

## “But Mary was preserving these matters, carefully bringing together and considering them in her heart”

### Ethical Listening, Contemplation, and the Cultivation of a Sexuating Silence

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*Abstract: Twice in Luke's gospel, and only ever in Luke's gospel, we are presented with the curious response of Mary to mysterious events concerning her son: "but Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart" (Lk 2:19) and "but his mother kept all these things in her heart" (Lk 2:52). We are never told exactly what Mary makes of these things she witnesses and hears. Her silence extends to us here, in the present, from this distant past. And indeed, this is quite a different response to that which she earlier gives her cousin Elizabeth, when she bursts into song. Of course, many have offered their own interpretations of Mary's silence, especially that she ideally demonstrates the piety required in the face of the divine truth of the son and as such is a Christian role model. Mary's response is not just silence, but a contemplative silence. However, rather than universalising Mary's meditative reaction, as indicative of the best way for men and women to respond to what is deemed the truth of the divine, I want to insist on interpreting these biblical moments as a contemplative silence for women. I shall do so by developing Irigaray's work on the cultivation of the breath and silence to promote the possibility of "becoming woman". Here, I draw specifically from Irigaray's stunning, though, to many perplexing recasting of the Madonna, and her insistence that "women mindful of their liberation" need to imitate Mary and not Jesus.*

It is astonishing that many women, in particular women mindful of their liberation, today want to imitate Jesus or his male disciples, rather than Mary. (Irigaray 2004a, 152)

#### 1. The Silence of Mary in the Gospel of Luke

It is conventionally asserted that in Luke's gospel the depiction of Mary, the mother of Jesus, is a positive one. She is the "favoured one, having been endowed with grace" (kecharitōmenē; Lk 1:28) chosen to do the god's work of bringing his divine child into being, of being mother to the saviour, Messiah, and Lord (2:11), and she is "the handmaid/slave (doulē) of the Lord" (1:38). There are also strong suggestions that Mary is depicted as a prophetess, though she is never explicitly named as such.<sup>1</sup> This image of Mary is the result of her characterisation in the first two chapters of the gospel, including the stories of: the Annunciation (1:26–38), the Visitation (1:39–45), the Magnificat (1:46–56), the birth of Jesus (2:1–7), the nativity scene with the shepherds after their encounter with the angels (2:8–20), the naming of Jesus and his presentation at the temple (2:21–40), and the twelve year old Jesus in the temple (2:41–52). After this, Mary only appears twice in the story (8:19–21 and indirectly in 11:27–28). Thus, after the first two chapters, and

<sup>1</sup> See Croy and Connor (2012) for a good discussion of the literary, historical and theological issues concerning the question of Mary's prophetic status.

after the mention of Jesus' mother and his brothers trying to see him in 8:19–21 and the reference to her in 11:27–28, Mary disappears from the story; she is not depicted as one of the followers of Jesus (though she will reappear in Acts 1:12–14, named as a member of the early community of believers), nor is she mentioned as one of the women present at the foot of the cross. And yet, her brief appearance at the beginning of the gospel, albeit as a prominent character (more so than Joseph), leads scholars to make claims about her importance, beyond her status as virgin–mother, notably that she is an example of proper Christian discipleship (Fitzmyer 1981, 341; Moloney 1985, 34–56; Brown 1999, 318; Brown et al. 1978, 105–77) and a “paragon of faith” (Bovon 2002, 92). These claims especially concern the way the author of Luke depicts Mary's various responses to the situations in which she finds herself: questioning Gabriel then consenting, her prophetic song of praise in response to her cousin Elizabeth's favourable summation of her belief, and of principal interest to me here, her contemplative silence in the face of the mysterious things she hears and witnesses in the stories of the shepherds and the twelve year old Jesus in the temple. I shall first summarise the two stories that include these notes about Mary's contemplative silence.

Around the time of Jesus' birth an angel appears to a group of shepherds in the region who are out at night keeping watch over their flock (2:8–9). Just like Zechariah (1:12) and Mary (1:29, 30) before them, the sudden presence of an angel/messenger of the Lord causes them to be fearful. After the angel's announcement concerning the birth of “a saviour, which is Christ the Lord”, more beings from the sky (“a multitude of the heavenly host/army”; *plēthos stratias ouraniou*) appear, give praise to the god and impart a blessing of “peace among men” before they all (*hoi angeloī*) depart into the sky (*eis ton ouranon*). The shepherds are excited and make haste. They find Mary, Joseph, and the baby in the manger and thus recognise the sign of the “saviour” that the angel has given them. At this point, they pass on the message of the angel and, we are told, “all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them” (2:18). When they leave, the shepherds are described as “glorifying and praising god for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told to them” (2:20). In between the description about the wondrous response of all who heard what the shepherds reported (2:18) and the shepherds' own response of praise and glorification, we get the brief notice about Mary's own distinct reaction to all of this: “But Mary was preserving (*synetērei*) these matters (*ta rhēmata tauta*), carefully bringing together and considering (*symballousa*) them in her heart” (Luke 2:19).

Mary's response is notable for its difference. While we might initially include her among the “all” who hear the shepherds' report and “wonder” or “marvel” (*thaumazō*: 2:18)<sup>2</sup> at these extraordinary things, verse 19 sets her apart. Nor does she glorify and praise the god, like the shepherds. Indeed, the quiet and internal manner of her response is in direct contrast to what we may infer is the noisy and

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<sup>2</sup> The word *thaumazō* hitherto describes the reactions of people to strange and important things witnessed and heard, such as Zechariah's delay in the temple (1:21) and the naming of John (63) and will be used many times in the rest of the Gospel in similar ways (4:22; 7:9; 8:25; 9:43; 11:14, 38; 20:26; 24:12, 41), including Mary and Joseph's response to the words of the prophet Simeon (2:33).

vocal excitement of those around her. As Fitzmyer puts it: “Mary’s reaction to what has happened is something that she keeps to herself, and is contrasted to the reaction of the shepherds who go forth to spread the news, and to the reaction of wonder and astonishment of those who heard the news” (Fitzmyer 1981, 398).

Later in the chapter, diegetically about twelve years on, we get the story of how Mary and Joseph lose Jesus. Returning from Jerusalem, where they have been celebrating the feast of the Passover, they realise Jesus is not with their group of kinsfolk and acquaintances (2:44). We, the reader, have been informed that Jesus has stayed behind in Jerusalem (2:43). Mary and Joseph return there when they cannot find him. They discover him in the temple, where he is sitting with the teachers, listening and engaging them with questions and answers that effect astonishment (*existēmi*; lit. to move from a standing position, or more colloquially as we might say “to knock off [their] feet”) from all those who hear him (2:47–47). When Mary and Joseph see him they too are astonished and shocked (*exēplagēsan*, from *ekplesso*, to strike with panic). His mother berates him for causing her and Joseph such worry, saying: “Son, why have you treated us so? Behold, your father and I have been looking for you anxiously.” Given Mary’s reference to Joseph as Jesus’ father, Jesus’ response about being in his father’s house is curious. Both Mary and Joseph fail to understand what he said to them (*to rhēma*; the matter or thing; 2:50). He returns with them to Nazareth and, we are told, he is obedient to them and that “Mary kept very carefully (*diatērei*) all these matters (*panta ta rhēmata tauta*) in her heart” (2:51). The mention of Mary’s (and Joseph’s) lack of understanding in 2:50 is said to emphasise Mary’s limited understanding of the import of the situation (Fitzmyer 1981, 398; Marshall 1978, 129).

This lack of understanding is also said to “humanise” Mary by emphasising the on-going (and therefore incomplete) nature of her understanding, and by placing her amongst all the others who, historically, couldn’t yet possibly understand the full importance of her son. With respect to 2:51, Brown argues the following:

If the reference to the obedience softens the portrait of Jesus in the scene, the statement about Mary in this last part of vs. 51 softens the portrait of Mary. She may have been amazed at what Jesus did (48); she may not have understood what he said of himself (50); she may have reproached him (48b); but she is not unresponsive to the mystery that surrounds him. Her lack of understanding is not permanent; for the fact that she keeps with concern such events in her heart is by way of preparation for a future understanding as a member of the believing community...By stressing her lack of understanding in vs. 50, Luke is faithful to history; the Christology of Jesus as God’s Son was not understood until after the resurrection. By stressing Mary’s retention of the things that happened, puzzling to understand their meaning, Luke is giving us a perceptive theological insight into history...and when Christian disciples like Mary believed in Jesus as God’s Son after the resurrection, they were finding adequate expression for intuitions that had begun long before. (Brown 1993, 494)

We are never told exactly what Mary makes of these things she witnesses and hears; though the imperfect forms of *syntēreō* and *diatēreō* imply the ongoing nature of the acts of preserving and keeping carefully. The author of Luke does not, for whatever reasons, feel the need to explain to the reader what Mary's concerns are, as he does earlier in the similarly worded passage concerning the neighbours of Elizabeth and Zechariah ("and all who heard them laid them up [ethento) in their hearts, saying "What then will this child be?"; Lk 1:66). Nor does he present her reactions as "interior monologues" on these two narrative occasions as he does with other characters in his gospel.<sup>3</sup> And indeed, this contemplative silence is quite a different response to that which she earlier gives Elizabeth, when she bursts into song, or the angel Gabriel, whom she questions before giving her assent.

These two verses are often mentioned together, along with the Annunciation, by scholars who seek to understand the author's historiographical, literary, and theological intentions when it comes to the portrayal of Mary. According to Meyer (1964), the historiographical issue pertains to the question of whether or not the author intended them as a reference to Mary as a primary source for the infancy narratives. This question, while important for those who engage with the biblical texts in more traditional, historical-critical modes, is of no interest to me here. The literary considerations of the verses have also generally followed the traditional, historical-critical concerns of source and redaction criticism, structural issues, genre and style, Hebraic and Greek influences, the meaning of the key words (*syntērein*, *diatērein*, and *symballein*), and the content of what exactly it is that Mary keeps in her heart (Meyer 1964, 31). Again, I am not interested in posing such questions about what we might know about the author's intentions with these texts. What will concern me, however, is the silence in the text, both the depiction of Mary as remaining contemplatively silent and the fact that we are never told what she eventually makes of what she witnesses, the outcomes of her careful musings.

In terms of theological significance, these notices attest to the question of Mary's ability to understand the significance of what she is witnessing and being told about her son. In other words, the theological importance of Mary's reactions in Luke's gospel concerns Christology. As Meyer puts it:

"Theological standpoint" refers to the perspective in which these notices are theologically significant: this is a Mariological perspective, which here, as always, derives its meaning and importance from Christological themes. (Meyer 1964, 31)

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<sup>3</sup> See Sellev (1992). Sellev discusses the Lucan literary device of the "interior monologue" in six of the parables: the Foolish farmer (12:16–20); the Unfaithful Servant (12:42–46); the Prodigal Son (15:11–32); the Crafty Steward (16:1–8a); the Unjust Judge (18:2–5); and the Owner of the Vineyard (9–16). As Sellev points out, this device is unusual in the gospel tradition, but is obviously something the Lucan author favours. It is also important to note that this technique, whereby the reader is given insight into the characters' unspoken ideas and motivations, is only present when Jesus is narrating: "Luke', as narrator of the story as a whole, is thereby able to characterize his hero with specially sharp and penetrating insight, as glimpsed in his masterful storytelling" (Sellev 1992, 253).

Thus, “as always”, Mary’s importance is secondary to that of the son, and this satellite quality, along with her virgin–mother status, rightly continues to render Mary a difficult figure for feminist readers. Indeed, the silence of Mary can be criticised as submissive and passive in comparison to the active art of speech. In Luke’s gospel, generally, there is a lot of silencing of characters, beginning with Zechariah’s punishment. Jesus silences demons (4:35, 41) and charges people not to tell of what they have witnessed or heard (5:14; 8:56; 9:21). Later on in the gospel there will be another silent Mary, praised for that silence in comparison to her vocal and forthright sister, Martha (Lk 10:38–42). So much of feminist biblical scholarship focuses on the question of whether or not the New Testament, in general, can be read as promoting the idea of women as legitimate leaders and ministers of the “the Word”, that is, as speakers, with a vast amount of literature focusing explicitly on Luke’s gospel and its portrayal of women.

The problem of the third gospel’s portrait of women is important. In comparison to the other gospels, Luke’s gospel includes more women than any other. It also utilises a parallel structure of stories of men and women. These features have led certain commentators to laud the gospel as “the Gospel for women” (Plummer 1981, xlii; cf. Reid 1996, 2) and as evidence of an egalitarianism shared between men and women (O’Toole 1984, 120; cf. Reid 1996, 2–3). However, a number of feminist scholars have shown that Luke’s gospel is not as easily classified as a work promoting women as equal in the task of discipleship or leadership (notably Schüssler Fiorenza 1983; D’Angelo 1990; Schaberg 1992). As Mary Rose D’Angelo argues, while we can make an argument for the discipleship and even, to a lesser degree prophecy, of women in Luke–Acts, the participation of women in these roles is depicted as diminished: “its apologetic is also addressed to the women who practice and aspire to practice that prophetic ministry, and its intent is to change that practice, to restrict the participation of women to the bounds of discreet behaviour...the women in the Gospel are at once a means of edification and of control” (D’Angelo 1990, 461).

If our judgements about the depiction of women in the New Testament hinge on the question of whether or not they are allowed to proclaim the good news, an issue of importance especially for women who wish to assume such a role in the various Christian churches today, then the silence of Mary in 2:19 and 2:51 needs to be approached carefully. Indeed, the usual translation of 2:19—“but Mary kept (or cherished/treasured) these things, pondering them in her heart”—ignores the psychological and intellectual implications of the verbs used in the text, *syntereō* and *symballō*. As Spenser puts it:

The *syn/sym* preposition suggests Mary’s determined striving to “pull/get it all together”, to interpret and integrate all the new words and events (*rhēmata*) she’s encountered in Bethlehem into a coherent whole. More specifically, *syntereō* connotes “keeping with concern” or “receiving and retaining the event as much as the deed one sees in the word one hears.” It implies a deep emotional and intellectual engagement with matters beyond what the sappy translation—“Mary treasured all these words ... in her heart (*kardia*) suggests ... Far from feeling warm fuzzies about the shepherds’ revelations about Jesus, Mary holds on to them like



a wrestler, probing them, mulling them, trying to wrench from them their thick meaning” (Spencer 2012, 84–85).

Unsurprisingly, women have responded somewhat ambivalently to these verses. For example, Jane Schaberg (1992, 279) points out that these verses help create the image of Mary as “Luke’s model of obedient, contemplative discipleship.” Schaberg (like D’Angelo and Schüssler Fiorenza) argues that the gospel provides women with a passive model of Christian life, presenting readers with female characters who are “prayerful, quiet, grateful women, supportive of male leadership, forgoing the prophetic ministry” (Schaberg 1992, 275). Barbara E. Reid (1996, 85) states that, while Mary is a prominent figure in the first chapter of the gospel, after the birth of Jesus she “recedes to the background.” However, more positively, she notes that the descriptions of Mary’s contemplative silence in 2:19 and 2:51 convey “Mary’s piety and her humanness in needing to continually ponder God’s ways and words in order to understand their meaning. As with all believers, it is her constant reflection on experience and on God’s word that reveals God’s purposes over time to her” (Reid 1996, 85). Elsewhere, Reid describes the Mary of these two verses as a “silent theologian” (Reid 1996, 26). One might rightly ask what use a silent (female) theologian is, particularly given the hegemonic control (certain) men have wielded historically when it comes to the biblical texts and their interpretation and dissemination.

I, however, have no interest in trying to “save” the text, or to make any claim about whether or not women can proclaim “the good news” of Jesus based on the ancient biblical texts. And as an atheist I am hardly listening out for some god’s purpose concerning me. Nor, however, am I interested in dismissing the literature as irredeemably masculinist. My concern with the biblical texts and their potential for women derives from the complex thinking of the philosopher Luce Irigaray who, over the last thirty years, has come to write often about certain features of the Hebraic and Christian stories and about why it is important that we, as women, learn to approach them anew.

As such, rather than universalising Mary’s meditative reaction as indicative of the best way for men and women to respond to what is deemed the “truth” of the divine, I want to examine these curious examples of Mary’s contemplative silence as instances of ethical listening and restorative thinking *for women*. I shall do so by exploring Irigaray’s work on the cultivation of the breath and silence to promote the possibility of “becoming woman.” Here, I draw specifically from Irigaray’s stunning, though to many, perplexing recasting of the Madonna, and her insistence that “women mindful of their liberation” need to imitate Mary and not Jesus (Irigaray 2004a, 152).

## 2. Reading and Breathing with Irigaray

Over the last three decades, the philosopher Luce Irigaray has steadily been developing a way for women to engage fruitfully with the Christian figure of Mary, the mother of Jesus.<sup>4</sup> Irigaray’s focus on Mary emerges as a significant feature of her development of her philosophy of religion. She insists that religion must be at

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<sup>4</sup> For a more detailed discussion of Irigaray’s reading of the Madonna, see Kelso (forthcoming, 2015). Much of this section and the next is a summary of that essay.

the forefront of our thinking today, if our future is not only to be better, but, more urgently, if it is to be at all. This turn to religion and the divine (understandable perhaps, after Heidegger, as a “god-less” thinking that can cultivate an awareness of the divine as immanent; the “sensible-transcendental”) is not, she insists, to remain at the level of some abstract theorisation or construction of a new morality or even some form of contemplation of a new immutable “truth.” Rather, Irigaray’s philosophy of religion is to be understood as a practical philosophy, “a daily behaviour which allows us to be faithful to ourselves and to communicate with the other(s)” (Irigaray 2004, 145).

While Irigaray is well-known for her turn to Eastern spiritual practices, especially Yoga and its attention to the body’s energies (or *chakras*) and to breathing, this turn in her work also returns her to her own tradition, Roman Catholicism, one with which she has had a complex relationship:

For years, I have tried to navigate on the raft of such truths, such dogmas. I trusted them, was wounded by them, and then distanced myself from them. I have come back to them, but to question and no longer to submit blindly. To me, this task seemed a necessary one, but also for all women and all men in their search for liberation. (Irigaray 2004, 150)

The necessity of this task of critically returning to and reinterpreting “such truths, such dogmas” as the incarnation of the divine in the body of a woman is a feature of much of Irigaray’s recent work, and it necessarily involves the development of alternative modes of interpretive practice. Irigaray acknowledges that her reading of the Annunciation and the Incarnation is enabled both by the Western iconographic tradition, and by the Eastern tradition of yoga, with its attention to the breath.

Breathing, or rather the cultivation of the breath, has become a central feature of Irigaray’s philosophical practice. She argues that the importance of the breath and of breathing as a way of fortifying the self has been forgotten or repressed in patriarchal societies, especially in the West. In *Between East and West*, she notes that what she learns from the Eastern masters is the necessity of an awareness and cultivation of the breath, the daily practice of which “could help awaken or reawaken and discover words and gestures carrying another meaning, another light, another rationality” (Irigaray 2005, 6). Cultures of breath enable new modes of listening, thinking, and speaking, modes that Irigaray argues are necessary if we are to move beyond the currently debilitating social forms within which we largely merely endure (Irigaray 2013, 217). In cultures that promote and cultivate the breath, different modes of speech are more highly regarded, modes such as “poetic telling, hymns and chants, prayers of praise and dialogue” (Irigaray 1996, 122). Unfortunately, Western patriarchal cultures have demoted these modes in favour of “pre-written discourse or texts”, the effect of which is the paralysis of language by the preferred modes of “ritual, repetition, a secondary attribution of values, speculation, and ... a logic unsuited to life and its breath (Irigaray 1996, 123).

We need to remember that breathing is our first autonomous act. In the womb, our first dwelling, we are all dependent on the maternal body, specifically the placenta, for the oxygen required for existence. To be born is to begin breathing on our own. Given this phenomenal fact of being, and given what she learns from

the Eastern traditions, Irigaray reminds us that there are two types of breath that require our attention: vital and spiritual breath. As such, Irigaray argues that learning to breathe properly could eradicate the unethical mode of placental living, by which she means living via the appropriation of others, of material things, and of cultures. When we function in this placental mode, we forget how to breathe in a way that can cultivate both our physical well-being and also, more importantly, our spiritual flourishing. Irigaray's focus is not just the vital breath, what sustains our physical existence and functions only at the level of needs, but the breath that pertains to the spirit. Thus, what Irigaray (re)learns from yoga is that:

Breath is the source and food of natural and spiritual life for the human being. To cultivate life comes down to preserving and educating breathing, the origin of an autonomous existence, but also of the soul, understood in its original sense, as living. (Irigaray 2005, viii)

Becoming spiritual is, according to Irigaray, a transformative task that points towards and participates in a "becoming human," and as such interrelationality, affect, corporeality, intellection and speech are intimately connected in her philosophy:

As far as I am concerned, becoming spiritual signifies a transformation of our energy from merely vital energy to a more subtle energy at the service of breathing, loving, listening speaking and thinking (sic). This implies going from merely individual survival to the capacity of sharing with the other, and not only goods but breathing, love, words, thought. We thus find again the link with the other(s) but through a personal becoming, which otherwise runs the risk of being paralysed. When I speak of a spiritual virginity, I allude to the capability of gathering, keeping and transforming an energy of one's own ... (Irigaray 2008a, 104)

She is critical of the religious traditions of the West, traditions that centre only on words or "the Word." According to her, the Judaeo-Christian traditions, in the main, fail to give due attention to the breath and the restorative silence that enable speech, the effect of which has been an unhealthy authoritarian, dogmatic culture of death. She says "(u)nfortunately most patriarchal philosophical and religious traditions act in this way: they have substituted words for life without carrying out the necessary links between the two" (Irigaray 2005, 51).

With respect to Western myths and sacred scriptures in general, Irigaray is not interested in asking traditional historical-critical questions about authorship, dating, textual and redactional history, etc., nor is she a revisionist seeking to improve our knowledge of the past. Irigaray is more interested in developing alternative modes of reading, listening and interpreting when it comes to the sacred "texts and other traces" of the West. Explicitly, her interpretive purpose, as she puts it, is one of "founding a new ethics":

The myths and stories, the sacred texts are analyzed, sometimes with nostalgia but rarely with a mind to change the social order. The texts are merely consumed or reconsumed, in a way. The darkness of our imaginary or symbolic horizon is analyzed more or less adequately, but not with the goal of founding a new ethics. The techniques of reading,



translating, and explaining take over the domain of the sacred, the religious, the mythical, but they fail to reveal a world that measures up to the material they are consuming or consummating. Work like this, which earns various promotions and credits, is sometimes informative but rarely creative. (Irigaray 1993a, 86).

Irigaray is insisting that we engage with those texts, which we've deemed to be "sacred", in a manner that can "reveal a world that measures up to the material" itself, that is, bring into being a new social order. In other words, while our critical interpretive methods have enabled us to develop a certain knowledge of the past, such methods are not, according to Irigaray, changing the world substantially by "founding a new ethics."

For Irigaray, women must seek "what remains to be discovered, especially the future in the past" (Irigaray 1993a, 86). In *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, she explains that the task for women should be one of reworking the images of the feminine or "woman" constructed by masculine discourse:

I search for myself, as if I had been assimilated into maleness. I ought to reconstitute myself on the basis of a dissimulation ... Rise again from the traces of a culture, of works already produced by the other. Searching through what is in them – for what is not there. What allowed them to be, for what is not there. Their conditions of possibility, for what is not there. Woman ought to be able to find herself, among other things, through the images of herself already deposited in history and the conditions of production of the work of man, and not on the basis of his work, his genealogy (Irigaray 1993b, 9–10).

Her thinking about Mary is enabled in part by a careful questioning of certain features of the Christian texts and traditions, features that seem to exceed or confound the logical requirements of the masculinist narrative and religio-philosophical traditions themselves. Again, the task is not to discover new knowledge about the past but to engage with the representations of our culture in a manner that is conducive to the production of a future that is currently unimaginable.

When Irigaray insists that women might be better off imitating Mary, not Jesus, this at first seems rather perplexing, given the problematic figure that Mary has become for women. However, Irigaray is obviously not suggesting that women become passive instruments of oppressive patriarchal will. Nor is she suggesting that Mary function as an idol of worship. Rather, Irigaray is insisting that we reclaim, by whatever means possible, those (repressed? forgotten?) divine aspects of Mary that enable her to become an *aid* and not an idol that paralyzes women's spiritual becoming: "The representation or figuration of the divine ought always to remain an aid in a journey, without ever being assimilated to its accomplishment" (Irigaray 2007, 354). Taking what she has learnt from the Eastern "tradition of the physical and spiritual centers of the body, the *chakras*" (Irigaray 1996, 140), Irigaray notes a number of features present in the iconography of the Annunciation (see below). In other words, she is prepared to bring together two seemingly disparate traditions to draw out what remains to be understood about certain important aspects of our own religious traditions. For Irigaray, the New Testament texts and the interpretive traditions that emerge in

light of those texts present limited, masculinist responses to the historical moment when the divine comes to be understood as “an incarnational relationship between the body and the word” (Irigaray 2004a, 150). They do, however, manifest certain features that enable alternative interpretations to be made.

### 3. Irigaray’s Madonna

Irigaray understands the virginity of Mary and the incarnation of the divine to be more than mere symbols of the Western tradition. Rather, she insists that these features of the West’s central religious story indicate an epochal shift in history that we are yet to understand and interpret beyond the restrictions of masculinist thinking:

It is necessary to understand their historical occurrence and to be able to invent new figures to help us in our becoming. I do not interpret the incarnation, the Blessed Virgin Mary and God the Father as non-historical symbols, even if a symbolic use of their historical occurrence can be made. (Irigaray 2008a, 103)

I do not consider the incarnation as a symbol. It rather alludes to an event of our history about which we have texts and other traces. Interpretation and faithfulness regarding this event is incumbent on everyone. One could say the same about the Blessed Virgin Mary as mother of a divine son, even if the interpretation of her virginity provokes questions. (Irigaray 2008a, 102)

For Irigaray, the incarnation is a vital concept that must not be discarded, for it indicates that at a certain point in our history we begin to think the possibility of divinity as “an incarnational relationship between the body and the word” (Irigaray 2004a, 150). Rather than interpreting the incarnation as the victory of the transcendent over the immanent, of the Word over the flesh or of culture over nature, so that redemption becomes possible, Irigaray understands it as the possibility for divinity to be understood as something like a nuptial movement between nature and culture, a movement that maintains their distinction while effecting a relationship between them (Irigaray 1991, 169).

Irigaray emphasises that, when it comes to the events of the incarnation and the annunciation to the Virgin Mary, interpretation of these events, beginning with the gospel accounts themselves, have been monopolised and limited by a monosexual framework that universalises a masculine model of subjectivity and experience. She insists that we read these moments anew, searching “for the traces of the divine in anything that does not preach, doesn’t command, but enacts the work of the incarnation” (Irigaray 1991, 170). In trying to rethink the importance of these features of our cultural history in terms that might lead the way beyond such a monosexually determined understanding of humanity and divinity, Irigaray insists that the incarnation needs to be understood as “the word made flesh in Mary” (Irigaray 1991, 181). The idea that divinity or the Word is simply incarnated in the singular form of Jesus not only perpetuates the patriarchal phantasy of woman as an empty envelope or vessel, container of the father’s potent seed; it also refuses to consider the divinity of the feminine required in such a production. When the Word is made flesh, it happens in and

with Mary's body, and for Irigaray this is potentially the most scandalous aspect of the story:

He returns in an unexpected place and in an unexpected guise. In the womb of a woman. Is she the only one left who still has some understanding of the divine? Who still listens silently and gives new flesh to what she perceived in those messages that other people cannot perceive? Can she alone feel the music of the air trembling between the wings of the angels, and make or remake a body from it? Without that virgin's sensitivity—that ability to sense and open up to the most delicate vibration—how could he whom we call Jesus of Nazareth be born? And if God, in the beginning, "created" man and woman, could the unheard of and scandalous part about Jesus of Nazareth's coming into the world be that he issues forth from a woman? A virgin-mother would give God back to God. A tardy, and quickly neglected, recognition of woman's share in creation? Co-creation of a divine nature? The presence that had been buried and paralysed in the text of the law and is made flesh once more in the body of a woman, guardian of the spirit of the divine life. (Irigaray, 1991, 175-76)<sup>5</sup>

In *Amante Marine*, Irigaray is asking us to consider the question of why a woman is deemed necessary to this task of bringing divinity back into the world. Unlike the matricidal story of Dionysus or the Hebraic father-creator god of Genesis, this god-man gestates in and is birthed by the body of a mortal woman. Irigaray's answer is that Mary might be the only one capable of hearing, understanding and agreeing to the requirements of such an incarnation, asking: "Is she the only one left who still has some understanding of the divine? Who still listens silently and gives new flesh to what she perceived in those messages that other people cannot perceive? Can she alone feel the music of the air trembling between the wings of the angels, and make or remake a body from it?" In her later work, notably *I Love to You, Between East and West*, and "The Redemption of Women", Irigaray answers these questions in the affirmative, claiming that it is Mary's virginal status that determines her suitability to understand the requirements of and participate in the production of divinity, which according to her means the production of words that remain faithful to the flesh in the service of the cultivation of sexuated identity. It is Mary's virginal status that makes her appropriate for the task of listening to and remaking the words of the divine.

Irigaray's Mary is a "spiritual virgin." Irigaray rejects the patriarchal definition of virginity: that it pertains only to the presence or absence of a body part (the hymen) and that it is something one loses as a result of a certain physical act. Instead, she casts virginity as something a woman aspires to attaining and this

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<sup>5</sup> This comes from the final chapter of *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche* (1991; *Amante Marine de Friedrich Nietzsche* 1980), titled "The Crucified One: Epistle to the Last Christians" and it is where Irigaray first provides a provocative reading of the Incarnation and the Annunciation, one that acknowledges, rejects and begins to re-think the traditional interpretation that eventually (from the 6<sup>th</sup> century onwards) affords Mary a unique status among women as the virgin-mother of a god made man. Ultimately, according to Irigaray the traditional interpretations of the Incarnation and the Annunciation (and the Crucifixion) reveal the muted status of maternity/materiality in the masculinist conceptualisation of the holy.

aspiration needs to be a constant feature of her life. Specifically, the virgin woman is one who has attained autonomy through the cultivation of breathing, an autonomy that enables her to reach and maintain her integrity as a woman. Only such a woman is able to participate in the production of the divine because she is the one able to produce “a living and breathing speech, a speech which cultivates breathing and communicates with other(s)” (Irigaray 2008a, 96). In other words, Mary is able to incarnate the divine, to make the Word flesh as it were, because she is the one capable of listening to and producing speech that remains faithful to the flesh. Because she has attained spiritual autonomy as a woman, she is capable of participating with the father-god in the production of a divine child; she is the one capable of ensuring the “incarnational relationship between the body and the word” (Irigaray 2004a, 150). In the iconographic tradition, Mary’s hands are often crossed over her chest and for Irigaray this signifies Mary’s attainment of a spiritual interiority as a woman, achieved through autonomous breathing.

With respect to the Annunciation, Irigaray states:

The Annunciation is given the following rather univocal interpretation nowadays: Mary, you who are young and still a virgin, thus beautiful and desirable, the Lord, who has power over you, is informing you through his messenger that he wishes to be the father of a son to whom you will give birth. Mary can only say “yes” to this announcement because she is the Lord’s possession or his property. The mystery of the angel remains.” (Irigaray 1996, 140)

Upon this “rather univocal” reading Mary is simply a passive vehicle at the hands of patriarchal will. The angel tells her what is going to happen to her and she submits, meaning that her “yes” has already been determined for her, eradicating any sense of agency. Thus, as Irigaray puts it in “The Crucified One”, “according to the traditional interpretation, her ‘yes’ is equally a ‘no’: a no to her own life. To her conception, her birth, her generation, her flowering. No to everything, except the Word of the Father” (Irigaray 1991, 167). However, for Irigaray, such a reading, which seems to be backed up by the Lucan narrative and especially by Mary’s self-designation as “handmaid/slave (*doulē*) of the Lord” (1:38), does not take into account the presence of or indeed need for the angel: “The mystery of the angel remains.” Why does the god not simply impose his will and impregnate her? When divinity historically emerges as understood to be about a relation between word and flesh (as John’s gospel makes clear), why is a figure associated with the air and with movement between the immanent and the transcendent realms necessary for such an advent?

Irigaray interprets the cherubim of Exodus 25:8–22 and 40:34–38 as representing the sexually differentiated couple who await the incarnation of a new divine (Irigaray 1991, 175).<sup>6</sup> After his banishment from the earth and his many attempts to return, in Exodus the god, who is seeking to dwell amongst humanity, is cast in dual elemental form: he is set in stone and protected beneath the cherubim, while his airy presence also remains guarded between them and their wings (Irigaray 1993a, 45). Irigaray argues that Gabriel’s appearance and

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<sup>6</sup> Irigaray’s interpretation of the cherubim of the Hebrew Bible is quite complex, and I cannot go into great detail here. See Kelso (2013).

message to Mary can be understood as the articulation of a tangible advent, of divinity coming to be conceived as the incarnational relation between words and life in the service of a sexuating identity, a divinity that would enable the emergence of “the two.” Thus, she insists that we hear in the message of the angel an announcement that invites a response, not a command. What we might come to hear in the Annunciation is a series of questions concerning Mary’s willingness to participate in the engendering of divinity. This could be an announcement from a god who respects speech as dialogue between two irreducible subjects, one who thus requires the mediatory work of the angel. For Irigaray, the iconographic representations of the Annunciation represent this mediation not just through the depictions of the angel, but also the depictions of birds, the ray of sun and words coming from the sky. In *Between East and West: From Singularity to Community* (Irigaray 2005) she puts it this way:

The Annunciation, which precedes the birth of Jesus, can be interpreted in at least two different ways: as the substitution of the word of the celestial Father for corporeal relations, notably of breathing, between two lovers or as the fact that, in order to engender a spiritual child—a possible savior of the world—the conception of this savior must be preceded by an announcement through speech and a response from Mary. It is not a question then of miraculous birth by a woman who is supposed to have kept her hymen, but of an engendering preceded by an exchange of breath and of words between the future lovers and parents. The angel, the bird, the ray of the sun, and speech represent the mediations between the body of Mary and that of the Lord. All these mediations indicate relations between the body and speech without substituting the one for the other, as a certain type of teaching would have us “believe.” (Irigaray 2005, 52)

Thus, what we might come to hear in the story of the Annunciation is the necessity of breath in the sharing of words between lovers, words that engender a divinity “between two” differently sexuated subjects. Only such an alliance can ensure that the flesh and words can be in a relationship that enables ethical living for each of them, together: “The logos becomes dialogic, the relationship between living women and men and not an ecstasy of truth in an idealized beyond” (Irigaray 1996, 124).

While Irigaray is critical of the dominant religious traditions of the West, she does acknowledge that divinity in the Judaeo-Christian tradition is associated with breath and air in relation to the work of creation. In both Classical Hebrew and Koine Greek, the word for spirit is also the word for breath (*ruach* and *pneuma*). And, as Irigaray points out, Genesis 2:7 presents the creation of man by a god who puts his breath into matter, while Jesus is born from the body of a woman “made fertile by the breath, the Spirit” (Irigaray 2005, 76). Gabriel’s role in the Annunciation is “to awaken the breath of Mary to make possible divine incarnation” (Irigaray 2013, 222). Actually, when we look at the original Greek version in Luke’s gospel of Gabriel’s famous explanation as to how Mary will become pregnant with the divine child, we can perhaps now hear something of what Irigaray is referring to with respect to the cultivation of breathing and its necessary presence in the production of divinity: “a holy breath (*pneuma hagion*)



will come upon you and a most powerful potency (*dynamis hypsistou*) will envelop you (*episkiasei soi*); therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the son of god" (Luke 1:35).

Of course, this is not how it is usually translated, and I am not claiming that the ancient author intended this; in all likelihood, given the rest of the gospel, he most certainly did not! However, buoyed by Irigaray's reading of the Annunciation, and her own teachings concerning interpretive listening and its purpose, I am trying to hear new possibilities enabled by the ancient text. Usually, the translations are heavily determined by patriarchal theology and its predilection for capitalising words pertaining to masculine divinity, such that the angel is interpreted to say: "the Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the son of God." The importation of definite articles and the capitals here, of course, serve to distance the source of divine activity from Mary, reducing her to a passive vessel for that activity, barely even a participant. But the Greek in fact has no definite articles before "holy breath/spirit" (*pneuma hagion*) or before what I am translating as "most powerful potency" (*dynamis hypsistou*). To translate *dynamis hypsistou* as "the power of the Most High" surely evokes an authoritative figure free to wield authoratative power, and such a translation leads to the inevitable reduction of Mary to a vessel of the father's word/seed. And yet, while *dynamis* can of course carry the meaning of authoritative power, philosophically it also pertains to something like potential or latent energy.<sup>7</sup>

Furthermore, the English translation of *episkiasei* as "will overshadow" is fairly standard. The word combines *epí*, "upon" and *skiazō*, "to cast shade." In English, though, to "overshadow" strongly connotes a competitive surpassing or outdoing more than a simple casting of shade or shadow, particularly if what is doing so is indicated as "the power of the Most High." Actually, *episkiasei* is used in the Septuagint version of Exodus 40:35, which, according to the Masoretic text, describes how Moses could not enter the tent of the congregation because the mysterious cloud had "settled upon" it (*shakan 'alaw*), *enveloping* it, and the glory of the Lord had filled the tabernacle. As such, we are able to hear Gabriel telling Mary that she will be able to bring a new divinity into the world because she is capable of being transformed through her bodily experience of divine breath and vitality. When we place this text, thus translated, alongside Irigaray's reading of the Annunciation, informed as it is by both Eastern teachings concerning the cultivation of the breath, and Western iconography, it is quite possible now to hear in the story of the Annunciation "the union of divine breaths in a woman, the breathing of God uniting with Mary's virginal breathing" (Irigaray 2008a, 88), and the awakening of "the breath of Mary to make possible divine incarnation" (Irigaray 2013, 222).

It is important to realise that Irigaray is not advocating for Christianity as a religion that accomplishes a thinking of the divine that promotes the becoming of women. In fact, one senses that, for Irigaray, what we broadly call Christianity—

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<sup>7</sup> Famously, Aristotle (notably in *Physics*, Book III) uses *dynamis* (potentiality/potency) in contrast with *energeia* and *entelecheia* (actuality); the former refers to something like a potential force contained within an entity, while the latter refer to something actually being in action, enacting that work that is natural to it.

its texts, traditions, interpretive forms, lifestyles, ethics, etc.—is the historical outcome of the *failure* to perceive what she believes to be the potential meaning of the stories of the Annunciation and the Incarnation. And it is important to understand the partial status of this Christian “event”: despite the fact that the redemptive couple of Christianity is constituted by a woman and a man, it is still confined to vertical genealogy, mother and son:

At this stage, the emphasis of the couple is put on genealogy and the necessity for a couple to succeed in realizing a horizontal couple, which is able to be divine. If the Old Testament tells us of the stage of creation and sin, the New Testament tells us of redemption. But it stops with the generation of a divine son. We have not yet reached the time of the divinization of the man–woman couple. I wrote in some texts that this perhaps could happen in the third time of Judaeo–Christianity, the time of Spirit. But it depends on the manner of interpreting the word Spirit. (Irigaray 2008a, 89)

In other words, Irigaray recognises the redemptive potential of this scandalous story, particularly for women. But, she is hardly arguing that fidelity to these “events” means fidelity to Christianity as something called the “true” religion.

Thus, when Irigaray asks if Mary is the one who still senses something of the divine and whether “she alone (can) feel the music of the air trembling between the wings of the angels, and make or remake a body from it” she is in fact suggesting that Mary’s attainment of autonomy through the cultivation of the breath or spirit (her “spiritual virginity”) enables her to be an ethical listener, someone capable of listening to the discourse of the other, understood as “someone and something I do not know yet...encourage(ing) something unexpected to emerge, some becoming, some growth, some new dawn, perhaps ... as the revelation of a truth that has yet to manifest itself” (Irigaray 1996, 117). It is this aspect of the Madonna that Irigaray believes warrants our attention. In light of all this, I now want to ask if we might ourselves listen for something new in the Lucan image of Mary as contemplatively silent.

#### **4. Luke’s Mary as Ethical Listener and Thinker**

In Luke’s account of the Annunciation, Mary, though fearful of the angel, is not afraid to speak. And, while her speech is challenging, unlike Zechariah she is not punished. When she visits Elizabeth, the sound of her words causes Elizabeth’s child to leap in her womb. Elizabeth is then filled up with a holy breath (pneumatōs hagiou; 1:41) and cries out her famous blessing. Mary, in response, sings what we now call the Magnificat. Even though the Greek has the word *eipēn* (“to say or speak”), the form of her response is poetic, or in Irigaray’s terms, it is a “poetic telling”, and Tradition acknowledges it as song. How curious, then, given Mary’s propensity for joyful words of greeting and song in response to this advent, that she chooses to remain silent and thoughtful in the presence of men who celebrate and wonder at the message of the angels. And silent again, after she witnesses her son amazing the men in the temple, and when he confounds her and Joseph by asking: “Why is it that you were seeking me? Did you not know that I must be in my father’s house?” (2:49). While I have no interest in dismissing the readings of Luke that argue for his intended message with these passages

concerning Mary's thoughtful silence—that she is an example of proper Christian discipleship and, more critically, that she is cast as such to show women their true status, as a passive model of Christian life (these seem rational enough and convincing in light of the ancient material)—I am interested in pursuing the task that Irigaray assigns us when it comes to the literature we deem sacred, to search or listen for “what remains to be discovered, especially the future in the past” (Irigaray 1993a, 86).

As I mentioned earlier, Mary's lack of understanding in 2:50 is generally interpreted historically and theologically as reference to the fact that no human could understand the true nature of this god until after the resurrection. However, Irigaray's point is that even the recognition of the need for a woman in this (ideational) conception and production of the divine warrants deeper questioning, given the absence of the need for maternal productivity in the Hebraic and certain Greek creation mythologies. For Irigaray, the choice of a woman in this myth is notable, and able to be read differently, as I outlined above. Woman/Mary is chosen because she is “the only one left who still has some understanding of the divine ... (w)ho still listens silently and gives new flesh to what she perceived in those messages that other people cannot perceive” (Irigaray 1991, 175). Can we not ask now if Mary is contemplatively silent and later perplexed—required to gather together in her heart all that she witnesses, to be given careful and ongoing consideration—because she realises the message of the Annunciation is being misinterpreted in her own time? If Mary, because of her “spiritual virginity”, is the only one capable of listening *ethically* to the words that come from the other, if she is the one “capable of welcoming the word of the other without altering it” (Irigaray 2004a, 152), her contemplative silence as response to the sole focus on the divinity of the son, in what will become the cult of the father, the son and the spirit, might be read as an appropriate response to the *failure* of the meaning of the Annunciation and Incarnation to be heard properly by the others, by men. And I think this gives new weight to the fact that Mary's deliberations are never revealed in the Lucan material, are never given content, even after the resurrection. If we can accept the prophetic characterisation of Mary in this gospel (despite the struggles of Protestants, or the “minimalist Protestant direction” taken by the Catholics Fitzmyer and Brown; Brown 1993, 631–32), we might characterise Irigaray's recent interpretations of the Incarnation and Annunciation as the result of her own careful listening *for* that very revelation, hitherto inaudible to masculinist thinking.

Having said that, I am more interested in the depiction of Mary as retreating into thought here, as responsively different to her questioning or singing the Magnificat (both features said to be among the evidence for the prophetic image presented by the author of the gospel). The words used in 2:19 and 2:51 (*syntērein*, *ymballein*, and *diatērein*) suggest a deep and rigorous deliberation upon the possible meaning of information that is difficult to interpret. Furthermore they have parallels in the Old Testament, apocalyptic and sapiential literature: In the LXX of Gen 37: 5–11, Jacob “kept with concern (*dietērēsen*) this event” of his son Joseph's mysterious dream; the LXX of Dan 4:28 reads “At the end of the words Nebuchadnezzar, as he heard the judgement of the vision, treasured (*syntērēse*) these words in his heart.” Furthermore, in the apocalyptic *Testament of Levi*, Levi is given a tour of the temple and the throne of glory of the

Most High by an angel, along with being led to find a shield, and he says “And I guarded (*syntēroun*) these words/events in my heart” (6:2). More importantly, certain wisdom texts (Sirach 39:1–3; Prov 3:1; Ps 119:11) demonstrate that this language of keeping carefully or preserving what one witnesses or hears “involves not only interpreting the puzzling words of the past but also observing their message in one’s life” (Brown 1993, 431).<sup>8</sup>

“But Mary was preserving these matters, carefully bringing together and considering them in her heart” (2:19). Perhaps in the face of her realisation that only the masculine divine is audible in her own time (and ours?), Mary/woman, in her wisdom, turns inwards. Mary/woman, rather than speaking and proclaiming the wonder of the son’s divinity, retreats into a particular type of *thinking*. The location of this activity of “carefully bringing together and considering” (*syballousa*) in the heart, the *kardia*, rather than the mind, the *nous*, is important; the consideration of difficult matters not yet understood, or even understandable, does not take place in a purely rational manner, in the *nous*, which is the locale of the faculties of perception and understanding, of rational thought (for e.g. Lk 24:45). While *kardia* also is a site of understanding, it is rather the more holistic site of a person’s physical, spiritual, and mental life; the centre of purpose and will, emotion and thought.<sup>9</sup>

If Mary is a woman capable of transforming her “vital breath into a breath in the service of (her) heart, (her) listening and speaking, her thinking, that is, in the service of a proper spiritual becoming and a social and cultural autonomous existence” (Irigaray 2013, 217), then her retreat into a mode of thinking that pertains to an ongoing contemplation and understanding of the words and deeds of others can be heard as an ethical mode of engagement *as woman* with the world. But it also can be read as evidence of Mary’s autonomy as “becoming woman”, of her ability to retreat into the self in order to replenish it, even protect it against the words of the world, so that she might return to the world with words that remain faithful to herself as a woman. (In this sense, perhaps, it is a blessing that the author of Luke never gives us the content of her contemplative thinking.) This emphasis on the need for women to cultivate autonomy is not to be confused with the feeble cult of the liberal individual (and the abominable “me time” we hear so much about). The purpose of such replenishment is the enabling of the self to return to the world of others without needing to appropriate and destroy it/the other(s), or without being subsumed by the other(s), but always to be in *relation with*. On the necessity of such a retreat, Irigaray writes:

After listening to the other and to the world—and not only the world built by us—we have to return home, to return to ourselves, within ourselves ... Thinking is the time of turning back to the self. Thinking is the time of building one’s own home, in order to inhabit one’s self, to dwell within the self...Thinking has to secure the return to home, the dwelling within oneself for reposing, for a becoming of one’s own, for preparing future relations with the other, the world. (Irigaray 2008b, 234–35)

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<sup>8</sup> See Fitzmyer (1981, 413), Brown (1993, 430–31) and Spencer (2012, 85–86).

<sup>9</sup> See Bovon (2002, 92–93).

Mary's silence is bound to be read as problematic for women whose perception of themselves as valued is only considered attainable through their access to the functional roles and sites of speech available, that is, if they can gain access to those (masculinist) positions that enable them, for example, to continue the work of the disciples and proclaim the "good news" of the son. Of course, I am not suggesting that the *silencing* of women should be ignored; rigorous analysis of the ways women have been silenced is crucial to the liberational task. However, with Irigaray, I am also suggesting that the Annunciation, the Incarnation and the contemplative listening of Mary, if read without the restrictions placed on us by masculinist modes of thinking—"no longer to submit blindly" (Irigaray 2004, 150)—can enable us to produce interpretations that are more conducive to the promotion of a non-imitative subjectivity in the feminine, one that can begin to develop an Incarnational, non-theistic notion of divinity more appropriate to us as women, always in the process of becoming:

If the *word* is a vehicle of the divine, we have to take care that it will be deifying for us, that it incarnates us, as women, deifies us, as women. It is therefore advisable to be mindful, moment by moment, to respect, in our words, the *I-she* and its links with our own qualities: concern for the sensible, for the tangible and the natural environment, for intersubjectivity, for relations with the other gender, for the future, for being and doing things together, as two particularly. (Irigaray 2004a, 156)

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