

Feminine Existential Style

An Operative Concept

This chapter explicates the existential concept of style and gives a preliminary characterization of the sense which Irigaray explicitly gives to feminine existential style. In addition to this preliminary characterization of feminine existential style, I will also explore it by putting it into operation. In the course of this book I will show how feminine style is gradually unfolded and developed throughout the temporal continuum of Irigaray's work in a manner which is structurally similar to personal history. But I will also demonstrate the significance of feminine existential style by organizing that process of temporal constitution of Irigaray's work into another, genetic order of constitution. The subject's genesis can be detected in any instance of style in its process of being constituted, in a piece of writing or at each moment of a person's becoming. This is because the habits, intentions, and motivations formed in the past and the opportunities left open for the future are included in any instance of an existential style.



Irigaray characterizes sexual difference by several related terms. She speaks about the feminine (*le féminin*), the maternal-feminine (*le maternel-féminin*) and woman (*la femme*), but she also uses the concepts of feminine style (*le style féminin*) and woman's style (*le style de la femme*).

In Irigaray's terms, for the feminine existential style to become actualized, we must, rather than interpreting or repeating the feminine figures and function acceptable within the confines of the masculine discourse, modify the feminine "as an excess that exceeds common sense" (TS, 78). According to Irigaray, the feminine existential style only can actualize "on condition that the feminine

[does] not renounce its 'style'" (TS, 78/CS, 76). In other words, in Irigaray's view it is the feminine "style," which forms the excess of that which is defined as comprehensible by masculine discourse.

Irigaray distinguishes between two senses of style by marking one with quotation marks: she speaks about "style" (or "writing") on the one hand and style on the other. In my view this is a distinction between an experienced and gestural unity of the lived feminine body on the one hand, and a subject constituted by first-person acts of expression in all their modes from gestures to writing on the other hand. In discourse the experienced and perceptual unity of gestural expression obtains a more structured articulation.

Irigaray seems to maintain that in the current situation the only mode of being recognized and acknowledged is the masculine one. Moreover, lacking articulations of alternative existential style(s), the masculine mode of being is not even recognized as a style but instead forms a general norm for coherence. For this reason Irigaray thinks that the feminine "style" is not perceived nor experienced as a style: "[it] is not a style at all according to the traditional way of looking at things" (TS, 78/CS, 76). Furthermore, woman's "style" is not only excluded from the "traditional way of looking at things" but it also questions the already established forms in a radical manner: "This 'style,' or 'writing,' of women tends to put the torch to fetish words, proper terms, well-constructed forms" (TS, 79/CS, 76). Irigaray continues: "This 'style' resists and explodes every firmly established form, figure, idea or concept. Which does not mean that it lacks style as we might be led to believe by a discursivity that cannot conceive of it" (TS, 79/CS, 76).

Instead of lacking style, Irigaray argues, woman's "style" or "writing" has a *figure or form of its own* but this is not acknowledged. Hence, according to Irigaray, while the feminine style is possible, the prevailing discourse does not account for nor does it provide means for the development of feminine self-expression. Moreover, the discourse does not allow us to perceive the potential *gestalt* and style of the gestural unity of the feminine lived body experienced and perceived in our life-world. The gestural unity of the feminine body can challenge the absoluteness of the dominant discursive formations, but only if it is developed in all the dimensions of life and subjectivity.

Irigaray explains that women's "style does not privilege sight; instead, it takes each figure back to its source which is among other things *tactile*. It comes back in touch with itself in that origin without ever constituting in it, constituting itself in it, as some sort of unity. *Simultaneity* is its 'proper' aspect—a proper(ity) that is never fixed in the possible identity-to-self of some form or other. It is always *fluid*, without neglecting the characteristics of fluids that are difficult to idealize: those rubbings between two infinitely near neighbours that create a dynamics" (TS, 79/CS, 76). This quotation shows that in Irigaray's view,

woman's style is not a substance, an essence, or an entity for which movement and change would be external. It cannot be experienced insofar as experience is identified with or reduced to reflective experience, "[woman's] 'style' cannot be upheld as a thesis, [it] cannot be the object of a position," writes Irigaray (TS, 79/CS, 76). So, Irigaray does not want to repeat the metaphysical distinction between form and matter or the distinction between idea and appearance. Rather than constituted in binaries or oppositions, the feminine is constituted by proximity, touch, contact, and contiguity (Jones 2010, 84). Moreover, in Irigaray's view, woman's "style" does not emerge from the positings of objects and thesis (*noemata* and *noesis*) as correlates of the meaning-giving consciousness, but rather originates from a pre-discursive source that precedes and escapes these distinctions and positings² (Heinämaa 1996).

The feminine style cannot be fully controlled or totally grasped. It cannot be circumscribed nor described exhaustively. This means that concepts which we need to characterize the feminine way of experiencing must be nonstandard and take into consideration the non-graspable character of this way of experiencing and its position outside, or in the margins of the prevailing discourse. If the feminine "style" could be brought into the discourse, it could also indicate another expressive style which does not yet understand itself as a style, but sees and presents itself as an absolute.

According to Irigaray, the feminine style is best characterized by the features of contact, proximity, fluidity, tactility, contiguity, and simultaneity, but still it forms a unity, like that of writing understood as a spiritual-embodied unity, which, in phenomenology of the body, is considered as structurally similar to the lived body. Also for this reason, I will argue that the different concepts of style that Irigaray uses can be best understood in the framework of the phenomenology of the body. The phenomenological concept of style refers to dynamic and relational unity which is constituted in relations, connections and disconnections between different unities and inside singular unities. Thus, rather than being a closed, substantial unity, an essence or an entity with stable features, style is a dynamic, open, and temporal becoming (Heinämaa 1996, 158).

The style at issue here is not a style in the linguistic or literary sense, nor restricted to writing and speech, but is an *existential* style and thus concerns the being and becoming of things, the birth of sense. Existential style is intentional, motivational, and changes in time, but preserves its unity in these changes, or, in other words, changes in ways characteristic to it (Heinämaa 1996, 158). The intentional relations of action, thought, volition, emotion, remembering, and even motility, perceiving, and sensing are constitutive for a style (Heinämaa 2003, 31, 41).

This existential style can be either disclosed as my own style or as an expressive unity of another person. Thus, style is an essential structural feature

of the person. Through style a person can be identified both from the point of view of the person her- or himself and from the point of view of others. Style expresses personality to others in different, intertwined ways: it is exemplified in bodily movements and gestures as well as in speaking and writing. In these gestures the relations to others are formed in an individual manner. For their part, relationships with others can effectuate gradual changes in the temporal constitution and motivational structure of subjectivity and in the subject's ways of relating to others (Heinämaa 2003, 31–44). Moreover, style can also be detected in artifacts, such as philosophical writings or works of art.

In all these cases (own, alien, and artificial style), style means a way of relating to that which exists: to the self, to others, and to the world. With respect to the world, a person's style is constituted in the subject's relations to enjoyment and production. With respect to the other, a person's style is constituted in relations to interaction and communication. In our relation to ourselves, the capacity to focus attention to oneself concerns both singular acts and their connections. Thus, the style of a person concerns his or her current state but also his or her past and future, as the lived present opens in both directions.

Past activities, and passivities as well as affectivity, constitute habits which give direction and motivation for future actions and lived experiences. The motivational force of habits and sedimented experiences depends on the capacity for self-reflection and are thus tied to individual and cultural practices and ideals. The possibility of self-reflection is based on the reflexivity of the self: we can be aware of ourselves in our activities and passivities. Depending on the capacity of self-reflection in the three interconnected relations—self, others and the world—personal style can develop more or less fully. This process also includes the process of becoming aware of one's own pre-conceptual experience and its motivational force.

According to the phenomenologists of the body, I cannot experience the other's activities and passivities directly but can only capture them indirectly by his or her expressions. The style of another person is constituted in conscious life on the basis of his or her bodily positions, movements, postures, gestures, facial expressions, and vocal expressions. I can identify the other person as such, i.e., as another self with his or her unique and ungraspable stream of experiences, on the basis of the similarity between my own bodily style and his or her style. The other person is also identified by me as similar or different with respect to my own acts which are constitutive of my style.

Gender as an existential style does not mean to apply to a preexisting norm. Rather, each existential style is constitutive of a norm of its own (Heinämaa 1996, 162). This means that this conception of existential style also includes a new way of conceptualizing the gender-blending phenomena as a confusion or a distraction of the dual tendency in the constitution of gender identities, as stylistic variations of existence (Heinämaa 1996, 162). Merleau-Ponty's holistic

conception of sexuality, on which the idea of gender as an existential style is based, does not draw sexual identity from any particular (sexual) organ, acts, or characteristics. Neither can it be localized merely in one field of existence or activity: existential style runs through all these (Heinämaa 1996, 156). This means, for example, that reproduction or sexual act cannot be thought as the origin of sexuality understood as holistic.³

Heinämaa describes the development of sexual identities as existential styles in terms of imitation and mimicry, repetition and modification rather than in terms of inheritance or properties (68). So, existential style is formed *partly* by mimetic acts and repetition but is not reducible to them. Because of its temporality it necessarily consists of changes and modifications between bodily and sensuous of experiences. This temporal dynamics of change also opens up the possibility for change within certain confines, namely our nature as embodied and temporal beings, which belong to a certain time and place (43–44).

Being comprehensive, and running through the life of an individual as a whole, style also covers intellectual, even philosophical, activities such as reflection and critical and self-critical inquiries. It is worth emphasizing that this conception of style covers writing but is not restricted to writing. With regard to scientific work it refers to the whole of scientific activity. This whole includes ways of posing questions, applying and choosing methods, constructing interpretations, and presenting the process of research in writing.

As mentioned, depending on the capacity of self-reflection in the three interconnected relations—self, others, and the world—and in their dimensions—embodied, affective, and spiritual—personal style can develop more or less fully. This means that a person, man or woman, can become more or less aware of him- or herself and the relationality by which she or he is constituted. This holds also for women and men as genders or as general styles. The capacity of self-reflection, however, is not only dependent on individual potentialities, capacities, and restrictions but also on the means and obstacles provided by close and distant others, as well as by the dominant culture and discourse. By different, individual and collective, means, an existential style can be consciously cultivated and developed into an explicit form if it is perceived, identified, and recognized rather than used, bypassed, and neglected. This is possible, even if the feminine existential style has come to mean “that which does not exist, or that which hardly exists according to the dominant norms of conceptualizing the sense of being. The feminine existential style, or its partial manifestations, can even be subjected to strategic demands within a particular field of existential activity. The interpretation of strategic essentialism, which is the dominant way of reading Irigaray’s work sympathetically, accentuates this option. Yet, I will argue that the (feminine) existential style, originating from the feminine pre-discursive experience, is not reducible to such narrow or crystallized forms or pre-posed aims.