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Disrupting Symmetry:
Jean-Luc Nancy and Luce Irigaray
on Myth and the Violence of Representation

Abstract:

Through myths that pattern and repeat we figure the world to ourselves. The desire to be done with myth, to surpass mythic thinking in favor of a “more” rational way of thinking, is but one way of perpetrating violence in the guise of similitude. The rejection of *muthos* by *logos* is itself a form of violence, with significant ramifications. The following analysis will explore the work of Luce Irigaray’s *Speculum of the Other Woman*, and Jean-Luc Nancy’s *Inoperative Community*, focusing on the ways in which myth becomes mythology, and the inescapable question of violence that attends this operation. This paper, although touching upon the matter, is not an attempt to answer the larger question of what myth is. The scope of this analysis is constrained to a discussion of both Nancy and Irigaray’s understanding of myth as foundational, as well as interrogating the nature of the violence of representation. I will briefly touch upon the long and elaborate conversation surrounding the *muthos-logos* divide.

Keywords:

symmetry, Jean-Luc Nancy, Luce Irigaray, myth, disruption, violence

“Doesn’t it call for – in the language of being – the necessarily violent transformation of this language by an entirely different language?”¹

Introduction

Through myths that pattern and repeat we figure the world to ourselves. The myths themselves provide a template: they are stories by which to recognize other familiar stories, and thus provide ways of making the world known to ourselves, as well as organizing and distributing meaning.² The desire to be done with myth, to surpass mythic thinking in favor of a “more” rational way of thinking, is but one way of perpetrating violence in the guise of similitude. The rejection of *muthos* by *logos* is itself a form of violence, with significant ramifications. As both Luce Irigaray and Jean-Luc Nancy illustrate, myths do not die out. They regather, in literature, art, and philosophy. Both thinkers see in myth the work of disruption – myth breaks apart what has become solid (identity, *logos*). Significant for Irigaray is the work of re-mythologization, as her writing enacts a violent disparaging of the “*muthos* to *logos*” thesis, demonstrating instead that fiction engenders fiction. Nancy’s analysis of the interruption of myth exposes myth’s auto-representational function, one that disrupts its symbolizing and distributive speech. For both thinkers, fiction is foundational. In re-mything the iconic myth of the cave, Luce Irigaray and Nancy connect in their understanding of the synthetic and disruptive aspects of the mythic: that myth both sustains (raises worlds) and breaks up (prevailing economies of thought) as part of its fictioning. The following analysis will explore the work of Luce Irigaray’s *Speculum of the Other Woman*, and Jean-Luc Nancy’s *Inoperative Community*, focusing on the ways in which myth becomes mythology, and the inescapable question of violence that attends this operation. This paper, although touching upon the matter, is not an attempt to answer the larger question of what myth is. The scope of this analysis is constrained to a discussion of both Nancy and Irigaray’s understanding of myth as foundational, as well as interrogating the nature of the violence of representation. I will briefly touch upon the long and elaborate conversation surrounding the *muthos-logos* divide. The connections made between Nancy and Irigaray to the thought of Schelling, Heidegger, Levinas, and Derrida merit further research and exploration.

In the *Inoperative Community*, Jean-Luc Nancy assesses the potency of myth, specifically through its modes of representation, suggesting that to think without recourse to the binaries that oppose myth and *logos*, fiction and reality, would be a way of thinking myth that opens the possibility of myth’s function in language and as a mode of thinking. Alongside the well-known roles that myth plays (as falsehood or fable, as dangerous or unreasonable, as formative with respect to peoples and cultures, as leading one always back to origins [themselves mythic]), we find in myth an exploratory function or playfulness that elides these established representations. Myth shapes belief systems, knowledge production, language, and art, taking on “a whole series of values that amplify, fill,” and lend to its “dimensions as a narrative of origins and an explanation of destinies.”³ Its narrative has the power to bring together disparate individuals, as they may assemble together to listen to a story they all know, a story of origins, “of the beginning of the world, of the beginning of their assembling together, of the beginning of the narrative itself.” This is how foundation is a fiction, for it consists in a thinking (a fictioning ontology) that engenders itself (the search for lost origins is one primary mythic example) in its own image, “in order to project upon itself the essence and the power that it believes to be its own,” its own presence,

1) Jacques Derrida, “Differance,” in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 157–158.

2) See Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, trans. William Weaver (Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 1974).

3) Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, trans. Peter Connor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 44, 48. Hereafter this book will be cited in the main text as IC followed by page number.

its own truth; “The myth of myth... is nothing other than an ontology of fiction or representation” (IC, 55). Through the refrain, mythic in itself, the reader is reminded that such a scene is, “ancient, immemorial,” and, “repeats itself indefinitely,” using, “the sacred language of a foundation and an oath” (IC, 44). The telling itself also sounds familiar, for as Nancy says, we know this scene well. It is the telling of myth, whose,

story often seems confused; it is not always coherent, it speaks of strange powers and numerous metamorphoses; it is also cruel, savage, and pitiless, but at times it also provokes laughter. It names things unknown, beings never seen. But those who have gathered together understand everything, in listening they understand themselves and the world. (IC, 44)

Myth’s telling binds the world, by providing a narrative of origins and explaining destinies, making the world known and ourselves known to the world. The scene of myth is what Nancy calls, “the ethnologico-metaphysical scene of a humanity structured in relation to its myths,” as this is the stage upon which we represent everything to ourselves and this function of myth is the starting point for Nancy’s critique of representation⁴ via myth (IC, 45). Nancy reminds us that while we often speak of the contents of the myth and the ends that myth serves (cosmological, moral, political), we must also attend to the function of myth, significantly to the ways that myths collectivize peoples and operate around certain kinds of identificatory gestures (the nation state, nationalism).⁵ Under certain circumstances, operating in certain spaces, from one repetition to the next, such narratives duplicate the founding of sameness, justify violence, and thus necessitate interruption.⁶

Myth’s capacity to found is more often than not paired with violence: consider the stories told of holy lands and those lost in the wilderness, the victim stories associated with nation building, the example of Romulus and Remus. And many of the ancient myths are tales of metamorphoses, of transformation that happens magically and also violently: think of Dionysus and Pentheus, Semele and Zeus. It could be that this disruptive⁷ power of myth – to disrupt identity, to disrupt genres, to go beyond the ordinary sense of things through images that refigure the spectacular, happens quite often by using the very same language of philosophy, only differently. This “differently” might be thought through, for example, in Levinas’ use of the language of myth and of the Bible to speak of the other, or as the language of metaphysics used by Derrida and Irigaray to critique the metaphysical tradition itself. Myth, in this way, through disturbing orders of sense and by transforming language, violently if need be, opens a way of thinking about the other, and announce itself as a play of that which does not belong, and yet appears, re-appears, tracing behind the superstructures that organize and frame

4) Throughout this paper, I understand representation in a hermeneutical sense as that which appears and is taken up by consciousness in the effort to understand (symbolically, to stand in the place of, to fashion a narrative of sense making). To represent is to make the world known to ourselves, to engender the world in our image. As Nancy elucidates, “myth is not simple representation, it is representation at work, producing itself – in an autopoietic mimesis-as effect: it is fiction that founds... the fashioning of a world for the subject, the becoming-world of subjectivity... where being engenders itself by figuring itself, by giving itself the proper image of its own essence and the self-representation of its presence and its present.” (IC, 56, 54) See also; Schelling, Levi-Strauss, and Levinas. Particularly relevant for Irigaray’s recuperation of the myth of the cave would be the understanding of re-presentation as the bringing into presence again or anew (to *re-present* as to make the text say something otherwise and new).

5) See also Horkheimer and Adorno, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002).

6) Interruption is here understood as to cut off from an intended meaning. Nancy references Thales’ presupposition of an uninterrupted world of presences as better understood as, “a way of binding the world and attaching oneself to it” (IC, 49). What is needed is to cut myth off from its autopoiesis, to interrupt the proliferation and repetition of the self-same.

7) Disruption is here understood as the break or dissolution effected by mythic thought, leading to new thought and vision. Disruption is inherently violent, anarchic.

modes of thinking. Myth returns us to the question of what is still alive and relevant even if not quite visible on the surface of things. Myth cannot be denounced as a fiction or untruth, because the fiction that it is, is an operation of engenderment and exchange. And so it becomes, in contemporary times, an ethical imperative to become aware of myth's modes of distribution: its schemas of logic, the ways in which humankind represents the world to itself through myth.

Foundational Representations

The founding power of myth will be Nancy's primary concern throughout the entirety of "Myth Interrupted". Myth's antediluvian character is to create and bond, to close off rather than open up, to justify by operating around certain kinds of identificatory gestures, to collectivize peoples around stories, and ultimately to duplicate the founding of sameness within a community. Myth founds a fiction, and from this follows Nancy's second (mythic) refrain: "in this sense, we no longer have anything to do with myth," in that representation is power, and "the invention of myth is bound up with the use of its power" (IC, 46). Representation also often closes off a world, rather than opening one up. The danger of Western modernity is to become closed within its own representation of itself – to pretend/have the pretension that it can, "appropriate its own origin," and perpetually represent itself as "returning to its own sources in order to re-engender itself from them as the very destiny of humanity," (IC, 46) similar to how Cronos devoured Zeus, and Ouranos before him, in order to prevent usurpation of the thrown. If we keep re-appropriating the origin, we re-engender, refashion the world in our own image, and this becomes its destiny: we write our own history (our own myth of origins). This is the danger of myth, the risk it poses. The danger Nancy calls awareness to is that one cannot be done with myth just because it manifests itself in deviant ways, poses a threat, or because it has been used to cement ideological (if unsound) belief systems. If a re-appropriation of myth is threatening, the thought, or refrain, must go further, "in order to conceive what we might still have to do not with myth, but rather to the end to which myth inexorably seems to lead" (IC, 47).

Philosophical thought typically identifies as the discourse of truth, understood as the purity of a concept free from metaphor. Any other discourse, be it literature, poetry, allegory, speaks impurely, by means of, and misses, through figuration, this truth. In "Myth Interrupted", Jean-Luc Nancy interprets Thales' claim that all things are filled with gods to be about the relation of humanity to a world uninterrupted from its truth and from its presence, where speech binds the world into a great whole of becoming (IC, 49). Nancy references a passage from Heidegger's "What is Called Thinking", wherein Heidegger discusses the essence of myth as that which appears, "*Logos* says the same... *Mythos* and *logos* become separated and opposed only at the point where neither *mythos* nor *logos* can keep to its original nature.⁸ Thus, myth and *logos* are not, "placed into opposition by philosophy as such," but it is imagined, "by virtue of a prejudice modern rationalism adopted from Platonism... that *mythos* was destroyed by *logos*." Heidegger's summation of the matter is that, "nothing religious is ever destroyed by logic; it is destroyed only by the god's withdrawal."⁹ And Lacoue-Labarthe, thinking about the very same question, offers the following, that myth and *logos* are the very same thing, and neither is more true or more false:

That saying is not a true as opposed to a fictional saying, but rather a saying pure and simple...
Neither true saying, nor the other. There is no origin and no end, but only the same, as it were

8) See Martin Heidegger, "What is Called Thinking?," in *Basic Writings*, trans. David F. Krell (London: Routledge, 1978), 375–376.

9) *Ibid.*, 376.

eternal, fable. Tearing philosophy from mythology, the repression of mythology, and all the divisions accompanying it (opinion/science, poetry/thought, etc.), no longer mean anything.¹⁰

Lacoue-Labarthe refers to the traditional binary opposition of myth and *logos*, where myth is understood as a fiction and as untruth, while *logos* is associated with rationality and truth. Said distinction made between myth and *logos* has a grave implication – it ignores the mythical basis that founds the configuration of Western contemporary culture and its imaginary. The primal relationship with myth cannot be avoided; what is needed is awareness of the ways in which myth *founds*, as fiction, as empire, and as ideology. Lacoue-Labarthe is arguing for the dissolution of the binary opposition between myth and *logos*. Neither truth nor fiction, but an eternal fable: the thinking of mythology, wherein the *logos* is implanted.¹¹ In a related way, Nancy seeks to pose a way of (still) not asking what myth is, but instead, “what is involved in what we have been calling ‘myth’ and in what we have invested, with or without the support of positive, historical, philological, or ethnological mythologies, in... ‘a myth of myth’” (IC, 48). In part this would be the refusal to acknowledge the particular logic that accompanies the operation of mythic thought, alongside the perpetuation of another logic that deems myth fictional and hence inferior as a form of thought. Yet the phrase “myth is a myth” opens us to the awareness that, “mythology cannot be denounced as a fiction, for the fiction that it is an operation... of engenderment... of distribution and exchange” (IC, 53). For Nancy, the phrase “myth is a myth” indicates a modern usage of the word myth which simultaneously contains two variant meanings at play in an ironic relation: “This is the same myth that the tradition of myth conceived as foundation and as fiction” (IC, 52). The fictioning power of myth itself *founds* community, consciousness, and speech: its very own fiction in turn becomes a foundation of meaning(s).

According to Nancy, the very auto-figuration of myth provides for an understanding of the dissolution of the binary *muthos/logos*. *Muthos* is the appearance and the communication of *logos*, and mythic speech is the foundation of a world. “Myth has been the name for *logos structuring itself*, or, and this comes down to the same thing, the name for the *cosmos structuring itself in logos*” (IC, 49). Again, “myth is nature communicating itself to man... it is itself the rendition of the *logos* that it mediates, it is the emergence of its own organization” (IC, 49). For Nancy, myth serves an inaugural function, even *before* entering into narrative. Myth is the language of manifestation, of what appears.

It is the speech and the language of the very things that manifest themselves, it is the communication of these things: it does not speak of the appearance or the aspect of these things; rather, in myth, their rhythm speaks and their music sounds... Myth is very precisely the *incantation* that gives rise to a world and brings forth a language, that gives rise to a world in the advent of a language. (IC, 50)

Inseparable then, is *mythos* from *logos*, fiction from foundation, according to similar operations. Myth is a fiction that founds a foundation that is fiction. The appropriation of myth by the *logos* nonetheless adds a mythical dimension to reason itself.¹² *Mythos* enacts the paradigm that is the structuring of a cosmos, a world; around its

10) Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *The Subject of Philosophy*, trans. Thomas Trezise (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 8.

11) See Friedrich Schelling, *Historical-Critical Introduction to the Philosophy of Mythology*, trans. Mason Richey and Markus Zisselsberger (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2007).

12) Paul Ricoeur, “Myth as the Bearer of Possible Worlds,” in *A Ricoeur Reader*, ed. Mario J. Valdes (Buffalo, NY: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 486.

utterances, a community is organized, identified (IC, 54). Through myth humans recognize themselves, identify themselves, and invent themselves. The myths around which people gather are myths of origins, of where humanity comes from, of where the world comes from. This too has always been myth's function: the enactment of humanity's representations. Nancy's point is that these foundations too are mythic, that the desire to return or to reinvent the origin is itself mythic thinking. "Myth is of and from the origin, it relates back to a mythic foundation, and through this relation it finds itself (a consciousness, a people, a narrative)" (IC, 45).

Take for consideration, the foundation myth of the origin of Rome. The myth of Romulus emerges and returns in different contexts. From a plethora of versions, one unifying story has survived to relate and transform Roman history, linking the mythical past with the historical present. In its metamorphosis, Romulus' negative features are glossed over, and the historical myth is preserved as the model example of the hero as savior who founds Rome. Romulus becomes a Roman emblem of triumph and virtue. Caesar Augustus saw in the figure of Romulus a means to verify his divine genealogy and empire by modeling himself on Romulus. So it became fact that Rome was founded by one man, and could be ruled in happiness and prosperity by another. Augustus, like Romulus, was seen as a hero, a savior, the realization of greatness and a new founder of Rome. With Augustus, a simple foundation story turns into an ideological model, elevating Augustus' own god-like qualities. The Romulus myth is a classic example of myth-making, and, becoming *mythology*, it reflects the founding ideological power of empire, with its glories and its horrors.

The above example of the myth of Romulus provides one instance that Nancy will continuously emphasize, regarding how myth operates, how myth becomes mythology. Through fictioning, multiple versions of a historical myth are intentionally engendered into a single version of an ideology that is then propagated within a community, solidifying and poeticizing its origins. This "new myth" legitimizes a cultural identity, binding together an understanding known as what founded "Rome". Citizens, Romans, will draw together around such mythology. This is the mythic status that is afforded to myth (IC, 48). The Romulus myth provides a glimpse into an instance of how myth operates by auto-fictioning and engendering a history. This would then be the historicity of myth, its availability to *logos*, its presence as myth that establishes itself as foundational, a "fabulous representation" (IC, 46). Myth mythologized re-founds a community, yet one that is self-representing, self-communicating. The myth of origins is in this sense dangerous because it enunciates man's total return to himself as a social being.

According to Nancy, this enunciation "brings to light the thinking from which the myth of myth arises: it consists in the thought of a poetico-fictioning ontology, an ontology presented in the figure of an ontogony where being engenders itself by *figuring itself*" (IC, 54), in its own image. This would do no more than substantiate and propagate the self-same ontology of subjectivity: perpetuating an ideology of sameness. New myths totalize and give back to the world an image of a humanity modeled in its own image (auto-figuration), a humanity that has reached fulfillment. This is precisely the danger of the myth of progress, for instance – as myth's relation to *ideology*, its ability to found ways of being, to organize people, identify communities, to create human structures and beliefs, can and has been historically known to lead to perversion and extremes.¹³ And yet the double edge of myth is that it is often authoritatively spoken of as "merely myth". As Paul Ricoeur points out, we are no longer justified in saying so, nor of speaking of "myth in general."¹⁴ Myth *is*, it is a part of socio-political foundations, and it must be approached critically, no longer at a level of immediacy or of refusal, nor at face value. As Nancy, referring to the ends of myth, perceives: "Whether one laments that mythic power is exhausted or that the will

13) Examples such as the Aryan myth, the myth of absolute power, the scapegoat, the bloody side of communism, and as found in national socialism, American exceptionalism, and Islamophobia abound.

14) Ricoeur, "Myth as the Bearer of Possible Worlds," 485.

to this power ends in crimes against humanity, everything leads us to a world in which mythic resources are profoundly lacking. To think our world in terms of this ‘lack’ might well be an indispensable task” (IC, 47).

The Interruption

Etymologically, interruption signals a break of continuity, particularly the continuity of speech which is disturbed by cutting off or diverting an intended meaning, as will be seen, for instance, through the use of irony. To speak of the interruption of myth, which is Nancy’s concern in the chapter “Myth Interrupted” in *The Inoperative Community*, is to remind us that the function of myth, if it is indeed self-fulfilling, cannot be “diverted”, held back, or pushed aside. In short, it cannot and should not be ignored (IC, 6n, 160). Interruption is the only recourse to what Nancy deems an “intellectual fascism” or to the ideological sway of myth-making. The two are bound, myth and ideology, and this is, for Nancy, the dilemma. “If we suppose that ‘myth’ designates, beyond the myths themselves, even beyond myth, something that cannot simply disappear, the stakes would then consist... where myth itself would be not so much suppressed as suspended or interrupted” (IC, 47). We are still of the supposition that what can be known of myth is not its essence (the definition of myth), but rather its content, its function, its modes of distribution, and how it serves a community, a politics, a people. Nancy acknowledges the complexity of myth – its fleeting, ungraspable, mercurial quality – but insists that to know this is not enough, nor is the alternative between its absence/presence in contemporary times (IC, 47).

What matters is not the suppression of myth, but its interruption. Even as myth helps to fiction an ontology that orders the world into categorical representations, modeled according to motifs of darkness and light, where the light of truth is privileged over all other possible representations, part of the power of myth also lies in its ability to interrupt these “schemas of logic” and “discourses of truth”. Nancy points out that the capacity we have to think mythically, to structure the world relative to our myths, and to representation in general, is born by way of mythic thought, whose functioning is anterior to all representation (IC, 54). This is perhaps one sense of understanding theogony, that the gods are within immediate consciousness, and it is only when this immediacy ruptures (thematically) that they no longer are, or become a representation rather than a living reality.¹⁵ In this sense too, one can say that myth is *a* myth. The very same capacity that myth has as a mode of thinking reflecting out upon the world may also serve to totalize that world (this is a point Emmanuel Levinas raises with regard to the myth-making capacity). Nancy describes this double movement as the mythic operation always at play. He says, “myth is not simple representation, it is representation at work, producing itself — in an auto-poetic mimesis — as effect: it is fiction that founds. And what it founds is not a fictive world, but fictioning as the fashioning of a world” (IC, 56).

Precisely in this double meaning (“foundation is a fiction”, “fiction is a foundation”), lies the interruption of myth. It is this double bind that Nancy wishes to reconsider, for it leaves one at a limit the moment one is able to say, “it is a myth”. At once what is signified is the fiction of myth (a negation) and yet what the myth might mean (an affirmation). This confirms the contemporary discourse of myth: that it disavows as fable as much as it avows a lack (what the myth once was).¹⁶ “This is what constitutes the interruption: ‘myth’ is cut off from its own meaning... if it even still has a proper meaning” (IC, 52). The myth does not end, nor is it lost, but in fact, because it itself does not disappear, it must be interrupted, its mything or fictioning diverted. The interruption cuts off the myth from its own meaning, from its auto-originating, from its founding capacity.

15) See Ernst Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms: Mythical Thought*, vol. 2, trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1965).

16) See Hans Blumenberg, *Work on Myth*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985).

Once the myth is interrupted, its function, or operation, will not be simply (auto) representational. Because the interruption disrupts by sending myth's propriety astray, bringing into play fragmentation and variance, it suspends "fusion and communion" and in this interruption "something makes itself heard, namely, what remains of myth when it is interrupted" (IC, 61–62).¹⁷ One way of concretely imagining such an interruption is by thinking of the legitimacy of demythologization with regard to myths that are directed toward perverse dogmatic ideologies, thereby alienating and de-symbolizing/debunking their misconstrued intentions.¹⁸ The interruption of such a myth would thereby interrupt a certain discourse, perhaps of community or of identity, potentially debilitating its representative power.

As Ricoeur states, "myth is something which always operates in a society regardless of whether this society reflectively acknowledges its existence."¹⁹ Nancy's task in "Myth Interrupted" has been to reflect actively on the historicity of myth in a time of destitution, drawing from myth its logic and its limit. Aware that in calling myth "mythic" one is simultaneously involved in the *operation* of a myth, Nancy introduces the thought of the interruption of myth rather than its suppression or denial. Through his acknowledgment that the absence of myth designates an ongoing condition where the sources and resources of myth are lacking, and so leads to the possible distortion of myth for ideological purposes, the proposal of an interruption of myth invites a way of stepping into this lack, and of reflecting on the kinds of myths that found contemporary societies. Myth speaks of, exposes, and displaces any one particular founding of a community or of identity, by disclosing other possible horizons. Such is the fiction of myth.

Re-presentation

In *Speculum of the Other Woman*, Luce Irigaray rereads the myth of the cave as told by Plato in a mythical manner that emphasizes how violence is endemic to foundation stories. Plato in particular established a myth of origin for Western metaphysics and beyond. Irigaray's version returns to this violent myth of origins as a subversive rewriting that disrupts the foundations of an ideology already cemented in place. It is a rewriting that borrows from myth in order to create a new myth, one that points out the violence endemic to certain fundamental conceptions of Western culture that exclude women. She then herself repeats this violence by retelling the myth ironically, thereby tracing the exclusions and the perpetuations that found Western identity as an identity of the self-same, one that does not account for sexual difference. Irigaray's recasting should be read through the lens of irony, a strategic irony, whose employment subverts the original tale. As Derrida notes, "irony, in particular Socratic irony, consists of not saying anything, declaring that one doesn't have any knowledge of something, but doing that in order to interrogate, to have someone or something (the lawyer, the law, Socrates himself) speak or think. *Eirōneia* dissimulates, it is the act of questioning by feigning ignorance, by pretending (mimicry)."²⁰

Irigaray reinvents and re-mythologizes this myth of origins, thereby demonstrating how myth is transformative and can itself be transformed. The traditional tale is broken, altered, violently and ironically. Irigaray provides a sense of the possibility of myth to break with its foundation, to interrupt its possibility, displace its

17) See Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989). The role of interruption is related to that of irony, especially Socratic irony.

18) See Ruldfolf Bultmann on demythologization, in Ruldfolf Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings*, ed. and trans. Schubert M. Ogden (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1984).

19) Ricoeur, "Myth as the Bearer of Possible Worlds," 484–485.

20) Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 76.

intended meaning, which then offers the possibility of other configurations of meaning: assemblage. Importantly, Irigaray here reimagines the traditional myth of the cave through a telling that incorporates sexual difference, recasting the meaning of this myth of origins.

Irigaray suggests that the myth of the cave as told by Socrates (as the situation of mistaking images for reality and the liberation from darkness and bondage into the light of knowledge) is capable of being read otherwise. “Read it this time as a metaphor of the inner space of the den, the womb, or *hystera*... a silent prescription for Western metaphysics.”²¹ With violent imagery Irigaray describes the conditions of the myth as circus-like: “as projection, reflection, inversion, retroversion” (SOW, 244). The cave in Irigaray’s reading functions as a “theatrical trick”, in a “theatrical arena of representation” (SOW, 245). Here men are chained and fixed in place, unable to turn, captive to an artificial representation, “the image of an image” (SOW, 246). The myth of the cave is, according to Irigaray, a speculum, or inner space of reflection, reflecting back the scene of representation as symmetrical, as “phallic scenography and its system of light metaphors,” dominated by truth, light, resemblance, and identity (SOW, 256). It is this “theater of representation” that Irigaray undermines by offering an interpretation of the cave that turns the traditional rendering on its head (SOW, 268). By taking this founding myth, the cave, as a myth of representation, Irigaray disrupts the boundaries and the assumptions that are inherent to the traditional telling. She thus makes the myth say something new, primarily with the goal of illustrating how women are excluded from the production of meaning. This new telling yet incorporates the language of the original myth, mimicking it; exploiting it, through powerful writing and forceful imagery. Irigaray’s retelling should be read as disruptive because it involves a violent dissolution of continuity, where myth’s identity is not only cut off, that is, interrupted, but broken apart, as is the meaning that was intended in the original telling. The original myth is disrupted in the sense that its original meaning is shattered, and then gathered and bound in a recasting that speaks of something other: another world, another sense of identity.²² This would be a way to understand the return of myth not simply as a story that repeats itself over time, but as a way in which to encounter the spectacular anew.

Irigaray’s reading of the myth of the cave at once de-myths and re-myths the Platonic myth, by breaking up its scenography and shattering the coherence of the metaphors at work in its imagery, while simultaneously providing another telling, a recasting of the myth, a mything myth, which nourishes the original telling. In this sense, Irigaray and Nancy may be seen as connected in their understanding of the synthetic and disruptive aspects of the mythic: that myth both sustains (raises worlds) and breaks up (prevailing economies of thought) as part of its fictioning.²³ In the recasting, form is not paralyzed, but “evokes contact as well as rupture,” and provides the possibility that the passage between one version of a myth and the next will not lead back to a version that is identical to itself. Other horizons are exposed through myth’s interruption (SOW, 351).

According to Irigaray, what has been forgotten is the foundation that allows for transcendence to occur. The representation that presents itself allows for the forgetting of the foundation that it rises out of (SOW, 247). We are shown how “forgetting you have forgotten” is impressed upon the understanding through a working of metaphors that transport, displace, and tell the tale “of the self-same functioning of representation” (SOW, 247). The refrain speaks of a dream, “an old dream of symmetry,” that masks both the origin and the unrepresentable desire for symmetry inherent to Plato’s myth of the cave. Irigaray is adamant that what has been forgotten

21) Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), 243. Hereafter this book will be cited in the main text as SOW followed by page number.

22) This would be the sense of disruption as a breaking apart (L: *disruptus*), which involves a violence that interruption does not. Notably, disruption conveys a violent dissolution of continuity, whereas interruption refers to a break in continuity, and one can imagine it possible to return to what preceded the interruption itself.

23) See Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972).

has been prescribed in this economy of representation that can now only return to a vision of sameness, where semblance defines what is proper, and the power of fantasy is circumvented (SOW, 298).

Irigaray returns to the myth of the cave in order to explicate the masking of difference, deferral, and otherness that “are gradually banished” through the employment of solar metaphors, that establish another origin, an origin of semblance, “always already there” (SOW, 289). This process is described under various names: a “deceptive pro-ject of symmetry,” “the very fiction of versimilitude,” “privilege of the *phonē*,” “the recurrence of sameness in the identity of reason to itself,” synthesis, and syntax (SOW, 249, 251, and 338). All speak of an economy of metaphor violently at play, where one representation substitutes in the place of another, as violent refounding.²⁴ Irigaray revisits the narrative of longing for origins as an exemplary mythic motif: the power of myth to raise worlds. In this particular version, the division between the sensible and the intelligible informs this narrative of origins as one that begins either from an “empirical, material, matrical” basis, or from the notion that Irigaray ironically critiques, that, “being is instead received from one who wills himself as origin without beginning,” where stories such as the sun, the cave, eternity, “veil the truth”, by submitting the sensory gaze to images of intelligibility, order, “the universe in[to] conformity with divine ideas” (SOW, 295, 302).

This passage between the sensible and the intelligible leads to a substitution of cosmic elements in place of the shadows and objects in the cave, where the reality of “divine truth” becomes available only when “man leaves behind everything that still linked him to this sensible world that the earth, the mother, represents” (SOW, 339).²⁵ The myth, in its violence, serves to repress the sensible realm and its associations with sensation, matter, the earth, impurity; a realm without measure, without limit, without form; opaque, blind, and mute (SOW, 345). This sensible realm is veiled in the ascending passage toward the *logos*, which is always represented in metaphors of height and light as transcendence, associated with the intelligible, the soul, the sublime, ideas, naming, indivisible form, and purity of conception (SOW, 344). The Socratic myth of the cave is a myth of verisimilitude. As Irigaray declares, “fiction reigns”. In the Socratic myth, this is the fiction of “a simple, indivisible, ideal origin” (SOW, 275). Irigaray’s rendition interrupts the solidity of metaphor at work in the original Platonic telling, where the progression from the sensible to the intelligible takes place as a linear progression from illusion to truth. In Irigaray’s mything this myth, the story of the cave comes undone, and is transformed. We should read it “this time” as a myth of disruption, a mythic disruption in that it dismantles the solar ideology of the intelligible transcendental. The myth of the cave tells the tale of the movement from appearance to reality. In Plato’s tale, one passes from myth to reason. In Irigaray’s retelling, such passing is violently disparaged. Irigaray looks mythically to the passage between worlds, and the scenography of the cave itself as indicative of a foundation of symmetry which is itself mythic.

The historical-cultural relevance of myth is not to be overlooked. The interruptive and disruptive power of myth, common to both Nancy and Irigaray, continues to inform important conversations around identity, community, literature, politics, philosophy, and art. Myth raises worlds, and that this is powerful in (but not only in) a violent and destructive sense. Myth is always returning, always recasting, always presenting or presented in new configurations, often taking us back, circling around narratives of origin. Both Nancy and Irigaray make the critical connection that the foundations themselves are mythical. All versions of myth are *mythic*. Nancy emphasizes this in his discussion of “Myth Interrupted”, in which the origins of myth are seen as the founda-

24) This idea of economy as used by Irigaray and Nancy, as well as Derrida, is informed by Bataille’s notion of general economy and its connection to myth and ritual. See Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy, Consumption*, vol. 1, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1991).

25) Irigaray’s discussions of a natural economy and of matriarchal societies are in part informed by Bachofen’s studies in myth and mother right. See Johann Bachofen, *Myth, Religion, and Mother Right*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967).

tions of consciousness and speech. Humanity's desire for myth is directed toward the mythic nature of myth: it points out that as human beings we myth and in mything we represent the world to ourselves. Since this primal relationship with myth cannot be avoided or denied, what is needed is awareness of the ways in which myth *founds*, as fiction, as empire, and as ideology. Luce Irigaray's recuperation of the iconic cave myth illustrates the way in which myth can be reread and refashioned (mythically) to create a new sense of meaning that points otherwise than traditional tellings would have it. The fiction of myth, alongside its violent tendencies, can also be playful and exploratory. Nancy evinces as much, and Irigaray demonstrates the violence inherent to any making of metaphor, any telling of a tale.

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