmuch as both are receptive practices which cannot master or become their object. Hence Nancy says that thinking is love, but not in the sense that thinking is an orgiastic libidinal obsession. Rather, the equation of thinking and love is found in the word 'philosophy' itself. Hence Nancy praises Plato's *Symposium* for showing the connection between thinking and love, but he also critiques the conclusion which Plato reaches because although Plato implied the connection between thought and love, he failed to make it explicit. The connection between thinking and love arises, for Nancy, because both testify to a limit or to finitude. By playing with the French words, '*pensée*' and '*pesée*' ('thinking' and 'weighing') he connects thinking to finitude. Inasmuch as weight denotes the limit of something's mass, thinking falls to the limit of sense. Thinking cannot think beyond itself, it is limited. And hence when Nancy says that thinking is love, he aims to connect love to the limit, and hence finitude, as well. Philosophy's failure to understand the connection between thinking and love has made it resort to a dialectical scheme of love. But Nancy critiques this dialectical formula to show that love is the exposure to the possibility of a dialectic, rather than something which succumbs to its power.

In his deconstruction of the dialectic, Nancy shows that love is so similar to the Absolute that should we accept that there is no such thing as an Absolute, then love shatters the power of the dialectic into the plurality of hearts that beat in chests of singular plural beings. Because, in dialectical terms, love's

synthesis would be a return to itself, there is in fact no synthesis. But this would be the way in which the Absolute would function if all reality is the interaction of the Absolute with itself. But since there is no Absolute, love must then occupy the heart of Being. Indeed, Nancy supposes that it is meaningless to suppose that Being has a heart since he maintains that there is no being-in-general, but only beings. Thus love lies at the heart of the subject who loves. The image of the heart is central to Nancy's understanding of love, because it links love with exposition and with finitude. A heart, moreover, must be broken in order to beat inasmuch as the systolic and diastolic movements of a heart are the beating across a break which exposes its two sides. Only a living being has a loving heart, but the heart does not beat beyond itself. Thus Nancy argues that love exposes the subject to the possibility of relation, and love's exposure is epitomised in the words 'I love you'.

Nancy's formulation of love is therefore very distinct from Levinas's phenomenology of eros. Levinas explicates eros as the equivocal simultaneity of corporeal need and metaphysical desire. But eros is deficient inasmuch as it falls back to the 'this side' of egoistic need due to the intensity of sexual pleasure. Paternal fecundity offers Levinas a means with which to think the simultaneity of the ego and the Other, inasmuch as the son appears as both an 'I' and an 'Other'. Nancy, however, identifies this Levinasian formulation as dialectical despite Levinas's aversion to dialectics. For Nancy, a heart must already be broken by love before it can exist (recalling the fragmentary character he asserts of Being). Thus, if love is the breaking of the heart which permits the possibility of being exposed to 'being-with,' and 'being-with' exists prior to the distinction between ego and Other, then Nancy finds Levinas to have mistakenly asserted that the erotic subject does not truly exist as 'being-with' in the fall back to the egoistic sameness of pleasure.

But Nancy seemingly disputes any fall-back from love to self-love as mistaking love with pride. Pride would be the projection of my own properties on to the other, and thus love would amount to nothing but the love of self as projected upon the other. Nancy critiques this as the mimicry of capitalism's characteristic to value surplus, and moreover Nancy shies away from thinking love as pride. Rather, Nancy supposes that love must dissolve the difference between losing oneself and finding oneself in love. Love is not to be understood as a movement from ego, to other, and back to ego. For Nancy love breaks the ego and its dialectical operations. Love exposes the subject as frail and incomplete, and hence love exposes the subject as necessarily 'being-with'. Love would be the negation of pride, and thus love disrupts the activity of the dialectical subsumption of the other.

This picture of love also contrasts to Irigaray's formulation of eros. Despite Irigaray's emphasis upon the radical difference embodied in gendered subjectivity, and eros as the irreducible intermediary between the poles of gendered subjectivity, her formulation of gender nevertheless resembles pride. Even if Irigaray deigns eros as the moment in which gendered subjectivity comes to realise its limits

and its other, by applying Nancy we find that the gender of a subject resembles too closely the property which self-love projects in order to love itself. Moreover, Irigaray emphasises the regenerative power of eros, which thus affirms the gendered subjectivity of lovers. But Nancy therefore contrasts to Irigaray since he considers the 'I' to return broken as well as rejuvenated. Thus Irigaray's more rigid formulation of gender is weakened already by Nancy's critique of dialectics, and hence another means by which to think the sexed subject is pre-empted by Nancy's configuration of love as heartbreak.

The broken heart is also emblematic of Nancy's understanding of transcendence. But Nancy again critiques the dialectical understanding of transcendence which considers its condition as the possibility for the self to surpass itself. Transcendence for Nancy is rather the 'dissimplification' of the self, or in other words the breaking of the self and its immediately consequent exposure as being-with. Love itself is the other for Nancy, rather than the other person. Love opens the self up by arriving from the outside or exterior, exposing the self to this outside. But at the same time, love cannot be seized by the self. Love arrives in departure and departs in arrival; it is the ephemeral *par excellence*. Love therefore exposes the subject to the impossibility for love to be complete, and in turn, the impossibility for the self to exist in solitude. The beating heart is once again the appropriate image for love, and its living rhythm foreshadows the finitude of its last pulse.

Love thus unveils finitude for Nancy inasmuch as the love break exposes the self to something infinitely inappropriable. Moreover, Nancy connects this unveiling of finitude with Heidegger's concept of concern, and thus asserts that concern and love are actually the same thing (although Heidegger seemingly did not apprehend this fully). But finitude refers not only to the death of *Dasein* since Nancy insists that *Dasein* must always be *Mitsein*. Hence, I do not come to realise my own finitude until I realise the finitude of he, she, or those, whom I love. Nancy therefore mediates the impasse between Irigaray and Levinas regarding the connection between love and death. Where Levinas insists that the death of the beloved other is of more concern than my own, Irigaray implies that love might facilitate my coming to terms with my own death by not substituting the (feminine) gendered other for that particular unthinkable. Nancy's thinking includes both, since it is the mortality of the one I love which attests to my own mortality.

It is important that we understand Nancy's distinction between desire and love in order to derive a more specific account of eros from his work. Nancy claims that desire is inherently the dialectical attempt to resolve an infinite lack at its root. Desire, unlike love, appropriates its object in order to satisfy itself. But even in the acquisition of the object of desire, desire reformulates itself towards another object. Where desire is selfish, love will share. Indeed, love is constitutive of *Dasein's* sharing its being-in-the-world; in other words love allows for *Mitsein*, where desire is ignorant of it. Love is

therefore not libido. But this presents a problem for thinking eros, since one would assume that eros is the confluence of love with libidinous desire. But Nancy seems to argue otherwise, and this leads to the radical character of his understanding of eros.

Despite the fact that love, for Nancy, is the indefinite plurality of all loves, at the same time each instance of love implies every other kind of love there is. Moreover, Nancy's text consistently alludes to tales of romantic love, such as Tristan and Isolde or Don Juan. But despite the differences characterised in these love stories, and their uniqueness due to this, for Nancy each is still regarded precisely as love. The daimon Eros, son of Poros and Penia, is interpreted by Nancy to represent the poverty of love's essence and the plentiful abundance of love's shatters. Love is thus the innumerable instances of love implied even in a single instance of love. Indeed, love shatters being into the plurality of singular beings who are opened by love to the possibility (and necessity) of 'being-with'.

These conceptualisations of love testify to the paradoxical impossibility for love itself to be seized by thinking. Hence Nancy offers us an alternative way in which to grasp the truth of love, not by schematising love's operation, but as the promise contained in the words 'I love you'. These words are peculiar because the impossibility to guarantee that I love you is precisely the condition which allows me to utter them sincerely. Love's promise is predicated upon the fact that it is impossible to keep. The best that one can do is renew one's promise, but what that promise involves will always elude he or she who makes it. To love another is to take the risk that one might not love the other, or that the love will end. But as such, love alludes to the possibility of a future, and it is the exposure of one being to another. Love therefore exposes the self to the other along with the exposure to the limit and finitude. For Nancy then, love can at best be understood as this exposure. Love is without obligation, but only presents itself as the breaking open of the self, or the breaking of the heart. Hence when Levinas says that love aims at the frail other, Nancy understands love as that which makes one frail in the first place.

Yet, despite the allusions Nancy makes to other kinds of love, the final section of *Shattered Love* is loaded with erotic undertones. The words 'to joy' are the translation of the French colloquial term for sexual climax. And Nancy develops 'joying' as emblematic of the incomplete yet relational character of identity. 'Joying' is at once the epitome of identity and the epitome of being-with. The 'joying' self is only a self inasmuch as it shares its joy, but at the same time this joy is felt by the self alone. Hence joying syncs up with Nancy's ontology of being-singular-plural. Just as being is always the singular occurrence of a being constituted by relation, love is also a singular instance implying the infinite plurality of its possibilities. Love and joy make the self radically singular, but they simultaneously open the self up to the possibility of relation and affirm this possibility as necessary.

If we subject Nancy's conceptualisation of love to feminist critique from an Irigarayan perspective, his thought stands up to the standard criticisms which this might entail. Irigaray and Nancy are quite similar in terms of love as the mediator between subjectivities. But Nancy does not predicate this mediation upon sexual subjectivity like Irigaray does. The feminist might therefore treat Nancy's work with suspicion since it might mask patriarchal biases behind the neutral subject. But Nancy's thought is not so simple. His work resembles no particularly masculine features, such as teleology or linearity. One can even extend his thinking to account for the maternal-feminine which Irigaray is so keen to defend. But without the recourse to sexual difference as the prerequisite for love, Nancy's thinking moves beyond the rigid sexual dichotomy which underpins Irigaray's philosophy, and moves towards a more pluralistic account of gender.

Although both Irigaray and Nancy emphasise touching, and the chiasmic interaction this implies, Nancy's thought on touching extends to the very relation that is being-with. Both thinkers assert touching as primary, rather than something like sight. Indeed, sight could be considered as light touching the eyes. Both Irigaray and Nancy therefore accord the immanence favour over the futurity in Levinas's paternal impulse. The import of chiasmic touching in eros, for Irigaray, is the ethical potential it provides for a relation between the sexes which respects alterity. The thinkers are also similar in that they both think that the erotic caress may begin at a distance, where the meeting of gazes can constitute a touching of the other. But where Irigaray insists this touching to exist between gendered subjectivities, Nancy does not suppose that sexual difference must be as primary as Irigaray desires it to be. For Irigaray, the radical nature of sexual difference imbibes a (re)generative power into eros, allowing the subjects therein to renew and rediscover themselves and the other. But Nancy offers a similar possibility without prioritising sexual difference. For Nancy, love opens the subject to 'being-with' and exposes the subject to finitude. Exposition and finitude indicate the limit of subjectivity, and as such offer the subject a chance at authenticity. When Irigaray asserts the daimonic eros as that which puts everything in touch with itself, Nancy says something similar about love unveiling Being as 'being-singular-plural.' And where Irigaray predicates transcendence upon the radical alterity of gender, Nancy formulates it without recourse to that dichotomy. For him, the transcendence of love is embodied in its exposition to the excess beyond it; whether that is alterity and whether that alterity is gendered differently, is of no concern. Thus Nancy accounts for the points that Irigaray raises but also moves beyond the hindrance of dichotomous sexual alterity.

Indeed, Nancy deconstructs the reified concept of the body, and biological sex falls under the scope of this deconstructive project. For Nancy, sex is a unique point on a polymorphous swerve, and thus sex is another parallel with 'being-singular-plural'. Where love is both the indefinite plurality of all loves but also each irreducibly unique instance of it, sex is also a plurality of possibilities manifested as

unique in a single body. These possibilities are indexed as ‘man’ or ‘woman’, but more for the sake of convenience than for anything else. Indeed, even the sexed nature of a single body is not a unified whole. The body would be the indefinite amount of relations between the body and itself; its outside and its inside, its thoughts, joys, sorrows and pains, and perhaps even down to the cellular level. The body, for Nancy, is purely exterior, interiority is but another mere convenience. Hence there is no such thing as penetration, and the erotic act is thus considered as simply another kind of touching.

To say that sex is a unique and particular set of relations within a body allows us to consider sex outside of the masculine/feminine dichotomy. In this consideration, Nancy makes room for thinking gender pluralistically rather than as a duality. Hence, Nancy’s view of masculine and feminine is more akin to Levinas’s supposition that all people participate in both. But Nancy moves beyond even Levinas, since the ‘masculine’ and the ‘feminine’ are but mere convenience or points of reference. Nancy’s configuration of sex allows him to derive four ‘laws’ which correspond to sex. Firstly is the law of least contact, which refers to the idea that even minimal contact is an erotic touch. Hence Derrida explores the ‘law of tact’ which he identifies in Nancy’s work. The second law Nancy derives it that to consider the body purely as skin is a superficial convenience. But this is not to suppose that sex is skin deep.

The third law Nancy derives is an important one. By way of this law, Nancy asserts that sex and love are necessarily and unavoidably complicit. There is no love without sex, and there is no sex without love. But the formulation of this law is deliberately ambiguous. Sex could refer both to gender or to the erotic act. Hence Nancy implies that to have a sexed body is to be marked and crossed already by love. And this love must indeed be eros, even when there is no explicitly sexual tension in a relation characterised by love. But if we take into account what Nancy developed in *Shattered Love*, and love is the very condition for being-with, then this love is also eros inasmuch as each being who is with is also a body, and as a body is a sex. Hence, as echoed in *Shattered Love*, Nancy suggests that love unveils sexual difference rather than mediate between two extreme poles that index it.

The final law Nancy derives is particularly interesting. In this law Nancy asserts that sexual desire or libido does not equate with a subtending imperative to touch. In this imperative, Nancy alludes to the joying characteristic of lover’s syncopated identity. Hence Nancy seemingly separates sexual desire from an even more repressed imperative. This would be the love which breaks the heart and puts the being as a body into a relation with others. Hence, by the end of the exposition of Nancy’s thought, we see that almost all his thinking reflects the essential ontology he develops. Namely, Nancy asserts that each being is radically singular, but exists in a necessary relation with an indefinite plurality of such singularities. Ultimately, love, sex, the body, concern, and indeed eros, correspond to this pattern.

What are we therefore to make of eros, after having journeyed through three dense and complex French thinkers views on eros? In the subsequent and final chapter, we reflect upon what each thinker offers to thinking eros, and whether any questions may remain unanswered.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

What can we conclude regarding eros from the interwoven complexities of the three chapters devoted to the critical exposition of eros in the thought of Levinas, Irigaray, and Nancy? In order to guide this dissertation's conclusion, we shall organise it according to the relationship which eros holds with each of the following themes. Firstly, we must examine the relationship which each thinker supposes eros has with alterity. All three thinkers provide their own nuanced understanding of what exactly eros means in terms of the relation between self and other, and hence it may be possible to derive something about eros as relational. Indeed, the figure of sexual difference must be mentioned here, that we might establish exactly what sexual difference entails with regard to the erotic relation. Secondly, we must examine the tactility of the erotic, since touching and caressing give eros its distinctive nature. Connected with this second theme is the character of erotic desire, and its complicity with erotic love. Thence, we must examine the third theme regarding eros, namely whether erotic transcendence is something worth considering, and if so what exactly this transcendence entails. This leads us to a fourth theme regarding love's affair with death, where we can evaluate what love and death reveal about one another. Fifthly, we must mention something regarding the status of Plato's *Symposium*, and thus identify how the mythical roots of eros presented in that text has shaped the way in which the selected contemporary French thinkers understand eros. Finally, we draw all these themes together and figure love's relationship with plurality. By doing this, we discover that eros is the mysterious basis upon which plurality becomes thinkable?

1. Loving Me, Loving You: Eros and Alterity

Levinas's phenomenological analysis of eros directs the way in which eros is thought in both Irigaray and Nancy. For Levinas, the phenomenology of eros is one analysis of many in which he uses an experience to which many can relate in order to point to the alterity upon which such an experience depends. The Other in eros is emblematised as a feminine absolute alterity. Despite the sensuousness of erotic pleasure, the Other slips beyond this dimension of erotic need. But eros itself is equivocal, and hence suspect. Although it is evident that eros cannot occur without the Other, Levinas claims that the carnality of the experience renders it a profane relationship with alterity. As such erotic pleasure ceaselessly falls back into the economy of the same. The feminine thus allows herself to be the conduit for voluptuous erotic pleasure whilst at the same time remaining an Other which that pleasure cannot wholly appropriate. Eros thus presents the Other equivocally, for she is at once absolutely Other, and at the same time the condition for the egoism of sensual pleasure. A particular reading of Levinas thus yields eros in his work as the love aimed at the Other but which only reaches as far as the sensuality of the same. The erotic subject in Levinas fails to love alterity truly, although (his) love is given impetus by that alterity. A lover in eros inevitably loves love itself, not the Other.

Irigaray takes exception to Levinas's view because of the status the feminine is accorded within it. Irigaray identifies Levinas's phenomenology of eros as implying that the feminine beloved is a far too passive figure in eros. As such, the feminine is incapable of loving in an authentic way. This indicates, for Irigaray, that the feminine is not accorded the possibility of a radically different, but nevertheless equally important, position as a subject. Irigaray argues that Levinas's concepts of profanity, equivocation, and paternal fecundity, imply that the feminine is relegated to a less important realm of carnality. To formulate a more just account of feminine subjectivity, Irigaray thus argues that the carnality of eros be celebrated rather than treated with suspicion. Eros provides Irigaray with a moment where an ethical relationship with alterity can be explored inasmuch as for her ethics is concerned with the relation between the sexes. If there is no absolute 'Other,' but only the other that is different from me sexually, then Irigaray suggests that eros is the perfect situation where a most intimate encounter with the other is possible. Eros offers a site of chiasmic overlap, where the masculine and the feminine might share desire. Through this sharing of desire, lovers may inform their respective subjectivity; not by assimilating or appropriating the other, but by making that other more aware of their own gender through an encounter with the one that is radically different from it. Eros is therefore the irreducible intermediary between the poles of alterity embodied in sexual difference. Moreover, eros is not fecund only in terms of procreation, but it engenders a fecundity of spirit which informs masculine and feminine subjectivity. Eros is thus the relation between the sexes which affirms them as sexed subjects in relation to an alterity comprised of sexual difference.

Irigaray and Levinas are therefore incommensurate in the way in which they think eros in relation to alterity. Although both think the feminine other as the exemplar of radical alterity, eros for Levinas is an equivocal relation with the other tainted by the sensuality of erotic need. But for Irigaray, the sensuality of eros is precisely what accords it its significance as a situation in which radically different sexual subjects can come to know themselves by understanding the limits of their bodies. Yet Irigaray's somewhat enthusiastic praise of eros comes at the price of accepting sexual difference as absolute. In other words, Irigaray does not permit sexual difference to be anything but a dichotomy, and thus a heterosexist bias underscores her concept of eros. I have understood Irigaray to espouse a particularly rigid dichotomy of gender. Despite all the attempts she makes to alleviate problems resulting from the occlusion of feminine subjectivity, the implication is that men and women can only identify with one gender: their own. But as I have demonstrated in my interpretation of him, Levinas supposes that masculine and feminine are two categories in which all people might participate in various degrees of intensity, and thus the feminine other is not necessarily a woman. But Irigaray's critique of Levinas is at least in part understandable, because if the masculine and the feminine are but metaphysical categories, then how do they relate to the real experience of empirical men and women? One has to assume then that sexual pleasure is masculine inasmuch as pleasure is the realm of need

and the same. Thus feminine sexuality is denied its own status, and the feminine belongs solely to the order of the Other and the metaphysical desire the Other inspires. Irigaray and Levinas are therefore at an impasse concerning eros, and thus we must look to Jean-Luc Nancy for a possible solution.

Nancy's reconceptualisation of sexual difference is key in understanding how he might consider eros relating to alterity. Rather than suppose that sexual difference is the biological marker of alterity, as Irigaray contends; or suppose that the masculine and the feminine are two metaphysical categories in which we all participate, as Levinas asserts; Nancy supposes that sex is the unique set of relations between the different parts, sites and zones of a body. For Nancy, we name a person 'man' or 'woman' only for the sake of convenience. The sex of a body is the unique way in which that body is exposed. But since exposure is always an exposure *to*, being sexed is necessarily always also to be in relation with others. Indeed, the most vigorously recurring leitmotif in Nancy's thought is the priority of being-with. Furthermore, Nancy argues that being-with is possible because love breaks the subject open. But since to be is to be an exposed body, and the fact that this body is sexed implies that all loves are subtended by eros, then eros is the exposure of one sexed subject to another or others. Nancy's ontology, however, aims to express something more fundamental than the relation between the ego and the Other (or other). Eros thus does not describe a particular situation between an ego and the Other, or between the masculine and the feminine. Nancy's conception of self implies that it is impossible to consider the self in terms of 'sameness.' The self, or that element in which all pronouns take place, is both superbly singular and also in relation to other selves in likeness and togetherness. Inasmuch as every self is uniquely sexed because it has a body, it is superbly singular. And inasmuch as each sexed self is exposed because of eros, then eros is what accounts for being-with others. For Nancy, eros is thus not a relation with the Other which originates in the ego, aims towards the Other, and then falls back into the sameness of sensual need. Nor is eros the intermediary between the poles of sexual alterity. Eros is rather the basic exposition of the sexed body to any other. This exposition is necessary; it is not simply one possibility of a relation between two subjects. Indeed, eros would be the self exposed as a sexed body, and thus the self's necessary erotic undertone to its being-with.

2. Touching Me, Touching You: The Tactility of Eros

In thinking eros, each philosopher in this dissertation has said something regarding touching. Levinas elaborates upon the erotic caress as a tactile movement which – like eros itself – is both aimed at the Other but lapses into sameness because of its sensuousness. The sensuality of eros falls within the category of 'nourishment,' or that which provides the ego with spacing of its existence. But Levinas supposes that the nourishment of a sensual existence is solitary, or that it does not yet provide the full escape from being enchained to oneself. Therefore the voluptuous nourishment of eros cannot give the ego time as the face can. As we have seen, the presentation of time in eros is ambiguous and hence the

caress seeks a future never future enough. This future is accomplished in fecundity, rather than eros. Hence the caress connects eros to the transcendence of paternity. Therefore, whilst the sensuousness of the caress is bound to the corporeality of need, the future to which it aims betokens the metaphysical desire for the Other. But because of need's sensuality, desire cannot be accomplished in eros. It is only in the son, who again presents a face untainted by erotic need, where metaphysical desire can be accomplished. And although Levinas's phenomenological account of the caress serves a particular importance in his work, Irigaray and Nancy are able to take it further in order to elaborate the theme of touching in broader terms in their own work.

Irigaray thus critiques Levinas's formulation of the caress because of its connection with paternal fecundity and the transcendence of time. Moreover, Irigaray critiques Levinas's preference for the transcendence of time over the immanence of erotic touching. What Irigaray identifies in Levinas's phenomenology of the face is a particular prioritising of the sense of sight over the sense of touch. This connects with the oculo-centrism of patriarchy, which 'views' women as objects and dominates them with a gaze. Yet Irigaray claims that sight actually is touch: the eyes touch the body, and seeing is light touching the eyes. Thus the erotic caress is more significant than the return of the face in the son. The erotic touch has access to the most intimate and invisible part of a woman, which is also the place where all subjectivity begins. Erotic tactility emphasises the embodied subject as masculine or feminine, and thus establishes a fecund relationship between the sexes which does not subject one to the dominion of the other. Indeed, since Irigaray considers eros as that which puts everything in touch with itself, she understands the erotic touch as emblematic of mediating between the poles of a sexed reality. The erotic caress is inspired by wonder for the other sex, and through the tangible, and mediating, power of the mucous, eros is granted the power to regenerate subjectivity through touching. The erotic touch is thus testimony to the chiasmic relationship between the sexes, informing both, and hence is important in Irigaray's ethics of sexual difference.

Indeed, Nancy's conception of touching, as Derrida explains, is also chiasmic. For Nancy, touching is always touching the untouchable. It is a chiasmic self-touching-you; or the self touching itself touching the other. This is thus part of the 'debt' which Nancy owes Levinas, for it is quite similar to the caress which touches upon an untouchable futurity ever beyond its grasp. Nancy's conception of touching, however, is a consequence of the precondition of being-with. But if we combine Nancy's thinking regarding love and being-with, with his thought on the body and sex, it is evident that touching always has an erotic character. Furthermore, erotic touch is not restricted to skin-on-skin contact; one even touches another through a look. Therefore where Levinas identifies the sensuality of touching as profaning the relation with the Other, Nancy suggests that all relations with others are subtended by an erotic touching. And whereas Irigaray's formulation of touching is pinned to the

erotic relations between men and women, Nancy's touch transcends such a dichotomy for the same reason. Since Nancy considers sex to be the fragmented coordination of different bodily figures, the dichotomy of masculine/feminine is not restricted to genital or chromosome configuration. For Nancy, erotic touching underscores our very existence inasmuch as being-with is constituted by the criss-cross weavings of a subtly erotic being-with, made possible by the exposition that is love. It is true that both Irigaray and Nancy suggest one may caress another with a look or that a caress may begin from afar. Furthermore, both Nancy and Irigaray formulate ways in which erotic touching can inspire the regeneration of subjectivity. But whereas Irigaray supposes that the relation between eros and subjectivity is geared towards emphasising subjects as masculine or feminine, Nancy argues that subjectivity is constituted by being-with, which is in turn testified to by the interconnectedness of finite erotic touch. We can therefore suppose that Nancy thinks touching in broader terms than Irigaray, and more immanent terms than Levinas.

Erotic touching is fundamentally important to understanding eros in terms of the embodied character of an erotic experience. Therefore the relation between the caress and other terms such as need, desire, and, love, elucidates the special character of touch as it pertains to eros. For Levinas, the caress is the gesture of both an immanent sexual need and the transcendent metaphysical desire for the Other. But need's complicity in eros overwhelms the desire for the Other, so much so that although this desire is not obliterated, it can only be accomplished in fecundity and paternity. On the other hand, erotic need nevertheless situates the lover in a certain erotic space. The neediness of eros is therefore important in terms of the ego's economics of existence and thus the profanity of eros does not suggest that eros is completely damnable or insignificant. Eros provides the ego with the nourishment it needs, or a most intense self-awareness that comes at the price of profaning alterity. We can conclude that for Levinas, the neediness of the caress to be inevitable, and the profanity of eros a necessary one.

Irigaray, on the other hand, avoids making the distinction between need and desire as Levinas does. Indeed, Irigaray's view implies that such a distinction relegates the feminine to status of an object inasmuch as it is the feminine who accomplishes erotic need but it is the son who accomplishes desire. Irigaray therefore dissolves Levinas's need/desire distinction, claiming that sexual desire is the only desire worth taking into consideration. As a psychoanalyst, Irigaray supposes that subjectivity is constituted by sexual desire or sexual energy. In eros, the limit of this desire is crossed in the crossing of the threshold of gendered subjectivity. Erotic touching thus facilitates a sharing of desire whereby the gendered other can inform the subjectivity of his/her lover by exposing him/her to possibilities of desire which would be impossible to generate without the sexed other. Erotic touching, for Irigaray, would therefore realise the sexual desire which fuels subjectivity and hence an ethical relation

between the sexes would inspire different but equally significant new possibilities of self for both men and women.

Nancy, however, makes a sharp (and somewhat counter-intuitive) distinction between love and desire. Nancy supposes that desire operates as an infinite dialectical movement to satisfy an impossibly deep lack. And Nancy includes sexual desire, libido, need, and so on, in this formulation. What desire would amount to then, would be nothing like love. Self-love or pride, is similar because pride is the dialectical traversal of the other in order to affirm the self outside of itself. But love is not self-love. Nancy deconstructs both desire and pride to show that love is neither. Love is the exposure of the self to the other, or the breaking of the heart which constitutes the self as being-with. While this might seem problematic in terms of eros, because it is difficult to suppose that eros has no reference to desire, in Nancy's thought on the body he nevertheless asserts that there is something more fundamental to the dialectical operation of desire. For Nancy, if love is the exposure of the self, eros is the exposure of the self as a uniquely sexed body. The feature of the self as a sexed body makes it an erotic self, and all its touching is therefore complicit with a sexual imperative more fundamental than libidinous desire. To be exposed as a sexed body is the erotic exposure to being-with. Nancy therefore transcends the Levinasian distinction between need and desire. Whether or not there is such a thing as sexual need, Nancy does not say. But his thought suggests that there is no metaphysical desire for the other, because the self is already exposed to the other by virtue of being constituted by love and hence being-with. Eros would simply be this exposure in its sexually embodied sense. Moreover, the version of desire which Irigaray offers closely resembles Nancy's formulation of pride. If Irigaray suggests that one comes to understand one's own gender by encountering he/she who is sexually different, then what her thought implies is that eros is the positing of one's gendered property outside oneself in order to know it. In supposing that when thresholds are crossed in eros, thereby taking the gendered subject to the limits of the desire which fuels it, Irigaray configures coming to know oneself as gendered as a movement which reaches a limit and then returns to its origin. This would, for Nancy, resemble too closely the dialectical movement of pride; from the self to its outside in order to reaffirm its properties (of which 'gender' is assumed as one) as a self. Rather Nancy suggests that eros exposes the self as sexed without pinning gender to an encounter with an other. Thus Nancy figures gender beyond the masculine/feminine dichotomy which Irigaray insists upon and he nevertheless preserves eros as being complicit with sexual subjectivity.

3. The Possibility of Erotic Transcendence

Levinas formulates a problem with transcendence which eros is unable to resolve. To solve the problem of transcendence, Levinas maintains that a situation must be thought of wherein the 'I' and the Other are in relation without one being overwhelmed by the radical alterity the other. Eros cannot

achieve this, because the hither side of need weighs too heavily in sameness. Thus the erotic subject does not transcend the sameness to which it is rooted. The ego in eros does not become other to itself, despite the erotic subject touching the frontier of an absolute alterity and futurity. Fecundity, however, offers a situation wherein the 'I' and the Other can relate without one abolishing the other. Levinas sees the son as both an I and an Other, and hence the paternal relation solves the problem of transcendence as Levinas formulates it. But fecundity and paternity are not necessarily rooted in strict biology. Indeed, Levinas maintains that we may have a paternal disposition towards anyone. By adopting a paternal attitude in relation to others, we may consider another person's possibilities as our own whilst simultaneously appreciating that the person is infinitely other, giving time as a future beyond the sameness of Being. But if we adopt an erotic disposition towards other people, Levinas would maintain that the selfishness of erotic pleasure prevents us from adopting this paternal disposition. The Other in eros can only be the frail feminine Other, profaned by the impossibility of need to grant transcendence.

Levinas's formulation of transcendence in terms of fecundity and paternity is severely critiqued by his feminist readers. Indeed, Irigaray identifies the step away from eros to fecundity and paternity as a typically phallogocentric move which prioritises teleological linearity and disembodied transcendence. Levinas's reluctance to consider transcendence as possible in eros itself, argues Irigaray, renders the feminine at the mercy of the masculine, which in turn reinforces the mechanisms of theoretical patriarchy. Irigaray thus insists that we consider transcendence to be possible in eros, and that in thinking erotic transcendence a more just relation between men and women can be actualised. Hence Irigaray introduces the concept of the sensible transcendental which acts as intermediary between the subterranean depths of femininity and the lofty heights of masculinity. Irigaray argues that transcendence cannot be anything but a physical experience intimately connected with one's nature as a gendered subject. Transcendence, for Irigaray, hinges upon the encounter with a person of the other gender which in turn indicates the limit of one's own gendered subjectivity. Making transcendence sensible, for Irigaray, means that it does not imply that one leaves oneself. For Irigaray, transcendence is the inward movement, or 'enstasy,' inspired by an encounter with another sexed differently than I am. The transcendent is thus that which limits all subjects as gendered subjects, and provides these subjects with the readiness to encounter each other in a respectful way. Moreover, Irigaray identifies eros as the situation *par excellence* for this kind of transcendence. In eros, the tactile encounter with the other is a particularly intense one which delimits the gendered bodies of lovers. Therefore, if transcendence is not the ecstatic leaving of oneself towards an infinitely distant future or Other, but rather the respect for the other because his/her status as differently sexed reveals the limits of my own status as sexed, then eros becomes both the site of a sensible transcendence and the ethical relation between the sexes. But Irigaray is once again hoisted by her own petard, since her insistence on

transcendence's connection with the dually gendered character of subjectivity makes it problematic. If, as Irigaray maintains, transcendence is geared towards an emphasis of one's gender through an encounter with a gendered other, then not only do homosexual relations lose the possibility of transcendence, but Irigaray's concept of love might amount to what Nancy calls pride.

Nancy's definition of self-love as the love of self as property threatens Irigaray's view of transcendence. If transcendence for Irigaray is that movement which reveals the limits of my own gender through an encounter with another - differently gendered - subject, then it too closely resembles a movement whereby the self posits its properties outside of itself in order to love itself. Despite Irigaray's insistence that love indeed does reach the other, if the transcendence of love is an enstatic movement due to the limit which the gendered other reveals to me, then how does love reach the other? Irigaray claims that eros allows the lovers to renew and regenerate their respective gendered subjectivities through the crossing of a threshold and sharing desire. But if transcendence is the sensible appreciation of the limit and knowing one's own gender in contrast to the other's, then the transcendence of eros is more akin to self-love as the love of one's property as gendered. Nancy considers love in terms quite different from Irigaray, and thus the transcendence with which love is complicit is also quite different.

Where Levinas suggests that transcendence is the movement outward towards an infinite future via the fecundity of paternity, and where Irigaray suggests that transcendence is the movement inward as a result of an encounter with a gendered other, Nancy's thought suggests the inverse of both. Transcendence, for Nancy, is the arriving departure of love which breaks the self open to the possibility of relation. Transcendence breaks the monadic self-presence of a subject, rather than allowing a subject to surpass itself in a paradoxical paternal relation between the 'I' and the Other, or limiting a subject as gendered in relation to the other gender. For Nancy, transcendence would therefore be the idea that no single subject is complete unto itself because of love. Rather, all subjects are incomplete because love has broken their subjectivity in order that they must necessarily stand in relation with others. It is therefore better, Nancy claims, to name transcendence the 'crossing of love.' If love is that which breaks the subject open to the possibility of relation, and love is that which exposes the subject as incomplete, then transcendence is the movement of love which puts selves into relation with one another. And again, when we combine Nancy's thought on love with his thought on the body, love automatically becomes somewhat erotic because of the sexed character of the body. Thus, against Levinas reluctance to grant eros the chance of transcendence, and also against Irigaray's enstatic conception of transcendence, Nancy suggests that transcendence is not only possible, but inevitable, in eros.

4. Till Death Do Us Part: Eros and Death

The significance of love's relationship with death lies in the way in which a certain trajectory unfolds from Levinas's thought through Irigaray's and into Nancy's. In Levinas, the paradox of death's non-occurrence illustrates that the death of the beloved Other is of more concern than the ego's own death. Because I am gone at the moment death arrives, death does not happen to me, but may only be significant because those who love me feel grief. Love is thus as strong as death, and perhaps the inevitability of death can lead us to deduce the inevitability of love, which indeed is something Nancy's thought yields.

In Irigaray's psychoanalysis, she notes that the unthinkable alterity of the feminine can be utilised by patriarchal discourse as a substitute for the unthinkable mystery of death. Irigaray contends that the result of such a substitution would be twofold: man would not face his own mortality and its ensuing anxiety and at the same time woman is dominated in man's attempt to achieve mastery over death. A loving, and indeed erotic, relationship between the masculine and the feminine wherein each is accorded a justified subjectivity would negate these two features of the patriarchal mechanism. In loving women ethically, men would have to face the inevitability of their own deaths which may perhaps guide them into a more authentic way of being. Simultaneously, women would no longer be the substitute for death and hence the attempt to gain dominion over the feminine would no longer be a masculine priority. The characteristic features of a view which substitutes the feminine for the death would be the teleological imperative of eros for reproduction, which Irigaray identifies both in traditional psychoanalysis and also Levinas's phenomenology of eros. Although Levinas's thought on fecundity and paternity is not restricted to biology, Irigaray implies that the gesture of supposing the infinity of time in the 'transsubstantiation' of fecundity aligns Levinas's view of eros with Irigaray's claim that the feminine is substituted for death. A patriarchal bias hides within Levinas's concept of transcendence which could be psychoanalysed from Irigaray's perspective as the substitutive use of the feminine to cope with the anxiety caused by the inability for man to gain mastery over death. But if eros is cultivated then both the masculine and the feminine lovers would come to terms with their own deaths, whilst at the same time each would respect the other as a radical alterity embodied in sexual difference.

But Irigaray's view cannot resolve the Levinasian paradox that death does not happen to me. Although her thought does suppose that ethics must be guided by the relation with alterity, such a relation does not account for the significance of the death of a beloved other. Nancy's thinking, however, illustrates a view which encapsulates both the Levinasian concern for the death of the beloved, and, the Irigarayan view that true love ushers lovers into accepting their own mortality. Love, for Nancy, unveils the finitude of both lovers. In other words, because lovers love each other

they must acknowledge that they are both finite beings which in turn places a limit on the time which they can love each other. Love paradoxically reveals the finitude of both being-there (*Dasein*) and being-with (*Mitsein*) because love is that which permits the possibility of being-with. But this permission comes at the price of finitude, but also holds the reward of authenticity. What makes love real, for Nancy, is the fact that it cannot last forever. The true name of love is the promise ‘I love you,’ which is conditioned by its lack of guarantee. It is impossible for me to love you forever because I am finite, and hence by declaring my love for you I must accept the inevitability that this love cannot last forever (even if it lasts my whole life). But because love always wants more, it is the exposure of the self to its limit, love is the glamorous presentation of finitude. As such, love promises that even though I might be finite, love will nevertheless always occur as another shatter of Being even after my own death. Nancy’s thought therefore accounts for the fact that the death of the beloved other is my concern, because the finitude of the other is testified to by loving him/her. At the same time, love unveils my own finitude because by loving the other I realise that he/she is finite. The result is therefore that because of finitude lovers are urged to make the most of their time together, or in other words that they can make their love authentic. At the same time, however, love promises that although the particular love of lovers might cease due to their own finitude, love will nevertheless perpetuate in its shatters because it is precisely that which conditions the axiomatic inevitability of being-with. We can therefore consider Nancy’s view on love as a dialectical synthesis of Levinas’s and Irigaray’s respective views on love and death.

5. Eros and Philosophy: The Legacy of Plato’s *Symposium*

Plato’s *Symposium* receives significant attention from each of the thinkers examined in this dissertation. Of particular importance to all three thinkers is the mythical parentage of the daimon Eros, that is, as the son of Poros (plenty) and Penia (poverty). Eros is therefore first defined as an ambiguity or duality by Diotima, who tells of his parentage. The apparent confluence of opposites in Eros is subsequently interpreted differently by Levinas, Irigaray and Nancy. Nevertheless, the way in which they do so says something about eros and the way in which we can think about it.

For Levinas, the combination of Poros and Penia corresponds to the equivocal simultaneity of need and desire in eros. Need would be the plentiful wealth which arises from poverty. By appropriating the objects which satisfy need, an ego experiences the nourishments of daily life. But this apparent plenitude, although it gives nourishment and enjoyment, cannot offer the real escape from the ego’s enchainment to itself. An ego should necessarily realise that even should its needs be satisfied, a desire for something beyond these will arise. This, for Levinas, is the metaphysical desire for the Other. Desire in turn motivates the ethico-metaphysical question: “How can I justify my being in the face of the Other?” Desire is therefore the insufficient poverty of plenty itself, or the realisation that

even in accounting for all my needs I nevertheless desire the transcendence of the social relationship. Eros is then the double appearance of need and desire: the immediate enjoyment and plenitude of physical pleasure and the realisation that this pleasure is insufficient to accomplish desire. Hence eros ushers a desire for transcendence which is achieved in fecundity and paternity. Moreover, the confluence of need and desire shows that eros is not simply the wanting to fuse with a once lost other half. Such a fusion, which Aristophanes claims is the essence of eros, is the failure to realise that even in the wealth of sexual need's satisfaction, a desire for transcendence nevertheless remains which eros itself can never realise.

Yet Irigaray understands Eros's parentage somewhat differently. Indeed, Irigaray insists that we note how Diotima's words are misinterpreted and twisted by Socrates's account of her speech. Irigaray interprets the confluence of poverty and plenty as an indication of Eros's intermediary nature. Eros connects the depths of the carnal to the heights of transcendence, and hence offers a site for ethical and creative interaction between the poles of sexual subjectivity. Although this is similar to Levinas's interpretation inasmuch as he interprets eros as the simultaneity of corporal need and the desire for transcendence, Irigaray and Levinas differ upon what transcendence refers to. Where Levinas looks to the fecundity of eros to evince a resolution to the problem of transcendence, Irigaray insists we take note of Diotima's remark that eros is fecund of body *and* spirit. The formulation of transcendence which propagates an implicitly patriarchal line therefore occludes the possibility of eros to provide nourishment to both the masculine and the feminine subjectivities involved in the experience. Although Levinas does admit the plenty of need, and considers the enjoyment which arises from need's satisfaction as nourishment for an ego, the insufficiency of this nourishment is evinced in the desire that is realised not in the feminine erotic partner, but in the son. Irigaray, on the other hand, maintains that the fecundity of spirit in eros grants the erotic itself a transcendent character, which would be achieved in the sensible transcendental. Thus the intermediary character of eros is that which makes eros itself transcendent, rather than the profane lapse back into sameness. Eros, for Irigaray, must be the irreducible intermediary which confuses the distinction between sensibility and transcendence. At the same time, she emphasises that this indistinction is the only possible way in which to appreciate transcendence if we are to maintain an ethical (non-phallogentric) relation between the sexes.

But since Nancy understands transcendence in completely different terms to both Levinas and Irigaray, he naturally interprets Plato's *Symposium* in a different way. Nancy considers Plato's dialogue on love to grasp at the equation of love with thinking, but failed to fully grasp what this entails. In claiming that thinking is love, Nancy proposes that to hold the capacity of thought means that one must already be touched and broken by love in some way. That is to say that to think means

that one exists, but this existence is conditioned by the fact of being-with. Moreover, Nancy's assertion that love is at once an infinite plurality of difference loves with each instance of love being radically singular offers him a different way in which to interpret Eros's parentage. Because each time love happens it is completely different from each other instance of love, love lacks a singular essence. Love is therefore poor because it has no singular nature which we can grasp. Simultaneously, love is indefinitely plentiful in its manifestations. Thus Nancy considers the confluence of poverty and plenty in love to indicate the shatters of love to be infinite in number but finite in existence. And if love is always subtended by the erotic exposition of one's sexed body, which is induced to touching others by something more fundamental than libidinous sexual need, then the idea that eros is the equivocal simultaneity of need and desire is called into question. Furthermore, if the transcendence of love is the crossing of love which exposes a subject as incomplete and necessarily in relation with others, then eros is not marred by the bodily immanence of sexed subjectivity. Moreover, the fecundity of spirit, which Irigaray is intent on preserving, is also accounted for in eros because of love's unveiling of finitude. Thus, Nancy's view once more traverses the impasse between Levinas's and Irigaray's perspectives on love. And Plato's enigmatic text on Eros continues to echo in the thought of these French thinkers by establishing a peculiar confluence of plenty and poverty.

6. Eros Pluralises

Despite the selected thinkers rooting their thought in the ancient Platonic text, all three make an interesting connection between eros and plurality. This connection, I think, may be considered as a useful insight into the problems faced by schools of thought that demand plurality be addressed, such as Cosmopolitanism, for example.

Against the Parmenidean unity of Being, Levinas claims that reality is plural. To show that there is plurality in Being, rather than unity, Levinas maintains in his works up until *Totality and Infinity* (1961) that it is sexual difference and eros which directs us to consider Being as plural. Levinas uses eros as an 'everyday' experience to show that there is a situation in which a radical Other stands in relation to the sameness of egoistic existence. Although this relationship is a profane one, and thus subsequently lapses into sameness due to erotic pleasure, the fact that it is an encounter with the absolute contrariety of the feminine 'carves up' the sameness of Parmenides's picture of Being as unity. But because eros is tainted by the immense sameness of voluptuous pleasure, it is only in paternal fecundity where Parmenides's unity is finally broken up into plurality. Yet eros remains a crucial step upon the path to plurality, and as we see in Irigaray and Nancy, eros itself ultimately becomes the principle of plurality.

As is by now to be expected, Irigaray objects to the teleological implication of paternity in relation to eros. Indeed, Irigaray picks up upon the theme of plurality, which she claims is encapsulated by the status of the feminine. The phallogocentric structure of patriarchy, Irigaray claims, prefers unity over plurality which is in turn indicative of the dominion of the masculine over the feminine. If an eros which accords each sex a position equally worthy of consideration because they are different, then eros is the bringing into relation of unity and plurality. Thus eros is for Irigaray, as it is for Levinas, a crucial step along the path to emphasising the importance of plurality in contrast to a preference for the unified sameness of a supposedly permanent 'Being.' But Irigaray deviates from Levinas, since she rather supposes that plurality is the essence of the feminine, rather than the occurrence of a site wherein the 'I' is also an Other (that is, Levinas's formulation of the son). And if the ethical question of our age, according to Irigaray, is primarily to establish a just relation between the sexes, and cultivating eros is the ideal means of achieving this, then the ethics of eros is that which establishes a just relation with plurality. But if Irigaray's dichotomous formulation of gender is problematic because of its rigid distinction between masculine and feminine, then another way of emphasising eros may be necessary.

Hence we can identify the pluralising effect of eros in the work of Nancy. Although Nancy thinks plurality as fundamental, which is to say that it neither requires the rigorous proof which Levinas formulates using eros nor does it find itself embodied in one half of a dichotomous picture of gender, the status of plurality's fundamentality intimately connects itself to a fundamentality of eros. Being can be both singular and plural, that is *Mitdasein*, only because it is love which breaks the heart and thus exposes the self to the relation with others. Moreover, since love's exposure is also the exposition of a sexed erotic body, Nancy's thought implies that eros is therefore fundamentally important to the very fact of plurality. Plurality could thus include the plurality of genders. This means that all bodies are, despite a unique sexual configuration, subtended by the erotic exposition of their sex. This is not to say that chastity is impossible, but it is to say that chastity is simply another form of erotic proximity. To be in relation, to be one of the many and be with those others, the self must necessarily be sexed and erotic.

Hence the specific relevance of the three chosen French philosophers to direct my thematic inquiry. Levinas introduces the possibility of plurality by touching upon eros and the feminine. Irigaray's psychoanalytic deconstruction of Levinas's eros makes the claim that plurality *is* the feminine. But since Irigaray's dual formulation of gender does not truly account for the plurality of gender itself, we see that in Nancy eros is that which exposes the sexed body to the plurality of others. Eros thus pluralises Being. Nancy's view, however, is not without fault and must therefore be interrogated further. But such an investigation is beyond the margins of this dissertation.

7. Final Remarks

If eros is the pluralising of Being, and the exposure of a sexed being to others, then what can we conclude regarding the status of eros in French/Continental philosophy? When subjected to philosophical reflection, eros is neither the chemical formulation of love discovered by science, nor the idealised union of souls proclaimed by common ideological fantasies. The exposure of being sexed implies that the nature of an embodied and relational existence is one in which the relation between all selves is erotic in some part. This relation is constituted by the interwoven touching between selves, and the way in which such touching is understood pertains to the proximity between selves. Moreover, transcendence exists not as the surpassing of self but as the insufficiency which makes it incapable of being completely alone. Love furthermore unveils the finitude of both the self and the other. And in this exposure to finitude, the self, the other, and the love between them, are impelled to authenticity. Since Plato's *Symposium*, eros has been worthy of philosophical consideration due to its enigmatic heritage. But in sum, the chief characteristic of eros is that it forces us to consider the nature of Being as plural, and not as the singular overarching static unity of Being proclaimed by Parmenides. This plurality constitutes a world shared by a multiplicity of gendered bodies, each unique and in relation to an indefinite multiplicity.

What then can we say of that mess of love alluded to in the opening lines of this dissertation? Ultimately I think that at least three elements of this mess may have been explicated, namely: the debt that contemporary thought owes Levinas regarding love, the role of the feminine and the objections made on her part, and the understanding of love as exposure in the thought of Nancy. To recall, Lawrence blames the ego, the mind, and the will, for making love into this mess. Indeed, perhaps in line with Nancy, this mess could be interpreted as the mistaking of love for pride. Would Lawrence be more satisfied then with Nancy's configuration of love as being exposed? Perhaps he might prefer that, since it implies a comfortable vulnerability of being exposed to others in the moment without the desire to control or limit such exposure. But whether this eliminates the mess of love or simply incites us to be comfortable with it is a contestable point, which I leave up to my reader to decide.

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