

Margaret Whitford, 1947–2011

It is difficult to convey the desert which faced women philosophers in Britain in the early 1980s', Margaret Whitford once remarked. It was a desert that Margaret's own work was pivotal in modifying. At a time when feminism was flourishing outside the academy, philosophy seemed especially immune from its influence; both in terms of content and in terms of numbers of women philosophers employed in academic departments. Philosophers who attempted to interrogate the foundations and presuppositions of their discipline, explicitly from their position as women, uttered what she later (in her inaugural lecture¹) identified as 'fragments of ideas ... murdered at birth' by the policing of the philosophy establishment. To provide the conditions of possibility within which such ideas could take root, Margaret, along with other feminist philosophers,² started women's reading groups, seminars and workshops. From these came the establishment of the UK Society for Women in Philosophy, which her energy and vision were pivotal in maintaining. This established the *Women's Philosophy Newsletter* (later renamed the *Women's Philosophy Review*), which Margaret co-edited and produced from 1991 to 1997. She remained as books reviews editor until 2001.

Margaret's first book, *Merleau-Ponty's Critique of Sartre's Philosophy* (1982), remains a standard reference. Although its content does not reflect her growing feminist concerns, it reveals an intellectual style that would mark her later feminist and psychoanalytic work. There is a refusal to take sides in the debate; a chiding of Merleau-Ponty for failing to recognize that Sartre was preoccupied with different concerns, and had resources to respond to many of the criticisms; a recognition that we often need to hold together strands of thought which sit in tension with each other; and a respect for the authors which forbade any cheap point-scoring that might yield the facade of a decisive refutation.

Such characteristics marked Margaret's position in feminist philosophy. With Morwenna Griffiths she edited the first book of papers to come out of UK feminist philosophy, *Feminist Perspectives in Philosophy* (1988). Later, with Kathleen Lennon, she edited the first British collection on feminist epistemology, *Knowing the Difference* (1994). For Margaret, feminist thought was not marked by a common content, for there was a multiplicity of views and lively debate between them: 'there is no membership requirement for feminism, its diversity is its strength.'³ What marked feminist philosophy was an interrogation of our position as women in relation to the history of philosophy and its contemporary manifestations. This process required an essential openness of thought, a refusal to respect boundaries, between different kinds of philosophy or between philosophy and other disciplines. One of the ways in which 'fragments of ideas' were murdered in many philosophy seminars was by the complaint that they were *not really philosophy*. (This complaint was also sometimes uttered by practitioners of analytic philosophy against those working within the 'continental' tradition.) To think creatively, Margaret insisted, was to think across boundaries rather than being confined within them. In her 1996 inaugural lecture she stressed the importance of making *linkages* within and across disciplines. The point was 'a new object of thought',

not ‘the purity of the domain’. References to the processes of interpretation and translation – processes central to her own intellectual work – recur in the lecture. Margaret lectured in a French department, as a philosopher, engaged in research in contemporary French thought. She translated French philosophy. She brought a psychoanalytic framework to all her thinking, later training as a psychoanalytic psychotherapist. She was a voracious reader of literature and had a passion for contemporary art.

There was nothing easy in the task of the feminist intellectual as Margaret envisaged it, and she set a demanding example for those of us who worked alongside her: ‘there is probably very little that is not relevant for the feminist researcher; the only problem is where to draw breath.’ Creative thought was essentially a collective endeavour. It required that we be informed of the work of others; a task which went hand in hand with the ‘moral imperative to recognize and acknowledge the work of fellow women scholars’.⁴ But this did not suggest an easy accessibility. She insisted on ‘the time of



understanding’, the ‘slow process’ of making connections.⁵ The *Women’s Philosophy Review* was pivotal in facilitating this process. Through Margaret’s reviews, and those of others that she commissioned, we were kept informed of a range of work within feminist philosophy and related areas, which allowed our own projects to develop. Margaret saw the model of feminist research employed here as paradigmatic of ‘what intellectual inquiry might be’.⁶

In the early 1990s Margaret began publishing her work on the French feminist Luce Irigaray. She edited *The Irigaray Reader* (1991) and, together with Carolyn Burke and Naomi Schor, co-edited *Engaging*

with Irigaray (1994). Her important monograph *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine* was published in 1991. More than anyone else, she was instrumental in bringing Irigaray’s work to the attention of English-speaking feminists, and in defending it against charges of a simplifying essentialism and reductionism. For her the diversity of interpretations to which Irigaray was subject and the strength of response to her work indicated its fertility and complexity. Margaret herself admitted to not being immediately attracted to Irigaray’s thought, but – in a way that was characteristic of her insistence that we take ourselves out of our comfort zone – believed that a woman ‘speaking as a woman ... deserves a fair hearing’. She was interested not in providing a definitive interpretation, but rather in ‘the creative relationship between reader and text.’ ‘What interests me’, she wrote, ‘is what Irigaray makes it possible for us to think.’⁷

The upshot is Whitford’s Irigaray, opening up the possibility for later thought in a number of ways. Her reading puts the critical engagement with psychoanalysis centre stage, and foregrounds the concept of the Imaginary. Irigaray’s use of this concept is compared and contrasted with not only Lacan, but also Bachelard and Castoriadis. In contrast to Lacan, the Imaginary and Symbolic are intertwined, rather than the Imaginary being contained by the entry into the Symbolic. The intertwining yields an affectively laden set of structures, forms and images, in terms of which we experience our bodies and world. These morphologies are necessarily laden with affect, from which they cannot be disentangled. As with Castoriadis, multiple imaginaries, anchored in the social, have an openness and indeterminacy that derive from the creativity of the psyche and the plasticity of the drives. However, in contrast to other writers’ conceptions, these imaginaries are *sexed* in complex ways, which makes the issue of what it is

to think or speak as a woman one which is under constant interrogation. Our imaginaries have predominantly been created by men and include the male imaginaries of what it is to be female. However, given the creativity of the psyche, there is a possibility of reimagining what it is to be female in less damaging ways. But such reimaginings require careful and collective reworkings of current morphologies, with unpredictable and open outcomes.⁸

The stress on interdisciplinarity and creativity that informed Margaret Whitford's research and writing also informed her teaching. She was a superb teacher. One of her very successful courses was constructed around choosing books, reading them and writing reviews; reflecting her belief that our own thoughts develop by critical and creative engagement with the thought of others. But developments within universities from the late 1990s onwards militated against her mode of thinking and working. Teaching became increasingly regulated by formulaic aims, objectives and outcomes. Research became regulated by Research Assessment Exercises, which, whatever the rhetoric, worked against creativity and interdisciplinarity, bringing back, for philosophers, the murderous whisper: 'is this philosophy?' Margaret became increasingly disenchanted with the academy. Her interest in psychoanalysis deepened and she trained as a psychoanalytic psychotherapist at the Lincoln Clinic and Centre for Psychotherapy. On retirement from her post as Professor of French at Queen Mary, University of London, she took on a number of patients as well as continuing with her translation work, particularly psychoanalytical texts, right up until her death. Margaret thus exemplified her own dictum that we may need to step outside the academy 'to other spaces to renew our thinking'.⁹ She continued her longstanding support and generosity to other writers, colleagues and friends, including younger academics finding their feet.

At a time when government funding of the arts and social sciences is being withdrawn and research is required to demonstrate immediately and directly its impact, we would do well to remember Margaret's warning that 'what you do in one place has effects in another, which may not involve direct contact but rather a whole series of links which are difficult if not impossible for any single individual to trace; so that knowledge production will be thought of in terms of an inexhaustible web or network. The consequence of cutting in one place ... will have incalculable effects elsewhere.' Sadly, in place of the model of intellectual inquiry that she advocated, we are in danger of a practice of 'inertia and repetition' whose 'apparent proliferation ... turns out to be a false liveliness'.¹⁰

Margaret will be much missed by those of us who never left her company without fresh insight. The possibilities she helped facilitate within the profession will continue to benefit its practitioners.

Kathleen Lennon

Notes

1. Margaret Whitford, Inaugural Lecture as Professor of Modern French Thought at Queen Mary and Westfield, University of London, 7 March 1996. Reprinted in the *Women's Philosophy Review*, December 1996, www.swipuk.org/datapubs/old/1996-12-WIP.pdf.
2. Including Alison Assiter, Christine Battersby, Paula Boddington, Morwenna Griffiths, Jean Grimshaw, Joanna Hodge, Judith Hughes, Kathleen Lennon, Sabina Lovibond, Mary Midgley, Anne Seller and many others.
3. Margaret Whitford, *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine*, Routledge, London and New York, 1991, p. 5.
4. Whitford, Inaugural Lecture, p. 34.
5. Whitford, *Luce Irigaray*, p. 5.
6. Whitford, Inaugural Lecture, p. 41.
7. Whitford, *Luce Irigaray*, pp. 3, 4.
8. Margaret later moved away from Irigaray's work, sharply disagreeing with the perspective of some of her later writings.
9. Whitford, Inaugural Lecture, p. 41.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 39, 36.