Bodies, Voices, Relations: Thinking with Adriana Cavarero

Edited by

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Inclining Politics. Introducing Adriana Cavarero

Federica Castelli, Marco Piasentier, and Sara Raimondi

The philosopher Adriana Cavarero has long been a well recognised voice in the plural landscape of contemporary Italian thought. Her engagement with grounding themes and ideas has resonated across, and often profoundly shaken, multiple fields of enquiry, spanning political philosophy, the humanities and classical studies, literary theory, and the traditions of feminist debates. Whilst a coherent synthesis of such a vast reception would be impossible to pursue in one volume, the collection of contributions that follows attempts to portray – via a multiplicity of perspectives and angles – Cavarero's work, and the important legacy and debates that it continues to spark, not only in Italy, but also, increasingly, at an international level. On the backdrop of an expanding reception in and outside Italy, however, we can ponder whether it is plausible to speak of an "Italian" philosophy; in other words, can philosophy be constructed in national or geographical terms, or rather does it need to be conceived as inevitably stateless, and not bound by territorial constraints? Assuming the admissibility of the existence of a philosophy that is distinctively "Italian", then, the question would arise: what are its main traits? What are its distinctive and, possibly, uniquely recognisable characteristics? While these questions have been central to the *Journal of Italian Philosophy* since its inception, their origins have a much more complex and extensive historical trajectory.

Studies on the topic can be traced back to the writings of Bertrando Spaventa in the 19th century (Spaventa, 2009), and some of their most comprehensive and innovative

formulations in the 20th century can be found in the works of Giovanni Gentile (2003) and Eugenio Garin (2008). While these historical works have not generated significant interest in the Anglophone world, contemporary Italian philosophy has, in recent years, begun to gain attention in the international philosophical landscape. This growing international interest has developed alongside a burgeoning national debate regarding the relevance of Italian philosophy and its positioning within the European context, particularly thanks to the contributions of Roberto Esposito (2012). The use of terms like "Italian thought" and "Italian theory" – to characterise the prevailing trends in contemporary Italian philosophy – evokes a reminiscent debate akin to the one sparked in the US regarding the significance of French post-structuralism from the 1960s onward. This correlation is not merely terminological; it extends to the substantial borrowing of concepts from French post-structuralism by current Italian philosophy. A prominent instance of this influence lies in Michel Foucault's legacy in the genealogies of biopolitics, as this line of inquiry has notably become a reference point in the works of influential figures such as Giorgio Agamben, Toni Negri, and Esposito himself.

However, acknowledging this intellectual kinship should not lead to overemphasise the analogy between French and Italian theory. Each of these philosophical trajectories maintains its own distinctiveness, and brings a unique contribution within the broader landscape of contemporary European thought, even if with some recognisable resonances and borrowing. Moreover, the terms "French theory" and "Italian theory" have quite different genealogies. The former mainly originates in the Anglophone world, whereas "Italian theory", as Dario Gentili and Elettra Stimilli argue in a recent volume on the subject, "is not an American invention but a way to reflect – within Italy – on the potentialities and the limits of the diffusion of some strands of Italian philosophy, strands that recently re-emerged and came to the forefront of the

international debate at a time of crisis for those European philosophies – like, for instance, deconstruction, hermeneutics, critical theory, and post-structuralism – that were more renowned up to a few decades ago" (Gentili and Stimilli, 2018: 9). Dedicating an issue of the *Journal of Italian Philosophy* to the works of Adriana Cavarero allows us both to reflect on the potentials and limitations of Italian theory, and to open it up to its reception in the international debate. On the one hand, Cavarero's thinking sets her apart from the Anglophone tradition of gender studies; on the other hand, it places her in critical dialogue with certain expressions of European feminism. Although her thinking is influenced by all of the above traditions, and she continuously engages with them, it also bears a distinctive vibrancy of thought, and an inexhaustible need to intertwine different perspectives, which we try to capture in the volume.

Cavarero's texts are permeated with the themes of bodily materiality, political practices, and with a deep critique of the patriarchal symbolic order. These critical stances resonate with the struggles that some Italian feminist groups have upheld over the years (such as Rivolta Femminile, Diotima, and others). In line with their radicality and complexity, Cavarero's political proposal is not limited to claims for recognition and rights at the individual level; rather, it operates at the level of interdependent relations between embodied subjectivities, and thus implies the plural and collective dimension of action. In this posture, politics continually overflows the spaces of institutions, representation, and law, and becomes the vibrant matter of living together. For the Italian feminist tradition, power and politics are not the same (Diotima, 2009); power is what needs to be questioned, understood, but also eluded. Politics means being on another side, thinking politics by beginning from bodies and relationships before rights. Mirroring her political stance, on the ethical plane, Cavarero challenges the sovereign subject and the idea of freedom as a

property. In her dialogue with authors from different traditions, she builds bridges, alliances, interlocutions; she re-reads, re-signifies, and eventually subverts the accepted intellectual heritage of canonical thinkers in the tradition of male philosophy – a practice shared with other Italian feminist authors: if Carla Lonzi invited us to spit on Hegel, Adriana Cavarero urged us to think "*in spite of Plato*". The universal, neutral subject of the Western metaphysical tradition is revealed in its partial nature; for Cavarero, knowledge is understood as embodied, gendered, and linked to practices and contexts. We are embodied, interdependent, sexualised subjectivities. Difference and differences are rooted in the materiality of our bodies, which make – and are not just made by – politics.

Bodies, therefore, in the complexity and plurality of the paths they take, are not just to be deconstructed, erased, and deprived of any particularity; rather, they are a point of rooting, an element with which to come to terms and, sometimes, enter into conflict. In this inextricable knot between bodies, relations, and subjectivities, it is especially the body of the mother that becomes the metaphor and the emblem of a social and political order grounded on interdependence, care, and disparity between powers and subjects – an order that thus stands as an alternative to the ontopolitics of phallogocentrism. In Cavarero, the maternal figure so conceived redefines politics as relationship and bodily practices; it opens up rootedness and care. In line with the philosophical tradition of Italian feminism and in resonance with the work of contemporary philosophers such as Judith Butler, Cavarero generates a feminist knowledge that does not amount to a discourse *on* women as a static object of study. Rather feminist knowledge is an opportunity to critique the Western subject and its metaphysics. To the Western sovereign subject, feminist knowledge opposes a relational, embodied, situated ontology. This leads Cavarero and Butler – in different yet intertwined ways – to think of new

horizons for ethics and politics that foreground precariousness and vulnerability, care and violence.

Picking up the feminist invitation to situate knowledge, we can explore the intertwining of the personal and the political in Cavarero's journey. Born in Bra (Piedmont) in 1947, she attended a *liceo classico* in Turin, and pursued her studies in Philosophy at the University of Padua; the latter town saw the start of her academic career before she moved to Verona, where she served as a Professor of Political Philosophy until 2016. Her earlier works were centred on various aspects of ancient and modern philosophical traditions, encompassing four major monographs: *Political Dialectic in Plato* (1974), *Plato: The Philosopher and the Political Problem* (1976), *The Political Theory of John Locke* (1984), and *The Hegelian Interpretation of Parmenides* (1984). During these years, Cavarero significantly contributed to the establishment of the feminist and philosophical community in Verona known as "Diotima" (1984), named after Diotima of Mantinea, whom Socrates referred to as his fundamental teacher in the pages of Plato's *Symposium*. Her involvement in Diotima continued until 1990.

Starting from the late 80s, Cavarero embarked on a radical intellectual journey, increasingly focused on critically examining the notions of subjectivity and the corporeal self in the Western metaphysical tradition. Her seminal work, *In Spite of Plato: A Feminist Rewriting of Ancient Philosophy* (1995) undertakes a rigorous deconstruction of classical philosophical texts, primarily sourced from Plato, along with insights from Homer and Parmenides. The main aim is to liberate four prominent Greek female figures from the confines of patriarchal discourse that has historically constrained them within predefined societal roles. While disentangling these female figures from the grip of entrenched patriarchal narratives, Cavarero concurrently constructs an alternative symbolic framework. If death functions as the foundational concept for the entire structure of traditional philosophy,

Cavarero posits birth as the conceptual linchpin, which enables the interweaving of new feminist critical concepts.

As Guaraldo (2022) highlights in a concise yet significant analysis of Cavarero's *oeuvre*, her philosophical-political endeavour draws inspiration from corporeal materiality, spanning her initial reading of Plato and her most recent exploration of "inclination" (Cavarero, 2016). This materiality eludes reduction either to language or to a simple sociocultural construct. "The body is an *elementary given* (*un dato elementare*) that Cavarero considers a decisive *source* of vitality, an undeniable *limit* of the self, the locus of relationality, vulnerability, and dependency that as such must be taken into account, signified theoretically, and also affect the way in which we conceive of our ethics and our politics" (Guaraldo, 2022: 154). These themes are central to Cavarero's work *Stately Bodies* (1995), where she critically traces the usages of the body politic metaphor. Plato's logocentric philosophy – which aims at the unity of diverse elements – establishes a structured balance favouring the rationality of the soul over the instability of the body. This approach transforms the *polis* into a harmonised order akin to the *cosmos*, but the strict division between soul and body neglects the physical aspect. In this work, as well as in others, the concept of sexual difference, as formulated by Luce Irigaray, has significant importance in Cavarero's understanding of embodiment. Within this framework, the subject is inherently non-neutral. Simultaneously, the reconfiguration of subjectivity through the lenses of embodiment, contingency, vulnerability, and relationality is not solely aimed at dismantling patriarchy. Rather, as mentioned, she endeavours to establish an alternative framework, a distinct conceptual landscape for imagining the subject and its ethical as well as political aspects.

From this perspective, the philosophy of narrative assumes a pivotal role in examining human existence. In *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood* (2000), Cavarero

delves into the diverse ways individuals shape their own portraits through storytelling. She addresses a range of mythological and literary figures, demonstrating the impossibility of fully grasping the singularity inherent in each subject. By extending the concept of uniqueness as elucidated by Hannah Arendt, Cavarero maintains that individual uniqueness relies on the testimony of others to exist. She emphasises relationality as critical to understanding the self: the latter cannot be purely autobiographical since it is inherently linked to others. Cavarero delves further into these concepts in *For More Than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression* (2005), where she places a particular emphasis on the significance of the voice. By exploring the uniqueness that pertains to each voice, she highlights the philosophical tendency that *Logos* has to devocalise in its abstraction from the embodied uniqueness of language. Against this move, Cavarero recaptures the physicality of the voice by mobilising a series of female archetypes, who become pivotal for the alternative canon that she constructs throughout her work.

The political dimension remains central throughout Cavarero's journey. Her later work *Horrorism: Naming Contemporary Violence* (2008) scrutinises the contemporary transformation in the apparatuses of power. In this text, she introduces the neologism "horrorism", which is absent from the Italian vocabulary, to articulate the present-day landscape of violence perpetrated against the vulnerable. Against the backdrop of pervasive global violence, the canonical distinctions between "conventional" warfare and "unconventional" terrorism become increasingly indistinct. The book re-examines modern-day instances of violence via the analysis of the biopolitical practices of the present, that range from concentration camps to suicide terrorism. Without abandoning the references to the Greek myth that regularly recur in her work, Cavarero advocates for a profound shift in perspective: she urges the abandonment of the warrior's

viewpoint in favour of embracing vulnerability. This shift seeks to foster a comprehensive understanding of the opposition between victims and perpetrators, with a pronounced emphasis on fragility. The inquiry into the political dimension continues in *Surging Democracy: Notes on Hannah Arendt's Political Thought* (2021). Cavarero's intention to emphasise the generative rather than the conflictual aspect of Arendt's concept of the political implies a reclamation of the etymological sense of "surging" as "to arise", or "to well up", rather than to rise up or to stand in opposition, which commonly accompanies related terms such as "insurging". Cavarero provides an insightful intervention into the contemporary discourse on the essence of democracy, proposing that its emergence is rooted in a non-violent and creative process, characterised by a participatory and relational power.

But how has the rich and composite trajectory of Cavarero's thought shaped her lasting legacy and contemporary reception? In what ways has her *oeuvre* influenced both Italian (feminist) literature, as previously explored, and the broader international discourse? The pieces collected in this Special Issue play with key concepts in Cavarero's lexicon, by proposing reflections that build and expand on some of the key nodes of her thought: the voice; embodied subjectivities; uniqueness; sexed thinking that disrupts the abstractness of the neutral Subject in Western thought; the feminist critique of knowledge; vulnerability as a political category; bodies as political beings, in the exposure/relation to otherness; plurality, interdependence. These often intertwined themes shape Cavarero's conceptual mosaic, which yet does not pretend to create a recognisable picture, or ultimate image. They operate, one could say, less like a carefully designed pattern and more like a loom in constant motion that ties multiple threads together to create connections and bonds. Central to this collection is not merely the act of selecting or signposting some of the most renowned themes in Cavarero's work; rather the *ensemble* of contributions that

follows tries to put these themes in dialogue with other thinkers and traditions of thought: from black feminism (Söderbäck), to queer theory (Cossutta), to contributions in contemporary democratic theory (Huzar, Butler) – a dialogue and an intricacy of voices that organically morph into a play of figures of thought (Giardini). We aim to read the collection as if we were following an embroidered tapestry in the act of its very making: running through multiple motifs and recurring themes to let new patterns emerge from the novel relation of their proximity and intertwining.

As mentioned above, the body remains a central theme that sparks attention in the contributions and works of the authors in the collection. Carlotta Cossutta, for instance, focuses on the female body and its exclusion from politics, understood since the Greek tradition as the life of the *polis*, which transcends the biological dimension of the body and of existence. Only in modernity do we see the body re-enter the political sphere, due to the transformation of the nature of power in its controlling and generative character: the body becomes central to a model of politics that focuses on the reproduction of society. Even more, practices such as increasing medicalisation and health technologies make the body an instrument of subjectification, particularly that of women. The theme of the body is equally, if not exclusively, dominant in Emma Ingala's piece, where the centrality of the body is problematised through the optic of the image and the discursive tradition. Different traditions of thought have accessed the body either via its materiality and corporeality – the tangible dimension of blood and flesh – or rather through the plethora of images through which bodies can be apprehended and captured. Ingala argues that Cavarero's philosophy plays a key and unique role in laying the ground for a reading of the body that poses the relationship between the imaginary and the corporeal as one of inseparability. By so doing, Cavarero has proved herself a timely and relevant author in contributing to current debates on the discourse/ matter

divide that populate contemporary critical theories, in which the Italian author can meaningfully intervene, precisely by blurring and demystifying the rigidity of such divides. Matter and discourse, body and images continuously interact to disrupt settled practices and images around the body in everyday experience, and by doing so, they make the body a cradle and a pivot to the formation of subjectivity, and, thus, of politics.

Along with the all-too-material, all-too-tangible dimension of the body, there is another, only apparently less palpable element of subjectivities that is central to many of the following contributions: the theme of the voice, which runs in the pieces by authors such as Huzar, Cossutta, and Bazzoni. The voice, in both its physical manifestation and function, is not exempt from finding a quite unique positioning in the divide between matter and discourse mentioned above: the voice, too, is intrinsically corporeal and, as Huzar reminds us, is expressed often in the ruthlessness and incomprehensibility of its givenness, of its sound. In this most immediate, expressive dimension, the voice needs to be put in contrast with the dominance of *logos* that pertains to the public sphere: against the universality of *logos,* reason, and philosophy, the voice is the emblem and expression of uniqueness. Also, the voice always operates outside of the constraints of the semantics of *logos,* and becomes a way of "thinking otherwise": it is a disruption of the discourse of politics, which starts from bodies rather than reason. Politics is understood along the lines of thinking with "radical difference", as Cossutta reminds us, with "no initial model to adhere to".

Another recurrent theme attached to the above is that of motherhood, and the maternal body, which is foregrounded in Cavarero's own contribution, and further developed in many of the other pieces. Across these works, motherhood functions as the conceptual linchpin for an engagement with the feminist imagination and the state of the art of feminist debates when it is re-read in its fundamental intersection with the political.

Similar to the use of the body seen above, which is central to the search for a new *political,* motherhood provides a new optic that marks the rupturing with the dominant normative order. Truthful to the constitutively concerted approach that drives the ensemble of essays, however, each of the authors in the collection interprets and expresses the *political* through a different voice: in Woodford, the rupture with the patriarchal normative order is realised via a new way of reading and enacting (motherly) love; in Butler, it is achieved through the reinterpretation of disobedience outside the presumption of individualism and selfhood; in Ingala, again, it is accomplished via a double reading of the body and the image. Söderbäck's piece speaks chiefly to a unifying attempt that may be found in each of the contributions when she argues that Cavarero's work could be described "in terms of its efforts to offer a relational ontology of uniqueness that puts the hegemony of universality into question by way of embracing the inappropriateness of embodied uniqueness".

There is, at this point, a new overarching framework that starts emerging as a result of the assembling of the contributions, and that can only be thought of when looking at them as a composite set, rather than as a coherent whole: the distinctiveness and, indeed, the "uniqueness" of the multiple voices that continue to coalesce around Cavarero's theoretical provocations emerge precisely from the way they can be narrated, brought together, not as a coherent plot but as a set of relations that emerge spontaneously and creatively from their unexpected dialogue. The focus on (the power of) narration is central, for instance, in contributions such as those of Söderbäck, D'amico, and Giardini: all the authors, if with very different angles, argue that ultimately there is no distinction between philosophy and narration in Cavarero. Narrative becomes a "counternarrative", when it intersects with other traditions of thought such as the "critical fabulation" found in Black feminist scholars: narration and the power of

(counter)narrative pertain to the same commitment to relational uniqueness.

Counternarrative, perhaps in an unexpected reversal of the arguments intimated above, for Söderbäck, is connected to the *opacity* of singularity: by imagining the possible of the impossible of one's experience, by unrooting the historically untold that cannot be narrated or affirmed because it cannot be properly known, narrative creates a new episteme that becomes the space of philosophical work. It is now the accidental – as opposed to the universal – that constitutes the very object and motive of philosophy. Crucially, in the new relational ontology of uniqueness constructed in Cavarero's work in its complexity, philosophy functions as care: "narration is the oldest form of care". We found this repeated in Woodford via the idea of nonviolent love. Care is manifested in a different form of (motherly) love that breaks the shackles of both self-sacrifice and death, both of which remain the inescapable outcome of any form of love that is articulated under the grammar of the patriarchal order. Even more, by breaking with the stereotypical versions of patriarchal love, we open up the route to reimagining care as a response against violence: care is no longer directed towards a unique individual, or sustained by a biological bond, but its relational capacity stretches, or better, inclines, towards society as a whole, driven by the unconditional love that is felt when the perspective of the "new" and of the "being otherwise" starts to fold into the possibilities of the present. Love and care, so understood, remain, therefore, fundamentally political. Once again, we move from the ethical to the political dimension, which remains the constitutive fabric of Cavarero's works and intellectual texture; the pieces in this collection are a tribute to this key lesson, even in their sometimes more critical tones.

On this backdrop, we can then begin to disentangle the individual threads of the conceptual tapestry sketched above:

Clare Woodford reflects on the complex relationship between the understanding of maternal love and the (ever-present) possibility of its ushering into violence. The article compellingly maps out the ambivalent characterisation that maternal love – central to both Cavarero's work and to her critique of thinkers such as Emmanuel Levinas – takes when it is reduced to the patriarchal stereotypical image of the mother. In the patriarchal symbolic order, motherly love is condemned to the dichotomous choice between self-sacrifice on the one hand, and the inevitability of violence (aimed at protecting her own offspring) on the other. In an original reading, Woodford shows how Cavarero's ethics of inclination is able to sustain a model of not self-sacrificing love that can help us work towards a collective (feminist) political project oriented towards peace.

Emma Ingala's contribution thoughtfully focuses on the question of the body from both a deconstructive and a constructive perspective. In the *pars destruens*, the author shows how Cavarero challenges the dichotomy between discourse and matter, language and nature, which is a frequent topic in contemporary critical literature and in approaches interested in (re)turning to materialist ontologies. In the *pars construens*, the author argues that Cavarero outlines a new relationship between the force of imagery and the power of the corporeal. From this perspective, the relationship between the body and the image is reconfigured as a synergic and fruitful one: it becomes an endless process of contamination that disrupts any possibility of fixing an ultimate essence.

Federica Giardini's piece truly embodies, in style and content, the plurality of voices that the collection is inspired by: Giardini reminds us of how, in Cavarero, the voice is irremediably tied to another theme central to Cavarero's *oeuvre*, that of singularity. Giardini traces an embroidered canvas – that, in some way, functions as a microcosm for the whole Special Issue – by putting Cavarero in dialogue with other thinkers and figures: only through this intertwined and

composite narrative, the work of Cavarero emerges in its generative uniqueness, which is never static, but always in motion, always striving to challenge dominant voices – of philosophy as well as of political practices and injustices – precisely by inclining towards novel ways of thinking.

Moving on, **Fanny Söderbäck** elaborates an original and thoughtful analysis of Cavarero's philosophy by setting it in dialogue with the work of Saidiya Hartman. The reciprocal contamination between Cavarero's narrative theory and Hartman's critical fabulation allows Söderbäck to elaborate an in-depth inquiry into the power of narrating uniqueness. The article develops the themes of uniqueness, embodiment, and relationality from different perspectives, showing the relevance of these concepts to imagine new ontological, epistemological, ethical, and political perspectives, which at the same time rediscover but also open up new possibilities, stories, lives that cannot be contained in the historical archives.

Carlotta Cossutta's piece recuperates the theme of the voice, by carving out its irremediably political dimension. The Western tradition of political thought has sanctioned the political and public sphere as the domain of reason and (universal) rationality. In regard to this prevalently masculine, patriarchal sphere, women('s voices) have stood in a position of exclusion. What if we start from the body, rather than from the universalising dimension of *logos*? The article explores the possibility of rethinking politics starting from bodies and uniqueness, and proposes the space for an erotic relational ethics. Cavarero here enters into dialogue with Lynne Huffer's analysis of the lips as an emblem of queer female difference; the lips, through which voice is uttered, also carry the corporeality and materiality of the utterance. This becomes the basis upon which to construct an embodied and pluralistic relation beyond any linearity or dialectics.

The attention devoted to the voice, singularity, and their political potential is key to **Tim Huzar**'s contribution. The

article eloquently emphasises how central to Cavarero's work is a reading of the voice as a mark of the uniqueness of one's singularity, that is not tied to or informed by *logos*. Crucially, in Cavarero, the singularity of the voice becomes especially relevant when voices are captured in their multiplicity, which brings about the question of their politicity: the plurality of voices, as an ensemble of unique voices, remains distinct from that of a mass, or an army, since it preserves the pluriphony of the phonosphere, whereas the latter simply makes uniqueness superfluous. However, Huzar also warns us of a lingering formalism that survives even in Cavarero's treatment of the voice when the latter is mobilised politically. Embracing radical uniqueness – and thus, the true power of relational politics and ethics – means getting rid of any category or abstraction, even the ones that are meant to emphasise our common "humanity".

Alberica Bazzoni's article also helps situate Cavarero's contribution in light of recent feminist debates and *topoi*. It reminds us of the influence of Cavarero's work not only on philosophy and political thought, but also on literary criticism, which has significantly borrowed notions from Cavarero's conceptual toolkit (from inclination; to the narratable and relational self; to the deconstruction of the patriarchal symbolic order), and applied them to the interpretation of contemporary writings by women. Not only do philosophy and narration merge in Cavarero; they also undo the distinction between philosophy and literature, and contribute to the creation of a feminist imaginary. This proposition and application of Cavarero's thought to literary work is exemplified by her dialogue with the Sicilian writer Goliarda Sapienza, where narrative and the voice become integral parts of the construction of female subjectivity.

The following piece by **Marzia D'amico** brings to the choir the figure of another Italian poet and writer: Amelia Rosselli. The contribution is a profound investigation of Rosselli's poetics: her poetic texts are a creative enterprise that incarnates

– or gives voice in practice to – a particular (political) posture that constitutes inclining, and that sustains the many theoretical and ethical challenges posed by Adriana Cavarero throughout her career. Rosselli's poetics constitutes an experience at the same time textual and sexual: it inclines towards an emotional load which, by giving expression to the dimensions of interiority and emotions, articulates the profoundly political character of subjectivity, when it is understood according to the ethics of inclination. Whereas emotions and reasons have been parted in the patriarchal order, inclining not only establishes a bridge between the two, but makes feelings and dispositions the very constituents of a deeply relational, deeply caring and transformative politics.

The collection culminates in the dialogue between two authors who have historically engaged in sustained discussions despite divergences and disagreements: Judith Butler, and Adriana Cavarero herself. In her unpublished piece, **Judith Butler** reinterprets Arendt in light of the influence she has had on Cavarero and the Italian feminist tradition. The text interrogates experiences of judgement, freedom and responsibility, by staging a critique of the methodological individualism that permeates the tradition of Western philosophy and political practice. Atomised and individualised conceptions of responsibility and freedom can lead, in their most exasperated form, to the spreading of violence, fascism, and, even, femicides that we witness in contemporary politics. Can we reimagine modes of political interactions that embrace all living creatures that live in relationship to one another on an interconnected planet? This is the outcome that Butler advocates and aspires to, when political action is neither individualised nor isolated, but reimagined as concerted, performative, and plural.

The call for a more capacious (feminist) imagination grounded on an idea of nature as a generating force which encompasses all of the living, human and non-human, in a

single *cosmos* is also the point of culmination of the final contribution to the volume, that of **Adriana Cavarero** herself. Her piece invites a recuperation of the relationship between nature and the maternal body that is found in archaic cultures. Ancient cultures were grounded on a unique bond between the body of the mother and *physis*, which were assimilated under the shared principle of generativity. Whilst the Western tradition has eventually separated the notion of *physis* to match it to a universal, and thus abstracted, notion of the reproduction of the species, recuperating the original meaning of the maternal body can trace back the eternal character of nature in its dependence on the singular and the plural.

If there is something that can speak to Cavarero's thought as a whole it is precisely the tireless emphasis on embodied uniqueness that needs to be mobilised beyond the abstractness of traditional philosophy. The latter has made uniqueness irrelevant and redundant. It is from this position of erasure, of silencing, and exclusion, therefore, that a voice can also, crucially, become "irreverent": singular being can only exist not in the methodological individualism of modern politics, but rather in a plurality, in its "exposed, relational, and contextual" – or, we can now say, *inclined* – being.[1]

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Cavarero's Puzzle: Ethics, Maternity, and Loving "Wrong"

Clare Woodford[1]

Abstract

Adriana Cavarero's ethics of inclination presents us with a puzzle. Arguing that inclination, understood as a posture of affective response towards the other (exemplified by the stereotypical image of the Christian Madonna inclining over her child) could help us construct a more peaceful world, she develops the familiar idea that love can help us work towards peace via a revalorisation of maternal love for a collective feminist political project. However, I identify that her argument contains two different models of maternal love. Whilst the first is a self-sacrificing love, the second, I argue, emerges in a subtle shift that renders love a form of altruism that is not self-sacrificing. Intrigued by this move that remains unelaborated by Cavarero, I investigate what this means for her theorisation of love's political import. Whilst I argue that the first, Levinasian, self-sacrificing model could too easily transform into violence, I posit that the second is not stereotypical maternal love, but illogical love – love that loves "wrong" in the eyes of our contemporary world. I read this second model as a practice of nonviolence, offering the potential to transform not just our own relationships and sense of self, but the very frames of intelligibility that patriarchal violence depends upon. Whilst my argument does not abandon Cavarero's commitment to revalorise the maternal, it does invite us to re-imagine the everyday narrative of the maternal relation, and indeed, the love relation, not as a challenge to the posture of patriarchy, but as a challenge to its logic.

[1] Thank you to Luke Edmeads, Viktoria Huegel, Mark Devenney, and Bonnie Honig for comments on and discussion of an earlier version of this article.

Keywords: Adriana Cavarero, love, affect, feminism, maternity, Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida

Biography

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Adriana Cavarero's ethics of inclination presents us with a puzzle. Inspired by Hannah Arendt and Emmanuel Levinas, Cavarero argues that inclination, understood as a posture of affective response towards the other and exemplified by the iconic image of the Christian Madonna inclining over her child, could help us construct a more peaceful world. Her argument develops the familiar idea that love can help us work towards peace via a re-valorisation of maternal love for a collective feminist political project. However, her argument rather puzzlingly contains two different models of maternal love. Whilst the first, more explicit model is a self-sacrificing love, the second, I argue, emerges in a subtle shift that renders love a form of altruism that is not self-sacrificing. Intrigued by this move that remains unelaborated by Cavarero, I investigate what this means for her theorisation of love's political import. Starting with the self-sacrificing model, I am concerned that when faced with the threat of violence against those we love,

Cavarero's reading of inclined love as stereotypically maternal, postural, and affective could too easily be transformed into violence. I argue that not just stereotypical maternal love, but affective love in general, always contains within it a capacity for violence. Furthermore, Cavarero's turn to Levinas on responsibility only exacerbates this problem. Developing an original argument that Levinas's theorisation of responsibility entraps his theorisation of love in a violent egology of domination, I suggest that this priority of the self unfortunately carries through into parts of Cavarero's argument, seemingly casting doubt on her thesis that love can escape the "necessary" violence of patriarchy. Yet I argue that we could perhaps escape this concern via what I identify as a second, unelaborated model of love, understood as a form of altruism that is not self-sacrificing, since it is active rather than affective, ruptural rather than relational. Despite Cavarero's method of exaggerating stereotypes, I posit that this second model is not stereotypical maternal love, but illogical love – love that loves "wrong" in the eyes of our contemporary world. I therefore read this second model of love as a practice of nonviolence, which offers the potential to transform not just our own sense of self and our relationships with others, but the very frames of intelligibility that patriarchal violence depends upon. Whilst my argument does not abandon Cavarero's commitment to revalorise the maternal, it does invite us to re-imagine the everyday narrative of the maternal relation, and indeed, the love relation, not as a challenge to the posture of patriarchy, but as a challenge to its logic.

Maternity, Inclination, and Ethics in Arendt and Levinas

Cavarero's project sets out from the premise that the European philosophical tradition has systematically subordinated the female body, and in particular, the maternal body. Because in the Ancient Greek tradition the concept of birth is understood as "a coming from nothing" (Cavarero, 1990: 6–7) rather than coming from a woman, and because the discipline of philosophy inherited its symbolic order from the Ancient Greek world view, Cavarero argues that philosophy is founded

upon an original matricide, since the body of the woman, and in particular, the body of the woman as mother, is denied. Her work seeks to counter this subordination by asking what it would mean for philosophy to take women, women's bodies, mother's bodies, seriously. She works her way through our philosophical tradition by critiquing its blindness to mothers, whilst building an alternative philosophy that starts from maternity. This is not just a philosophical project: it stems from the political contention that the role of the mother, although symbolically revered, is, in practice, ignored, overlooked, and taken for granted. The labour of mothering is not valued in our social order. Hence Cavarero's project is not just to transform our philosophical tradition, but to emphasise the wider value that motherhood has for our social lives.

Cavarero's reorientation to maternity informs her development of an ontology of uniqueness and relationality. She is inspired in this approach by Hannah Arendt, who argued that birth is "the primary category of political thought" (Arendt, 1958: 9), since it is through birth that the new enters our world. Action, which is for Arendt the ability to distinguish ourselves and effect change within human society, re-enacts the capacity for originality that emerges at every birth. Arendt's appreciation of the radical capacity that change can effect in our lives leads her to refer in a secular sense to birth as a "miracle", since through birth, a new person appears to us as unique and unrepeatable (Cavarero et al., 2014: 14). Accordingly, Arendt posits birth as an alternative to the metaphysical tradition's obsession with death (Cavarero, 2016: 111). Furthermore, against the traditional understanding of humans as individual, independent, and self-sufficient, Arendt's emphasis on the importance of appearing to others leads her to understand our political sphere as relational, which she describes with a striking postural analogy. In response to Kant's argument that "[m]an is not only a rational being, he also belongs to the world of the senses which will tempt him to yield to his inclinations instead of following his reason or his heart", Arendt argues that "every inclination turns outwards, it leans out of the self in the direction of whatever may affect me from the outside world" (Arendt, 2003: 81). Inclination is a sign of being affected by the world, and whilst, for Kant, this is

"inconsistent with human freedom" (*ibid.*: 82), for Arendt, without inclination, without being affected by the world around us, we are not living a political life, and, as such, cannot be free. Yet Arendt does not exploit the critical feminist potential of her work. Despite her focus on birth, Arendt is more interested in birth as an analogy for what she understands as our second birth, which is the moment when we make our entrance as actors onto the political scene (Cavarero et al., 2014: 14). She does not consider the role of the mother, nor the condition of infancy in any detail (Cavarero, 2016: 116). Instead, Cavarero argues that it is in fact the biological scene of birth that is more useful to us in thinking about uniqueness, since in the moment of birth the child appears as unique to the mother yet is utterly dependent on the mother to recognise this uniqueness and respond with care.

Alongside the influence of Arendt on her work, the centrality of the asymmetrical encounter between mother and child in Cavarero's work is inspired by Emmanuel Levinas's ethics as first philosophy. It is worth exploring the relationship between Cavarero and Levinas's work here, as it helps to delineate the precise contours of Cavarero's project. The central feature of Levinas's work is his theorisation of the encounter between self and other, in which he argues that the self can no longer ignore the demand to respond to the suffering of the other. In looking into the face of the other, Levinas argues that the contingency of our subject positions is revealed. The self recognises his own vulnerability in the suffering of the other. For Levinas, ethics is first philosophy because if philosophy, understood as thinking the world, is to offer us a world that can resist domination, it must be seen to start from this moment of encounter and openness. Levinas's ethics presents an appealing critique of western philosophy and its grand self-contained systems of knowledge (e.g., Kant, Hegel, Heidegger) and offers to undermine the domination, western-centrism and hubris of philosophy, whilst avoiding descent into nihilism, by shifting our focus onto the suffering of others and away from our own selfish interests.

For Levinas, the encounter with the face of the other produces a struggle at the heart of ethics, which he believes can undermine all that we took for granted about ourselves and our

right to our world and property. Rather than a ground that prescribes how to respond to an encounter, Levinas's ethics is a call to respond that arises from the interruption of the encounter (Fagan, 2016). Ethics here refers to the problematisation of our conduct towards others, rather than to an instruction with regard to how to respond properly. Indeed, many philosophers of the ethical turn read Levinas's encounter between self and other as an encounter that is also a dilemma. It ruptures the traditional sense of our home, our property, and our selfishness – it obstructs our presumed exclusive right to our home, family, and possessions – and insists that the other comes right into the heart of our lives (Derrida, 1999: 71; Critchley, 2014: 16–7). As Cavarero emphasises in her reading of Levinas (2016: 167–8), it also causes us to respond to one particular other, placing them above other others. In this way, Levinas acknowledges the partiality and impossibility of our ability to respond fully to all. Far from effacing politics, this encounter is understood to be politics. It interrupts our world, our very comprehension of the world, to allow for a reconfiguration of relations that may no longer exclude that other (Forti, 2015: 115), although it will still be far from perfect.

Despite the promise of Levinas's critique of the metaphysical tradition, Cavarero argues that he is still held captive by the unrealistic independent, self-sufficient male subject, instead of what she argues is the more realistic experience – usually associated with the female – of human dependency and care for one another. Cavarero is struck by Levinas's example of a mother who fears for the life of her child as an illustration of how the "I" can disregard concern for its own life and instead care more about the life of another (2016: 166). However, similarly to her critique of Arendt, she notes that Levinas uses the female and the maternal as analogies, failing to understand the implications that an actual maternal body could have for his philosophy. First, Cavarero observes that his conceptualisation of the relation between self and other excludes the female, and operates on an erect and vertical plane where the masculine self must be transcended to move upwards towards the Other (*ibid.*: 141). This, in Cavarero's view, incorrectly assumes that the face-to-face encounter arises from an upright posture between self and other. She suggests that it

would be far more likely that the asymmetric relation Levinas describes would be embodied by the inclination of one towards the other. Furthermore, Cavarero seeks to escape Levinas's move to transcend the body in a way that responds to prior feminist critique. Irigaray argued that Levinas's failure to include the woman in the encounter denies women the possibility of ever engaging in the ethical sphere – they are constrained to the home (pre- or post-ethics), objectified, and denied subjectivity. Similarly, Sandford argued that since the notion of the feminine plays a key role in our understanding of ethics – by objectifying the passionate bodily behaviours that masculinity always seeks to transcend – it is impossible to reconcile any feminist position with such an ethics (2000: 139). Cavarero's solution is to bring Levinas's ethical encounter back down to the ground by recasting it as the encounter between mother and new-born child.

Cavarero's second critique concerns Levinas's emphasis on violence. She argues that, in the moment of birth, the vulnerability of the human cannot be denied. Although the philosophical tradition assumes that in growing up, we lose our vulnerability, and become independent, self-sufficient adults, Cavarero argues that we always remain vulnerable. Whilst the philosophical tradition has focused on death as the event that shapes our lives the most, she follows Levinas's observation that the etymological root of vulnerability could be either *vulnus* (wound) or *vel* (caress). Despite this, Levinas's reading of the face of the other as a prohibition on killing (Cavarero, 2016: 156), rather than an invitation to care, emphasises the capacity to wound such that his subject is predominantly characterised by death and violence. In contrast, drawing on Levinas's discussion of the caress in a sexual encounter, Cavarero asks whether our vulnerability has to communicate only kill-ability, or whether it could mean caress-ability instead. She argues for a shift from one to the other. She argues that the very possibility of ethics emerges from this double valence so apparent in the natal scene. By emphasising birth instead of death, Cavarero argues that we can recognise that there is always scope for change and renewal, however dire our circumstances. In this way, Cavarero's project can be read as a reworking of Levinas's ethics, maintaining the centrality of the

asymmetric encounter but replacing death with birth, rectitude with inclination, and the violent wounding of the patriarchal order with the love of the maternal caress.

Medusa, the Madonna, and a Medea Problem

Although Cavarero's call for inclination to become a fundamental schematism (2016: 129) could be taken to imply that her ethics imposes a ground, she clarifies that her work acknowledges the Levinassian ambiguity encapsulated in every encounter as presenting us with the responsibility to choose. She does not assume that all mothers are caring. She acknowledges that the maternal relation is ambivalent since it is also, in the patriarchal symbolic order, associated with horror – embodied in its most extreme form in the decapitated head of the Gorgon Medusa (2008: 13). Because Medusa was pregnant at the time she was decapitated, the face of horror is, Cavarero argues, not just female, but the face of the mother. She suggests that the petrifying face of Medusa suitably embodies the sinister associations that patriarchal thought identifies with motherhood. This arises from the horrifying observation that the mother is able to either preserve or destroy her child. Patriarchal thought thus idealises and demonises the mother. From this, Cavarero draws two further observations. First, that the symbolic importance of this fearsome side of the maternal relation does not emerge from just any post-natal relation between any care-giver and the infant, who they could destroy. The horror stems particularly from the very fact that it was the mother who gave birth to the child, arguing that the Ancient Greek tale of Medea, who murdered her own children, is deemed to be particularly shocking because it was she who bore them (*ibid.*: 27). Second, for Cavarero, maternal care is thus presented as a polarity of relations which she argues are represented in the symbolic patriarchal order via the opposing maternal images of the Medusa – fearsome and life crushing decapitated head of a woman separated from her womb – to the aforementioned Christian Madonna, as "the stereotype of self-sacrifice" (*ibid.*). Between these two poles, I note, Cavarero identifies that the

tradition of ethics – despite philosophy's ignoring and subordinating real women – objectifies women as its measure and marker; as the model of the most excellent ethical comportment and of the most horrific and depraved.

Furthermore, between these two poles, although on the side tending towards Medusa that is occupied by bad mothers, Cavarero locates Medea. Cavarero argues that despite multiple interpretations of Medea as a hateful mother, she did love her children. As Euripides' text shows, she agonised over her decision that they had to die by her own hand. Cavarero implies that it is perhaps because Medea loves her children that she kills them (*ibid.*). Despite, or perhaps because of, her love, Medea deemed their deaths to be "necessary". It is this "necessary aspect" that for Cavarero "makes the violence consummated in this scene a peculiar form of horror" that emerges from the violent patriarchal "imaginary of the West" (*ibid.*). In considering how we might resist this horrifying tradition, Cavarero returns to Arendt's analogy of inclination. She observes that the philosophical male subject is a subject of uprightness with its associated language of rectitude, righteousness, and verticality, and as such, seen through the lens of Arendt's comments, has limited relevance to embodied human lives, particularly the maternal. Cavarero employs Arendt's reading of inclination to undermine the pompous philosophical tradition of righteousness with its exemplary figure of the upright, independent, self-sufficient man. She asks what might happen if we were to establish an ethics that instead of the relentless postmodern attempt to "fragment the subject" sought instead to "incline it" (2016: 11). Her answer combines Arendt's relational conceptualisation of the human as "leaning outward" towards others, with Levinas's focus on vulnerability (*ibid.*: 12) to argue that human lives are irrevocably interconnected. Rather than seeking to hide our dependency on others and our vulnerability to each other, we should recognise it and use it first to undermine the liberal myth of the sovereign individual upon which, she argues, the patriarchal philosophies that lead to war and violence are based. Second, in place of this myth, we can use our recognition of dependency and vulnerability to inspire us to behave more altruistically towards others.

As noted above, Cavarero has often referred to the Christian Madonna as the symbol that best embodies maternal love (2008; 2014; 2016). In particular she refers to the image of the Madonna by Leonardo da Vinci – *The Madonna and Child with Saint Anne* – which, she argues, subverted contemporary conventions to portray the Madonna as human and ordinary. Of course, there are risks that using what is still such a traditional image could reinforce a stereotype of women as sweet, inclined, passive, affectionate, maternal, pure, and caregiving. However, Cavarero acknowledges that whenever anybody seeks to use maternity as an example, they are always accused by critics of furthering sexism, entrenching stereotypical ideas of women as caregivers and thereby "confirming the self-sacrificing and self-effacing role attributed to women" (2016: 124). Indeed, she argues that it is the "burdensome self-sacrificing stereotype" that causes many scholars to avoid discussing motherhood at all. Ironically, the fear that celebrating maternity could be seen to lumber women with the expectation that they enact such self-sacrificing love contributes further to the disappearance of the mother from philosophy (*ibid.*: 13–4). Yet if we are too cautious, Cavarero fears we will miss out on the valuable and easily accessible contribution that motherly love could make to our world (*ibid.*: 14), by enabling a critique of the patriarchal symbolic, and exemplifying an alternative model of ethical behaviour. She is not arguing that only mothers, or women, should seek to imitate the supreme example of altruistic love that Leonardo's Madonna embodies, but that everyone should imitate it. What if – she appears to ask us – we were all to relate to each other in the way that Leonardo's Madonna relates to her child? What if we were to remodel our communities around the love that mothers give, a love that is usually unnoticed and taken for granted? Wouldn't these changes make the world a much better place? She hopes it would enable us to challenge "the violent practices of domination, exclusion, and devastation of which the subject itself is an accomplice (ranging from racism to sexism, to homophobia, as well as war and other regular or irregular forms of destruction)" (*ibid.*: 12–3). By deploying everyday, easily available resources, Cavarero hopes we could revolutionise human relations. The appeal of such a promise

leads me to ask what it would require of us in practical terms?

In seeking to answer this question, some difficulties start to emerge. To encapsulate these, let us return to Medea's impossible bind. Euripides portrays Medea reflecting long and hard on whether to murder her children. Cavarero emphasises that Medea did love her children, and thus instead of the stereotyped image of an irrational psychopath, Cavarero brings into focus a woman whom patriarchy has forced into an impossible dilemma. Now that Jason, her children's father, has remarried, it is likely that the citizens of Corinth will seek to destroy her children to ensure they will not grow up to challenge their stepfamily's hold on the throne. Faced with the near certainty that her children will be butchered, and her lack of agency as a woman to protect them (even if she remarries, her new husband may want them dead), she decides that it is better that she kills them herself, to protect them from what may be a worse death at the hands of others. Cavarero observes that this symbolic myth, central to our tradition's conceptualisation of womanhood, indicates that to care for some we may have to do violence against them.

Would the Madonna's inclined love be able to challenge such violent structures? Medea is, in Cavarero's reading, inclined towards her children. Is it not possible that somebody seeking to enact the Madonna's maternal love might, if they were in difficult circumstances, end up enacting that of Medea – if for example, their infant, too, was trapped and threatened with death, with no protection from a human or superhuman father, and no escape route (to Egypt say)? It is not clear how the inclined love of the Madonna could transform Medea's impossible bind, or whether something more may be needed. There are two issues at stake. First, how could the love of the Madonna transform Medea's love into a non-violent love that could change the outcome for Medea's children – how could the Madonna have helped Medea incline differently? Second, how could the love of the Madonna transform the conditions under which Medea lived so that others might not face equivalent tragic choices in the future – how, in the future, could we avoid the dilemma between loving and committing violence?

Loving to Death

Let us start by examining the Madonna's inclined love in more detail. What does it consist of in practical terms? Little is known about the Madonna's mothering style. Cavarero's reference to female stereotypes implies that she was a caring and responsive mother, but what did that look like on a practical level? Surely new mothers in first century Palestine were confronted by choices concerning how best to care for their child? For example, when the infant Jesus woke his mother for the umpteenth time at night, did she let him "cry it out"? Did she sigh wearily before guiltily stumbling to attend to him? Did she ever perhaps think "my life was easier before he was born", before berating herself for not being a good enough mother? In real terms, what does inclined love require of mothers relating to their children, and what then does it require of us when we relate to non-family members, to strangers, or to enemies even?

In response to these questions Cavarero's model mother is first and foremost inclined. This is strikingly one dimensional, which is, of course, the intention. Cavarero purposefully distils the image of the mother inclined over her child into a simple inclined line. Elegant though this is, there is a risk that this reduction erases the complexity of our moral lives, rendering itself ill-equipped with regard to the question that still challenges us most today – how to respond to others without committing or exacerbating violence? How to avoid doing evil? As such, Cavarero risks her argument falling prey to the same abstraction of motherhood that she criticises in the work of others who have made use of the maternal scene in philosophy. Perhaps we need to be careful not to overread the postural argument, and should instead turn to Cavarero's descriptions of inclined love to help us map the parameters of the mother's actual body in its three dimensionality.

Cavarero notes that the philosophical tradition has always treated the notion of human inclination with suspicion, assuming it to be opposed to rational thought. It therefore associated inclination with the passionate and lascivious feminine realm which philosophers both desired and feared (2016: 3). Cavarero defends this understanding of inclination

against the sexism of traditional philosophy. She argues that the way that "sweeping passion" can intervene in our lives to upset that which we thought we knew and "dispossess" our sense of self can be valuable as it challenges our assumptions about how people should relate to one another (*ibid.*: 6–7). It challenges the desire of male philosophy to be upright, to have a dependable sense of self, and pushes us to appreciate the way that, through *eros*, our lives are interconnected. Indeed, inspired by the quotation from Arendt given above, she argues that inclination is affective and that the "leaning out of the self" that Arendt describes is an example of ecstasy – an experience in which the self "exits itself" (*ibid.*: 7). Furthermore, Cavarero opens *Inclinations* with an epigraph which defines inclination as "a disposition toward affect [...] which comes from certain likable qualities in the object: but it may become affect or impetuous love" (*ibid.*: 1). Yet despite this insistent defence of *eros* for philosophy, she rather surprisingly later argues that the inclination that can resist patriarchy, whilst inclined and affective, is not erotic.

This argument against *eros*, unnoticed in existing commentary, arises from Cavarero's mobilisation of the image of the Madonna as the exemplar of inclination. This image "excludes any interference by *eros*" (*ibid.*: 10), thereby enabling us to focus on the inclined posture of woman that arises from her "destiny of maternity" (*ibid.*). Free of the complications of *eros*, Cavarero identifies the inclined love of the Madonna as the aforementioned love of a mother for her child as described by Emmanuel Levinas (*ibid.*: 166–7): "love [...] without further purpose, without any ambition to possess or any anxiety of control, satisfied in its sublime composure" (*ibid.*: 174). It is here that Cavarero finds the requirement that this love should not be erotic, it should be "non-concupiscent", in Levinas' terms. In this subtle shift, unnoticed by commentators, I suggest that a Madonna rather different from the aforementioned self-sacrificing Madonna appears. This second Madonna is a non-stereotypical mother. Despite Cavarero's prior fear that she will be accused of employing a stereotype, she emphasises that this post-Levinasian Madonna need not be identified with the type of non-concupiscence that is understood as female purity and sacrifice associated with patriarchy's stereotypical good

mother. Instead, contra her earlier suggestion that the Madonna's is a "self-sacrificing" love (2008: 27; 2016: 102–3), Cavarero's reflection on Levinas leads her to assert that this second model of maternal love is "a type of altruism that is not abnegation and martyrdom, suffering, and renunciation" (2016: 174). This argument indicates that as long as maternal love remains self-sacrificing, it can be subordinated within patriarchy. However, when it rejects self-sacrifice it "presents itself as unusual, problematic [...] a sure and practical love, so everyday and spontaneous that it does not express signs of suffering or self-sacrifice, and even less of excessive self-awareness" (*ibid.*).

Contra Levinas' failure to take the reality of the maternal body seriously in his work, Cavarero emphasises that this love is bodily "[i]n the final analysis, the smile and inclination of Leonardo's Mother suggests that there is a carnal sense of existence, as mundane as it is prosaic, that consists primarily in her irrevocable inclination toward the other" (*ibid.*: 175). Furthermore, this is a love that is more intimately connected to the female body than the male. Cavarero has already argued that due to cultural stereotypes, women are more likely to realise the fact of human interdependency (2015: 107) as a form of innate knowledge that appears to women because of female biology. The ability to give birth exposes women to the fact of human vulnerability in the figure of the newborn. Thus, she argues, society would be less violent if we were to include women more in social organisation (*ibid.*: 107–9). Accordingly, we can conclude that this love is an ontological, maternal, affective, everyday care for the other that stems from our bodily existence as human beings. However, it is still not clear how this love can be practised to confront the violent forms of domination that Cavarero hopes it can oppose. We need to know more about how this second Madonna's love differs from Medea's love for her children.

If we consult Euripides' text, we see that the word Medea uses to refer to her love for her family is *philia*. This *philia*, although often reduced in contemporary understandings of Ancient Greek to brotherly love, in this context refers to instinctive family feeling, parental as well as brotherly and sisterly – albeit, of course, a sorority that is within the

patriarchal family structure. Although Cavarero's discussion of love is limited to *eros*, *philia* or familial love does appear implicitly in her discussion of Levinas, for it is *philia* that a mother feels when she fears for the life of her child. How then to ensure that this non-concupiscent yet still familial love avoids Medea's murderousness? Given the entrapment of Medea in patriarchal *philia* that ties a child's destiny to the protection of their father, one alternative might be to consider what sorority could offer in place of *philia*. Could a family love that rejects the righteous masculinist symbolic offer a way out for Medea?

This question has already been explored by Bonnie Honig, whose critique of Cavarero's work (2021a; 2021b) draws on Euripides' *The Bacchae* to reflect on the power of sorority in inspiring and supporting the women in the play, who, driven into a bacchic frenzy by Dionysus, have halted their housework and fled the city to live an enchanted life together in the woods. However, Honig notes that their idyll is short-lived, with the women soon committing gory acts of violence to protect their freedom, culminating in the dismembering of Pentheus, the King, with their bare hands, even though Agave, the leader of the women, is Pentheus' mother. Honig asks if this means that caring must be intertwined with murderousness (2021b: 66). Although the sororal community is, in Honig's reading, a horizontalist power, it ends up defending itself by re-enacting the violence of patriarchy. Ultimately, the women's sororal protest fails to overturn the law of Thebes, indicating that sororal love cannot provide the solution we were hoping for. In these examples, care requires murder. In both examples, mothers kill their sons. In the patriarchal order, familial love cannot resist the pull of violence. Despite Cavarero presenting the Madonna and Medusa/Medea pairing as opposite poles of motherly inclination – care or violence, love or hate – it is not maternity that is ambivalent as to whether it will enact love or hate. Rather, love, understood as an emotive family tie, is itself ambivalent. Love itself comprises a "necessary" violence. If the Madonna's love is motherly love, even if it is not self-sacrificing, it is familial love. It is thus still not clear what protects the Madonna's love from Medea's fate, nor how it can change the patriarchal symbolic that enables love's slide to

violence.

Necessary violence is not limited to familial love. Note that Euripides' Medea speaks of both *eros* and *philia* – her love for Jason is sometimes *eros*, sometimes *philia*, whilst her love for her children is *philia*. Yet it is her feelings of rage towards Jason – the object of her *eros* – that also inform her decision to kill their children. This indicates that necessary violence is related to both *eros* and *philia*. Indeed, we may be less surprised to note that *eros* is also intimately related with death in our symbolic imaginary. In *Horrorism,* Cavarero discusses the relationship between *eros* and the cruel, violent, and murderous passions. Her reading of Bataille notes that this relationship emerges from the patriarchal myth of the male sovereign subject. Since the unspoken secret is that this subject does have a limit, its destruction takes on a sacrilegious, erotic significance (2008: 50). Although Cavarero suggests that Madonna's non-concupiscent love is free from *eros*, she does not consider it to be free from familial love; it is instead modelled upon it – upon maternal love for the child.[2] Both *philia* and *eros* are affective, emotive forms of love, often understood today to be instinctive. As the aforementioned epigraph of *Inclinations* insists, inclination "comes from certain likable qualities in the object" (Cavarero, 2016: 1). *Philia*, *eros*, all involve inclination towards, a preference for one, or some, over others; whether we understand this as instinctive or socially constructed to further a blood line, or erotic and desiring, or a mixture of all of these, it favours those we find attractive, desirable, or alluring. Indeed, it seems it is the presence of affectivity that enables us to care but also provides the impetus for violence. The passion that drives affective love is the passion that drives the destructiveness that comes when this love is threatened or threatening. It seems that necessary violence can emerge from any form of love – including that which derives from the maternal body. Thus, rather than a pole of relations between horror and care, violence and love, death and birth, we find instead that it is affective love itself that violence stems from.

[2] In *Antigone's Claim,* Judith Butler indicates that these forms of love are only separated by repeated citation of kinship laws. Butler thereby indicates that their separation is not necessary, it is normative (2000).

Love sometimes generates hate, care can generate horror, the birth of some requires the death of others. It is not clear that the natal scene of familial love, everyday, mundane, prosaic, and ordinary, all too ordinary, can escape this. Here we are confronted with the ultimate problem of ethics. How to care, how to love, without causing or enacting violence and destruction either towards those we care for and love, or towards others?

This presents us with a problem concerning the limits of ethical relations, a problem that has been raised repeatedly with regard to the work of Levinas. Although praised for triggering an "ethical turn" in 20th century philosophy, he was however criticised for identifying limits to the relation of openness to the other in the face of the animal, and in the Palestinian enemy of the Israeli state. Whilst Cavarero's critique of Levinas suggests that, despite the potential of his ethics, he remains preoccupied with the philosophy of death and of rectitude, she fails to confront this limiting aspect of his work and, as such, could be seen to inherit what I am here referring to as the problem of "necessary" killing. Let us once again return to Levinas to explore how this problem arises in his thought so that we can investigate whether Cavarero's work can respond.

Responsibility

Notwithstanding Levinas' endeavours, a certain conservatism has been observed in his ethics. For a struggle to be produced by the Levinassian encounter, we need to be able to see the face as a human or, in some way, already valued as a "face" – so we can then engage with concern over the question of how to respond (Butler, 2004a: 150; Derrida, 2008: 237). What makes such an encounter occur? What makes it interrupt our world and result in a possibility for a change of affective flows from and towards the other, unless we are already predisposed towards that change? Something more is needed to jolt us out of our habitual response of ignoring or responding violently to the homeless person, the plight of immigrants, or other commonplace forms of exclusion (Badiou, 2002; Hallward, 2002; Bosteels, 2007). Political work at the threshold of

recognisability is necessary to convince the self that it should or even could respond compassionately.

Without this step, there is a risk that Levinas' other remains fixed in their otherness maintaining a position of privilege for the self (or "same"). For Levinas' other to be recognisable as one in need of response, it needs to be recognisable, even if only in part, as the other. This means, it has already to be identifiable within our current system of representation, even if it is as that which cannot (yet) be represented. The other is therefore already identifiable and anthropomorphised. It is this that enables the other to be identified in any encounter, as, for example, the poor or excluded of the northern hemisphere, and even to identify these more easily with already identifiable hierarchies within which the white, male, Christian of European origin remains at the top. As many critics have noted (Dussel, 1999; Badiou, 2000; Derrida, 2001; Hallward, 2002; Rancière, 2002; Bosteels, 2007; Eubanks and Gauthier, 2011), non–Europeans, non-Christians, and non-males have so regularly been associated with animals and the non-human that it is less likely that any encounter with them would provoke a radical interruption in our daily lives.

That this fixing of the other may not be completely inadvertent is seen in the way Levinas reserves a position for the enemy – as he who transgresses – within his ethical schema:

> The Other is the neighbour, who is not necessarily kin, but who can be [...]. But if your neighbour attacks another neighbour or treats him unjustly, what can you do? Then alterity takes on another character, in alterity we can find an enemy (Levinas, 1989: 294).

This can be interpreted to imply that the other, to whom one must be completely open, is only the other that behaves properly. The other only has a right to disrupt the self's home insofar as they respect the rules of those who abide there. There is a point at which the other to whom we must be open has transgressed too far and becomes the enemy, the permanently excluded other, who can be killed. Levinas's "what can you do?" signifies an acceptance of Medea's "necessary violence". In this way, Levinassian ethics does not

necessarily challenge the current order in which we live. In this respect, the Levinassian ethical turn has extinguished politics understood as contestation over who counts. Ethics functions here to curtail discussion. Political change is limited to reaching out to the understandable other, leaving us to exclude and abandon the incomprehensible or unrecognisable other. How does Cavarero's reorientation to the natal scene help us avoid this limiting move?

Rather than help avoid the limits we find in Levinas, there is a risk that Cavarero's emphasis on vulnerability could entrench them, making violence more likely. Jacques Rancière argues that, in our present symbolic order, the incomprehensible suffering of the holocaust has highlighted our extreme vulnerability and portrayed the human as tragic – born "too early": completely dependent on others and at risk of being wounded (2002: 4). He thereby argues that the holocaust has dramatically expanded our comprehension of the extent to which our vulnerability exposes us to the risk of cataclysmic suffering at the hands of others. In comparison to such horror, he argues that everything else could be rendered indistinct and undifferentiated, and after such horror we may struggle to believe that redemption or moral action is still possible. We cannot deny that extreme suffering is possible. In fact, for Rancière, it starts to appear more likely just because it can be said to have happened before. This is because our response to the ambiguity of vulnerability depends on what Rancière refers to as our "order of the sensible" – that which we take for granted – what Judith Butler calls our "frame of intelligibility" (2010). If we understand our current frame as one which already highlights our extreme vulnerability to others and is structured by contemporary crises – for example climate change, war, poverty, global inequality – a logical response might be to perceive ourselves as necessarily called to compete with others to survive. *Vel* could lead to *vulnus*. Madonna to Medea.

Rancière's emphasis on the order in which we live sheds a new light on Medea's dilemma. Why would it have been possible for Jason or the citizens of Corinth to respond with violence instead of care when confronted with the vulnerability of Medea's children? Why, in fact, were they so likely to fail to see the vulnerability that we today are supposed to identify

with the idea of childhood in general? Even if we are to recognise vulnerability, what is to stop us from following Medea in killing the vulnerable to help them escape a worse fate? In this way, it is possible that the turn to vulnerability may, within our current frame, intensify the risk of violence and, with it, acceptance of Medea's "necessary" violence. How can Cavarero's maternal love guard against this? How might it transform the frame which preconditions the possibilities available to us?

Reading ethics as rupture requires an eschatology of faith: an assumption – or at least hope – that the type of rupture that allows us to recognise vulnerability as something that should be responded to with care will happen. But when we know that so many encounters every day do not rupture, what is different about one that does? Is there a way that we could make an encounter more likely to rupture our everyday ordinary? For this, we need to turn to our second question. If the Madonna's love cannot help Medea in her response to the situation in which she finds herself, could it instead have changed the conditions under which Medea's children would be killed – could it help to transform Medea's frame of intelligibility? Cavarero's critique of philosophy has already powerfully described the structures of patriarchy that force our love into impossible choices or keep us so busy we have no time to realise how our actions might make us complicit in violence towards others. Yet, how might we persuade those who do not recognise the patriarchy she highlights that we are vulnerable to one another? One might acknowledge that we are not short of knowledge concerning how we should behave towards one another, however violence continues to tear our world apart. Rather than drawing attention to more models of good behaviour, our challenge is rather to overcome these structures in the face of opposition. Before anyone, particularly a woman, might be willing to enact the Madonna's love, measures might be needed to ensure that they would not just be taken advantage of. How might Cavarero's natal scene persuade patriarchal structures to replace violence with inclined love?

Indeed, the question of how our social norms or frames of intelligibility shape our possible response is raised by Derrida's critique of Levinas when he distinguishes the response to an

encounter from what he refers to as the "quasi-moment" of interruption (1999: 59), which has to in some sense "precede" the encounter. This "irruption" (*ibid.*: 63) is required for us to perceive the other as "Other". Derrida suggests that one way to conceptualise this might be to argue that we need to reach out not just to the recognisable other but to the "unrecognisable other" (2008: 109). However, he acknowledges that this still privileges the perspective of the subject and, as such, could be seen to "surreptitiously" extend "the similar" (*ibid.*), since bringing the unrecognisable into the sphere of the recognisable could thereby reserve a privilege for the self or "same". Yet, I am led to wonder if we could go one step further and consider whether there is anything we could do to make the "quasi-moment" of interruption more likely to rupture the position of the subject?

Levinas, Derrida, and Cavarero's aim is to reflect upon our condition of relationality itself (our ability to relate to one another). They are understandably suspicious of any move that might seem to remove the subject's capacity to respond – to be responsible. Responsibility is, for Levinas "the essential, primary and fundamental structure of subjectivity" (Cavarero, 2016: 167), so much so that he does not want the I to get lost even in a moment of ecstatic union with the other (*ibid.*: 148). Likewise, Cavarero is concerned to avoid what she refers to as the "post modern [...] fragmentation of the subject" (*ibid.*: 11), since she, too, wants to insist that the moment of encounter – this time embodied in the figure of a mother inclined over her infant – is one of responsibility. Although it does not determine what the response might be, she claims that the very posture of inclination indicates a "disposition to provide" a response (*ibid.*: 105). Even Derrida, who dwelt often on the aporia of responsibility, merely whittles away at the issue of response, reducing it, but still retaining it, as a limitless duty that precedes any calculable debt (1999b: 7, 58), despite acknowledging the violence that could also be retained in such a moment (*ibid.*: 58–61). For Levinas and Derrida, something must remain of the separation between self/other positions for a relation to exist. Thus, despite Fagan's argument that Levinassian ethics could avoid providing a ground for an order (Fagan, 2016), it does still provide a ground, even if only in a minimal sense, by

maintaining a relationship of responsibility between self and other. This maintenance of the possibility of responsibility preserves the primacy of the subject and continues to subordinate the other to the "same". I fear that, contrary to Cavarero's intentions, there is a trace of the upright philosophical tradition in this commitment to response/ability. Ironically, this egology of responsibility may be the last obstacle to overcome if we are to undermine the self's domination of the other.

Can Cavarero offer another way to interpret the encounter so central to Levinas? If the encounter requires the "unknown" (Derrida, 1992b: 170) and is anachronistic (Levinas, 2007), then its logic is not one of relation but is rather one which ruptures current relations, and our subjectivity, so as to effect subjectivation. Cavarero does not need to fear the fragmentation of the subject, since this would not be a permanent state of affairs. Instead, all that is required is a quasi-momentary disjuncture, to allow for the possibility of a radical reconfiguration of our relations. Returning to Cavarero's critique of Levinas, I ask what it would take for the "I" to "get lost", albeit just momentarily, to enable us to reconfigure our relations.

Ecstasy

When Cavarero comments on Levinas's aim to avoid the "I" getting "lost", she is discussing the risks posed by the ecstasy of an erotic encounter. For Levinas, even in such a moment when we may feel ourselves "swept away", we are, in actual fact, ensuring our own continuation through procreation – the generation of an I that is both the same (it is part of the father), and the other (it is not an absolute replica) (Cavarero, 2016: 148–9). Although the self in this example is not thought to be lost, it is "called into question" (*ibid.*: 155) by its confrontation with the other. Although Cavarero seems to defend Levinas' move, since it enables the self to maintain responsibility for the other, we have seen that she provides us with a different reading of ecstasy. For Cavarero, such a moment is "the removal of self control", which causes the I "to get carried away and to exit itself

[...]. Erotic inclination, accordingly, has an intrinsically ecstatic effect" (*ibid.*: 7).

Perhaps the ecstatic is Cavarero's way of provoking the "quasi-moment" of disjunction. We have seen that Cavarero associates the ecstatic with inclination – leaning outside of the self – more generally and not just with love or the erotic. Although she has not theorised the ecstatic further, Cavarero's work has for a while now been in conversation with that of Judith Butler, who argues that, in order to understand how the Levinassian encounter can alter our frame of intelligibility, we need to add in an account of the role of affect. Butler, too, notes that love, in the form of sexual passion, is not the only way to experience ecstasy. She suggests that other strong passions such as grief and rage can cause us to undergo the ecstatic (2004: 20). Although ecstatic grief or rage may sound a little strange to our ears, Butler is drawing on the understanding of ecstasy as standing outside oneself, which she equates with the idiom of being "beside oneself" with grief or rage (*ibid.*). For Butler, as for Cavarero, the ecstatic is not just a type of experience – our capacity for ecstasy, for experiencing a subject position outside of ourselves; it is an ontological structure of the body (2010: 33), which reveals our dependency on others, since it is others who provoke our experiences of ecstasy. For Cavarero, this indicates that the self is always already inclined towards others. Noting that our ability to recognise the other is dependent not just on the other, but on the normative order that structures our ability to recognise them, Butler suggests that the affects we experience, such as anger, pleasure, love, are not only the medium for understanding our world but also the means in which we might critique and change it. Interpretation of an encounter occurs in the field of intelligibility that is the social. It calls on "certain interpretive frames" in order for us to make sense of what we are feeling (*ibid.*: 34). Because these frames are "mediated [...] they also call into question the taken-for-granted character of those frames, and in that way provide the affective conditions for social critique" (*ibid.*). This is an attractive argument. The shocking impact of strong affects such as impassioned love, grief, or rage, could effect this change of their own accord – when we are affected deeply, our way of understanding the world is challenged for a moment – thrown

out of kilter. That which we took for granted has suddenly been shown to be lacking. To enable this to happen, all we have to do is to be open to our feelings, and our body will do the rest.

However, Cavarero and Butler's understanding of the ecstatic as an ontological structure of the body, albeit one that is productively provocative, risks blinding them to how strongly our affective responses are themselves socially conditioned. Although no one can deny that there are times when affective experiences alter one's perspective on the world, given the state of contemporary society, why is it not happening far more often? When we are conditioned to interpret certain affective responses in a certain way, it is not clear when affective experiences will transform our frame of intelligibility rather than being made sense of within that frame. I may feel pity or distress for a homeless person, yet, at the same time, I may conclude that it is just not practical to stop and speak to her, to invite her home for dinner, or offer her a place to stay. Furthermore, affect still requires the subject to remain in order to indicate who or what has been affected. Despite the potential for the ecstatic to interrupt, or, in Butler's terms, "dispossess" the self, Cavarero and Butler's turn to ecstasy does not quite escape the egology of relatability – of responding to and being responsible for the other (*ibid.*: 33). Is there another way to move outside of the self that might momentarily disjoin our affective flows, providing an opening for our relations to be restructured in a more productive way? If we start with the issue of the frame rather than the self, we find ourselves approaching the problem from another direction. Rather than remaining caught in the aporia of rendering the unrecognisable recognisable, can we instead seek to render the recognisable unrecognisable – rupturing our frame of intelligibility to provoke a transformation in our ways of relating to one another?

Loving "wrong"

If an interruption of the type Derrida calls for were to take place, our identifications with subject positions (both self and other, for example) would be momentarily challenged, to

prevent them from functioning by making them nonsensical (Cavell, 1991: 131; Rancière, 1999: 29–30; Norval, 2009: 75–6; Woodford, 2017: 152–3). Before we can even consider the responsibility or irresponsibility – of how and to whom we respond (Derrida, 1992a; 2008), something would need to "annihilate" our current perspective (Cavell, 1991: 131), prevent it from functioning. It is not that the positions of self or other cannot be distinguished but that any reason for seeing them as such appears lacking, illogical. Such a disruption would have to operate on the terrain of perception, to open space for a change in the ordering of the frame itself, not just reconfiguration within the order (Rancière, 1999: 28, 30). From the confusion it would create, other possible relations may be constructed. This conceptualisation of rupture is aesthetic. It understands the disjuncture to go all the way down – to scramble meaning such that our usual relations fail. Furthermore, in the characterisation of such a moment in Rancière's formula as an interruption of the sensible, it can be seen to intervene in our affective experiences – our sensibilities. To scramble them, confuse them, render them nonsensical, just long enough for us to see that, although we may not yet have a solution, our normative frame is lacking. Yet how might our actions towards one another – our current relations – prompt such a rupture in the way we relate?

I suggest that another feature of Butler's work can help here. In her work on performativity, Butler theorises that our normativity is established by the precedent of iteration. She therefore argues that we can challenge norms, initially focusing on gender norms, by performing them wrongly; parodying them in order to demonstrate their limitations and prove that alternatives are possible (2006). Although I have argued elsewhere that we might do this by playing with performativity more widely (Woodford, 2023), in this article, I want to explore specifically the question of whether Butler gives us another way to understand Cavarero's aforementioned subtle but undeveloped shift from self-sacrificing to non-self-sacrificing maternal love. Indeed, in some Christian traditions, the love of Cavarero's Madonna incorporates but also far exceeds the moment of maternal care as interpreted by Cavarero, and even challenges the female gender stereotype (e.g. Beattie, 2002;

Woodford, 2021; and Woodford, forthcoming). Radical, popular, and folk Mariology traditions emphasise how the love the Madonna practiced was not familiar familial (filial) love. It was a love that ruptured the order of men, the values of patriarchy. She is believed to have loved God enough to eschew social conventions and agree to carry his child despite the scandal it would cause to her family – in a challenge to her filial relations. Furthermore, although she demonstrated love and care for her son, she raised him to love others, all others, more than his human family. She raised him in fact, to sacrifice his life for others. Finally, she raised him to espouse perhaps the most ruptural love of all – love for enemies[3]. Was it in fact this love, which was so dangerous, that meant he could not be allowed to live? In all these ways, perhaps we could say that the Madonna loves "wrong". She does not follow the patriarchal model for love of self and love of family over others. Could the second Madonna's love be a love that loves wrongly? If so, could loving "wrong" – loving in a way that goes against the values of patriarchy – help us challenge the affective egology of our ordinary, self-preserving love relations upon which our current violent world relies?

Although wheeling out the commandment to love one's enemies may seem a little tired, appearing to recall much ink spilt already by Levinas, Derrida, Cavarero, and others, I here sketch a novel reading of affect that might help us to retain the spirit of Cavarero's argument whilst overcoming the trap that Levinas falls into when, despite his extensive work on ethics, he reserves a position for the enemy. I want to ask what type of love is commanded here? Although it might, in some circumstances, be possible to summon compassion for our enemies if we hear that some calamity has befallen them, are we being asked to affectively love in the sense of feeling compassion and warmth for our enemies at the very moment when they may be vindictively persecuting us? Is it not more likely that for many of us mere mortals we would be affected by feelings such as fear, hatred, or anger at such a moment?

[3] I am not arguing here that Mary had full knowledge of Jesus' calling, but that her maternal influence in shaping his personality and outlook is often undervalued or completely ignored (in line with Cavarero's argument about mothers in general) in any discussion of the Christian story.

Although in the Greek version of the Gospels the commandment to love your enemies is rendered using the term *philia,* which may appear to tie us back into the patriarchal realm of familial relations, if we refer to the original Aramaic word for love, it is, as in English and Hebrew, more ambiguous, and crucially, can refer to love as an action, not just as a feeling. Thus, we can render this command as an instruction to act without violence towards others despite how we feel towards them. To act peaceably towards them despite being affectively moved to do the opposite.

Despite the difficulty of enacting such love, I suggest that it is this form of love that Cavarero's second Madonna exemplifies. It may seem self-sacrificing to fail to defend oneself with violence in the face of violence – how could this have helped Medea? Yet to stand up and resist the normative order by acting against its rules can imbue a subject with a strength, a dignity that interrupts the everyday frame in which we co-exist with our enemies as well as our friends. Such an interruption opens a possibility that we might reconfigure the way we are responding to one another. Might the confusion of such unexpected behaviour prior to any need for a response put into question the planned violent response from one's enemy, or our own desire to respond violently to others? Doubtless it would often fail to have this effect, but the surprise, dignity, and drama of such a moment has the potential to render our current relations to one another in a new light. To show them as lacking or inadequate. This is less self-sacrificing than self-making – a subjectivating moment. I am not blithely suggesting that this would be easy to achieve, simply that this might be the secret of the altruistic, yet not self-sacrificing love, of Cavarero's Madonna.

Understood in this way, perhaps love of enemies could provide a strategy for making those quasi-moments of interruption more likely by being *a priori* peaceable towards those we are not meant to love before any encounter with them to which we must respond. Conceptualising such a moment as a political strategy, rather than an ethical or ontological one, removes it from the sphere of response and responsibility. It troubles our affective inclinations by, where necessary, resisting them. Of course, such a strategy of *a priori* nonviolence is not

failsafe, but rather than succumb to a situation in which one either relies on hope or kills one's loved ones, it gives an active and productive strategy aimed at transforming one's situation positively. Could the unexpectedness, the illogicality, of this love give us the strength that would allow us to stand up, to fight for the impossible, to make an argument for survival that we may not feel we could ordinarily make, to build a new world in the world?

Since there are no good grounds to distinguish inequalities between us, from such a moment, there arises the possibility that we can transform our social order not just to render the unrecognisable recognisable, but to include it on the same terms – simply because there is no reason not to do so. This is not a way of restoring the individualistic egology of equality which, according to Cavarero, seeks to smooth over the asymmetry of our lives (and which could be seen as Derrida's motivation to plump for responsibility, with its associated ills, as what he saw as the lesser of two evils), since it does not aim to dissolve subject positions so as to render us substantively equal in any way (2016: 154). Instead, this is an equality that only ever emerges negatively – from the failure of any basis for inequality. Thus, it is no threat to human uniqueness. It just prevents us from using the distinctions stemming from uniqueness as an excuse for domination.

Yet, if the Madonna's love is not maternal love, but love of enemies, must we understand it as alien to human love, whether maternal or non-maternal? Despite the necessary feminist task of identifying the often overlooked labour of motherhood, must we conclude that human maternity can only vacillate in this ambivalent matrix of care and violence? I do not think so. Cavarero has already begun to distinguish this "wrong" love from the patriarchal stereotype of maternal love, and, for Cavarero, it is in the patriarchal order that maternal love becomes entangled with violence. Indeed, could an *a priori* refusal of violence – not as an ontological condition – but as a political strategy, be part of a non-patriarchal maternal practice? A way to raise human beings who may be able to construct "political orders in which peace is not the temporary result of war" (Cavarero, 2015: 110)? The alternative is to accept the violence of one's society, as demonstrated by Medea, who,

accepting that her children's fate was defined by their relationship with their father, took it upon herself to enact that violence. Yet it was hardly a solution. Despite her victorious exit, how to carry on living after that?

I am not trying to demonise Medea, but I do wish to avoid the recurrence of such tragic choices. If we accept the argument that Medea perceived that she had no choice, then we need to ask how loving "wrong" could transform our collective frame, and how it could impact our world rather more quickly than waiting for future generations to be raised as more peaceable. Let us observe that few mothers give birth alone – but the moment of birth itself is already enmeshed in a network of social relations. Cavarero is aware that maternal love is not enacted in a void, yet her formulation of the Levinassian encounter also only contains two figures. Critics of Levinas have long noted the individualism of his encounter, which is not necessarily evaded by his conceptualisation of politics as the introduction of a third party, since this just multiplies what are still individual experiences. For the Madonna's love to inform a feminist politics, we need to ask how it could be enacted collectively, and what we could do as a collective to support it? Returning to the example of a Levinassian encounter with a homeless person, the type of shock it might be expected to provoke depends not just on the self's disposition but also on their material circumstances. If the self also has no home, or no food, then in some sense there is less distance to overcome to recognise the other as the self. Medea was not just angry with her husband. She was frightened, humiliated, rejected. This rendered her defiant but not in a position to negotiate. She had lost her social status and, with it, her confidence to pose an alternative. Our ability to enact nonviolent love is not limited to the resources at our disposal. Hence its potency. Yet, a lack of resources will always render its enaction more difficult. In order to better support the conditions under which nonviolence can be enacted, it is necessary that we do not wait to first change the frame of our social order, but simultaneously intensify the fight against inequality – not just to resist it in moments of political struggle, but to construct institutional infrastructures to replace and improve upon those we have lost to neoliberalism in the last fifty years. Nonviolence as a strategy requires this dual

approach, on both the individual and the collective front.

Conclusion

Rather than an ontology of vulnerability and inclination towards the other, I have proposed that the love of Cavarero's Madonna is a ruptural love, a love that is "wrong" by the standards of the world, characterised by nonviolent action. Despite the elegance of Cavarero's theory of postural inclination, the Madonna's love will often need to be enacted contrary to our inclinations. To answer the question of how nonviolent love might persuade the patriarchs, it does not wait to persuade them. It ruptures the patriarchal values of family and friends first by repeating the norms of love in a manner deemed "wrong", interrupting the way we usually relate to one another, and opening up the possibility for a change in our patterns of relationality. Rather than an affective maternal love figured as a relation between selves, it mobilises an alternative theorisation of maternity which figures this relation between selves in constant negotiation with a wider societal normative frame. This model of maternity is subjectivating rather than self-sacrificing, inculcating this "wrong", illogical, and dangerous love in its love objects, giving them the power to intervene in and transform the violent relationships of our contemporary world.

And what of Cavarero's argument that something about the experience of giving birth exemplifies this love? Is there not an illogicality in a mother's inclination towards a new-born? An illogicality that patriarchy, with its romantic representations of motherhood, fears to acknowledge in case it tempts women to abandon their responsibilities? Pregnancy, birth, and motherhood are detrimental to the upright, independent self. Pregnancy strains the body's resources, changes one's body; the labour of birth often drives women to the limit of their physical ability; and the months that follow usually make extreme physical and mental demands in a very particular way on a mother's post-natal body. Indeed, I recall stories of mothers who, upon giving birth, do not report a sudden rush of affection for their new-born child, but exhausted, bleeding, in shock, and

feeling more vulnerable themselves than the new-born who is already comfortably in the arms of a caregiver, illogically, irrationally, and despite perhaps needing to be cared for themselves, without knowing why, reach out their arms, to meet the often tearful infant who has caused them (and will continue to cause them) so much trouble. Not yet because they love, not yet because they care, and not yet because they see the infant as vulnerable. Perhaps they reach out because, in that moment, as their former self recedes, they are curious about what "new" this unique being might bring to their life – and to the world.

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Imagining the Body: On the Power of Images and the Force of the Corporeal in Adriana Cavarero

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Abstract

The body, its materiality, and the images through which we apprehend them have been a constant concern in Adriana Cavarero's philosophy. The contention of this paper is that her work on this topic lays out the foundations for (1) an understanding of the relationship between the imaginary and the corporeal as one of entanglement and inseparability; and (2) responding to the questions of what an image and a body can do. To develop this, this paper focuses on two texts, *Stately Bodies* and *Inclinations*, that provide, respectively, (1) an account of the assemblages and frictions between images and bodies through an analysis of the metaphor of the body politic in Western thought; and (2) an ontology of bodily images. Although both texts critically engage with Western hegemonic images of the body, I argue that the presence of the body as a powerful physical givenness articulates the narrative of *Stately Bodies*, while *Inclinations* is rather focused on the capacity of images to constitute different subjects and different worlds. These two perspectives are complementary rather than contradictory. Reading them together allows for the distillation

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of an original approach to the body in its double dimension of flesh and image that contributes to current debates on the discourse/matter divide, and offers a nuanced understanding of the power of the imaginary and the force of the corporeal. The fundamental argument defended is that Cavarero points continuously to the capacity of the concrete matter of bodies to sustain and/or disrupt the imaginary constructions that structure our experience and, at the same time, to the potential inherent in images to sculpt our bodies, our subjectivity, and our politics.

Key words: Adriana Cavarero, images, body, corporeal ontology

Biography

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Western philosophy has tended to consider the body and its material reality in a binary opposition to the soul, reason, or the mind. Since ancient Greece, the body and everything associated

with it – nature, biology, matter, passions, passivity, needs, the feminine, animality, and so on – has generally been regarded as a burden, a liability, or an imprisonment. This has led many philosophers to either downplay and ignore the corporeal, subordinate it to the higher and nobler status of the incorporeal, or consider it a threatening, dangerous, and even horrific reality that must be kept under control. As a consequence, Elizabeth Grosz has suggested that Western thought "established itself on the foundations of a profound somatophobia" (Grosz, 1994: 5), one that continues to structure contemporary thought.[2] To combat this, a number of contemporary theorists – especially those aligned with the so-called new materialisms – have called for a (re)turn to or a foregrounding of matter (Coole and Frost, 2010: 2; Dolphijn and van der Tuin, 2012: 85, 93).

The work of Adriana Cavarero addresses and attempts to offer redress for the historically prevalent somatophobia of Western philosophy. To do so, she has focused on the hegemonic images of the body that articulate our collective imaginaries and symbolic frameworks, and has striven to propose alternative images that, in reshaping these imaginary and symbolic structures, promote alternative ways of experiencing our (corpo)reality. Her research has frequently highlighted the power of images to mould our world and our bodies, and, consequently, the importance of questioning and subverting certain images to make room for other imaginings and, along with them, other embodiments and worlds. At the same time, Cavarero has not only scrutinised the realm of the imaginary but brought to the fore the potency of the corporeal itself, of the flesh, of "physical givenness" (Cavarero, 2002: xi). The materiality of the body is thus regarded not just as that which is produced by the images that render it intelligible and visible, but as something that can underpin or disrupt these images.

This paper examines the nature of the relationship between images and bodies in Cavarero's philosophy, and seeks

[2] These statements are, of course, a generalisation. However, while there have been important schools of thought in Western philosophy that have valued matter and the body, the privileging of the non-corporeal over the corporeal has more often than not been the dominant position.

to make explicit an insight that implicitly traverses her entire *oeuvre*: the entanglement of the imaginary and the corporeal. Images and bodies are not two discrete realms, but intertwined and inseparable realities. With this, Cavarero's work neutralises the material/discursive opposition, and situates itself methodologically on the threshold between images and bodies. To explore this entwinement of images and bodies, I focus on two texts separated by almost twenty years, *Stately Bodies* and *Inclinations*, that provide, respectively, (1) an account of the assemblages and frictions between images and bodies through an analysis of the metaphor of the body politic in Western thought; and (2) an ontology of bodily images. Although both texts critically engage with Western hegemonic images of the body, I argue that the presence of the body as a powerful physical givenness articulates the narrative of *Stately Bodies*, while *Inclinations* is rather focused on the capacity of images to constitute different subjects and different worlds. These two perspectives are complementary rather than contradictory. Reading them together allows for the distillation of an original approach to the body in its double dimension of flesh and image that contributes to current debates on the discourse/matter divide and offers a nuanced understanding of the power of the imaginary and the force of the corporeal. Although Cavarero does not explicitly respond to the question of what a body/an image can do, she continually points to the capacity of concrete bodies to disrupt the imaginary constructions that structure our experience and, at the same time, to the potential of images to sculpt our bodies, our subjectivity, and our politics.

The Figural and the Flesh

In her 1995 book *Stately Bodies* (*Corpo in figure*), Cavarero explores the origin and different versions of the metaphor of the body politic, wherein the political community is portrayed as a body with a head, members, and/or organs. She does so by stressing a paradox inherent in this metaphor: on the one hand, Western politics predominantly banishes the body from its phallogocentric domain and confines it to the realm of the

private, all the while, on the other hand, figuring the political order through corporeal images. The body is expelled from the political and rational domains only to return to these domains as a metaphor of their nature and organisation. For Cavarero, even if the exiled body and the returning body are not the same – the former is feminine, murky, animal, uncontrollable, and linked to necessity and biology, while the latter is masculine, rational, adult, vigorous, harmonious, independent – there is something symptomatic in this stubborn return (Cavarero, 2002: viii). It bears witness to a materiality that, often in disguise and appearing to be tamed and rationalised, acts as a disrupting force that refuses to remain buried beneath the surface of the established order:

> The body of which we speak is obviously an imagined one: the body as represented, belonging wholly to the discursive order. This is true although its mere physical givenness often comes to undermine the order of the design that adopts its figure. Thus, something inherent within the elementary potency of the *given* ultimately exceeds the discourse that has taken it as its object (*ibid.*: xi).

In the history of the figural analogy between the human body and the political community, Cavarero claims that the body is initially forced out of the logocentric male realm and placed in polar opposition to reason, but it compulsively attempts to return and re-enter the space from which it was expelled. Western somatophobia's operation of exclusion is not, therefore, a neat manoeuvre, but one that, in psychoanalytic terms, provokes a return of the repressed. As Freud hypothesised, the repressed always returns, albeit distorted and deformed, in the form of a transactional product – such as dreams, symptoms, parapraxes, slips, and so on – resulting from the negotiations between the repressing and the repressed forces (Freud, 1957: 154). In *Stately Bodies*, Cavarero interrogates the different historical and conceptual forms that the return of the repressed body takes, promoting not so much a voluntary re-turn *to* matter and the corporeal as such, but enquiring about the symptomatic and often unconscious and unintentional

manifestations of the return *of* matter and the corporeal in Western culture.

My contention is that Cavarero offers in this text a careful analysis of the return of the rejected body under two particular forms, and that this analysis contains an account of the relationship between the figural and the carnal. Specifically, the excluded body returns through a double movement: on the one hand, under the guise of a tamed or domesticated corporeality – a transactional product stemming from the conflict between a pressing and stubborn materiality and the repressive force of the *logos* – dressed in images of an ordered, structured, perfectly harmonious, male, adult, and rational body; while, on the other hand, the body bursts uninvited into the rational political order as a prelogical, feral, wild, raw, feminine, and animal flesh, that challenges and perturbs this order. Cavarero's position is not that the first body is purely figural or that the second body is exclusively material; both are complex assemblages of imagery and somatic givenness. In the next two sections, I turn to examine these complex assemblages through Cavarero's reading of Antigone, Plato, and Hobbes.

"A Word Red and Dark as Purple": Antigone's Body

Cavarero's history of the returning body starts in ancient Greece and, more concretely, takes as its point of departure the centrality of the body in Sophocles' *Antigone*, a centrality that she identifies as being anomalous in Western culture. While standard readings of this tragedy emphasise the expulsion of the feminine body – Antigone's – from the *polis* as its terrible other, Cavarero points out that the whole story revolves around a rejected body – or rather a corpse: that of Polynices, the dead brother whose burial Antigone fights to guarantee against her uncle Creon's decree – with no soul, a body whose centrality is subsequently transferred to the body of Antigone herself, punished for her violation of the city's law with being buried alive. Cavarero draws attention to this odd foregrounding or "triumph of the body" (Cavarero, 2002: 15) that the *polis* fails to expel and keep at bay; a body considered the enemy of the *polis*, uncanny, monstrous, deadly, and symbolically loaded with the

value of a "pure body" (*ibid.*). The tragedy's plot revolves around the "uncontrollable contest between violent expulsions and terrifying returns" (*ibid.*), and in this particular contest it is the expelled that wins.

Cavarero reads this centrality of the body from two sides: on the one hand, its "unrivalled figural power" (Cavarero, 2002: 19), its "symbolic power" (*ibid.*: 24), which unleashes a cascade of uncanny images linked to the terrible, dreadful, pre-logical, "cadaverous nausea and incestuous sexuality" (*ibid.*: 16); on the other hand, the terror induced by these images is underpinned by "the corporeal materiality of existence" (*ibid.*: 32), by the fact of death but also the fact of birth, both horrifying from the perspective of the city's masculine rationality.

While this reading acknowledges the force of the materiality of existence, and more concretely the capacity of "the very pulsing of the body" (*ibid.*: 34) to disrupt and subvert the imaginary scaffoldings of our worldviews, this materiality is not understood as an unfiltered presence, but as something that appears always already wrapped in a symbolic fabric. The two most common mythical figurations of this pure body in Western culture are the woman and the animal, and Cavarero shows how both are linked in the question of the origin (*arche*) of man: born of a woman and born as an animal that soon, and to his own relief, domesticates and leaves behind his bestiality through his rational and technological skills (*ibid.*). However, as much as man tries to sever his ties to the mother and the animal – and hence the body – to erase a story that "he either does not recall or is afraid to narrate" (*ibid.*), these ties underpin what he is: "the politics that banishes the body from within its walls speaks indeed, from beginning to end, only in the grammar of the body" (*ibid.*: 48). There is, thus, in Antigone, a corporeal imagery that, under many forms and figures, bears witness to "a corporeal substance that pervades language" (*ibid.*: 51), an excess or overabundance that cannot be contained within the parameters of words and images but that nevertheless inspires and provokes a new stream of words and images. "A word red and dark as purple", Ismene's description of her sister Antigone's speech – for which Cavarero chooses Hölderlin's translation (*ibid.*: 50) – condenses the entanglement of words and images in the tragedy: Antigone's words are dense and red

as blood to the point that they cannot be neatly separated from her body, precisely because they are sustained and rendered possible by this body that the mainstream Western tradition has forever struggled to keep out of sight.

The Uncontainable Monstrosity of the Body: Plato and Hobbes

Cavarero reads the centrality and excess of Antigone's body in parallel with Plato's condemnation of the corporeal. Although these might seem antithetical perspectives, Cavarero shows the extent to which Plato's efforts to abject the body from his philosophy result in an obsessive presence of the corporeal in his lexicon and his metaphors. Even if Plato's infamous identification of the body (*soma*) with a *sema*, a prison or tomb for the soul, initiated the polar opposition between the intellectual and the material and, with it, Western thought's phallogocentrism, Cavarero draws attention to the fact that he is simultaneously the thinker that inaugurates the analogy between the body and politics that will lead to the figure of the body politic. Antigone, therefore, is not the opposite of Plato, but his dark reverse, the repressed that returns despite Plato's conscious intentions.

According to Cavarero, a similar return occurs in Hobbes' doctrine when the state is portrayed metaphorically through the image of the biblical monster Leviathan, an imagery that entails a violent irruption in the realm of the political of the bestial horror of the corporeal. In Cavarero's itinerary, Plato and Hobbes are two examples – the first inaugural and the second paradigmatic of Modern thought – of the intricate relationship between the body and its images. In this section, I therefore analyse Cavarero's reading of these two authors to develop her insights on the materiality of the body; namely, that this materiality (1) cannot simply be understood as raw and pure, but is always already apprehended through a framework; (2) destabilises the images crafted by Western thought to tame and dominate the body, in particular the images of an adult, rational, and male body that are invoked by the metaphor of the body politic; and (3) is not the opposite of rational and

political discourse, but its neglected foundation, which is why it compulsively returns to the political scene.

Cavarero traces the return of the repressed body in Plato in two texts: the *Republic* and the *Timaeus*. The presence of the body in the *Republic* is ambiguous and paradoxical (Cavarero, 2002: 57), its images are "neither simple nor univocal" (*ibid.*: 68). On the one hand, the body appears as the material place of inscription of the tripartite soul, with the rational soul located in the head, the impulsive soul in the breast, and the appetitive soul in the belly. Analogously, the body is the image upon which the political realm is organised and administered with justice, insofar as it is divided into three classes of citizens, each of which must adhere to their particular function in accordance with their link to one of the parts of the soul and the body: philosophers, warriors, and producers. From this perspective, there is an internal affinity between *psyche*, *soma*, and *polis*, and justice and health become synonyms, requiring that each part of the order performs its own specific task. On the other hand, the body emerges as an external and upsetting threat, a disquieting alterity, and an obscure matter against which the rational order is built. This return of the repressed is explicitly acknowledged by Plato as an occurrence of the night, especially in sleep (*ibid.*: 64–6), when the rational soul lets down its guard and the other two parts of the soul, home of the passions and the instincts which are taken to be more corporeal than intellectual, take control.

However, Cavarero points to another form of the return of the repressed in Plato that is no longer conscious or explicitly acknowledged by him, but rather symptomatic of a Freudian parapraxis: while Plato seeks to design the political order analogously to the order inherent in the soul and its tripartite structure, the body ends up paradoxically being the surface of inscription and unintended foundation of this design (*ibid.*: 69); a foundation that Plato "sought to deny and remove, even as he betrayed its obsessive presence" (*ibid.*: 68). Against Plato's will, the corporeal invades his language and his imagery, seeming, as it happened in Antigone, "to win out over the logical powers so keen on removing it" (*ibid.*). Plato's lexical ambiguity leads him not only to situate the soul inside the body, in specific parts of it, but also to include in the soul a sort of monster – with which

he refers to the appetitive soul (*ibid.*) – that man carries within himself and which he must spend all his life trying to restrain and tame.

The ambiguity of the body is equally present, albeit from a different perspective, in the *Timaeus*. Cavarero focuses on the image of the *chora*, a motherlike and material figure, an invisible, ductile, formless, and ineffable being or receptacle wherein all visible things are generated according to the model provided by the intelligible – reproducing the mother–son–father triangle. The *chora* works as a radical alterity with respect to the *logos*, as something unspeakable and unintelligible, and simultaneously and paradoxically as a necessary precondition and foundation of the logical order; it is that which remains outside of the *logos* and, at the same time, that which makes possible and produces the visible world according to rational guidelines. The *Timaeus* is "an example of that phallologocentric foundation of Western discourse that is built simultaneously *against* and *upon* a corporeal material identified with the female" (*ibid.*: 84). The material, the corporeal, and the feminine are expelled only to be found again as an eerie presence that both underpins and subverts the domain of the *logos*.

Cavarero's analysis of the symptomatic presence of the corporeal in Plato concludes with a reflection on the status of the body at stake:

> We are speaking of an image, and thus of an operation pertaining to the discursive register. There is no doubt, however, that the given organisation of the body is the principle that guides the image's contents. The image is thus wholly free within the creative play of discourse, yet is anchored to an empirically binding datum (what we might call its specific object), necessarily preceding it and constraining it within a specific, objective, and pre-existing grid of figural inventions (*ibid.*: 88).

A few pages later, in a chapter devoted to the metaphor of the body politic in the Middle Ages, Cavarero repeats this idea: "any bodily image must necessarily contend with a fundamental material realism inherent to the thing represented" (*ibid.*: 110). In both passages, we are confronted with the notion that the

creativity and inventiveness of the images that represent our world in general and our body in particular have as their limit "the given organisation of the body" (*ibid.*: 88), "an empirically binding datum" (*ibid.*), a "fundamental material realism" (*ibid.*: 110). Despite the best efforts of Western hegemonic discourse to suppress the corporeal, the body always returns as a disturbing presence that challenges and disrupts the logic of this discourse. Cavarero stresses that it may seem that, in Plato, the relationship between the pure physical givenness and its images, or between the bodily material and the discursive and imaginary register, is reversed. After all, for him, the body is prefigured as an idea in the sphere of the *logos* and thus the idea of the body would come first, with the actual body being "not so much the object of representation as its faithful result" (*ibid.*: 88). However, there is, beyond this seeming resolution, and hidden behind the figure of the *chora*, "an unresolved primordial matter that contradicts the self–sufficiency of the entire operation" of the *logos* (*ibid.*). Corporeality "turns the tables" yet again (*ibid.*: 89).

Although Cavarero does not develop her position regarding the capacity of the corporeal to undermine the endeavours of a repressing and taming image, she lays the ground for a nuanced conception of the body that is not reduced to the pure materiality of its flesh or the direct result of an imaginary and discursive construction, but a complex entanglement of matter and image. We could say that, although she leaves open Spinoza's question regarding what the body can do (Spinoza, 1985: 495), she provides a series of conceptual resources and tools to think it in its double and inseparable dimensions of matter and figure.

Cavarero pursues this double dimension in Hobbes' philosophy. Hobbes prefigured one of the hegemonic images of subjectivity in liberal political thought and, more broadly, in contemporary societies: that of the individual. In Hobbes' account, individuals exist from the very beginning, even before the establishment of an institutionalised political order. His narrative starts in a state of nature where individuals, in seeking to fulfil their own selfish aims and, as a consequence, clashing against each other, provoke a chaotic situation of war of all against all. Hobbes explains that, in this state of nature, he

considers "men as if but even now sprung out of the earth, and suddenly (like mushrooms) come to full maturity (VII.1)" (cited in Cavarero, 2002: 178–9). In the beginning, men are not born of a gestating body but are self-generating mushrooms. As Judith Butler describes it, "the state of nature provides an imaginary framework in which there is only one individual in the scene: self-sufficient, without dependency, saturated in self-love yet without any need for another" (Butler, 2020: 30). The individual is always already male, adult, sovereign. Drawing from the psychoanalytic lexicon, Butler conceives of this notion of the individual not so much as a *fantasy*, that is, a conscious wish, but as an unconscious *phantasy* (*ibid.*: 34) that has opaque determinants and complex effects. This resonates with Cavarero's diagnosis of Plato's foregrounding of the rational soul as being founded by and simultaneously provoking a symptomatic unconscious obsession with the body. In Hobbes' case, the phantasy of the individual is built on and depends upon a prior expulsion or repression: of the scene of birth, of childhood, of the feminine and everything traditionally associated with it, of our fundamental vulnerability, interdependency, and need for care, of illness, and so on. For the individual to affirm himself, an "annihilation" or "inaugural violence" (*ibid.*: 38) had to be accomplished. However, what is written out of the picture vehemently returns to undermine it, and Cavarero studies the particular form that this return takes in Hobbes.

Hobbes theorises the passage from the state of nature to the political state as the result of a pact wherein individuals transfer their power to a sovereign that absorbs and concentrates all forces into one and who consequently is able to protect them, end the conflict, and guarantee peace. Cavarero focuses on the different metaphors that Hobbes employs to describe the state that results from this pact: a machine, a gigantic artificial body, a person, and a monster (the biblical Leviathan); the first three conceived of as rational, and the last one carrying the semantic load of the terrible, of an absolute and irresistible force, and of bestiality (Cavarero, 2002: 167). There are, therefore, two conflicting images at play: the state understood as an artificial – as opposed to the state of nature – rational body or machine, mechanically constructed and so

knowable, and the state as a mythical, bestial, and unknowable monster endowed with an invincible power to which nothing can compare. Cavarero notes that the biblical monster is barely engaged with in Hobbes' text, but its presence is so significant as to become the title of the work: "the power of the image surpasses the intentions of its user" (*ibid.*: 181). The symptomatic return of the body in Hobbes, of what was repressed in both his notion of the individual and his conception of the state as a rational machine, crystallises in "a dark side of power that may exceed the rational structure of political order, lending it a monstrous aspect" (*ibid.*). This monstrous aspect of power is not the opposite of the rational state, but its reverse side: to end with the state of war of all against all, a terrifying power takes control concentrating in itself the force of all. That force, therefore, does not disappear, but is absorbed in its entirety by the sovereign. "Violence, war, and conflict do not remain objects to be tamed and *resolved* by the political structure; rather they seep into the order itself, contaminating and transfiguring its peaceful face, presented as just and good, into something terrifying" (*ibid.*: 182–3). The body thus returns under the form of a bestial monster, through the image of an unparalleled and terrible power that the rational order struggles constantly to banish. In this sense, the phantasy of the individual and its ideal of self-sufficiency and self-control is disrupted by a monstrous corporeality that remains beyond its command all the while being a neglected albeit intimate part of the individual. Equally, the state reveals itself in an ambivalent manner as both human and monstrous, rational and bestial, peaceful and threatening: "The object that both motivates and overshadows the political order invades the figure and always inevitably returns" (*ibid.*: 187). The images concocted to exorcise the monstrosity of the body, that of the individual and that of the state, end up discovering that very monstrosity at their core.

What Can an Image Do? Inclining the Subject

Although in *Stately Bodies* Cavarero does not directly respond to Spinoza's question on what the body can do, in several passages she points to the ways in which the force of corporeality

disrupts the imaginary, symbolic, and discursive constructions through which we experience our bodies and our subjectivity. Her stance regarding images in *Inclinations: A Critique of Rectitude (Inclinazioni: Critica della rettitudine,* 2014) is similar: she insists on the importance of working at the level of the imaginary, of crafting and providing images that can constitute an alternative to the violent, exclusionary, and patriarchal images of the body which are hegemonic, but she does not directly address the question of what an image can do. The aim of the second part of this paper is to examine Cavarero's ontology of bodily images and extrapolate from it, through the mediation of Emanuele Coccia's theory of the sensible, the status, role, and power of images.

In *Stately Bodies*, Cavarero studies the metaphor of the body politic in Western culture and the representation of the corporeal underpinning it as the figural grounds of a binary logic that institutionalises a dualistic distribution of gendered bodies. Images, therefore, have the capacity to give shape to and condition our experiences and the way in which we structure our world. Conversely, Cavarero insists that these images are frequently underpinned and/or disrupted by what she calls the "physical givenness" (Cavarero, 2002: xi) or the concrete matter of the body. Her work in *Inclinations* also presumes this double dimension of corporeality, but the body is approached fundamentally from the perspective of its images and their ontological rather than their epistemological or ideological status; that is, from the perspective of their being and their power to mould being.

The first principle of an ontology of bodily images is that our experience of bodies and our way of referring to them is always dependent on a discourse or image that turns them – or does not turn them – into something visible, intelligible, and even readable. The material is, as we have been insisting, not absent or merely secondary, but since it is always presented to us through an imaginary framework, it is important to acknowledge the effects of this framework: it can render bodies noticeable, important, valuable, but it can just as well be translated into inequalities, exclusions, and violence. Identifying and confronting this violence requires that we take seriously the task of analysing the potentiality inherent in

images and dispute the figures that populate the imaginary. From these premises, and through an engagement with Cavarero's ontology of bodily images, I would like to emphasise the importance of working in the realm of images because this is, first, a creative and productive dimension, to a great extent responsible for our processes of subjectivation and for the structuration and categorisation of our world; and, second, the site where critique can (i) denounce the imposition and naturalisation of certain practices of violence and exclusion that operate on the basis of a particular imaginary framework to (ii) open up the space to more just frameworks.

Cavarero does not systematically discuss what an image is nor what it can do. Therefore, before turning to examine her project in *Inclinations*, I will supplement her analysis by very briefly engaging with Emanuele Coccia's response to these issues. In *Sensible Life: A Micro-ontology of the Image*, Coccia maintains that images are neither subjective nor objective, neither mental nor corporeal, but constitute a third territory, an intermediary and supplemental world, or a "medial space" (Coccia, 2016: 35). From this space, "as if in exile from the world in which the body and soul co-exist" (*ibid.*: 17), existing *"out of place"* (*ibid.*: 19), images give shape to both subjects and objects, minds and bodies. Images derive from the space of objects – without being confused with them – as a sort of "*esse extraneum*" (*ibid.*), extraneous or foreign being that appears "outside of itself" (*ibid.*), and from that foreignness they support and make possible the life of the subjects and their bodies. Images are

> the manner in which we give ourselves to the world, the form that allows us to be *in* the world (for ourselves and for others), and the way in which the world becomes understandable, accessible, and liveable. Only in sensible life is a world given to us, and only as sensible life are we in the world (*ibid.*: 2).

As such, there are as many worlds as there are images. With this, Coccia forces us to look at images beyond the binary opposition between matter and mind, and to understand their intimate link to and effect upon matter:

> Thanks to images, matter is never inert but always malleable and full of form, and the mind is never purely interiority but technique and mundane life. It is harmful, then, to reduce the sensible life to the psychological; images have a *cosmological* function, not merely a gnoseological or physical one. Images are the true cosmic transformers that allow for the spiritualisation of the corporeal (or its animation) and the embodiment of the spirit (*ibid.*: 38).[3]

Coccia explicitly addresses the question of what an image can do: "In man [*sic*] and in his body, what is the sensible capable of? How far do the power, activity, and influence of sensation go in human activity?" (*ibid.*: 4). His answer is that the sensible – that is, the medial space of images – precedes and survives the act of its perception and works as a "background murmur" or "ultimate horizon" (*ibid.*: 43) of every project, activity, and reality. Images allow us to act on things and be acted upon, to have an environment and to interact with it. They can make our world liveable or unliveable.

From these coordinates, we can now return to Cavarero's ontology of bodily images to examine what these images do to ourselves, to others, and to our world. In *Inclinations*, Cavarero studies what she identifies as the hegemonic corporeal posture in Western culture, whose images have been not only privileged but also idealised since at least Plato: rectitude, uprightness, righteousness, straightness, and erection. The idealisation of this posture has led to it being semantically associated with truth, morality, justice, norms or normality, the mind or soul, culture, and the masculine. Conversely, the image of rectitude has produced its binary opposite: a negative conception of inclination as that which has to do with passions or emotions, abnormality or perversion, the body, nature, and the feminine. Cavarero holds that the history of Western philosophy is

[3] This is an idea that appears in Cavarero as well, especially when she deals with the status of the orgasm and the prevalence of the body: "The prevalence of the body is indeed here only the inherence of the existence of the body – or, rather, the spirituality of the flesh and fleshiness of the spirit, which makes their indiscernibility the miracle of uniqueness" (Cavarero, 2000: 112).

articulated around the image of rectitude, and that this image reaches its zenith during Modernity, when the notion of the self-standing individual, an upright man that does not need any support (Cavarero, 2016: 2), becomes the dominant representation of subjectivity. Although Descartes does not appear in *Inclinations*, his understanding of the subject as endowed with an upright reason that always wants the truth and, as if following a straight line, always tends towards it – and whose error can only be attributed to the interference of external elements such as passions or the senses; an error that can be avoided if a good method is implemented – is a paradigmatic example of the idealisation of rectitude (Deleuze, 1994: 131). The image of verticality, of an upright posture, provides a visual representation for the phantasies of autonomy, independence, and self-sufficiency that give content to the modern notion of the individual. Verticality is the posture of an individual who stands straight on its own, alone, without needing anything or anyone to maintain its equilibrium and subsist.

Cavarero tracks the origin of this promotion of the image of rectitude and of the idealisation of *homo erectus* back to Plato's myth of the cave, where a man – the true philosopher – manages to leave the cave, abandon the awkward position of being bent over himself, stand up, and conquer the erect posture. "Then comes the climax of Plato's story: the liberated man stands firmly under the perfect midday sun, its rays perpendicular and hence producing no shadows. He turns his eyes to the sun and is able to contemplate it without being blinded, recognising it as the principle of everything that is visible" (*ibid.*: 47). The birth of the modern individual, therefore, is made possible by a "mechanism of verticalisation" (*ibid.*: 53) that starts in Greece and that leaves in the shadows everything that actually supports the individual and keeps him standing and alive. From the myth of the cave to Kant's anthropology, where the newborn's crying is interpreted as "a cry of indignation for not having been born already adult and perfectly autonomous" (*ibid.*: 29), Cavarero outlines a genealogy where rectitude and verticality render invisible the links, bonds, and dependencies that constitute and sustain subjects, and

impose a moral pattern of binary opposition between straight and inclined, right and wrong.

The inclusion of Hobbes in the genealogy provided in *Inclinations* offers a different perspective from the one outlined almost twenty years earlier in *Stately Bodies*. Although, as we have seen in the latter text, Hobbes is one of the creators of the ideal of the individual that appears on the surface of the earth as a self-sufficient adult, erasing any trace of dependence or helplessness, in *Inclinations* Cavarero stresses Hobbes' pessimistic anthropology, which conceives of humans not as naturally good but as naturally inclined to violence:

> Hobbesian anthropology is characterised by a horizontality on which violent and congenitally "warped" individuals move and clash. This predicament explains the need for an omnipotent and terrible vertical political sovereignty to rectify these otherwise warped individuals (*ibid.*: 75).

In this case, verticality and rectitude are neither the defining feature of a rational subject (as in Descartes or Kant), nor an ideal toward which humans must strive (as in Plato), but an artificial corrective mechanism that is not only introduced from the outside (the sovereign state) but also conceived of as an irresistible power able to suffocate the potential threats coming from the twisted nature of the individuals that submit to it. The Hobbesian subject is bent by his own passions, inclined, and never really straightens up; verticality belongs only to the Leviathan. There is, therefore, an ambivalence in Hobbes' theorisation of the subject: individual but inclined. The idealisation of rectitude is still there, but the return of the repressed is more patent than in other thinkers; in Hobbes, rectitude is menaced from the inside by what in *Stately Bodies* Cavarero identified as the monstrosity of the body.

With her genealogy of rectitude, Cavarero does not simply aim to unveil a number of presuppositions of mainstream Western philosophy, but to reflect on the effects of the images through which we experience and give shape to our bodies and our bodily postures. From this, she builds up an alternative image, that of inclination, which serves as the basis for a new

postural ontology and a new ethics. To do so, she first re-signifies and re-evaluates what being inclined means. Rectitude and inclination are to begin with geometrical concepts, but the philosophical re-appropriation of these images immediately grants them a moral connotation: they represent the correct and incorrect, normal and abnormal, reason and passions, straightness and deviation, orthodoxy and perversion. Cavarero points to the gendered dimension of these two images: the *homo erectus* is the archetype of reason, virility, and technology, whereas inclination – whose etymology relates to *kliné*, "bed" in Greek (*ibid.*: 3), and which is associated with instincts, emotions, and nature – is tied to the feminine.

Cavarero invites her readers to fill the medial space of images with inclined postures and to rethink what being inclined means. An inclined subject is no longer an unencumbered, straight, or static subject, but a subject who depends on others and other things to stand and survive, and who therefore leans towards the outside, lives outside of itself, ecstatic, without stability. For an inclined figure, stability is always precarious, always reliant on being supported by something external. Cavarero illustrates this through Leonardo da Vinci's "The Virgin and Child with Saint Anne", which contains figures – two mothers and a child – leaning forward, bending over each other, each sitting on another's lap, caring affectionately for each other. In this context, Christ's vulnerability and exposure appear not as contingent features of a child, but as features shared by the whole of humanity. In Butler's words,

> no one actually stands on one's own; strictly speaking, no one feeds oneself […]. No one moves or breathes or finds food who is not supported by a world that provides an environment built for passage, that prepares and distributes food so that it makes its way to our mouths, a world that sustains the environment that makes possible air of a quality that we can breathe […]. We do not overcome the dependency of infancy when we become adults. That does not mean that the adult is dependent in the exact same way that the infant is, but only that we have become creatures who constantly imagine a self-

> sufficiency, only to find that image of ourselves undermined repeatedly in the course of life (Butler, 2020: 41–2).

For Cavarero, images are a sort of theatre where the human condition can be interrogated (Cavarero, 2016: 10). They offer and entail a staging of the human. Coccia affirms something similar when he describes the sensible realm of images as a "secret natural theatre where everything comes to manifesting itself; […] a stage that is in constant movement, opening the world to another life" (Coccia, 2016: 35). This is, however, a very particular theatre wherein images do not simply describe, represent, or illustrate, but make worlds, are the fabric of different ontologies, and entail various ethical and political commitments. The two postural paradigms of rectitude and inclination produce different worlds, mark bodies differently, lead to different ethics. Whereas rectitude imposes an individualistic and egoistic view and a pattern of normality that exerts violence upon whatever does not conform to that norm, inclination displaces the centrality of the individual and the normal to render visible the relations and interdependencies that constitute the subjects, the processes and the elements through which subjects are produced and sustained—or condemned to disappear both from the realm of the visible and from existence. While the image of rectitude produces individualism, binary distributions, and exclusions, Cavarero considers that the image of inclination "bends and dispossesses the I" (Cavarero, 2016: 7) and, for that reason, can be invoked to articulate a relational ontology and an ethics and a politics of solidarity, community, and action in concert (*ibid.*: 131).

Concluding Remarks: Incarnated Images

I have read Cavarero's analysis of the metaphor of the body politic in parallel with her proposal for an ontology based on the imagery of inclination. In combination, these projects (1) acknowledge a materiality or physical givenness of the body that obsessively returns to underpin and/or disrupt the corporeal images, especially those that try to foreclose it; and

(2) insist on the importance of disputing these hegemonic images on the terrain of the imaginary itself. Putting these two efforts together prevents us from reducing Cavarero's notion of corporeality to pure and unfiltered matter, and the posture of inclination to a mere image. The concrete matter that appears and reappears compulsively is always already apprehended through a myth, a narrative, an image, a discourse, or a set of conditions that make this appearance possible. Similarly, the image of inclination is not an image that is first proposed and then superimposed on bodies, but one whose success corresponds to it being anchored in the flesh, in the corporeal experience, underpinned by the force of materiality. The reason why the fantasy of the individual and its adult, male, perfectly harmonious body is continuously challenged by the force of the corporeal is the same as the reason why the image of inclination has a chance of effectively populating the medial space of the sensible: materiality bears witness to the vulnerability and interdependence of bodies, and not to their supposedly atomistic and self-standing existence. The individual and the body upon which the metaphor of the body politic is built are, thus, not incarnated but discarnate, not rooted in the experience of the flesh but concocted as a fantasy that negates this very experience and represses its materiality.

Admittedly, as some commentators have noted, while Cavarero's work on images throughout philosophy and art is deep and thorough, her engagement with the concrete materiality of bodies and the diverse experiences of corporeality is limited and remains abstract. Fanny Söderbäck, for example, remarks that, although Cavarero finds Arendt's notion of natality original and fruitful, but abstract, disembodied, and sexually neutral, Cavarero's own notion of birth runs a similar risk of abstraction, since "she actually rarely grapples concretely with the gestating body in all its complexity" (Söderbäck, 2018: 278). According to Söderbäck, while Cavarero appeals to the importance of the material and maternal body, nowhere in her work does she engage with the particular and embodied experiences as expressed by actual mothers. This leads Cavarero to overlook the experiences of gestating bodies that do not conform to cis-normative standards of reproduction and the ways in which racialised

bodies differentially experience gestation, labour, and parenthood (*ibid.*: 278–9). Söderbäck concludes that Cavarero's notion of birth, invoked to make Arendt's natality more incarnate, remains a concept disconnected from lived reality, with the consequence that the remaining task is to "bring flesh itself to bear on both birth and death, and the life that spans them" (*ibid.*: 279).

Cavarero's work certainly exhibits these limitations, and to enrich and nuance its potentiality, it is crucial to incorporate flesh itself, real bodies and their different experiences into her notion of concrete matter or physical givenness. Nevertheless, one of the fundamental contributions of her research on the threshold of bodies and images – the one that this paper has focused on – remains its acknowledgment and examination of a quasi-transcendental double dimension of the body/image entanglement: on the one hand, the force of the corporeal to sustain or tear apart the scaffoldings of the imaginary; on the other hand, the power of the imaginary to make worlds and, with it, liveable or unliveable bodies and lives – to use Butler's notion (for example, Butler, 2015: 18. See also Zaharijević and Milutinović Bojanić, 2017). These two dimensions are not dualistic, binary, or consecutive, but simultaneous, the front and back of the same movement of incarnated images and imagined bodies.

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More than One Voice. Relation, Body, and Narrative

Federica Giardini

Abstract
While Derrida in *La Voix et le Phénomène* (*Speech and Phenomena*) invited us to exercise psychoanalytic suspicion in relation to the claim of the authentic fullness of consciousness, the voice in Cavarero shapes another perspective. Singularity emerges in a backward move: it is made by genealogies that free up space for expression; difference is manifested in the relationship with the other in flesh and blood; and authenticity, as it is in Lonzi, does not entail a static and self-assured subjectivity, but rather is set in motion by violence and injustice.

Keywords: Feminist philosophy, Cavarero, voice, relation, narrative

Biography
Philosopher and feminist activist, Federica Giardini is Full Professor in Philosophy of Politics at the University of Roma Tre. After graduating in Philosophy from the University of Pisa, she worked on the relationship between philosophy and psychoanalysis, and then focused on the corporeal dimension of intersubjectivity at the intersection of Phenomenology and Philosophy of difference. Her most recent research uses Difference as an operator to address some of the main themes of contemporary political philosophy, from the relations of obedience/disobedience to the extension of the political sphere to the order of relations between human and non-human ("cosmopolitics"). She is the coordinator of IAPh–Italy – www.iaphitalia.org – a research centre for feminist thought, and director of the Masters degree programme "Studi e Politiche di Genere" at the University of Roma Tre.

Among her main works we find: *I nomi della crisi. Antropologia e politica* (2017), *L'alleanza inquieta. Dimensioni politiche del linguaggio* (2011), *Relazioni. Differenza sessuale e fenomenologia* (2004) and, together with Gea Piccardi, *Produzione*

e riproduzione. Genealogie e teorie (2015). She also edited *Conflitti. Filosofia e Politica* (2020), *Sensibili guerriere. Sulla forza femminile* (2011), and *Il pensiero dell'esperienza* (2008).

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Starting from a relational practice that is shared by both of us, Adriana Cavarero has shaped a path of research and reflection between philosophy and feminism which opens up other spaces and other styles of thought. Attentive to the relationship and the singularity of each voice, her philosophy emerged out of the relationship with others – authors, thinkers, partners. In 1980s Italy, Cavarero is an initiator in the sense defined by Hannah Arendt, a thinker who has always accompanied her: the ability to start anew is the proper of the human condition. Initiator, together with others, of a great bet: betting on the possibility that *being a woman* could make a difference, could open up ways and worlds, different from the existing and consolidated ones, in a plurality of voices and expressions. Some key points of her work will therefore be presented through the many relationships that have both made evident and further interrogated the significance of her thought.

Being a woman – with Carla Lonzi

The irruption of the unexpected subject (Lonzi, 1970), this experience, and the words in which it was told, has been an event with respect to an order and space of power. This event was initiated by women but, today, having that irruption inaugurated again, it can be taken and relaunched by all those subjects who attempt to undo the grammars of power and to produce alternatives. I therefore intend to take "woman" as the signifier of these subjects, as the sign under which to place an enterprise of meaning, of politics, of life. This enterprise consists of risk, of adventure, of knowledge, whose aim is precisely that of undoing the order of power, rather than surveilling the boundaries of that same knowledge. So, from now on, when the word woman recurs, I mean also those in any position that have the experience of defeat, and who do not

want to repeat the history of the winners; who constantly work to undo this history, its effects on the present, and to produce another time. To the ears that are more familiar with a certain thought, this might seem a replica of what Gilles Deleuze has already said, the "becoming–woman" as a wish for freedom for the whole of humanity. Surely, when elaborating his formulation, the French philosopher is affected by the mark of the times, and is sensitive to the awakening of feminist political intelligence. And yet, he avoids embodying that formula, and fails to bring it back to gestures actually made by women. What remains, however, is that the beginning of this story was embodied in the bodies and thoughts of women. The irruption that occurred through female awareness had the time of the event: punctual time, which interrupts the flow of things as they go, their inertia. Here lies all the difference: recognising the eruption of feminist difference offers us a resource and a responsibility: to become unexpected subjects, to get out of the patriarchal history "that is made of the effects of power", relies on lifestyles, on actions actually carried out, on words actually spoken.

A successful bet, if we look at Adriana Cavarero's philosophical work, which has followed at least two paths. The first was to tell otherwise, to free some figures from the philosophical and literary canon. *In Spite of Plato* (Cavarero, 1995) has taken and redesigned Penelope, the servant of Thrace, Demeter and Diotima, as figures of intelligence, strength, independence, removing them from the function of secondary support to male events. Making a difference means also going back to the canon, stealing pieces from its figures, reformulating its logic. Starting with how *difference* itself was formulated according to hierarchical, linear, and dual oppositional principles.

Difference – Opening up the Canon

Diff-, from *déférance* "character that distinguishes one thing from another", c. 1200.

Dis-, prefix that has either privative force, or negative, or serves to indicate an action contrary to that expressed by the simple word, or denotes estrangement, removal, detachment.

Mes-, prefix derived from the Germanic *miss*– (less likely from the Latin *minus*) which indicates a defect, error, or irregularity, "transformation from an original comparative meaning to a negative and pejorative one".

Deu–, lack, need, cf. the Greek *deuteros*, missing, second.

Dyo, two. Accadic *tu'wu*, double, placed side by side, the unit marked next to the other. So *dis*, **dwis*, that is "twice". In analogy with the system of marking a unit next to something, on one side or the other, the original meaning is "below, next to, against".

It was a philosophical gesture which opened up other worlds, with Cavarero and the company of others, such as Christa Wolf and Luce Irigaray. A gesture that has never been abandoned, such as for Antigone with María Zambrano, and Ondina with Ingeborg Bachmann (Cavarero, 2002), or Artemisia (Cavarero, 2016), up to the Sirens and the nymph, Echo (Cavarero, 2005). And I still remember the way in which she restored – I would say a myth, a figure of the contemporary – the friendship between Emilia and Amalia (Cavarero, 2000) that snatches the figure of recognition from the Canon: a figure not of enslavement, but of liberation. The recreation of the meaning and life of these figures, between the crystalised *time* of tradition, the event of feminist irruption and the duration of the elaboration of a response to violence.

Time – with Nicole Loraux

The temporality within which the work of difference can be conceivable is not a linear progressive temporality, but a recursive one, a characterising trait that allows us to grasp the coexistence of different temporal layers (Loraux, 2005). Sexed difference is at the core of the constitution of the political, and at the same time exceeds it; it is a transhistorical constant and

yet nothing can be said except through its historical configurations. It is historical and yet it constantly points to humanity: it does not exist between two entities that can be represented as such, but marks the human being without making it two separate identities; rather, it is the space for negotiation, conflicts, and denials in which humanity necessarily and constantly recreates itself. As for the times internal to the present, on the one hand, we find the instantaneous or reactive temporality of communication: the daily bloody rosary of sexual violence. It is a reactive time, that is not nourished by the past, but by the archaic, and by the instantaneousness of institutional politics, such as the "security emergency", that legitimises illiberal interventions. On the other hand, the slow time of populations. In an era in which geographical borders are more than ever political borders – porous or impermeable according to the needs and the order of reasons with which each "community" represents and administers itself – population movements (internal ones, such as the rate of demographic growth, or external ones, such as migratory flows) introduce the *longue durée* into our present. Family policies, increase or decrease of births and resources, configure the state of sexual relations. But it is also the temporality that characterises the subjects not foreseen by the philosophies of progressive history, which thus break in with their own memory and time, tracing other conflicts, other precedents, in that space that official history delivers as a mere absence.

I said that Cavarero made this bet in two ways at least; the other, although linked to the free re-signification of one's experience, has expanded to the point of proposing a different philosophy. If I had to identify the cardinal points, I would name the following: relationship, the body, uniqueness, and narrative. All terms that are at the same time critical, and affirmative. Relationship challenges the isolated and self-possessed subject. The body presents itself as a force that threatens the mastery of the will, and at the same time can become a source for resignifying the world. Uniqueness and narration are the terms that bring her the closest to Arendt: the former warns against what makes us serial, compliant, docile to the designs of power; the latter opens up to a style of thought,

of writing, of the sense of self, which has no claim to mastery over the truth, through *logical argumentation;* which rather asks for and presupposes listening and therefore the presence of others.

Other Discourses – with Iris Marion Young

Young points to three different discourse styles for effective communication (Young, 1997). The greeting formulas with words or gestures: "hello", "welcome", "how are you?", are phrases that – whilst used in communication without expressing any content – are signals of recognition of the interlocutor. They are *rhetorical* signs, that is, signs of the choice of topics that may strike the listener; it is precisely listening that is highlighted. In the landscape of discussions that take language as an irreducible human dimension, little space is given to listening, which is instead an indispensable requirement for exchange. Unlike the figure of recognition, listening refers to the context within which the communication takes place, to whom the individual speakers are, to the relationship they establish with the listener, and vice versa. Finally, another discursive style is storytelling. As opposed to the deployment of discourse in institutional politics, advertising, or the corporate world, narrating is a relational practice. Neither generalised intersubjectivity nor individuals competing for their own interests in order to prevail, narrative accepts that the initial discursive situation is made up of misunderstandings, if not of a complete lack of understanding, and makes it the starting requirement. Through the narration of singular experiences, which cannot be immediately common – those who are forced to use a wheelchair recount the episode of their difficulties in the face of architectural obstacles, for example – the listener will have a concrete understanding of the situation available to them, while not experiencing it themselves. Furthermore, the narrative has an explanatory and inclusive effect: while the argument that proceeds from a premise to a conclusion solicits the agreement of those who share the premise, telling a story allows those who are not already familiar with that world to

understand the practices, positions, values or symbols of the narrator.

In *For More than One Voice* (Cavarero, 2005), the philosophical canon is taken off guard, too; both in Derrida's philosophy, which entrusted subjectivation to writing against the self-deceptions of presence to oneself through the conscience as an inner voice; and in Habermas's, which bends the voice and its legitimation to the rational argumentative logic, where truth and recognition become internal properties of the utterance. In Cavarero, the voice is both extroverted and intensified: moved by others, it takes consistency into the corporeal dimension.

Voice – with Carol Gilligan

The voice, that of the interviews constituting the corpus of Gilligan's initial research, allows her to dwell on hesitations, contradictions, inconsistencies. The voice, a physical sign of a singularity that expresses an entire era, can only be such if it is listened to, if it is heard. Here Gilligan's work encounters a central theme for the thought of European difference, the linguistic and discursive matrix of the sense of self. When she denounces the repression that operates through the framework of dominant values; when she tells us that the sense of self for a woman becomes available as long as she conforms to what a society defines as a "normal woman", or under the condition of silencing everything that does not fall within this standard. Assuming that silences, hesitations, contradictions, which have their own consistency, are signs and traces of a different economy, the author approaches the great work that has been done around the figure of the hysteric. The symptom, a sign straddling body and word, is already a signifying act, it is already endowed with truth, however it needs an order of discourse that allows it to arrive at expression or, more precisely, to enter the circuit of relationships, of those exchanges that constitute common living. Moreover, the symptom becomes an opportunity to extend the meaning of resistance (Gilligan, 2011). Resistance refers to the dynamics between the spoken and the heard word: before speaking,

something has always already been heard. The subordination of the girl she describes – who can enhance herself only according to the values of competition, aggression, arrogance, the alternative between her own interest and that of others – is an obedient being. In fact, obeying (*ob-audio*) refers to the sense of hearing: it is through the ear, one of the senses that most exposes us to the outside, that the injunctions reach us and for which our speaking is not so much an original and independent activity. The primacy of *logos* is overturned: the voice, knowing how to speak, refers to an original posture, listening. And yet this is nothing more and nothing less than an opportunity, not a guarantee. Resistance becomes that first movement through which what arrives as an injunction from within is pushed back outwards. In the space thus rediscovered, speaking, and the voice, do not unfold immediately with coherence and a persuasive capacity, that is, with the ability to be heard. Here, in fact, lies the second side where the voice–listening relationship appears: against too easy and pacifying interpretations of Gilligan's work, in an invitation to dialogue, the voice becomes such when it works on its own occurrence, when it creates and generates the conditions which allow it to be heard.

Like the traces in the snow of Karen Blixen's story (Cavarero, 2000) – the sense of Cavarero's work is and will be traced in a backward move that chorally (*coralmente*) relaunches and updates her main figures: body – the voice is not consciousness of cognition, it consists of the physical and internal body that we are; the relation – the voice consists of both pronouncement and listening; uniqueness – the voice, when it is not that of one speaking for all, becomes the cipher of singularity; narration – when the voice frees itself from argumentative logic, which seeks an impossible legitimacy, having renounced listening and uniqueness – here comes the "epic song" (Cavarero, 2005: 80).

Other Beginnings – with Vandana Shiva

The dualism between nature and technique, the title *par excellence* of the anthropic subsumption of planetary otherness through linguistic reductionism, decays due to the alternative

between subjectivity and modernity. Shiva shows how the sacred and technique can be contiguous, if not coincident. Just as there are names for the single moments of encounter between the river Ganges and the beings that engage with it, so there are at least twenty-five names to designate the hydraulic systems of irrigation and the transportation of drinking water, which make Rajasthan the most flourishing desert on earth. Technique, like language, is therefore reconsidered as a relationship of co-creation, neither creation *ex nihilo*, nor a referential sphere. The ways of the songs are paths taken through a gigantic extension, on a non-human scale, at times hostile, certainly not reassuring. Unlike ours, in the Australian Aboriginal tradition, making this extension a viable, livable space does not involve construction, domestication, appropriation. Rather, it is through movement, encounter, and a special mode of language, that this extension becomes a space. While walking, one meets a rock, a river, an animal and, by singing it, creation happens, of oneself and of that being. The space does not pre-exist and is not attributed to someone to the detriment of someone else; it is rather the effect of a physical relationship – the meeting – and of a non-appropriative linguistic relationship – singing. Thus, a cosmogony, the moment in which everything begins, again.

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Narration as a Practice of Care in the Wake of Violence: Adriana Cavarero's Narrative Theory and Saidiya Hartman's Critical Fabulation

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Abstract

In this essay, I engage Adriana Cavarero's narrative theory and put it into conversation with the work of Black feminist scholars who engage in practices of narrative rewriting of the archives of Black life in the wake of slavery. First, I elucidate the importance of Cavarero's narrative theory for developing a framework for understanding selfhood in relational terms. Next, I turn to Saidiya Hartman's concept of *critical fabulation*, reading it as an example of the kind of relational narrative that Cavarero seeks to promote in her work. I suggest that Hartman, like Cavarero, ventures to trace the contours of the extraordinary singularity of the women and girls whose lives she narrates in her work – lives that would have been rendered invisible and silent had it not been for her insistence on putting them into what she calls a *counternarrative*. I also engage Christina Sharpe and M. NourbeSe Philip, among others, to expand my analysis of how it is that narration, and especially counternarratives, can serve as practices of care in the wake of violence and destruction. My hope is to open avenues for

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relating the narratives of these distant traditions to one another, through their shared commitment to relational uniqueness and their mutual desire to narrate history – and histories – otherwise.

Keywords: stories, critical fabulation, narrative, counternarrative, slavery, Adriana Cavarero, Christina Sharpe, NourbeSe Philip

Biography

Fanny Söderbäck is Associate Professor of Philosophy at Södertörn University and the co-founder and co-director of the Kristeva Circle. She holds a PhD in Philosophy from the New School for Social Research and has held positions at Siena College and DePaul University. She is the author of *Revolutionary Time: On Time and Difference in Kristeva and Irigaray* (SUNY Press, 2019). She has edited *Feminist Readings of Antigone* (SUNY Press, 2010) and is a co-editor of the volume *Undutiful Daughters: New Directions in Feminist Thought and Practice* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012). She is also the editor of a special issue of *philoSOPHIA: A Journal of Continental Feminism* on the topic of birth. Her work has appeared in scholarly journals such as *Diacritics*, *Hypatia*, *Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy*, *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, *Signs*, and *Theory & Event*. She is currently working on a book project on Italian feminist philosopher Adriana Cavarero, in which she puts her work into conversation with queer and trans theories as well as Latinx, Black, and decolonial feminisms to re-envision selfhood and human relations through the framework of singularity.

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Rather than salvation, the accidental needs care.
To tell the story that every existence leaves behind itself is perhaps the oldest act of such care.
(Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*)

The past cannot be undone, but its narration and monumental illustration can.
(Cavarero, *Surging Democracy*)

Adriana Cavarero has devoted much of her work to a reflection on the loss of singularity in Western philosophy and culture, which, she argues, privilege abstract universality over embodied uniqueness. As I have argued elsewhere, each of her books examines the logic by which universality commits the crime of covering over the unrepeatable uniqueness of the existent, in the name of the Human, the Subject, or Man (Söderbäck, 2020: 2). Cavarero argues that this logic, which has dominated much of the Western philosophical tradition (even though, of course, there are myriad exceptions to it), "ignores uniqueness as such, in whatever mode it manifests itself. The unrepeatable singularity of each human being, the embodied uniqueness that distinguishes each one from every other is, for the universalizing tastes of philosophy, a superfluity. *Uniqueness is epistemologically inappropriate*" (Cavarero, 2005: 9, emphasis added). What is proper to each is thus inappropriate to an abstract all that views embodied uniqueness as either irrelevant or irreverent. Cavarero seeks to challenge this epistemic paradigm, and her work as a whole could be described in terms of its efforts to offer a relational ontology of uniqueness that puts the hegemony of universality into question by way of embracing the inappropriateness of embodied uniqueness.

Her critique of the dominant Western philosophical paradigm rests on the claim that, while philosophy has reduced embodied uniqueness to fit its own anonymous-abstract epistemic framework, narration, instead, gives voice to such uniqueness. If philosophy has been concerned with naming the *what* of universal abstract Man, Cavarero thus turns to narration as a kind of discourse that holds the promise of teasing out the *who* of singular embodied individuals (*ibid.*: 9).[2] From Penelope to Diotima (*In Spite of Plato*), from Antigone to Ophelia (*Stately Bodies*), from Oedipus to Ulysses (*Relating Narratives*), and from the Muse to the Sirens (*For More than One Voice*), she mines her cast of figures to develop her own relational ontology of uniqueness, and to think selfhood as constitutively "marked by exposure, vulnerability, and dependence" (Cavarero, 2016: 11).

[2] Cavarero borrows the what-who distinction from Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition* (Arendt, 1998: 179).

Challenging the hegemony of individualistic ontologies of sameness, she insists on thinking "relation itself as originary and constitutive, as an essential dimension of the human" (*ibid.*: 13).

I want to stress from the outset – and here I think Cavarero would agree – that no rigid distinction between philosophy and narration exists, and that attempting to draw one would ultimately be reductive. Rather than saying that there is an absolute difference between narration and philosophy, it might make more sense to highlight how and why it is that philosophers depend on narration without recognising and acknowledging that this is so. To be sure, the very philosophers we tend to point to as the ultimate examples of the privileging of universal abstractions – I am thinking here of Plato and René Descartes among others – depend on narrative tropes such as fiction, mythology, and autobiography in constructing their arguments. Plato might insist that art must be banned from the city, yet his own dialogues depend on artistic imagery and stories throughout. Descartes might claim that experience is antithetical to philosophical clarity, yet he draws upon his own experience at every step of his philosophical work. We might also add, of course, that there are examples of narration that foster forms of universalism, discrimination, and violence. Rather than being separate and distinct genres, I would argue that philosophy and narration are co-constitutive and co-dependent in ways that philosophers have tended to deny. It is, therefore, also not really the case that philosophy deals merely with abstract-rational truth while narration deals exclusively with emotional-lived experience. As much as certain philosophers might like to uphold such distinctions (for the sake of maintaining the "purity" of philosophy), they are bound to collapse and undo themselves, such that singularity always rears its head even in the most abstract-philosophical accounts, albeit quietly and from the margins of the text. Cavarero is a master of seeking it out and rendering it audible-visible where we least expect it. And her own philosophy of narration is indeed an attempt, I think, to blur such boundaries while centring embodied uniqueness as that which must be brought into focus.

In what follows, I want to engage Cavarero's narrative theory and put it into conversation with the work of Black

feminist scholars who engage in practices of narrative rewriting of the archives of Black life in the wake of slavery. I begin by elucidating the importance of Cavarero's narrative theory for developing a framework for understanding selfhood in relational terms. Next, I turn to Saidiya Hartman's concept of *critical fabulation*, reading it as an example of the kind of relational narrative that Cavarero seeks to promote in her work. I suggest that Hartman, like Cavarero, ventures to trace the contours of the extraordinary singularity of the women and girls whose lives she narrates in her work – lives that would have been rendered invisible and silent had it not been for her insistence on putting them into what she calls a *counternarrative*. Along the way, I also engage Christina Sharpe and M. NourbeSe Philip, among others, to expand my analysis of how it is that narration, and especially counternarratives, can serve as practices of care in the wake of violence and destruction. My hope is to open avenues for relating the narratives of these distant traditions to one another, through their shared commitment to relational uniqueness and their mutual desire to narrate history – and histories – otherwise.

Narrating Relational Uniqueness: An Epistemology of the Inappropriate

If much feminist theory has relied on the notion of a *narrative* self – the idea that the self comes into existence through the very practice of self-narration – Cavarero instead insists on a *narratable* self. For her (and here as so often she follows Hannah Arendt), the telling of our life-stories depends entirely on others, the spectators and onlookers who bear witness to our lives they unfold, in large part unbeknownst to us, retrospectively and from the outside: "Exposed, relational and contextual, the Arendtian self leaves behind a life story that is constitutively interwoven with many other stories" (Cavarero, 2000: 124).

In *Relating Narratives*, each chapter offers a variation on this theme. Her analysis of Oedipus in the opening chapter (in which she establishes the very distinction between a philosophical focus on whatness and the narrative propensity

for whoness), provides the literary landscape in which the central thesis of her book can be formulated: "what man is, is said by a definitory knowledge of philosophical assonance – who Oedipus is, is said by the narration of his story. To complete the thesis, however, we must add a qualification: it is *others* who tell him *his* story" (*ibid.*: 12). Insisting that the Sophoclean drama gives us a "polyphonic tale," Cavarero invites us to pay attention to the "dramatic assembly" that gives us the "narrative fragments" that allow Oedipus to finally ask "Who am I?" instead of remaining trapped in the Sphinx's formulaic "What is Man?" (*ibid.*). Jocasta, Teiresias, the messenger – these are the characters who help him arrive at an answer to his pressing question, whereas Oedipus alone was able to resolve the Sphinx's philosophical riddle.

A necessary other stands at the heart of Cavarero's narrative theory – one who can bear witness to my actions and put them into a story to be told and remembered. In the court of the Phaeacians, heroic Ulysses "does not seem to know who he is, until he meets up with himself through the tale of his story", as told to him by a blind rhapsode singing of the Trojan war (*ibid.*: 17). Recognising himself in the story, receiving it from another's narration, Ulysses weeps, and his tears bear witness to our desire to hear our story told, to appear in our constitutive exposure to others: relational, embodied, born-of-another.

On the outskirts of Milan, Cavarero gives us Emilia and Amalia, two close friends, the former trying and failing repeatedly to coherently narrate her life story, the latter finally writing it for her such that she can carry it in her purse, reading it "again and again, overcome by emotion" (*ibid.*: 55). Emilia weeps as her story is told to her, confirming the desire to achieve unity through narration, to have her life take shape or form a pattern. Cavarero elaborates: "the *who* of Emilia shows itself here with clarity in the perception of a narratable self that desires the tale of her own life-story. However, it is the other – the friend who recognises the ontological roots of this desire – who is the only one who can realize such a narration" (*ibid.*: 56).

And in a Paris apartment, Gertrude Stein attempts to write her own life story, but can only do so by making it be told by another, Alice Toklas, who types up the narrative as handed to her by Gertrude, under the rubric of the now famous book, *The*

Autobiography of Alice Toklas. Under the pretence of writing Alice's autobiography for her, Gertrude instead has Alice write her – Gertrude's – autobiography, because the text was never intended to be about Alice, but about Gertrude herself: the text is "an autobiography of Gertrude Stein, written by Gertrude, where Gertrude herself appears in the text, however, as a character narrated by Alice" (*ibid.*: 81–2). While nobody seems to weep on 27 rue de Fleurus, there is plenty of desire here, and Cavarero describes the text as "a feast of exhibition and appearance", where the reality of the self "is totally *external*" (*ibid.*: 83). The basic rule of autobiography – that one narrates one's own story – implodes upon itself and is fundamentally undermined by the relational ontology of uniqueness that underpins Cavarero's argument. Stein's text "puts into writing the relational character of the self that the autobiographical genre – as such – is prevented from putting into words" (*ibid.*). We are, in other words, "completely given over to others", we are "fragile and unmasterable", and, as it turns out, the "protected spaces of private rooms of impenetrable refuge for self-contemplation" (*ibid.*: 84) – à la René Descartes and others – are a philosophical fantasy guilty of reducing embodied-relational uniqueness to the irrelevance and irreverence of epistemic inappropriateness.

Cavarero's attention to the violence of abstraction motivates her, from the start, to revisit the archives of philosophical discourse, to scrutinise their founding acts of erasure, and to retrieve from them the silenced figures – almost all women – who serve as the constitutive others of such archives:

> My hermeneutical project consists of investigating the traces of the original act of erasure contained in the patriarchal order, the act upon which this order was first constructed and then continued to display itself. This is how my technique of theft works: I will steal feminine figures from their context, allowing the torn-up fabric to show the knots that hold together the conceptual canvas that hides the original crime (Cavarero, 1995: 5).

A classicist by training, she is in the "habit of going backwards, to the beginning, the origin, the source" (*ibid.*: 9) – a historical

impulse to engage the past – yet this movement of return is always for Cavarero motivated by present concerns and injustices: it is from the "here and now" that we must begin, and her "enterprise of theft is inspired by women's present needs and the categories of their current political practice" (*ibid.*). Her hermeneutics of theft – mimetic and repetitive-playful in nature – thus amounts, for Cavarero, to a form of care. And narration, as we saw in the epigraph of this essay, "is perhaps the oldest act of such care" (Cavarero, 2000: 53). The Italian here is *cura* – meaning both "care" and "cure" – such that narration must be understood as care-work but also as a cure, a salvation, what might save uniqueness from the abyss of oblivion and generalisation.

If philosophy has taken it upon itself "to redeem, to save, to rescue the particular from its finitude, and uniqueness from its scandal" – what Cavarero has in mind here is the philosophical tendency to reduce finitude and materiality (among other expressions of our embodied uniqueness) to problems to be resolved, as evidenced by the influence of the metaphysics of presence or mind-body dualisms – "this task of redemption, however, logically transformed itself into an act of erasure" (*ibid.*). She references both Hegel and Arendt as having importantly recognised that the ultimate intention of philosophical contemplation is to abolish the accidental, which is to say singularity, uniqueness, our being-born and embodied and sexuate and relational and vulnerable – as Cavarero so often puts it, our being irreducible: "this and not another" (*ibid.*).[3] But rather than salvation, then, "the accidental needs

[3] While Cavarero names Hegel here, she rarely if ever engages with his work beyond this reference. That said, the reference is perhaps telling, in that it locates in Hegel – who typically would be depicted as a paradigmatic proponent of universality – the capacity to also register philosophy's own erasure of uniqueness. This speaks to my comment at the beginning of this essay about the need not to establish a rigid boundary between philosophy and narration, but rather ambiguate and complicate philosophy such that it can include uniqueness in its epistemological framework. If Hegel remains a marginal figure for Cavarero's own project, Arendt is a key interlocutor for her, and many of the terms that organise Cavarero's own philosophy of singularity – plurality, natality, being as synonymous with appearing, the who of embodied uniqueness, to name but a few – derive from her work. Importantly, Cavarero tends to couple Arendt's political

care", and narration is "perhaps the oldest form of such care" (*ibid.*). What, we must ask, does it mean that narration is a form of care? What kind of caring is involved in storytelling, and in what way is this care also a cure, a remedy, a form of healing?

To begin to address these questions, I want to turn now to Cavarero's essay "Narrative Against Destruction". Here, she examines the circumstances under which a self can "emerge from the ruins of a self", through narration (Cavarero, 2015: 7). More specifically, her focus is on the totalitarian dismantling of the human being during the Shoah, and she attempts to resurrect singular human beings out of oblivion. With Arendt, Cavarero believes in the "redemptive power of narration", since it "saves and hands down to posterity" both our singular life stories and history more broadly construed (*ibid.*: 4). Narration, in other words, is the most powerful remedy for our finitude and the fragility of human life – through narration we are made immortal as our life is put into a story to be retold and remembered – but this remedy should not be confused with the philosophical call for salvation – a call, as we have seen, that denies the power of the accidental and that has transformed the task of redemption into an act of erasure (Cavarero, 2000: 53).

Narration "does not explain, does not organize nor understand the events from within a conceptual framework", but rather "reveals the meaning without the error of defining it" (Cavarero, 2015: 9). What is more, it "saves this meaning from oblivion, a forgetfulness that [...] is not the consequence of the simple passing of time, but the intentional outcome of violent erasure" (*ibid.*). Narration, in other words, is a restorative response to violence: more than serving as a remedy for our finitude, it is a form of resistance against the destruction that we might experience in the course of our lives. Narration can bring us back from the dead, not only because a life put into a story can be remembered into posterity, but also because the very act of telling can serve to animate a self whose selfhood has been under attack to the point of erasure and silence.

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ontology with Luce Irigaray's philosophy of sexual difference, which is what gives her work the distinctly feminist orientation that is lacking in Arendt. For an engagement with Cavarero's feminist critique of Arendt (and more specifically with the concept of natality in her work), see Söderbäck, 2018.

Citing first Arendt and then Primo Levi, she insists that "human nature as such" – more so than human suffering or human lives – was at stake in a totalitarian machine aimed at the "demolition of man" (*ibid.*: 6). Her claim, then, is that the saving power of life stories has the capacity to restore the human status of uniqueness to victims of ontological violence. Narration is a form of rehumanisation, a "redemption of the meaning of the human from the ruins of the inhuman" (*ibid.*: 10). But this work of narration does, again, have a complex relation to the work of philosophy. It is less a matter of *understanding* the horror, or of offering an analysis that would capture correctly its undoing powers; rather, and here again Cavarero follows Arendt, it "belongs to the sphere of *poiesis:* of making, constructing, creating" (*ibid.*: 14). Narration, on Cavarero's account, "is not merely a 'reconstructing' [of] the thread of a life story; it is above all opposing the work of destruction that has devoured life itself. It is ultimately a making against destroying, a creating against demolishing, a doing against undoing" (*ibid.*).

Cavarero offers a reading of W. G. Sebald, who attempted in his work to narrate the stories of "ordinary individuals" who had survived the Holocaust, stories that might otherwise have been lost and silenced (*ibid.*: 7). In *The Emigrants*, for example, Sebald draws from interviews and archival research to narrate the lives of four survivors – life stories that "would have never seen the light of day", had they not been put into a narrative by the author (*ibid.*). The work of narration, in this context, constitutes an aporia of sorts – as Cavarero herself puts it, it entails the task of "narrating the unspeakable" (*ibid.*: 8). To be sure, Sebald's narration cannot bring lost ones back to life, but as Timothy Huzar has pointed out, he "restores the damage and destruction wrought on these lives, a damage and destruction that would too often remain silent (if not invisible)" (2018: 159).

At stake, again, is the possibility of rendering audible and visible each of their uniquenesses – cast into the form of a narrative – assembling "the fragments of a life experience that disclose the meaning of the uniqueness of that very life", here and now and for posterity (Cavarero, 2015: 9). Cavarero notes that there is an ethical dilemma in soliciting traumatic memories to put them into a story. Sebald himself spoke of the

"collateral damage" that such intrusion can cause, and Cavarero alludes to a "reluctant narratable self" that is made to "emerge from the ruins of a self that the totalitarian machine has intentionally tried to destroy" (*ibid.*: 7). If Emilia wept as she read her own story as Amalia had written it down, then "what tears must the victims of the totalitarian catastrophe shed", Cavarero asks, "when forced to tell their stories to the narrator who may be able to retell them?" (*ibid.*).

To narrate the lives of those who perished in the disaster that was Auschwitz – those "whose existence, starting with the erasure of their names and personal data, was being obliterated, so that having lived in the world, they could not become part of a story, nor of history" – thus poses a particular set of challenges and impossibilities that Cavarero examines in her work (*ibid.*: 5). How to narrate what cannot be narrated? How, to echo Theodor W. Adorno, to narrate after Auschwitz? With Sebald, as we have seen, Cavarero invites us to confront this "aporia of narrating the unspeakable" (*ibid.*: 8), to save meaning from an oblivion that is "the intentional outcome of a violent erasure" (*ibid.*: 9). But Cavarero is careful not to fall into the philosophical temptation of definition. The task, she insists, is not to *resolve* "the inexplicability of the horror [...] in a frame that articulates it or explains it", but rather to sit with inexplicability,[4] allowing it to intensify, which in turn will require a categorical interrogation of our own relation to such impossibility and inexplicability (*ibid.*: 11). In other words, Cavarero's narrative theory does not seek closure or explanation – I read it as an invitation to a radical rethinking and reimagining of our own place in history and in relation to one another.

Such a monumental task, Cavarero tells us, requires "mixing facts and fiction, life and art, in addition to using images and photographs – sometimes real, sometimes fictitious portraits" (*ibid.*). We shall see, in what follows, how such challenges and such narrative modes get reproduced in the context of another disaster, namely that of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and forms of anti-Black violence that follow in its wake. In the hope of having provided a sufficiently coherent

[4] A task similar perhaps to what the poet Dionne Brand has described as "sitting in the room with history" (2011: 25).

framework for thinking the power and limits of narration through the lens of Cavarero's philosophy of relational uniqueness, then, I want to turn to a specific set of narrative efforts, namely those that attempt to singularise where uniqueness has been subjected to forms of erasure, specifically in the context of Black archives of history. I think, especially, of Saidiya Hartman's work on critical fabulation and intimate history, but also of Christina Sharpe's articulation of wake-work, as well as poetic attempts at narrating singularity in the wake of slavery, such as M. NourbeSe Philip's long poem *Zong!* While Cavarero herself never engages with these bodies of work directly, I want to show that staging a dialogue between them can be a fruitful exercise, both because Cavarero's conceptual toolbox allows us to see aspects of such Black feminist discourse that might otherwise have gone unnoticed, but also because I believe bringing this discourse to a volume on Cavarero's work opens up new avenues for thinking – avenues that both confirm and challenge or complicate the conceptual universe that Cavarero's philosophy of singularity and her narrative theory make possible.

Narrating in the Wake of Slavery: Telling, Un-Telling, and the Impossibility of Narration

Like Cavarero, Saidiya Hartman has devoted much of her work to reclaiming singular uniqueness where abstraction-destruction has led to its erasure, although, to be sure, her work is situated in a context very different from that of Cavarero's. Hartman does not turn to Homer, Sophocles, or Shakespeare in her search for singularity, nor is she interested in the role that Western philosophy has played in facilitating its erasure. As a scholar of African American literature and history, she focuses instead on Black life in the wake of slavery, and on the forms of erasure that constitute the archives in which the afterlife of slavery is contained. She argues that what is at stake as we venture into these archives is the possibility of tracing unique life stories, and that such work – as challenging and fraught as

it is[5] – might serve as a remedy against the violences of the past as well as the dehumanising effects of ongoing forms of generalisation (its own form of monstrosity), and the violent erasures of the archives themselves. Narrating uniqueness is a matter of seeking intimacy where it has been destroyed, of forging human bonds where they have been severed. It amounts to retrieving "the ruins of the dismembered past", as Hartman herself puts it (1997: 11). At stake, we might say, borrowing from Cavarero's Arendtian vocabulary, is the possibility of making a *who* appear, in excess of the whatness of archival frames and erasures.

Throughout her work, and much like Cavarero, Hartman is particularly invested in giving voice to girls and women whose life stories have been reduced to tropes, statistics, stereotypes, and generalities, if not buried in complete silence. But if Cavarero takes it upon herself to narrate and expand upon the uniqueness of Demeter, Medea, Medusa, Eurydice, and Echo, among others – mostly mythical and fictional figures firmly situated in a European context – Hartman goes in search of Black women and girls in the midst and wake of trans-Atlantic slavery: slave women like Sukie and Celia (*Scenes of Subjection*); emancipated women exploring their newfound freedom in the midst of carceral logics, like Ida, Mattie, Mamie, Harriet, Esther, Eva, and Mabel (*Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*); but also the nameless ones: slave girls, Negro girls, meagre girls, the ditto dittos of the archives, the mammies, the Jezebels, and the Venuses ("Venus in Two Acts"). Reflecting on her work with the poem *Zong!*, to which I will return at length, M. NourbeSe Philip remarks on the practice of describing nameless Africans in the slave ledgers: "Purchasers are identified while Africans are reduced to the stark description of 'negroe man', *[sic]* 'negroe woman', or, more frequently, 'ditto man', 'ditto woman'. There is one gloss to this description: 'Negroe girl (meagre)'. There are many 'meagre' girls, no 'meagre' boys. This description leaves me shaken – I want to weep" (Philip, 2008: 194).

One such nameless girl is Venus. She is everywhere and nowhere in the archives – a stand-in for every Black woman,

[5] For an elaboration of such challenges, see Hartman, 1997: 10–4.

every Black girl, every female slave, every meagre ditto ditto there ever was: "Variously named Harriot, Phibba, Sara, Joanna, Rachel, Linda, and Sally, she is found everywhere in the Atlantic world", Hartman tells us. "The barracoon, the hollow of the slave ship, the pest-house, the brothel, the cage, the surgeon's laboratory, the prison, the cane-field, the kitchen, the master's bedroom – turn out to be exactly the same place and in all of them she is called Venus" (Hartman, 2008: 1).

In *Lose Your Mother*, Hartman recounts the events that took place on the slave ship *Recovery*, whose captain was tried for the brutal murder of an unnamed slave girl. Sick with gonorrhoea, she had refused to join the other women dancing on deck, as she was ordered to, under threat of the whip. This refusal to dance drove the captain to hoist her into the air, hanging her by her legs from the mast. For about half an hour she hung there, and while the women were dancing, their feet pounding on the deck, all you could hear was "the dull thump of the whip on the girl" (Hartman, 2007: 140). Strange fruit hanging, the unnamed girl appears only briefly in a "musty trial transcript", the few words of which constitute "the only defence of her existence, the only barrier against her disappearance" there ever was (*ibid.*: 138).

But alongside that girl was another, also sick with the pox: "The other dead one, Venus, which is what the crew called her, had it too", Hartman notes (*ibid.*: 141). When, in 1792, William Wilberforce stood before the House of Commons arguing for the abolition of the slave trade, recounting the events of the *Recovery* as a way of making the members of Parliament feel the burden of white shame, Hartman tells us that he "chose not to speak of Venus, the other dead girl". Her pet name, she notes, "licensed debauchery and made it sound agreeable" (*ibid.*: 143). When, in "Venus in Two Acts", she reflects on her own choice to write only these two brief sentences about Venus in her prior engagement with the case, thus "masking [her] own silence behind Wilberforce's", Hartman does so in order to name the potential pitfalls of her own methodological approach – the attempt to give voice to singularity in the face of oblivion: "I decided not to write about Venus for reasons different from those attributed to [Wilberforce]. Instead I feared what I might invent, and it would have been romance" (Hartman, 2008: 8).

This "might" is at the heart of Hartman's method of critical fabulation – the attempt to save Black girls and women from the fate of oblivion by offering counternarratives, imagining otherwise, attending to the gaps of the erasures of history – a subjunctive "might" that opens up a world of possibilities.[6] As such, it renders one susceptible to the desire for romance, since "the loss of stories sharpens the hunger for them" (*ibid.*). If Cavarero attended to a general desire to have one's story told (recall Emilia's weeping), Hartman invites us to think about the acute urgency of such desire when one's story – and the stories of all those who came before, the entire lineage of Black girls and women consigned to "the bottom of the Atlantic" (Hartman, 2007: 138) – has been reduced to silence, to oblivion, and to scenes of subjection that block from sight and audibility all that is wayward and beautiful and possible and irreducible to that very violence.

Her own hunger for such stories of intimacy renders her susceptible to romanticising and to providing closure where there can be none (and she is acutely aware of the risks this entails):

> If I could have conjured up more than a name in an indictment, if I could have imagined Venus speaking in her own voice, if I could have detailed the small memories banished from the ledger, then it might have been possible for me to represent the friendship that could have blossomed between two frightened and lonely girls. Shipmates. Then Venus could have beheld her dying friend, whispered comfort in her ear, rocked her with promises, soothed her with "soon, soon" and wished for her a good return.
>
> Picture them: The relics of two girls, one cradling the other, plundered innocents; a sailor caught sight of them and later said they were friends. Two world-less girls found a country in each other's arms. Beside the defeat and the terror, there would be this too: the glimpse of beauty, the instant of possibility (Hartman, 2008: 8).

[6] The subjunctive, Hartman explains, is "a grammatical mood that expresses doubts, wishes, and possibilities" (Hartman, 2008: 11).

Our attempts to imagine the girls – shipmates – are burdened by the "ifs" and "could haves" and "might have beens" of a past that is not yet past but that also will never be fully present for us to bear witness to, in its lived uniqueness. Through the conditional temporality of "what could have been", Hartman tells us, she "intended both to tell an impossible story and to amplify the impossibility of its telling" (*ibid.*: 11). Yet beyond the "ifs" and "could haves" and "could have beens" there is also that "would be" and "might" of our own imagination, of critical fabulation, of the yet-to-come: glimpses of beauty, waves of possibility in an ocean of impossibility – indeed, the possibility that results from the very act of amplifying impossibility, through narration.

Hartman describes her method as "playing with and rearranging the basic elements of the story, by re-presenting the sequence of events in divergent stories and from contested points of view" (*ibid.*). Her characterisation of critical fabulation as an attempt "to jeopardize the status of the event, to displace the received or authorized account, and to imagine what might have happened or might have been said or might have been done" (*ibid.*) brings it into immediate proximity with Cavarero's mimetic-repetitive method of stealing back and reclaiming lost female figures and voices at the very site of their discursive erasure. As Rosi Braidotti describes it in the "Foreword" to *In Spite of Plato:* "Cavarero turns this strategy into one of purposeful and deliberate conceptual theft: she steals back from the patriarchal imaginary female figures [...], she practices a merry version of conceptual pick-pocketing as a creative feminist gesture" (Cavarero, 1995: xiii).[7]

On the site of erasure that is the *Recovery*, Hartman sets out to engage with the impossibility inscribed in Venus's story. She wants to achieve "an impossible goal" by "redressing the

[7] Braidotti goes on to say that "Cavarero's writing is a direct application of the strategy of mimetic repetition. She questions the patriarchal order by trying to locate the traces of the feminine as a site of male projection but also as a site of feminist reappropriation of alternative figurations for female subjectivity" (Cavarero, 1995: xvi). Her telling was thus always already an un-telling. She returns in order to displace – renewing and perverting a tradition founded on her own exclusion.

violence that produced numbers, ciphers, and fragments of discourse, which is as close as we come to a biography of the captured and the enslaved" (Hartman, 2008: 3). This requires that we embody singularity while also respecting the opacity of singularity – that it cannot be properly known; that it defies the episteme of philosophical definition. That it is, by philosophical standards and measures, *inappropriate*. It requires the resurrection of "lives from the ruins" and the construction of stories from "the locus of impossible speech" (*ibid.*) – mandates that should be familiar to us from our reading of Cavarero's "Narrative Against Destruction".[8]

But such resurrection through narration – telling the untold stories and giving voice to those who have been muted, hearing their screams while attending to their silences – always also involves modes of un-telling. The making that constitutes narratives against destruction is also a form of unmaking. This is why such narratives are ultimately counternarratives, and sometimes even anti-narratives – they go against the grain of hegemonic archives and definitions, in an attempt to resist the violence such archives produce and reproduce.[9] Recall Hartman's claim that she "intended both to tell an impossible

[8] In this specific context, Hartman is not so much motivated by a privileging of biography over autobiography as she is trying to grapple with the silences conjured up when *there can be no* autobiography: "There is not one extant autobiographical narrative of a female captive who survived the Middle Passage", Hartman notes (Hartman, 2008: 3). What to make of such erasure, such all-encompassing silence? Although I would note that at least one such autobiographical narrative is available to us, namely Phillis Wheatley's poem "On Being Brought from Africa to America," which was first published in 1773 in her collection *Poems of Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, and which has achieved critical acclaim. For a rich engagement with this poem, see Jordan, 2006. For a discussion of how she got her name (Phillis) from the very ship (the *Phillis*) that took her from the coast of Africa to the United States, where the Wheatleys purchased her at the auction in which a girl became a slave (and also took the name of a ship), see Sharpe (2016: 42). It was the Wheatleys, Sharpe notes, who allowed and encouraged Phillis to become literate, to write poetry, to become "the first Black human to be published in America" (Sharpe citing Jordan, in Sharpe, 2016: 43). I would like to thank Val King for bringing Wheatley's poem to my attention.

[9] I would like to thank James R. Walker for convincing me of the importance of counternarratives.

story and to amplify the impossibility of its telling" (*ibid.*: 11). Her claim echoes that of Philip, who, in the brief essay published at the end of her poem *Zong!,* repeats, like a mantra, that her poetic writing is an attempt to tell the story that cannot, yet must, be told: "*Zong!* is the Song of the untold story; it cannot be told yet must be told, but only through its un-telling" (Philip, 2008: 207).[10]

If Hartman turned to a court case – one in which the murder of an unnamed girl on board a ship named *Recovery* was treated – to tell the impossible story of Venus, Philip's un-telling involves an earlier court case treating the massacre of some 150 African slaves who were thrown overboard as the captain of the *Zong*, a slave ship bound for Jamaica but lost at sea due to his navigational errors, sought to retrieve insurance money for those losses. Notably, the court case is not about a massacre, not about the murder of 150 Africans – indeed, it is not about *human losses* at all – but rather an insurance claim dispute in which those humans killed are reduced to cargo, to property, to nameless ditto dittos with a price tag but no inherent human value. It thus involves its own violent erasures and silences, obfuscating the fact that human lives were lost, and like Venus, the 150 men, women, and children who were thrown overboard became but footnotes in a legal dispute about property value.

Philip's poem was published in the same year as "Venus in Two Acts" (2008). We might say that her un-telling and Hartman's counternarrative are both attempts to wrestle with Cavarero's aporia: How to tell a story that cannot be told? How to tell it without reproducing the forms of violence that produced it in the first place? And how to tell it without offering closure (definition, meaning, salvation) where no closure can be had? Philip, like Hartman and Cavarero, cautions against any and all attempts to provide such closure. Writing in her journal about her writing process, she notes: *"my urge to make sense must*

[10] In an interview, Philip elaborates: "We can't tell these stories in the traditional way; or the Western way of narrative – in terms of a beginning, a middle, and [an] end. I think part of the challenge, certainly for me, was to find a form that could bear this 'not telling' [...] to bear this story which can't be told, which must be told, but through not telling" (Philip interviewed in Saunders, 2008: 72).

be resisted" (*ibid.*: 193), and, insofar as grammar is an ordering mechanism that in some sense mirrors the very logic of the slave trade as ordering force, her own writerly strategy becomes to disarm the ordering force of grammar, to make the random organisation of words on the page yield *nothing* (opposing the logic whereby the random picking of African slaves was expected to yield *something* – labour, profit, offspring).[11]

But like Hartman, Philip is aware of the power of romance, the tempting force of offering meaning in a context that was so brutally meaningless:

> I fight the desire to impose meaning on the words – it is so instinctive, this need to impose meaning: this is the generating impulse of, and towards, language, isn't it – to make and, therefore, to communicate, meaning? How did they – the Africans on board the *Zong* – make meaning of what was happening to them? What meaning did they make of it and how did they make it mean? This story that must be told; that can only be told by not telling (*ibid.*: 194).

Rather than imposing meaning where meaning cannot be had, then, telling the story that cannot be told becomes a matter of giving voice, of crying out, of attending to silence as a language unto itself, and it pulls the reader into these registers of the inappropriate: "I teeter between accepting the irrationality of the event and the fundamental human impulse to make meaning from phenomena around us. The resulting abbreviated, disjunctive, almost non-sensical style of the poems demands a corresponding effort on the part of the reader to 'make sense' of an event that eludes understanding, perhaps permanently" (*ibid.*: 198). Counter-narratives and un-telling – both are narratives against destruction (in the sense that they seek to make visible and audible singular uniqueness at its site of erasure), but they are also destructive narratives (in that they seek to amplify the impossibility of narration in the wake of

[11] As Patricia Saunders puts it in her interview with Philip, referencing her work alongside that of Hartman: "I feel like the work that you all are doing now is about asking, How have we become so comfortable in our knowledge and our comprehension of slavery? What does it mean to comprehend such a horrific experience?" (Saunders, 2008: 70).

violence). Like Cavarero's sitting with inexplicability (and Brand's sitting in the room with history) they require that we resist our desire for meaning, haunting and daunting as it might be.

Philip's poem is made up from the words contained within the 1783 legal brief of the *Zong* case, *Gregson v. Gilbert*, reproduced in full at the end of her book. From the two-page document, Philip extracts words and reorganises them on the page, making up the nonsensical series of poems that is *Zong!* Explaining that she used the text of the legal report much like a painter would use paint or a sculptor stone, "the material with which I work being preselected and limited", Philip strives to fragment and mutilate her source, "forcing the eye to track across the page in an attempt to wrest meaning from words gone astray" (*ibid.*). She works consciously to contaminate the report, to turn it into "half-tellings and un-tellings" (*ibid.*: 199), cutting it up and picking it apart, and just as the Africans on board the ship had been randomly captured to serve as slaves – and then again were randomly thrown overboard in order for the captain to collect insurance money – Philip randomly selects words from the report and spreads them across the page like drops of water. She describes this dis-organisation of a legal document that took itself to be "certain, objective, and predictable" (*ibid.*: 191) as a destructive act: "I murder the text, literally cut it into pieces, castrating verbs, suffocating adjectives, murdering nouns, throwing articles, prepositions, conjunctions overboard, jettisoning adverbs: I separate subject from verb, verb from object – create semantic mayhem" (*ibid.*: 193). Monstrosities abound. The legal archives mimic those of philosophy – certain, objective, predictable… and lethal – whereas the counternarratives require our un-telling (or, with Cavarero, un-weaving) to the point of murder.

And yet, Hartman's "playing with and rearranging the basic elements of the story" (2008: 11) signals the creative side of such un-telling – that it opens the door to a "might" and that the disjunctive is always already also a subjunctive. As Hartman un-tells the story of Venus and her friend, she cautions against romance and closure, but she also deliberately turns her attention away from the violence of their being murdered and focuses instead on the care that might have defined their

relation. In what follows, I want to attend to such forms of care, and bring us back to Cavarero's claim that narration might be the oldest form of care understood as attention to the accidental.

Narrating as an Act of Care: Intimacy, Relationality, and the Excess of Uniqueness

In the imagined horizon of the "might" of critical fabulation, Venus holds and beholds her dying friend, not the way the two of them were held in the hold of the ship, captured and subjected to the brutal violence of white men and to the holding patterns of history, which frame them as nothing but victims of that violence, but rather the *holding* and *holding on* that form the condition of freedom, the "hold on" (an imperative?) that appears in the final line of Hartman's *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* (to which I will return at length), or the *"I am held, and held"* that Christina Sharpe reads as a mark of resistance that defies the multiplying holds of the archive – holds in which deaths have accumulated, the ditto dittos filling "the archives of the past that is not yet past" (Sharpe, 2016: 73).[12] It is the holding and beholding of Brand's "map to be held; to behold" – a ruttier pointing to the anywhere and everywhere of possibility and of Black being exceeding "all of the violence directed at Black life" that Sharpe attends to on the final page of *In the Wake* – a book in which she chronicles Black life and resistance in the wake of slavery through a series of counternarratives: the un-telling that is wake-work (*ibid.*: 134).[13]

Both Hartman and Sharpe thus arrive, in the culminating moments of their work, at this imperative to hold and be held, through the image of two Black girls holding one another, despite and against the logics of the hold. And this holding/being held carries an enormous promise of intimacy and resistance, outside of the restrictive frames of the archives.

[12] For a more elaborate discussion of the hold of the slave ship, and its connotations for thinking Black life in the wake of slavery, see Sharpe, 2016: 68–101.
[13] See also Brand, 2011.

It is narrative as care and salvation; wake-work as care-work. It is what Sharpe has called "an ordinary note of care" (Sharpe, 2017: 132),[14] and what Hartman refers to as "a love letter to all those who had been harmed" (Hartman, 2021: 129). It is narrative – and counternarrative – as reparation, in the wake of all-too-much violence and destruction. As Hartman notes, "[i]t would not be far-fetched to consider stories as a form of compensation or even as reparation, perhaps the only kind we will ever receive" (2008: 4).

Her work is thus a meditation on the urgency (but also the dangers) of tracing the *whoness* of Venus in the act of holding and being held (dangerous, as we have seen, because potentially romanticising, and prone to seeking closure where there can be none, which is why we must refuse such closure, or practise what she calls *narrative restraint*, or what Philip referred to as the necessity to resist the urge for meaning). It is also a meditation on the impossibility of that urgent task. It is not a matter of "giving voice" to Venus, but rather of imagining "what cannot be verified [...] an impossible writing which attempts to say that which resists being said (since dead girls are unable to speak)" (*ibid.*: 12). It is, as Philip keeps reminding us, a story that cannot, yet must, be told. If Oedipus proved unable to ask "who am I?" when faced with the monstrous sphinx, it seems impossible to ask "who is Venus?" when faced with the monstrosity of slavery and white supremacy:

> One cannot ask, "Who is Venus?" because it would be impossible to answer such a question. There are hundreds of thousands of other girls who share her circumstances and these circumstances have generated few stories. And the stories that exist are not about them, but rather about the violence, excess, mendacity, and reason that seized hold of their lives, transformed them into commodities and corpses, and identified them with names tossed-off as insults or crass jokes. The archive is, in this sense, a death sentence, a tomb, a display of the violated body, an inventory of property, a medical treatise on gonorrhoea, a

[14] See also Sharpe, 2018: 173.

> few lines about a whore's life, an asterisk in the grand narrative of history (*ibid.*: 2).

Nevertheless, Hartman does not give up trying: "I want to say more than this. I want to do more than recount the violence that deposited these traces in the archive. I want to tell a story about *two girls* capable of retrieving what remains dormant – the purchase or claim of their lives on the present – without committing further violence in my own act of narration" (*ibid.*).[15]

I want to suggest that this search for what is "more than" is what motivates Hartman's project as a whole, and that it amounts to something very similar to Cavarero's attempts at narrating singularity. The "more than" gives us a *who* rather than a *what*. It tells the story of *these two girls* (as Cavarero often puts it: *this* and not another).[16] And this desire for the "more

[15] This fear of reproducing the violence of the archive is expressed time and again in Hartman's work. "How," she asks in "Venus in Two Acts", "does one revisit the scene of subjection without replicating the grammar of violence?" (2008: 4). Her first book, *Scenes of Subjection*, is motivated by a desire to turn *away* from the violence that otherwise floods the archives: "rather than try to convey the routinized violence of slavery and its aftermath through invocations of the shocking and the terrible, I have chosen to look elsewhere and consider those scenes in which terror can hardly be discerned" (Hartman, 1997: 4).

[16] Note that if Cavarero was concerned with our desire to have our story told to us by others, Hartman gives voice to a desire to tell *their* story – the story of *the two girls*. Perhaps these desires are not all that different in the end. Hartman's desire to tell *their* story is arguably also tied to her desire to understand her own. Like Stein's biography of Toklas, which turned out to be an autobiographical account of her own life, Hartman clearly also turns to the archives in search of herself. As she listens to the silence of the dungeons in West Africa, trying to discern stories of uniqueness in the depths of that silence, she notes that such a search was motivated by autobiographical desires: "Hovering in an empty room was my attempt to figure out how this underground had created and marked me" (Hartman, 2007: 130). Her project "is personal because this history has engendered [her]" (Hartman, 2008: 4). And her telling of her journey to Ghana begins with a discussion of her own name, Saidiya, which she chose while in college to assert her African heritage, instead of Valerie, which had been chosen by her mother as a gilded golden name with the potential to erase all that her mother did not want to be, and that she wanted to save her daughter from becoming (*ibid.:* 8).

than" motivates her most recent work, too: "*Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* lingers in the space of this *more* and attends to what exceeds the frame, *the something else* and the *what-might-be*" (Hartman, 2021: 131). It is "an archive of the exorbitant, a dream book for existing otherwise" (Hartman, 2019: xv). It is an attempt to read the wayward as possibility:

> Wayward, related to the family of words: errant, fugitive, recalcitrant, anarchic, wilful, reckless, troublesome, riotous, tumultuous, rebellious and wild. [...] Wayward: the unregulated movement of drifting and wandering; sojourns without a fixed destination, ambulatory possibility, interminable migrations, rush and flight, black locomotion; the everyday struggle to live free. The attempt to elude capture by never settling. [...] Wayward: to wander, to be unmoored, adrift, rambling, roving, cruising, strolling, and seeking. To claim the right to opacity. To strike, to riot, to refuse (*ibid.*: 227).

The wayward is what cannot be captured by the force of a definition. It is what, on Cavarero's account, has always haunted and troubled philosophy – its eternal remainder, what undoes it from within, what renders it monstrous and what resists this monstrosity. Cavarero and Hartman alike insist on the need to make visible and audible what otherwise would exceed the frame. They seek to be with that very excess, while tarrying with the violence that has produced it *as* excess. In Cavarero's words: "Unlike philosophy, which for millennia has persisted in capturing the universal in the trap of definition, narration reveals the finite in its fragile uniqueness, and sings its glory" (Cavarero, 2000: 3). And in Hartman's: "The experiment in prose and the construction of a serial, recursive narrative enabled me to tell stories that exceeded, even as they did not [...] escape, the ditto ditto of archival violence" (Hartman, 2021: 131).

I take it that Sharpe tries to get at something like this excess too, as she reflects, with Hartman, on care as an antidote to violence (Sharpe, 2018: 174). She meditates on the beauty that her mother brought into her life – her own small note of care if you will – whereby she insisted that there be "more" than the acts of violence and humiliation that she and her siblings were

subjected to on a day-to-day basis: "even as we experienced, recognized, and lived subjection, we did not *simply* or *only* live *in* subjection and *as* the subjected" (Sharpe, 2016: 4). The beauty of her mother's acts of care, her small note of care to see them off as they went out into the world, made space for the "more than" and the possible, in the midst of impossibility. It is this excess that marks the wake as a space of disaster *and* possibility – it is, we might say, what makes poetry possible after the Middle Passage. Against the dehumanising force of the hold, to hold and to be held is to appear as unique, as "more than" a victim buried in the archives. Sharpe ends her book with an oft-cited image of such excess, an image that echoes her mother's ordinary note of care: "while '*we are constituted through and by continued vulnerability to this overwhelming force, we are not only known to ourselves and to each other by that force*'" (*ibid.*: 134).[17]

[17] It is of course no coincidence that Sharpe attributes such care-work to her mother. Cavarero often reflects on the fact that care has been framed as maternal, but rather than rejecting such associations, she works with the stereotype, insisting that we revisit the maternal to reclaim care not as self-erasure but as an invitation to grapple with structures of dependency (Cavarero, 2016: 14). Keguro Macharia references Sharpe's closing line from *In the Wake* to highlight the devaluation of such ordinary notes of care in a society that privileges abstract thought: "Care pays attention to how we *are known to ourselves and to each other*. Care lingers at the *ordinary*: notices it, names it, creates it, inhabits it, pursues it, practices it. [...] There might be something *theoretically uninteresting* [and we might add, with Cavarero, *epistemologically inappropriate*] about care. It is feminized work, so devalued. It is also, frequently, tedious, repetitive, unglamorous work: feeding the vulnerable, cleaning up shit and puke, washing bedpans, changing nappies, cooking, cleaning, medicating. Repeat. And repeat" (Macharia, 2018). Elsewhere (Söderbäck, 2018), I have engaged with Cavarero's work on maternal care at greater length, including the implicitly white perspective of that discussion, and the subsequent lack of attention to the specific experience of Black motherhood, and how that experience (in the wake of slavery) necessarily complicates assumptions Cavarero makes about the relationship between motherhood, vulnerability, and care. For a brilliant engagement with my work in this area, which extends beyond it to involve a close reading of Hortense Spiller's seminal essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," see Huzar, 2021. Huzar ends his essay with a discussion of Hartman on these issues, citing her analysis in *Lose Your Mother* on the imperilments Black mothers have suffered in order to provide care, not only for their own children of course, but also for those of their white masters and, in our own times, of

In her commentary on Hartman's work, Sarah Haley insists on the scholarly value of such attention to that which exceeds the frame, and ties it to Hartman's methodological approach:

> If the founding violence of the archive is obliteration, the founding truth of the speculative and close narrative forms is that there is more, we might call it life, interiority, vision, imagination, desire [...] that exceeds archival documentation *and* that this *more* is a legitimate subject of history and scholarly writing. This conviction both requires deep archival excavation and scratches at the archive's hubristic limits; intimate history demands a public and scholarly consideration of the historical import of the more/excess that has often been rendered inconsequential or impossible, deemed *exorbitant* (Haley, 2021: 105–6).

Exorbitance as scholarly guidepost. The "more than" most certainly is epistemologically inappropriate. Hartman's "close narrative" and "intimate history" are manners of entering the archive while refusing the archive. If historians have tended to "see numbers, refusing to see how those numbers unhuman [*dehumanise*]" (Macharia, 2018), and if philosophers have sought out a universal "that applies to everyone precisely because it is no one" (Cavarero, 2000: 9), Hartman and Cavarero offer their intimate history and philosophy of narration, respectively, to refuse such anonymity, to insist on embodied uniqueness and on the exorbitant in the wake of – and despite – violence, silence, and erasure.

They bring into focus living breathing bodies in lieu of frozen images of a past marked by violence and victimisation. Rather than "thinking through and along lines that reinscribe [their] own annihilation, reinforcing and reproducing what Sylvia Wynter [...] has called [the] 'narratively condemned status'" (Sharpe, 2016: 13) of those buried in the archives, they

white folks in general (Huzar, 2021: 21). That maternal care-work is overdetermined by forms of racialisation (and therefore all but symmetrical) is a crucial fact that Cavarero by and large overlooks.

aspire instead to "become undisciplined" (*ibid.*), which is Sharpe's way of turning the epistemologically inappropriate into a methodological imperative. Their work is thus aspirational in Sharpe's sense of the term – they keep and put breath in the body that has been emptied of breath, and as such they seek to counter "the violence of abstraction" by way of "*care* as shared risk", between disaster and possibility (*ibid.*: 130–1).[18] They do this through an impossible narration and with the firm conviction that narration is the only path to the possible.

Such work entails intimate encounters over time with those whose lives one is trying to narrate, which in turn renders one capable precisely of seeing and hearing more than one otherwise might have – what falls outside of the frame. As Hartman puts it in terms of her own scholarly process: "I had lived in the raucous company of Mattie and Esther and Mabel and Gladys and Loretta and Edna, listening to them speaking with me daily. [...] I believe that living with them for so long enabled me to hear *something else* in the compelled biographies and meager stories of the case file and the state archives" (2021: 128). And, as we have seen in our discussion of Cavarero, the narratable self can only be understood in relation, through the constitutive "with" that marks each and every life story: "At once exposable and narratable, the existent always constitutes herself in relation to an other" (Cavarero, 2000: 40). It is to this constitutive relationality, and this living with, that I now want to turn, as I think about the kinds of relations that can be forged when singular uniqueness comes to the fore.

Narrating Wayward Lives: A Choral Ode to Women and Girls

In *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, Hartman sets out to tell the untold story of the first generation of Black women and girls born after emancipation. Creating an "errant path" through the streets of Philadelphia and New York (Hartman, 2019: 15), these

[18] As Cavarero puts it: "Uniqueness is not a characteristic of Man in general, but rather of every human being insofar as he or she lives and breathes" (Cavarero, 2005: 4).

women and girls are depicted as revolutionaries of their time, struggling to realise their dreams and to resist the many forms of violence that riddled their path and shaped their intimate relations. In search of the wayward, Hartman traces the footsteps of nameless girls, single mothers, queer dancers, passionate lovers, window shoppers, flaneuses, and incarcerated women (among many others) – many of whom were newly arrived in the city, seeking free love and emancipation in the workplace, refusing to be governed.

Commenting on a photograph of the "minor figure" to whom she devotes one of the opening chapters of the book – an unnamed, naked girl child reclining on an arabesque sofa in a famous Thomas Eakins photograph from around 1882 – Hartman notes, in a parenthetical remark: "The only thing I knew for sure was that she did have a name and a life that exceeded the frame in which she was captured" (*ibid.*: 15). What that name was she cannot know, and this in turn makes it impossible to trace her story beyond what the photo itself – and the speculations it has already garnered – tell us:

> From these bits and pieces, it has been difficult to know where to begin or even what to call her. The fiction of a proper name would evade the dilemma, not resolve it. It would only postpone the question: Who is she? I suppose I could call her Mattie or Kit or Ethel or Mabel. Any of these names would do and would be the kind of name common to a young colored woman at the beginning of the twentieth century. There are other names reserved for the dark: Sugar Plum, Peaches, Pretty Baby, and Little Bit – names imposed on girls like her that hint at the pleasures afforded by intimate acts performed in rented rooms and dimly lit hallways (*ibid.*: 14).

Again, "Who is she?" is an impossible question, yet one that Hartman insists on nevertheless asking, as she tries to trace "the singular life of this particular girl" (*ibid.*: 15). For this Venus, "a name is a luxury that she isn't afforded", and "without a name, it was unlikely that [Hartman] would ever find this particular girl" (*ibid.*), *in her singular uniqueness*. She is thus forced to fabulate, to "move beyond the photograph and find another

path to her," and this moving beyond the image, this looking for what exceeded the frame in which the girl was captured, ultimately becomes an invitation for Hartman to "retrace her steps through the city and imagine her many lives" (*ibid.*: 30). If Cavarero warned that "'Man' is a universal that applies to everyone precisely because it is no one" (Cavarero, 2000: 9), and if Hartman, too, worries that this very monstrosity is what has served to expel Black girls and women from history, she is nevertheless interested in thinking about how this one nameless girl – this minor figure whose story will remain forever unknown to us – "can stand in for all the others" (Hartman, 2019: 16–7). Having stared at the photo for a full year, Hartman felt compelled to write "not the story of one girl, but a serial biography of a generation, a portrait of the chorus, a moving picture of the wayward" (*ibid.*: 31).

Her analysis echoes that of Sharpe, who also spent a full year staring at a picture of a Black nameless girl. In the aftermath of the catastrophic earthquake that hit Haiti in 2010, Sharpe comes across the photo, mostly blurry, but where the face of a small Black girl comes into focus. She is lying on a stretcher, eyes open, she is wounded and wearing a hospital gown. What catches Sharpe's attention is the note affixed to her forehead: "a piece of transparent tape with the word *Ship* written on it" (2016: 44). In this girl she comes to recognise herself, indeed, she recognises "the common condition of Black being in the wake" (*ibid.*: 45). Sharpe explicitly compares her with Venus (*ibid.*: 51), and with myriad other Black anonymous and nameless girls whose singularity has been drowned in the archives. If the ships on which they arrived all had names – the *Recovery*, the *Phillis*, the *Zong* – these girls themselves were nameless, sometimes they came to be named after the ship that had carried them across as cargo (like Phillis), and sometimes (and this Sharpe identifies in the girl from the photo, by no means a slave, but a Black girl inhabiting the wake) they came to stand in for "ship" in general, for all girls in general, for the many meagre girls, the part for the whole.

We have seen that Philip – whose poem tells yet another tale of trans-Atlantic namelessness – wept as she encountered the meagre girls of the archives. Reflecting further on this epithet in an interview, she observes that "there is a whole story

in that word, "meagre". Where was her mother? Her father? Whom did she turn to when scared?" (Saunders, 2008: 77). These final questions are attempts at exceeding the frame. They mark a search for uniqueness. And they are what drive Sharpe to look further, look again, and to include the girl at the centre of her work, trying to position herself *with* her, in the wake: "My attention to her was an attempt to make visible, audible, sensible a life that was there and being lived. A life that is in excess of the photograph" (Sharpe, 2018: 176). Returning again to the note on her forehead she cannot but ask: "What can one see beyond that word that threatens to block out everything else?" (*ibid.*: 118). How to annotate otherwise, despite and against the anonymity of the archive? How to take care, where none has been offered? Sharpe finds her answer in a small note of care that exceeds the frame, that allows us to look elsewhere, to see something *more*:

> I was looking for more than the violence of the slave ship, the migrant and refugee ship, the container ship, and the medical ship. I saw that leaf in her hair, and with it I performed my own annotation that might open this image out into a life, however precarious, that was always there. *That leaf is stuck in her still neat braids.* And I think: *Somebody braided her hair before the earthquake hit* (*ibid.*: 120).

In these girls – one on a couch, the other on a stretcher, each navigating their own disaster while trying to also look beyond the frame of possibility – Hartman and Sharpe find opportunities for imagining otherwise, and for imagining a life beyond the frames of disaster. *Somebody braided her hair before the earthquake hit. Whom did she turn to when scared?*

It is by way of her very anonymity that Hartman's minor figure – the nameless girl on the couch – "yields to the chorus" (Hartman, 2019: 17). The desire to tell *her* story amounts to a desire to tell a *collective* story, and to tell it *as* a Black woman: "I endeavored to regard Black life from inside the circle and to recapture the wild thought and the beautiful recklessness capable of imagining the *with* and the *us* and the *we*" (Hartman, 2021: 131). If historical research – like so much research – is expected to be conducted by an individual from nowhere, Hartman instead insists on her locatedness and on establishing

bonds of intimacy with the individuals and communities she is engaging with: "Making new narratives entails a creative practice untethered [from] or indifferent to the rules of the historical guild, and directed by the assembly, the ensemble, the multitude, the chorus" (*ibid.*: 130). Becoming undisciplined – wrestling with the epistemological inappropriateness of the "more than" – entails becoming plural. But if Cavarero tended to approach this plurality on the scene of narration as an encounter between two – me and you – Hartman's close narration is more akin to the plural scene of the Arendtian imaginary: the assembly, the ensemble, the multitude, the chorus…[19]

The relationality of the self is here taken to its extreme. In the nude girl on the couch, not a singular life but an era comes into view, one "defined by extremes" – imperial wars and democracy, segregation and emancipation, incarceration and liberation, sexual violence and pleasure, enclosure and possibility, dutiful silence and rambunctious noise (Hartman, 2019: 31). So, Hartman ventured to follow her from Philadelphia to New York, and she "spotted her everywhere – on the corner, in the cabaret, on the boardwalk at Coney Island, in the chorus", but also, at times, she "failed to notice her" (Hartman, 2019: 33).

Seamlessly sliding from "she" to "they" and "we", Hartman tries not to render *universal* the unnamed girl (as Oedipus had done by offering "Man" as the answer to the sphinx's riddle), but to insert her into a chorus of Black girls and women whose lives were, and are, inevitably interwoven, both in terms of the violence they have endured (their disasters), and in terms of the wayward resistance that has become their response to and respite from such violence (possibility as excess). They are characterised as embodying a "beauty that propels the experiments in living otherwise", and they are depicted as harbouring a "love of *too much*" (*ibid.*). Her attempt to retrieve "minor lives from oblivion" by way of "redressing the violence of history, crafting a love letter to all those who had been harmed" (*ibid.*: 31), required her both to seek out the *who* of singular uniqueness, and the *we* of shared experience. The

[19] For an extended analysis of the Arendtian aspects of Hartman's book, see Honig (2021: 72–108).

unnamed girl on the couch comes into focus by bringing into view the many girls and women that surround the frame from which she looks out at us – holding one another, dancing together, screaming alongside one another: "The singular life of this particular girl becomes interwoven with those of other young women who crossed her path, shared her circumstances, danced with her in the chorus, stayed in the room next door in a Harlem tenement, spent sixty days together at the workhouse, and made an errant path through the city" (*ibid.*: 15).

If the monstrosity of the archives was to lump together all the Venuses as cargo and property and victims of sexual violence, Hartman's attempt at weaving the threads of their untold stories to sketch a serial biography of a generation that is anything but generalising. The anonymity of the unnamed girl, a minor figure on a couch, is radically undone by the stories that follow in Hartman's choral portrait. *Her* namelessness is not glossed over or taken for granted – it is thematised to the point of singularisation, even as she does inevitably remain nameless. And the blurry and redacted image of her, reproduced as the backdrop of the written text, comes into focus in a new way once we enter into proximity with the women who formed the backdrop of *her* lived reality. Through the lives of Ida Wells, Mattie, Mamie Sharpe, Harriet Powell, Esther Brown, Eva Perkins, and Mabel Hampton – their struggles and victories, their sexual defeats and pleasures, their fugitivity and errant paths through the slums and tenements, their maternal dispossession (*ibid.*: 74), their singing and roaring (Hartman, 2019: 282–3), their dancing within an enclosure but also with the world at their feet (*ibid.*: 303, 347), their insistence that they could be both ladies *and* Black at once (*ibid.*: 37–42) (despite the "oceanic ungendering" that Hortense Spillers has identified in "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe"[20]), their explorations of what might be and what could have been otherwise (*ibid.*: 46, 227–8), their trying to live while not being meant to survive (*ibid.*: 228), their ungovernability and open rebellion against the world (*ibid.*: 235, 237), their desire and defiance (Hartman, 2019: 260), and what Sharpe might have described as their living on the

[20] See Spillers, 2003: 214. For further discussion of this matter, see also Sharpe (2016: 50).

threshold between disaster and possibility (Sharpe, 2016: 134), or what is captured for Hartman in the questions pounding inside their heads: *Can I live?* and *How can I live?* (*ibid.*: 10, 349) – an unnamed minor figure comes into focus in her living breathing uniqueness, and in the company of all these girls and women whose worlds are also hers.

The untold stories of the archives are the untold stories of each Black girl and her lifeworld (in Cavarero's terms, *this* and not another). And telling such stories, as Philip points out in relation to her poem, "is totally subversive in the face of the kind of broad-brush brutalizing where people just get reduced to Negro man, Negro woman, and ditto, ditto, ditto. You pay attention to one, and it is such an amazing act – and one that spills over to all the other ditto dittos – *paying attention and taking care with just the one. Because that's all we can do is care one by one by one*" (Saunders, 2008: 78, emphasis added). Narration – and counternarration – are the oldest forms of care for the accidental, unique, and unrepeatable, in that they refuse the violence of generalisation by tending to the irreducible singularity of each life story, *taking care with just the one*. As Cavarero reiterates: "Every human being is unique, an unrepeatable existence," and no human life "leaves behind the same story" (Cavarero, 2000: 2).

It is this spilling over to all the other dittos, then, that allows Hartman to give voice to the unnamed girl, even as her story is riddled with the silence of anonymity, by way of telling the stories of Mamsie Sharpe and Esther Brown and Eva Perkins and the others. And while Hartman is acutely aware that "being black and female" has "licensed every brutal act" there is – lynching, mutilation, beating, burning, rape – she wants to insist that the way to respond to such violence is to do what one of the characters in her book, Mabel Hampton, did: simply "refuse the categories" (Hartman, 2019: 339). Refusing the categories is to be in excess of those categories: to be more than, to exceed the frame. This is what seeking out a *who* amounts to. This is how embodied uniqueness takes the place of the abstract universality of whatness.

But taking care with just the one, tending to the uniqueness of each one, always entails a relation – indeed, a web of relations. As Hartman put it in her discussion of Venus: "We

begin the story again, as always, in the wake of her disappearance and with the wild hope that our efforts can return her to the world" (Hartman, 2008: 14). To return Venus– and all the other unnamed girls – to the world, is to put them back into the web of human relations that is the condition of possibility for their singularity. It is to refuse the isolation and loneliness imposed on them by their captors, but also to reject the fantasy that their lives and deaths are historical events of a past that is distinct from our present. "If this *story of Venus* has any value at all", Hartman contends, "it is in illuminating the way in which our age is tethered to hers", given "the ongoing state of emergency in which black life remains in peril" (*ibid.*: 13). To return Venus or the nameless girl on the couch to the world is part of an effort to wrestle with our own world – not to reduce them to it but to invite reflection on the ongoing effects of slavery and the violence that haunts the afterlife of property that is our own present – but also, and perhaps more importantly, to set the stage for future possibility.

Conclusion: Vocalising Relational Embodied Uniqueness

Mabel Hampton, who, like the other women in *Wayward Lives*, had experienced her fair share of the dehumanising force of generalisation, felt the power of her own embodied uniqueness on stage, dancing and singing, alongside other Black women pursuing their dreams against all odds – a choral ode to the waywardness of their fragile singularity. And while no one was there to tell *her* story, just as she herself was unable to put it into a narrative, she would attend concerts and performances and let the music flood her to the point of feeling seen and heard in her uniqueness: "Music conveyed and echoed all the stories she never told anyone, the secrets she would never disclose, the cruel things she had endured, everyone she had lost. *Remember me*. All the queer endings. In the opera house, Mabel was not a domestic, not a prisoner, not a stud, not a woman, not colored, but a big, open heart" (Hartman, 2019: 333).

Much of Cavarero's work is devoted to the power of music – and vocalisation – to express embodied uniqueness. In an interview with Elisabetta Bartolino she declares: "I am

convinced that the best antidote to metaphysics is singing" (Cavarero and Bertolino, 2008: 161).[21] If philosophy has plugged its ears to tune in solely to the inner voice of reason, this "is a symptom of a problem that has to do with the philosophical affinity for an abstract and bodiless universality, and for the domain of a word that does not come out of any throat of flesh" (Cavarero, 2005: 8). Much like narration, vocalisation provides an alternative to the monstrous-disembodied project of Western philosophy. And like narration, vocalisation is constitutively relational: "In the emission of sound that comes to penetrate the ear of another, thus evoking another voice in response, the reciprocity of communicating is a revelation, a relation, and an (inter)dependence" (Cavarero, 2012: 81). Here again Cavarero attends to themes that are central to much Black thought about the afterlife of slavery, yet she never explicitly engages with such work.[22]

For Cavarero, voice and song become properly political when taken up plurally, and in this context she does seem to venture beyond the chiasm between "me" and "you" so prevalent in her narrative theory, to a more collective "we". In the final section of *For More than One Voice*, she elaborates on a "politics of voices", wherein she draws from Arendt to articulate a view of the political whereby it is less about *what* we say and more about *who* appears in the act of vocalising (whether it be speaking or singing). In her most recent book, *Surging Democracy*, Cavarero grapples with the state of democracy in our present as it relates to past forms of democratic government. Here she devotes much of her analysis to the question of voice, and of speaking or singing in concert. Distinguishing between the soundscape of the masses and that of plurality, she proposes that the phonosphere of the former is characterised by forms of vocal unison where the uniqueness of each voice melts away and the singularity of each person dissolves into the unity of the crowd (national anthems, on this reading, have the function of giving voice to the unity of the nation), whereas the

[21] See also Dohoney, 2011.

[22] Elsewhere, I have attended to the links between Cavarero's work on voice and contemporary Black discourse on vocalisation and music in the context of trans-Atlantic slavery (Söderbäck, 2018: 7–9).

phonosphere of the latter is characterised by a sonority of plurality capable of expressing singularity and difference without deteriorating into mere cacophony – what she names pluriphony (Cavarero, 2021: 67, 70, 75). To distinguish undemocratic from democratic gatherings, then, we have to listen, attentively, to the sounds they omit.

As she traces the steps of the newly emancipated women of the turn of the last century in Philadelphia and New York, Hartman most certainly tunes into the soundscapes they produced. From Harriet Powell's revolution in a minor key to Esther Brown's riotous assembly and Mabel Hampton's choral line, Hartman narrates through sound and chronicles the role sound came to play for women whose lives were narratively condemned, lacking chroniclers, deemed unfit for history. Even the sounds they produced have by and large been buried in archival silence, consigned to oblivion: "Nobody remembers the evening [Esther Brown] and her friends raised hell on 132nd street or turned out Edmond's Cellar or made such a beautiful noise during the riot that their screams and shouts were improvised music, so that even the tone-deaf journalists from *The New York Times* described the black noise of disorderly women as a jazz chorus" (Hartman, 2019: 232).[23]

It is, as the title of the book's final chapter indicates, the chorus that opens the way for Hartman. Taking as her cue the Greek etymological meaning of chorus as *dancing within an enclosure*, Hartman identifies in the choral line an image of refusal and rebellion, "the vehicle for another kind of story, not of the great man or the tragic hero" but of a collective of women, one girl standing in for any of the others, serving as "the placeholder for the story" (*ibid.*: 345, 348). Here, "particularity and distinction fade away", yet at the same time, it is in this very moment, as they are "engulfed in the crowd", that these women can be seen, perhaps for the first time, in their glorious waywardness, exceeding all frames, "an assembly sustaining the dreams of the otherwise" and "an incubator of possibility" (*ibid.*). Their unison is one of rebellion within an

[23] The sheer act of singing while captured or in the wake of capture is, undeniably, a feat. As June Jordan asks in a commentary on Black poetry: "Come to this country a slave and how should you sing?" (Jordan, 2006).

enclosure, improvisational and dissonant, yet deeply collective. The singular and the relational merge completely in the image of the chorus, no mass with a leader, but a group of wayward women longing for freedom beyond predetermined frames.

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Paradoxes of Political Bodies: Cavarero's Voices and Their Challenges to Political Discourses

Carlotta Cossutta

Abstract
This essay examines Adriana Cavarero's critique of the exclusion of women from politics and the paradoxical relationship between rationality and voice. It explores the possibility of rethinking politics from bodies and uniqueness, highlighting an erotic relational ethics. Connecting Cavarero's ideas with Lynne Huffer's concept of the lips as an emblem of queer female difference offers potential for constructing embodied, pluralistic relations beyond dialectics.

Keywords: Adriana Cavarero, exclusion, paradox, embodied politics, political philosophy

Biography
Carlotta Cossutta is a researcher in political philosophy, currently a research fellow at the Scuola Normale Superiore of Pisa. She is part of the research centre Politesse – Politics and theories of sexuality (University of Verona), where she pursues her interests in the history of women's political thought, and feminist and queer theories. She is the author of *Avere Potere su Se Stesse: Politica e Femminilità in Mary Wollstonecraft* (2021). She does not separate theory from *praxis,* and many of her reflections are nourished by her participation in the collective Ambrosia.

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> The distinction between a corporeal level and, so to speak, a "spiritual" level of identity, nonetheless has its justification only within the polemical limits to which the dichotomic obsession of philosophy restricts us. Philosophy, of course,

> loves to separate – within the subject – the body from the soul. In spite of philosophy, appearance – and the primacy of the visible with which it embraces phenomena – are nonetheless always and everywhere rooted in the materiality of the context.
>
> (Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*)

Adriana Cavarero's words take us directly to the heart of the challenge that women's political thought brings to philosophy and its discourses, a paradoxical challenge that starts from an exclusion in order to look at the centre, and interrogates it from precisely that exclusion. Reflection on the relationship between bodies and politics has been at the core of philosophical debate since its beginnings, and has been constitutively intertwined with the concept of citizenship and the possibility of participating in political life. In the Greek world, the body becomes a symbol of all the spheres and dimensions of life that are considered biological, and that, for that reason, are excluded from politics and its spaces: politics is concerned with reason and the *soul*, banishing bodies from its view, and considering them pure matter without substance of their own. At the same time, however, the metaphor of the body becomes the paradigm for defining systems of government and images of society. This representation of society as a *political body* finds its fullest realisation in modernity – consider the frontispiece of Hobbes's *Leviathan* – but it already had its roots in the political thought of antiquity, and extends its branches into today's world and lexicon. Theognis, in the sixth century B.C., speaking of Megara, writes: "this city is pregnant and I am afraid she will give birth to a man who will set right our wicked insolence" (Theognis, 1999: 181). In the same vein, Menenius Agrippa, in the most famous of his speeches reported by Livy, emphasises that "thus Senate and people, *as one body*, with discord perish and with harmony flourish" (Livy, 1919: 325),[1] comparing societies to human and organic bodies. This movement of a body that is constantly excluded and welcomed back is a

[1] "[S]ic senatus et populus *quasi unum corpus* discordia pereunt concordia valent".

paradox, revealing some of the contradictions and structures that are central to Western political reflection (Greblo, 2000; Kantorowicz, 2016).

In fact, as Adriana Cavarero points out, the exclusion of the body becomes above all the exclusion of women, who are considered more bound to biological materiality, and therefore less endowed with rationality:

> this constitutive impoliticity, or rather anti-politicity, of the body as opposed to the *logos* is ultimately revealed to be founded on the basic opposition of female nature to male nature. [...] In thinking the body as woman and woman as body, the *polis* of masculine foundation thus comes to synthesise in a single idea all that it considers its fearful *other*, and which then symptomatically corresponds to what the *polis* itself has, on a historical level, already liquidated and defeated (Cavarero, 1995: 9).

The exclusion of the body and bodies becomes in this sense a vehicle for denying citizenship and the possibility of political action primarily to women, who often become a metaphor for the nature and materiality of the biological. Even the *political body* takes on guises that are increasingly distant from the concreteness of individual bodies. Theognis is one of the few cases in which the body referred to is that of a *pregnant* woman; in the course of modernity, an adult body is more often described as neutral insofar as it is male and without any reference to biological dimensions.

At the same time, however, bodies – and women's bodies in particular – in the course of modernity are analysed and invested by the political gaze interested in the possibility of controlling the capacity to generate. Women's bodies thus become *public places* (Duden, 1993) to be guarded and controlled; they are central to the reproduction of society but still excluded from the possibility of political action. Moreover, from the 18th century onwards, women's bodies are exposed to the medical gaze, which begins to recognise their specificity without considering them as anything but a negative cast of the male body, and which begins to observe pregnancy and childbirth with greater attention to the foetus and the possibility

of *seeing it* inside the mother's womb, first through palpation and, two centuries later, ultrasound. Women's bodies, therefore, become the crossroads of a series of knowledges and powers that establish their boundaries and shape, and contribute to the process of subjectifying and subordinating women. The same process occurs for all bodies that appear to deviate from a reproductive sexual norm; they are studied in order to construct a normative ideal of *nature* to correspond to what ends up excluding them.

In the pages below, I will strive to retrace the reflections that Cavarero, especially in *Relating Narratives*, offers on the body in general and the female body in particular in order to analyse the role that the body plays in the interpretation of difference. I will conclude by seeking to relate Cavarero's thought to some reflections proposed by certain queer theorists to highlight the critique of the dialectic that is posed precisely by starting from bodies, and sexed bodies in particular.

Voiceless bodies

Going back to the origins of philosophical thought, Nicole Loraux emphasises the extent to which Greek politics is concerned with conflict, civil war, and *stasis*, the origin of which is also traced in female difference (2002). The identification of the *political* with the One excludes from view and, thus, from the public space, anything that might undermine the image of a homogeneous society, anything that might expose the city to the risk of *stasis*. This exclusion, however, is never unambiguous but always circular: the politician excludes but at the same time narrates and defines what he distances, always recomposing it in a discourse with which he also defines himself. The first exclusion – in both a temporal and ontological sense – from the Greek *polis* is that of women, in the name of a sexual binarism that becomes hierarchy and creates and delineates other dualities, such as the pairs of body and reason, nature and culture, and disorder and order, in which the negative pole is always the representation of the feminine.

Alongside these reflections, Cavarero emphasises a fundamental element that emerges with the mythical figure of

Pandora. Greek mythology assigns the birth of civilisation to fire, which Prometheus steals from the gods to give to human beings. Zeus's reaction is merciless, and Prometheus is condemned to be chained up on the Caucasus with an eagle that eats his liver every day, only to have it grow back every night. Humans, however, must also be punished, and this is where Pandora comes into play: a woman created by Hephaestus upon whom each deity has bestowed a quality — beauty, virtue, skill, grace, cunning, wit. Pandora has a box with her, which Zeus has ordered her not to open. Unable to resist her curiosity, the woman disobeys, and by opening the vase releases all the evils that afflict humanity: old age, jealousy, sickness, pain, madness and vice. As Cavarero points out, through this myth "a reversal has taken place: the *expelled, the feminine, is what is considered guilty and the origin of its own expulsion process*" (2007: 34). That is, the myth of Pandora makes it possible to read the exclusion of women as the result of their own guilt, of an original error which makes them guilty in a trial they have undergone and which frees men of all responsibility.

The need for the exclusion of women, whose overly-present bodies generate disorder in the city, is also made clear by the figure of Athena: a goddess who is born a fully grown and fully armed adult from the forehead of her father Zeus. She is thus a woman who presides over the city because she takes on all the elements of the masculine – from weapons to the independence guaranteed by adulthood – and because "Athena is a woman against women. In the tragedy, the Furies are taken and put under the earth: democracy can subsist because it has driven the *deinón* that are the Furies, the feminine, under the earth, and the political order has been built against a very dangerous and anti-democratic feminine power" (*ibid.*: 37). The only woman who can be in the political sphere is a woman who loses the characteristics that make her different and, as such, dangerous, to the unity of the community. Indeed, the community itself is constituted precisely through the exclusion of the feminine and could not exist without that founding gesture. As Cavarero points out, the only representations of the feminine that are accepted as political, even when they are explicitly hostile, are those of "an aggressive and feminine warrior", like the Amazons who "in order to draw their bows,

cut off their breasts. Here is the monstrosity of war that deforms the female body defending the city in the form of a goddess, but dressed as a soldier. Here is the functioning of the representation of the feminine that is displaced within the symbolic scenario, in order to reinforce the tightness of the symbolic scenario itself" (*ibid*.: 40). The women the city opposes, therefore, are also women who have modified their bodies so that they are not fully recognisable as such, while other women remain invisible and excluded.

The construction of Greek politics as constitutively male goes hand in hand with the construction of citizens as independent and rational beings and, as such, capable of detaching themselves from their bodies. Cavarero, however, gives this separation of mind and body a particularly interesting nuance when she notes the paradox at its foundation: rationality can only express itself in a discourse – an eminently political and philosophical element – that finds its highest moment in the assembly, in public discourse. Political discourse, therefore, is a discourse that necessarily needs the voice, an expression that needs others and thus marks the public and collective character of politics. But the voice, Cavarero reminds us, is an intrinsically corporeal element that resonates in the throat, in the vocal cords, in the diaphragm, in the movements of the tongue. And therein lies the paradox: we must deny this corporeal character of the voice in order to affirm the rational character of discourse.

This is a paradox that is evident, once again, when observing the role that myths, the founding narratives of the political sphere, assign to women. The archetypal figure in this case is that of the Sirens, who enchant, not by chance, but with incomprehensible, unintelligible, but still unimaginably beautiful, sounds, which for this reason create both malice and disorder. As Cavarero points out, in the development of the figure of the siren, we can see how

> the descent of the Sirens into the water, their metamorphosis into fishlike creatures, is in fact accompanied by their transformation into very beautiful women. This process corresponds, in a rather significant way, to one of the most stereotypical models of the female

> sex – namely, the stereotype according to which, in her erotic function as seductress, as an object of masculine desire, the woman appears first of all as a body and as an inarticulate voice. She must be beautiful, but she must not speak (Cavarero, 2000: 107).

Women are thus given a bodily voice that enchants but does not reason, while men are given a rational voice that somehow exists without the body. Once again, a paradox is dissolved by the exclusion of women, this time from the field of the rational.

Exclusion from the possibility of being rational subjects also means exclusion from the possibility of being part of a universal subject; in fact, "it is interesting to note the way in which the tradition removes the corporeal realm of the voice assigned to woman from the political sphere of universal subjects (which are modelled on 'man') assigned to man" (*ibid.*: 208). Thanks to the idea that rational discourse can be expressed by an abstract, incorporeal voice, it is possible not to avoid recognising as rational the particular voices that emerge from bodies: "in other words, in the (notoriously dichotomous) symbolic patriarchal order, man is conceived as mind and woman as body. The division of *logos* into a purely feminine *phone* and a purely masculine *semantikon*, finally, accomplishes and confirms the system" (*ibid.*: 107), a system that is founded, let us repeat, on the possibility of imagining universal subjects as equal, as interchangeable. In order to establish this universality, it is essential to exclude bodies as bearers of differences, of irreducible uniqueness. And we again find a paradox: Cavarero highlights how the claim of universality grounds metaphysics, which is based on postulating a One that erases all embodied uniqueness. We are therefore faced with a One that denies the very possibility of uniqueness – and here Cavarero echoes Arendt's critique of metaphysics and Plato (Arendt, 2005). Interestingly, starting with the woman–body association and the exclusion of the political sphere that follows, it is possible to question the very foundation of Western political thought and its metaphysics.

This critique is, however, immediately also the possibility of imagining different forms of relation and thought which do not involve the opposition of one universal to another universal

but instead aim precisely to question the necessity of universality understood as homogeneity. As Cavarero notes,

> in the devocalisation of logos that accompanies the history of metaphysics, the repression of vocal pleasure is above all a repression of the pleasure that characterises resonance as the primary, spontaneous rhythm and drive of the reciprocal communication of unique voices (2000: 199).

The abstract, universal rational discourse is in fact a discourse that denies the possibility of finding pleasure in the voice, in the communication that also passes through the tones, the uniqueness of an accent, of an intonation, of a way of speaking that requires us to think about the meaning not only through the content of what is said, but also through the way it is done and the timbre with which we communicate. In this reciprocal recognition of uniqueness lies a pleasure, a sharing that starts in the body and resonates there, in a form that goes beyond rationality but is not political. For Cavarero, this type of communication has been experienced particularly by women – and, we might add, by all subjects excluded from the rational – who have communicated not so much in argumentative form, based on syllogisms valid always and everywhere, but in narrative mode, through particular and situated narratives:

> through the split between "body" and "soul" that characterises the subject, women have an easier time approaching the experience of the narratable self. In other words, their so-called sentimentalism is the coherent aspect of a gathering of uniqueness, which, in the amorous scene as well, confirms itself through the familiar indistinguishability of embodied existences and life-stories. As poets of both sexes know well, love is too complex a phenomenon to leave to the advocates of autarchic eros (*ibid.*: 115).

The accusations levelled at women – of only talking about love, of having relationships that are too intimate, of not arguing enough – actually become signs of their strength, of the possibility of thinking otherwise, and of building embodied

relationships that are not based on the claim of recognising ourselves in a universal One. On the contrary, even through the complex phenomenon of love, it is possible to rediscover a uniqueness starting from bodies, a relationship that "finds its height in the orgasm" and in which "lovers therefore come to repeat the beginning of their existence" (*ibid.*: 111), not because they return to the womb but because they appear to each other as unique, as at the moment of birth.

This possibility of rethinking discourse and politics starting from bodies, for Cavarero, marks not a destruction but a re-signification: "it is not a matter of overcoming or erasing speech, but rather of keeping the primary sense of speech in proximity to the relational plurality of voices that originate speech, or that materialise it, as it were, by making it sing" (*ibid.*: 210). And it is in this re-signification that she sees the fullest fruit of Italian feminism and its practices:

> Italian feminism responds to the binary economy of the patriarchal order – which catalogues man in the sphere of thought and women in the sphere of the body – by making speech the reciprocal communication of women in flesh and bone who communicate themselves contextually "starting with themselves". It is thus not a communal belonging – in the sense of identity politics – to the feminine sex that determines the political quality of this communication. It is not Woman, which is just as fictitious as Man, which is here expressed and represented. Rather, this politics consists in the relational context or, better, the absolute local where reciprocal speech signifies the sexed uniqueness of each speaker in spite of patriarchal prohibitions – even before signifying something (*ibid.*: 206).

It is a question here of constructing a collective subject, a woman, who does not reproduce the male subject's claims to universality but who makes her own history of exclusion in order to start from the body to rethink discourses and politics: a capacity to feel together through radical difference, in the sense of having no initial model to which to adhere. It is necessary to recognise that "in the history of the West,

difference is difference-from: there is the adult man, male, free, and in relation to him the woman 'differs' from him in that she is non-male; she is therefore inserted in a hierarchy, at the lower level; just as the non-free differs from the free, the non-Greek from the Greek. In other words, a central identity is created and, through a strategy of exclusion, differences are named as differences-from" (Cavarero, 2007: 76) and, as a result of this recognition, break this mechanism of dichotomous differentiation in order to hear the plurality of voices and the bodies that emit them.

Sexed bodies

Cavarero's reflection in *Relating Narratives* allows us to link the exclusion of women from the public sphere, their identification with the body, and their lack of rationality in a vicious circle that should lead us to criticise the very foundations of politics. Moreover, this critique allows us to question the forms of political philosophical thought, starting from the supremacy accorded to rational argumentation, in order to propose ways of relating that pass through the connection with the body. Finally, Cavarero reminds us that it is possible to postulate a difference that is not dialectical, that is not posited as the overcoming of a previous stage but that creates a gap. The difference that emerges from the voice, from uniqueness, from the denied female body is not the overcoming of this negation; it does not lead to a universal synthesis but opens up unexpected possibilities precisely by refusing dialectics.

In this sense, Cavarero's reflection can be useful for reading some queer theories, and highlighting their feminist genealogy. In particular, it is interesting to link her reflection to that of Judith Butler, with whom Cavarero has been in dialogue (Guaraldo and Bernini, 2009). Butler, in fact, continually proposes defiance against Hegelian theories and in particular the master–servant dialectic to understand not only the mechanisms of recognition but also the extent to which they are inscribed in the body. As opposed to language that wants Butler's thought disembodied, the body is in reality constantly present as an element that is not immediately given but is rather

constantly interpreted. This interpretation passes through power relations, through exclusions and through what from time to time is brought to the fore. Since publishing *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997), Butler "has thematised a notion of 'self' as essentially 'excessive' or 'beyond oneself', thereby meaning that the sphere of agency and subjectivity cannot be accounted for in exclusively constructivist terms" (Guaraldo, 2012: 101). This is a notion of the self as never fully accessible but, as such, never merely constructed, as the very status of the body makes clear.

Butler, precisely on the basis of this awareness, criticises the notion of autonomy, not least for what it produces in the body:

> To disavow one's body, to render it "Other" as an effect of autonomy, is to produce one's body in such a way that the activity of its production – and its essential relation to the lord – is denied. This trick or ruse involves a double disavowal and an imperative that the "Other" become complicit with this disavowal. In order not to be the body that the lord presumably is, and in order to have the bondsman posture as if the body that he is belongs to himself – and not be the orchestrated projection of the lord – there must be a certain kind of exchange, a bargain or deal, in which ruses are enacted and transacted. In effect, the imperative to the bondsman consists in the following formulation: you be my body for me, but do not let me know that the body you are is my body (Butler, 1997: 35).

As in Cavarero, a paradox emerges: the need for a body that denies the body itself. As Catherine Malabou notes, "the 'properly human' is identified with that which is other than the body: the 'concept' or the 'meaning' as detached from any empirical content and therefore universal. Meaning is precisely what may be detached from any kind of context" (Butler and Malabou, 2001: 613). We find here the critique of the abstract universal that passes through the realisation that universality is only possible without bodies. Cavarero proposes to overcome this universality that dispossesses us of our bodies in a dialogue with others through narrative, which restores a relational sense of self. Butler, emphasising how "*to be a body, it must be bound to*

another body" (*ibid.*: 631), believes that not even the body, not even the voice, can be an anchor which protects us against dispossession, the awareness that my body is never really mine, but is enacted with others and in a set of norms and expectations that precede me. If, for Cavarero, then, sexual difference is a possibility of evading norms, of making sense of oneself, for Butler it remains a dialectical construction. Butler, after all, exposes us to an almost tragic dimension (to which, not surprisingly, she responds with the political use of parody) in which not even our voices really emerge from our bodies.

Interestingly, however, Cavarero offers a relational space that is possible and to which she also attributes characteristics of authenticity. As Guaraldo notes,

> Cavarero instead aims, more subtly, at providing a provocatively creative account of orgasm that is one with her effort of rethinking the subject: exposed and relational, profoundly dependent upon a bodily materiality that cannot be removed. Orgasm results in relationality at its purest, an instant of pleasure that does not include death or annihilation. This way of casting the body, its nakedness and exposure as orgasm, entails the claim that to experience one's unique being in relation to another uniqueness is a pleasurable, erotic, and empowering experience that as such must not necessarily entail appropriation (John Locke), control, or domestication (Carla Lonzi) (Guaraldo, 2021: 102).

There is thus an erotic dimension of relationality which is expressed in the orgasm as a symbol of a possible relationship that excludes the dialectic of the struggle for life and death but also distances itself from any fantasy of fusion. It is an entirely political choice to read the erotic dimension as a heterotopic space, stripped of its ambivalences and death drives, in order to use pleasure rather than desire as a guide to imagining different social relations.

And it is in this sense that Cavarero's reflection can be related to Lynne Huffer's (2013) attempt to question the lips of the vulva as a possible political element. Huffer uses the labia to propose a theory linking feminism and the constructs of queer

subjects, sex, and gender. Even in her title, Huffer combines a reference to Bersani's (1987) famous essay "Is the Rectum a Grave?" with Irigaray's (1985) *Quand nos lèvres se parlent* ("When Our Lips Speak Together"). By replacing the figure of the rectum with the labia, Huffer seeks to draw our attention to the gender and sexual difference that tends to be forgotten in the anti-social male strand of queer theory, which focuses on an autonomous and free subject in the pursuit of pure sexual pleasure and "reverse[s] common conception of ethics as relational moral norm into a negative ethics that is non-relational and anti-social" (2013: 29). She also wants to overcome the *tragic* sense of the impossibility of relationships that allows one to tell a truth about oneself that appeared in Butler's earlier work. Huffer thus wants to start from the lips in order to again question the autonomous and independent subject and to construct an erotic relational ethics: "all depending, of course, on the definitions given to *eros* (eroded according to Huffer by the biopolitical) and to ethics (associated by Huffer with the genealogical analysis of this erosion)" (Deutscher, 2016: 235). For Huffer, "eros is not a timeless form of expression delimited by genre or discursive form. Nor is it a libidinal, Marcusian energy waiting to be liberated – either through the talking cure or through literary language – with a promise to transform the conditions of work, the economy, and social institutions. Rather, eros is the name we can give to an ethical practice of embodied subjectivity in relation to truth" (Huffer, 2010: 269).

Huffer's eros appears to be a relational dimension similar to Cavarero's orgasm, in which a truth about oneself emerges, made possible by the encounter with another. Once again, we are faced with a radical critique of the presumption that it is rationality that grounds the subject. On the contrary, it is in this instance the paradoxical loss of self given by the erotic dimension that allows one to regain one's sense of self. And this sense of self also passes through a difference that is rooted in the body, a body not understood as biological destiny but as a field of possibility. Interestingly, Huffer quotes Irigaray and her presenting "the feminine in her 'function as the negative'" as "the power in reserve for the dialectical operations to come", and accuses the dialectic of "being 'phallotropic'" (2013: 47).

Along similar lines, Huffer emphasises the difference between a Hegelian dialectical negativity and her own use of the negative as a way "to maintain [the] irreducibility of the *you* with respect to the *I"* (*ibid.*). This ability to maintain the you in the I is fundamental for Huffer, and links her reflection to Cavarero's.

Furthermore, by choosing the lips as the emblem of a possible difference, Huffer proposes the idea of an immediately queer female difference: the lips are in fact two in one, non-reproductive and expressing a negative that unmasks and dismantles the violence of subjectivity as an ethical ideal and at the same time produces subjectivity as possibility. The lips, despite their name, do not speak; they remind us of the story of the Sirens, but at the same time they are lips that allow us to express ourselves beyond rational language: "for it is in their catachrestic, heterotopian attempt to speak otherwise that the lips are simultaneously here and elsewhere, now and not now: not a pinned-down figure of the Other of the Same, but a hovering, catachrestic Other's Other. The lips name a heterotopian *ethopoiesis*, an ethical remaking of the erotic relation" (*ibid.*: 43). The lips, then, are not only a symbol but also a concrete bodily element that allows us to maintain a you in the self; that is, to build relationships that are based neither on appropriating the Other nor on the Others's inevitable death.

The lips again reveal how, starting from a paradox, it is possible "ethically and politically, that we take seriously both our (narrative) boundedness and our (performative) capacity to engage in practices of freedom that unravel that which binds us" (*ibid.*: 106) and that, in this link between narrative and performance and between their respective boundaries, it is possible to construct erotic, corporeal, embodied, singing practices of freedom.

Conclusion

This journey through Cavarero, juxtaposed with Huffer's intervention on the lips, has allowed us to understand how the body is the paradoxical place *par excellence*. It is a body excluded from the sphere of rationality and therefore from politics, which is read in a circular fashion as feminine and therefore

used to exclude women, a body that must disappear in its differences in order to guarantee the possibility of constructing a universal and neutral subject. At the same time, the body can be the place to rethink precisely the political sphere, avoiding any dialectical overcoming in the name of a difference that is to come and is not yet given. Starting from the body, from its unique voice and its equally unique lips, it is also possible to rethink ethical relations in an erotic key in which eros is politically interpreted as positive.

Thus, it is clear that accepting this reading and understanding of bodies and politics is a real choice, a taking of sides in a normative manner. It is, however, a normativity anchored in experience, which is capable of not constructing absolute models, but is always *uniquely embodied*. Anchoring political choices to bodies makes it possible to escape the very metaphors of homogeneity applied to the body politic and to start instead from the individual organs of a body in order to build relationships. And it is this awareness that can allow us, today, to weave dialogues between feminism and queer theory that know how to rethink bodies in their multiple differences and in the possibility of narrating them in an equally multiple manner, but outside any solipsism. Or, in the words of Carla Lonzi, in a text notably entitled *È Già Politica* ("It is already politics"), accepting the void, the absence from which the body emerges together with the living flesh of the labia (or clitoris), because

> the identity that stems from the clitoris starts from a "nothing", a cultural void, and progressively constitutes itself through an acceptance of oneself that becomes one's own destiny but cannot fix itself in a role, lest it risks falling back into vaginality. And it cannot reveal itself in the cultural word, but in the identity that stems directly from the assumption of a non-compliant sexual identity which, alone, enables the authentic and complete utterance of the word "I". This "I" as cultural void is the premise for a rediscovery of our body, and therefore of a culture of our own (Lonzi, 1977: 21–2).

A culture that continues to disrupt philosophical and political thought.

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The Voice of Care: On the Informality of Uniqueness

Timothy J. Huzar

Abstract
In this article, I argue that the phenomenon of vocality – as conceptualised by Adriana Cavarero – suggests that theoretical conceptualisations of the political and the ethical have to be informal. The vocal, for Cavarero, first expresses a person's unique singularity. Singularity does not fit into a formal articulation of what politics or ethics is. This is because the formal necessarily concerns the abstract, not the specific. However, despite this, Cavarero suggests that uniqueness can be formally put to work to distinguish humanness from non–human life (in her *For More than One Voice*), and a political phonosphere from a non-political one (in her *Surging Democracy*). I reflect on the informality of the vocal in its specificity, drawing on Cavarero and Judith Butler's reflections on the distinction of the ethical and the political in the work of Emmanuel Levinas, to provide further evidence for the necessary informality of conceptualisations of both the ethical and the political.

Keywords: Cavarero, informality, uniqueness, vocality, ethical, political, Levinas

Biography
Timothy J. Huzar is a critical theorist whose work explores philosophical issues around narration, care, singularity, and politics. He has published in numerous academic journals, and is the co-editor of *Toward a Feminist Ethics of Non-violence*, a collected volume on the thought of Adriana Cavarero published by Fordham University Press in 2021. Tim is a Lecturer in Cultural Competency Education at King's College London, and a Research Associate at the Centre for Rights and Anti-Colonial Justice, University of Sussex.

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In what follows, I argue that when it comes to vocal uniqueness, our philosophising is always informal. I do this to resist the concluding claims that Adriana Cavarero makes in her monographs, *For More than One Voice* and *Surging Democracy*. Despite Cavarero insisting throughout these texts that vocality is first expressive of "uniqueness" – a kind of phenomenological given that does not reside within a person but emerges between people, and signifies nothing more than the singular particularity of *this* person in their ineluctable and inaugural connection to a plurality of others – a formalism emerges at the outer bounds of her argument. Here, unique vocality can be put to work to properly distinguish the politicity of different phonospheres, or the humanness of different existents. By dwelling on the connection between voice, singularity, care, and the political, I show that the unique voice disarms this type of formalism, at the same time blurring the edges of some of the structural binaries of what is known as Western metaphysics. This intervention, then, is a celebration of Cavarero's generative philosophical imaginary even in its gentle critical mode.

Elliot is almost five months old and he puts everything in his gob. It is how he extends into the world and at the same time how the world becomes a part of him. Elliot jabbers with his gob. Almost a gibberish, a jibber-jabbering, a blathering or a babbling – except that his is a gift of the gab. His, as Cavarero would say, is a voice "destined to speech" (2005: 211). Almost, then, the nonsensical babbling of a brook, but also almost the secret language of an argot, the subversive language of gossip, or the technical language of a jargon.

Jargon comes from the Old French signifying the cheeping of birds; in Italian, the word might be *garrire*, which, as well as a chirping sound, also refers to a fluttering or flapping, and therefore to a sense of touch. Like the jay, Elliot's is a garrulous voice. He barely waits before responding to you. His vocalisations come in fits and starts but they are always propelled: either by a joy that is mimetically relayed between you and him, or by a displeasure that it is also difficult not to be affected by. Both garrulous and *garrire* have their roots in the

Latin verb *garriō,* signifying chatter or prattle, cognate with the Ancient Greek word *gêrus*, meaning "voice". These are words that stick in the throat, guttural words, words that make the embodied character of the *logos* inescapable, words that you gargle, just as Elliot gargles as he discovers that his saliva is his own – like a gargoyle, from the Latin *gula*, meaning throat, and the Arabic *ḡūl*, meaning ghoul. *Garriō* and *gêrus* are themselves cognate with the Old English word *caru*, meaning sorrow, lamentation, concern, anxiety, and, crucially, care. Caring and vocalising thus maintain an affinity, but what is their relation?

Etymology here cannot constitute a proof; rather, it is an occasion for unbridled exploration. The voice of care places its accent not on the reason expressive of the political community – the *semantike* of *logos* that is embarrassed by the *phone*, as Cavarero demonstrates – but on the prattle or the chatter – invariably pejorative words – that are typically positioned as the obverse of rational communication (2005: 33–41). Prattle, chatter and babbling are not helpful in distinguishing "what is beneficial and what is harmful, and so also what is just and what is unjust" (Aristotle, *Pol.*: 1.1253a). The blah blah blah of the barbarian secured the coherence of the reasoning community of the *polis*, and the caring labour of tending – to the child, the household, the city – ensured the polis' sempiternal reproduction. The vocality of care, either in its nonsensicality or in its opacity, could then, following the prejudice of the powerful stereotype that is the Western tradition, simply signify the a- or anti-political. But prattle, chatter, and care's many other vocal manifestations are doing something other than communicating reason. Further, despite being at a distance from reason, they still maintain not only ethical worth (commonly granted), but also political worth. Taking inspiration from Judith Butler's reflections on Emmanuel Levinas, we might call this the anarchy of the ethical, revealing the moment where the ethical and the political touch (2012: 67–8).

The vocality of care is present in Elliot but no less present in any person of whatever maturity, and it "presences" Elliot just as it presences me as I am mimetically caught, beholden,

held, *apprehended* (Lewis, 2017).[1] To apprehend is to touch on the uniqueness of another, and at the same time to have one's own uniqueness celebrated. It is in this way a caring, connecting the babbling vocal to *caru* – to care – in this precise sense. Apprehension – which also signifies an anxiety that is reflected in care – orientates us within a horizon not of abstraction and generality, but of the specificity of this existent; this baby whose name is Elliot. As Cavarero shows, this is the scandal that the *logos*, as it is stereotypically thought in the Western tradition, escapes from: that the semantic, noetic reason of the *logos* cannot but touch on the embodied *phone*, which cannot but touch on the singularity of existence; that the soul is nothing other than the extension of the body (*this* body), even as it is distinct from the body (Nancy, 2008: 122–135); that Man collapses into men, and women, and non–binary existents, each in their specificity, even as the Human and its rights are sometimes polemically mobilised in contestations of the assumption of inequality (Rancière, 2007: 39–61).

As Cavarero notes, quoting Hannah Arendt, "For millennia, philosophy has diverted its gaze from the appearance of human beings because it cannot tolerate their most scandalous property, their realness, together with their contingency" (2002: 94).[2] This scandalous specificity is blatant in Elliot's babble. Elliot apprehends me and I apprehend him, which can be heard in the mimetic call and response that we both enter into, but it also occurs simultaneously even when the apprehension appears unidirectional. As Elliot apprehends me he is apprehended, and as I apprehend Elliot, I am apprehended. We care for each other, enjoying a common, everyday happiness. For me, this is given in those moments of gentle touch, attentive caress, as I incline in the evening, holding him, and his fingers grip and stroke my arms, and he coos, and I sing Eia Pumpeia like my mum and dad did, and like my omi did, and we calm down together to jointly prepare ourselves for the early sleep of the broken night, marvelling at the blackbird atop the holly tree making his contribution to the dusk chorus

[1] For more on mimesis as it relates to Cavarero's thought, see Adriana Cavarero and Nidesh Lawtoo (2021: 183–9).
[2] Cavarero is quoting Arendt in *The Life of the Mind* (1978: 91).

in anticipation of the dawn. Certainly, I also care for him in the sense that I respond to his vulnerability, refusing either an active or a passive wounding, as Cavarero argues; but this caring is an echo of a primary anticipation of *who* Elliot is, and who I am to him (Cavarero 2011: 30). To care then is to cry out because we lament, but also because we are in need, and also because we are searching for someone, and also because we savour the happiness proper to the apprehension of who another is. To care is to give voice, and it is a voice of chatter, a voice of prattle, a voice of babble like the cheeping of birds, like the gargle of a throat, like the water pouring from the mouth of a gargoyle. It is a voice that always returns to the specificity of another; to Elliot. As Elliot babbles, he cares, revealing who he is and who I am.

Elliot, or voice more generally (we can let Elliot carry on growing up now, although his singularity should be felt innervate all that is said here), finds itself somewhere between the nonsensical and the secret, between the animal and the human, between the body and the soul, between the public and the private, between the singular and the plural. This awkward indeterminacy is not a problem to be resolved. It is a necessary consequence of the fact that the voice is always someone's voice – that the voice refers to singularity, complicating the binaries central to the Western macrotext. This is Cavarero's primary argument in her *For More than One Voice*: that voice is always emitted from some *one*, to be heard by the ear of someone else (2005: 4). It brings us back, again and again, to the uniqueness of an existent – to who they are, as opposed to what they are. However, in both *For More than One Voice* and in her later *Surging Democracy*, the question of what counts as the sound of uniqueness causes Cavarero trouble: at the edges of her argument, uniqueness – not so much the specificity of existents but the specificity of *this* existent – becomes a quality or characteristic that can be properly ascribed to some, and not to others. How does this happen?

In the *Iliad,* Homer uses the word *gêrus* to describe the sound of the Trojan army: unlike the silent Danaäns, the Trojans sound like the bleating of sheep – or more specifically, of ewes crying out for their lambs (*Il.*: 4.422–40). However, this is the case not because the Trojans are simply animalistic,

lacking *logos*, but because of an overabundance of *logos*. What they lack is a *common logos*. The resulting cry – as languages intermingle through the disparate vocalisations of the Trojan army – sits uncomfortably between animal and man (Heath, 2005: 65–6). One could almost describe the noise of the Trojans, with Cavarero, as a "pluriphony", which is the sound made by a plurality (2021: 75). Writing in *Surging Democracy*, Cavarero says that a pluriphony is neither a harmony, nor a cacophony (*ibid.*). The singularity of each existent is not lost in the thrum – in the chirm – but nor does it remain "singular", if to be singular is to be separable from all others. However, the example is far from perfect, as it goes against the grain of Cavarero's desire to work against the bellicose nature of the metaphysics of the Western tradition, and sits closer to the counter-examples of crowds and masses that she takes from the writings of scholars studying the totalitarianisms of twentieth century Europe. Cavarero is rightly concerned by "the warlike rhythms, the marching feet" that are "fusional and ecstatic", in this instance as a crowd sings La Marseillaise in the work of Émile Zola (*ibid.*: 74). Rather than an army marching to war, Cavarero might exemplify the sound of plurality by turning to the audience at La Scala, murmuring before a performance of Don Giovanni; or, as she does in *Surging Democracy*, by making reference to the sound of Russian dissidents gathered at a poetry recital in Moscow, themselves having to recite a poem – one voice supplementing the other – after the poet drops his script (*ibid.*: 72–5). However, conceptually distinguishing between mass and plurality is not straightforward. Cavarero asks, "[i]s there a sonorous difference between the voice of plurality and that of the mass? Is there an acoustically perceptible difference between their distinct phonospheres?" (*ibid.*: 66). She answers her questions by focusing on the way plurality celebrates uniqueness, whereas in the crowd or the mass uniqueness is rendered superfluous. "Plurality's quality comes from the uniqueness of its political actors", she says (*ibid.*: 62). Despite the Russian dissidents reciting the poem in unison, which would otherwise be a sign of the collapsing of singularity into the totalitarian mass, for Cavarero, they nonetheless generate a pluriphony:

> [t]he poem is recited in unison, but the most relevant element, in the dynamic of this choral performance – or rather, the element that makes it a political performance – is not the typical fusional effect of speaking in unison, but rather the adding, one after the other, of singular voices. Put another way, the voices unite with the choir as unique voices and, independently of the effect of reciting in chorus, remain plural (*ibid.*: 73).

But distinguishing the phonospheres of the mass and the plurality in this way is only a temporary suspension of the issue. We still need to know what enables us to distinguish between the sound of uniqueness – of unique voice – and the sound of fungibility, or of the mass. To distinguish a plurality from a crowd based on the veneration of uniqueness might be correct, but if uniqueness refers to the specificity of a person – *this* person – can it be formally put to work as a measure of the politicity of a phonosphere?

The issue is starker in her earlier monograph *For More than One Voice*. Here, Cavarero explicitly links voice to humanness, which raises the question of whether not only voice but the uniqueness it cannot fail to celebrate is a privileged property of the human – a measure of humanness, just as in *Surging Democracy* it is a measure of a pluriphony. In Cavarero's words,

> [e]very human voice is obviously a sound, an acoustic vibration among others, which is measurable like all other sounds; but it is only as human that the voice comes to be perceived as unique. This means that uniqueness resounds in the human voice; or, in the human voice, uniqueness makes itself sound. The ear, its natural destination, perceives this unique sound without any effort, no matter what words are spoken. No matter what you say, I know that the voice is yours (2005: 177).

A page later, Cavarero says,

> [the ear] can try to decipher the sounds [...] but it cannot decide on, or control, their emission. The ear receives without being able to select beforehand. The ear

> distinguishes the sound of the voice and knows it to be human not only because it vibrates in the specifically human element of speech, but also because the ear perceives its uniqueness (*ibid.*: 178).

The problem here is twofold. First, politically, if vocal uniqueness is a proper quality of humanness, then it can be mobilised for exclusionary ends: those without voice, without uniqueness, are not human, or are not protected by the rights bestowed on humanness, even if their humanness is formally recognised. Second, philosophically, if uniqueness refers to the specificity of an existent, how can it be generalised and abstracted in its function as a property of humanness, expressed through the voice?

We know, of course, that some sounds are not heard as voice, and therefore not as human. As Jacques Rancière has shown, this begins with Aristotle and continues throughout the Western tradition (2010: 37–8). But would Cavarero have those thus devocalised find ingenious ways of demonstrating their possession of voice? Of better representing this voice, so it can finally be perceived? If, as Cavarero says, "it is only as human that the voice comes to be *perceived* as unique", then the political project would be to restore humanity to those dehumanised; to shift people's *perceptions*, so that the perception of another's (human) uniqueness is inescapable. This is a common way for politics to operate: a hegemonic contestation of discourse; a struggle over perception, representation and recognition. But is the political or ethical worth of uniqueness exhausted by issues of representation and recognition?

As I have noted, for Cavarero, voice is synonymous with the singular: with uniqueness. Voice is an expression of this singularity, and singularity only ever exists in its becoming, in its expression – it is not a quality but a *doing*. On careful inspection, the babbling, prattling, chattering voice evades its reduction to an inchoate reason, and instead is caught in the intimate relay of the caring celebration of who another is; in their apprehension. When Cavarero says that "[t]he ear, [the human voice's] natural destination, perceives this unique sound without any effort" (2005: 177) and that "[n]o matter what you say, I know that the voice is yours" (*ibid.*), this self-evident

immediacy is the case not because, in this instance, the perception of uniqueness is irresistible – perhaps because it is perfectly recognised, as a consequence of its politically ideal representation – but because the apprehension of uniqueness is not coterminous with its recognition. To receive a flavour or taste – "*un sapore*" – of another's uniqueness does not require its cognisance.[3] The political strategy that follows Cavarero's linking of voice and uniqueness should not be the ideal representation of voice, given the contingent barriers to its recognition. Instead, it would be something like the transformation of a philosophical imaginary that constitutively excludes some so that others can impersonate immortal, universal, abstracted forms of being.[4] It would be to sustain a sense of the world within which it would be nonsensical to parade as an independent existent who knows the world at an eternal distance *from* the world despite being *a part* of the world. It would be to open our senses to the forms of apprehension enacted in furtive co-appearance, including the babble, the prattle, the chatter, the gossip, and not only the reasoning that they all touch on and are touched by.

Uniqueness – expressed in and as voice – can never be adequately represented. Representation is anathema to uniqueness. Further, representation – or more properly, the mode of thought that privileges representation as the final gauge of political or ethical value – actively inhibits uniqueness. There are people who fail to perceive another's uniqueness; uniqueness can be effaced, sometimes in the very act of properly representing it. This is always a risk. But uniqueness – or voice – matters not because it signals humanness. Uniqueness matters because it *is*, and abstracted being depends upon the violent refusal of this particularity. In Latin, to care (*cura*) is in part to heed, to pay attention. When one cares, what one heeds or pays attention to – what one apprehends – is not

[3] On the translation of Cavarero's "*un sapore*", see Paul A. Kottman's Translator's Introduction to her *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood* (2000: xxviii, note 39).

[4] But with the proviso that the mechanism for this transformation is often complex, and the placing of transformation as the *telos* and measure of politics can just as readily depoliticise those who appear not to be contributing to this objective.

another's representation, but another's uniqueness. Uniqueness, singularity, particularity, finitude – cannot become the measure of another: you are unique, you are not. It is why when Cavarero makes uniqueness proper to humanness, this is a mistake. There is nothing that uniqueness is "proper" to. It cannot authoritatively distinguish the plurality from the crowd because it invalidates all appeals to authority. It cannot be measured and cannot be used to measure. It disarms us as we attempt this abstraction, and could therefore be said to be anti-violent – disarmed like "*l'inerme*", and in this way vulnerable (Cavarero, 2011: 30). It interrupts the rationale that enables the proper hierarchisation of being, racialised after 1492 (Wynter, 1995). It is incommensurable with a system of proprietorial measurement. So, while some may mobilise it in this way – as Butler notes, for Levinas the Palestinian has no face, or lacks the capacity to have a face – they are mistaken, they make a sort of category error (2012: 39). What those who are properly recognised as unique – that is, those who have qualified for the proper recognition of uniqueness – are granted is not uniqueness. It is uniqueness's representation, its abstraction, which is to say its nullification. The bestowing of uniqueness is always a reciprocal, dispossessive, tactile, informal activity.

What does it mean to say uniqueness is necessarily informal – that it refuses any formal appeal? In *Parting Ways*, Butler notes a tension between Levinas's conception of the face – with its referent in an abstract specificity – and broader formalisms that structure community. For Butler, this is a tension between the ethical and the political. The commandment "Thou shalt not kill" that issues from the face – the commandment that is the face – is an ethical injunction made not at a formal level but as if it were directed to me and me alone; as if I bear all responsibility for the upholding of this commandment. It refuses a formalism that would begin with the generality of the people, and consequently renders each one philosophically superfluous. This bars an extension of the commandment to the level of law and the political (Butler, 2012: 57). Butler writes,

> [e]ven though the social dimension of the political does not negate the ethical and its claim, it remains difficult to

> say in what way that ethical claim lives on in the social and political domain. [...] Does the face survive in the domain of the political? And if it does, what form does it take? And how does it leave its trace? (*ibid*.: 55).

This tension has also been marked by Cavarero. Writing in *Inclinations*, she notes that:

> the world is comprised, not of a series of duets, or duels, but of a plurality of human beings who, far from confronting one another face-to-face, [...] instead much more plausibly, stand beside each other, side-by-side with one another. [...] The problem of the connection between ethics and politics, for Lévinas, is configured as a transition from duality to plurality – or, more precisely, from an ethical and subjectivizing relation between two who face one another, to a social relation among many who do not look one another in the face (2016: 169).

For Butler this tension is an opportunity to deform what is understood as the political. Butler asks,

> [m]ust the face always be singular, or can it extend to the plurality? If the face is not necessarily a human face – it can be a sound or a cry – and is not reducible to a single person's face, then can it be generalized to each and every person to the extent that they appear precisely as of concern to me (but only to persons and not nonhuman animals, in his view)? Would this be a rupture in the way we think about plurality, or would it imply an entrance of the ethical precisely into the formulation of plurality itself? Would it imply a deformalization of plurality? (2012: 57).

To think this through, Butler highlights an anarchism in Levinas's ethical demand. The demand is anarchic in the etymological sense of an absence of authority: anarchic because it is trapped between an abstract Other and myself, lacking the authority to enshrine formal, general law. It is this that causes the fraught relation between the ethical and the political. For Butler, the ethical demand that is coterminous with the face of

the Other presses on the political when the law is unjust. In these instances, the ethical demand motivates a dissent from law (*ibid*.: 67–8). But can a "deformalization of plurality" (*ibid.: 57*) be imagined beyond an anarchic refusal? Is the political – or a plurality, or a pluriphony – necessarily formal?

If singularity is understood as my response to an abstracted specificity, then it becomes easy to sequester the singular in the realm of the informal ethical, in contradistinction to a formal political. For Cavarero, what is lost in Levinas's conception of the face is the specificity of the other whose face would otherwise occupy the centre stage of the philosophical scene:

> [t]he face is abstract, Lévinas says, because its self-signification abstracts precisely from context – which is to say from the world, from the frames of meaning shared by different historical or empirical situations, and not least from language itself. The face, then, has no attributes or qualities. If, to simplify the discussion, we were to translate Lévinas's lexicon into Arendt's, we would say that the face signifies the other's singularity implied by the question "Who is he?" whereas the question "What is he?" – because it relates to context, qualities and attributes – remains offstage and immaterial for ethics (2016: 164).

And yet for Cavarero, "the who is never without the what" (2002: 100), and so the who cannot bear this abstraction – which, for Cavarero, Levinas cannot help but reveal. Cavarero says,

> [t]he ethical relation is abstract, not because it relies on general formulas or universal principles, but because it excludes all effects issuing from the specificity of a given context. The problem is that, even though Lévinas is convinced of the importance of this thesis, and indeed hardly misses a chance to reiterate it, his own writing ends up regularly disproving it. When he writes about the "face-to-face" encounter, he continually invokes the orphan, the widower, and the stranger, as well as the poor, the indigent, the hungry, the stateless or even episodes taken from the

> repertoire of the Torah. In short, despite his insistence on the abstraction of the face, Lévinas nevertheless does not at all give up contextualising the ethical relation (*ibid*.: 165–6).

When the other is not the Other but rather another, in and of the world, then the anarchic ethicality that troubles the political – the voice of care that always touches the political – also reaches our own words, our own vocalisings, as we philosophise, as we note distinctions between what is political and what is ethical, what is public and what is private; that is, when realms, spheres and domains become apparent to us and appear essential. Butler is correct when she notes that a "deformalized" political reveals the dependence of the formal political on the informal ethical, most clearly seen in a moment of crisis, and the security that anticipates this crisis (Hamilton, 2013). However, Cavarero's refusal of the abstraction of the Other shifts Levinas' injunction from the promotion of non-violence to the promotion of an interruption of mastery, indicating a violence to the masterful, proper, formalised accounting of the world.[5] In this way, what is sustained when we consider the specificity not only of myself but of the other person who is necessarily present is not simply an informal ethical relation in contrast to the formal political. Rather, it is an ethicality essential to existing which overwhelms our topographical political distinctions. The dyad then, not because of its structure of two – whether in contrast to one or to many – but because of its emphasis on the uniqueness of both poles of its relation, leaves us with nothing other than informality in our making sense of the world.

In *Giving An Account of Oneself*, Butler says that ethics suggests itself in the absence of the surety of our standpoint. "To take responsibility for oneself", Butler says, "is to avow the limits of any self-understanding, and to establish these limits not only as a condition for the subject but as the predicament of the human community" (2005: 83). The question of ethics

[5] In Butler's words, "[i]f violence is an act by which a subject seeks to reinstall its mastery and unity, then nonviolence may well follow from living the persistent challenge to egoic mastery that our obligations to others induce and require" (2005: 64).

"emerges precisely at the limits of our schemes of intelligibility" (*ibid*.: 21). If we had certainty – if we knew what the right course of action was – we would have no ethics. What if this holds true for politics, too? In the absence of a formal ethics, we proceed with care, and in the absence of a formal politics, we proceed with care, too. I do not need theory to tell me what is ethical or what is political. With Rancière, we can say that politics is the moment when the formal authority of the political falls away, just as with Butler we can say that ethics is the moment when the formal authority of the ethical falls away. Both fall in the face of our singularity, as we apprehend one another. In this context, to not believe in spheres, realms or domains because they have no formal standing is specious. This would be to assume that only the formal can be believed in, acted upon. As such, the formal becomes re-instantiated as an impossible fantasy as quickly as it is rejected. Instead, our belief in these topographies can be, in its nature, vital, stemming from the dynamism of living rather than the deathly petrification of a sequestered *noesis*. We can then put spheres and realms to the test. Do they suit our needs? If so, then we can discuss them, informally but no less meaningfully. Do they not? Then we can find another way of articulating the political. They cannot be taken too seriously – which is not to minimise their violences, but to keep open another path of resistance. In either case, we are obligated to tread carefully in the absence of a formality that would grant us surety, mindful of what we are doing, and to whom. An informal obligation.

The point is not to contest that "the voice of plurality and the voice of the masses [...] are two essentially distinct political phonospheres" (Cavarero, 2021: 73). This is known to me, but it is known in the complicated way that one knows uniqueness: unmoored, enlivened, immediate, informal, given. Rather, the point is to question one's capacity to properly declare these phonospheres, via a theoretical proclamation, distinct, which would leave them tethered and stultified. Put more strongly, this failure of proper declaration is a conceptual necessity that is a consequence of taking seriously the singularity of uniqueness. Cavarero, of course, knows this better than anyone, and while she privileges a humanness in her writings, it is better understood as a phenomenological reflection of the givenness

of the world, rather than any kind of metaphysical claim. The baby has a voice "destined to speech", but their singularity muddies the waters of where speech ends and the chirping of birds begins, or even the rustle of a finely tuned engine. Elias Canetti, celebrated by Cavarero for his "exquisite hearing" (*ibid*.: 82) that he channels into an attention to vocality in his writings, hears the chirping of birds, which turns out to be the plural vocalisation of Jewish school children (*ibid*.: 75); and Cavarero notes that Roland Barthes, watching a scene in a film focused on a group of Chinese school children, hears their vocality first as a rustle (*ibid*.: 80). Barthes is transfixed by the distance from language that the rustle suggests, that nonetheless maintains a connection to language which offers a particularly human vitalisation of the rustle, amplified by Barthes' own distance from the language being spoken by the children. Canetti, in contrast, is just as happy hearing "the variety of soundscapes composed of human and inhuman voices, in the mixture of heterogeneous sounds that includes vocal emissions", Cavarero says (*ibid*.: 81).

It would appear that in both cases the vocality of the children demands that the distinctions between speech, chirping, and rustling – which are apparent to me even if their edges are sometimes unclear – can only ever be informally known. What blurs these distinctions at their edges is only in part their acoustic overlap. More significantly, it is the singular, babbling being – "a spring, pure and full of hope, vibrant and joyful, happy with its plural being" (*ibid*.: 85) – who, in his uniqueness, demonstrates the proximity of these distinctions and their occasional indeterminacy, spacing them as distinct, and in this spacing revealing their points of contact. And if this is true for these distinct sounds – the sonority of the human, the animal, and the object – it is also true for the distinction between politics; its inchoate, germinal, surging beginnings; the caring apprehension of care; and all that is exhausted from a "*justa propria principia*" (*ibid*.: 60) understanding of the political.

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Resonant Voices for a New Subjectivity: Adriana Cavarero and Contemporary Italian Women's Writings

Alberica Bazzoni

Abstract
Since the publication of *Nonostante Platone* (*In Spite of Plato*) in 1990, Cavarero's thought has become a point of reference in the interpretation of literary texts. This article explores different ways in which Cavarero's concepts such as mythic revisionism, resonance, the voice, inclination, the narratable and relational self, the exchange of gazes between mother and daughter, and the deconstruction of the patriarchal symbolic order, have provided literary criticism with a shared vocabulary and philosophical horizon to interpret contemporary writings by women. Cavarero's writings have been themselves considered as original discursive interventions that undo the distinction between philosophy and literature and contribute to the creation of a feminist imaginary. In the second part, I turn to my own direct engagement with Cavarero's thought in the interpretation of literary works by Sicilian writer Goliarda Sapienza, focusing in particular on three interrelated elements: the narrative constitution of identity; the role of the voice; and the crafting of a new female subjectivity.

Keywords: literary criticism; women's writings; feminist imaginary; female subjectivity; narratable and relational self

Biography

Alberica Bazzoni is Assistant Professor in Comparative Literature at the Università per Stranieri di Siena, Hon. Research Fellow at the University of Oxford, and Affiliated Fellow at the ICI Berlin. She completed her PhD at the University of Oxford, and then held Postdoctoral Fellowships at the University of Warwick (British Academy) and the ICI Berlin. She is the author of *Writing for Freedom. Body, Identity and Power*

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Adriana Cavarero's influence on contemporary literary criticism cannot be overstated. Since the publication of *Nonostante Platone* (*In Spite of Plato*) in 1990, Cavarero's thought has become a point of reference and a precious resource in the interpretation of literary texts, and especially of Italian women's writings. Fundamental concepts, strategies, and topics from Cavarero's thought – such as mythic revisionism, resonance, the voice, inclination, the narratable and relational self, the exchange of gazes between mother and daughter, the deconstruction of the patriarchal symbolic order (among many others) – have provided literary criticism with a shared vocabulary and a shared philosophical horizon to interpret contemporary writings by women.

In this article, I explore some examples (by no means exhaustive) of how Cavarero's conceptual apparatus has been employed by critics in their readings of literary texts by contemporary Italian women writers, and how Cavarero's writings have been themselves considered as original discursive interventions that undo the distinction between philosophy and literature, and contribute to the creation of a feminist imaginary. In the second part of the article, I turn to my own direct engagement with Cavarero's thought in the interpretation of literary works by the Sicilian writer Goliarda Sapienza, whose activity in fact precedes that of Cavarero, bringing to light multiple resonances between their voices. I focus in particular on three interrelated elements that define Sapienza's narrative, and that can be read jointly with Cavarero: the narrative constitution of identity; the role of the voice; and the crafting of a new female subjectivity.

Contemporary Literary Criticism

Taking her cue from Cavarero's *In Spite of Plato*, in her 1993 foundational essay "Mythic Revisionism: Women Poets and Philosophers in Italy Today", Lucia Re lays the basis of an investigation of mythic revisionism:

> a common project which several otherwise extremely different contemporary Italian women poets share, whereby these poets "steal" old stories and change them utterly, so that they can no longer stand as foundations of collective male fantasy, and become, rather, part of a feminine symbolic order (Re, 1993: 80–1).

In this early work of feminist literary criticism in Italian studies, Re resorts to Cavarero's thought in order to identify a set of textual strategies that poets and philosophers alike adopt in their "probing of some of the fundamental mythologies of western patriarchal culture" (*ibid.:* 75).

In *In Spite of Plato*, Cavarero re-reads a number of Western myths (Homer's Odysseus, Oedipus, Faust, Don Juan, and their re-elaborations: Dante's Odysseus, Freud's Oedipus, Kierkegaard's Don Juan), as well as female characters in Plato's texts (Penelope, Demeter, Diotima, a Thracian servant) in order to unleash an alternative symbolic potential repressed by patriarchal culture. In these mythological revisions, Cavarero foregrounds the categories of sexual difference, birth, the mother–daughter relationship, and the embodied dimension of existence, which constitute the basis of "a feminist mode of philosophical thought", and which systematically surface in texts by contemporary women writers. Re brings together four Italian poems under the category of "mythic revisionism": Rossana Ombres's *Orfeo che amò Orfeo* (1975); Maria Luisa Spaziani's *Unità della memoria* (1966), Rosita Copioli's *Furore delle rose* (1988), and, finally, Amelia Rosselli's *Variazioni belliche* (1964). Using Cavarero's thought as a *fil rouge*, Re analyses the poets' works, pointing out their different strategies and themes. Ombres's long poem *Orfeo che amò Orfeo* is a grotesque parody of the myth of Orpheus and of canonical male poetry, which reveals how "much of the lyric belonging to the western

patriarchal tradition is but a cover-up for self-indulgent narcissism and misogyny" (Re, 1993: 83). While Ombres's operation is one of "destruction", aimed at uprooting the foundations of a masculine myth through irreverent irony, Spaziani and Copioli pursue a "constructive" approach (*ibid.*: 84), replacing a patriarchal myth with one that founds a feminine symbolic order. Spaziani overturns the association of mythical female figures (the Parcae, Penelope, and the Danaids) with death, rewriting them as saviours of other women, and inscribing them in an economy of life. Copioli's *Furore delle rose* instead brings to the fore the relationship with a mythic mother, addressed as a power-giving muse, which Re reads in light of Cavarero's notion of "a feminine economy of gazes" (*ibid.*: 96). Finally, Amelia Rosselli's approach, defined by Re as "deconstructive", is more disenchanted: her complex rewriting of the figures of Electra, Antigone, and Cassandra, characterised by an allegorical and oxymoronic style, denounces the violence of patriarchal symbolic order, but no intelligible alternative signification is envisioned. Re concludes:

> Whatever one thinks of the advantages and disadvantages of the various strategies of mythic revisionism I have discussed, as a whole (and despite their different formal, epistemic, and political approaches), they represent one of the most compelling ways through which Italian women writers – poets, philosophers, critics – are calling into question the ideological underpinnings of a male-centered tradition while at the same time opening up a space for a feminine symbolic, a symbolic where the feminine is no longer always subordinate, secondary or negative, but takes on legitimacy and significance in its own right (Re, 1993: 105).

The project of mythic revisionism outlined by Re in relation to poetry through Cavarero is taken up in the field of narrative by Nghiem L. Nguyen, who positions Cavarero alongside the writers Francesca Sanvitale and Dacia Maraini as they all "subversively use myth in their writings to explore the socio-political position of women and to examine the complex

relationship between mothers and daughters" (Nguyen, 2013: 113).

Nguyen focuses on Cavarero's critique of the alignment of the patriarchal symbolic order with death, and on her reappropriation of feminine figures, especially Demeter and Persephone. Cavarero's creative theft of the myth of Demeter and Persephone brings to light a feminine symbolic order whose pillars are the maternal power "to generate or not to generate life" (*ibid.*: 121), and the mother–daughter bond manifested in their mutual exchange of gazes. Next to Cavarero in Nguyen's sketch is Francesca Sanvitale's novel *Madre e figlia* (1980), which "aims to corrupt the original myth through a rewriting or reworking of it through allusion" (*ibid.*). The novel tells the story of a mother, Marianna, and of her illegitimate daughter, Sonia, who narrates the story after her mother's death, as an act of reparation of their lost relationship. *Madre e figlia* is dense with references to classical myths, fairy tales, and biblical myths (such as Cinderella, Hagar and Ishmael, Mary and Anne), which Sanvitale appropriates and subverts, creating a space of legitimation of the mother–daughter bond. Finally, Nguyen analyses Dacia Maraini's play *I sogni di Clitennestra* (1981) as yet another example of mythical revisionism where the mother–daughter relationship takes centre stage. "As in Cavarero and Sanvitale's works", Nguyen remarks, "the main issue in Maraini's play is the relationship between women, namely Clytemnestra and Electra, and Maraini particularly scrutinizes the clash between mothers and daughters who often face contradicting allegiances in the paternal order" (*ibid.*: 129).

By bringing together Cavarero, Sanvitale and Maraini, Nguyen illustrates how Cavarero's philosophical reflections provide critical tools to investigate literary works that rewrite the patriarchal script, and at the same time represent a generative instance of a new symbolic in their own right. Furthermore, Re's and Nguyen's works show the receptivity of Italian literary criticism to the mutual permeability of poetic and philosophical discourses, which "proceed hand in hand as elaborations of and responses to the logic of the symbolic order" (Re, 1993: 75) – a legacy of feminist thought to which Cavarero's own style of thinking has arguably provided an invaluable contribution.

Cavarero's thought also plays an important role in critical studies that deal specifically with the relationship between mothers and daughters in contemporary Italian literature. Notably, in her study "The Passion for the Mother. Conflicts and Idealisations in Contemporary Italian Narrative", Adalgisa Giorgio refers to Cavarero's philosophy of narration developed in *Tu che mi guardi, tu che mi racconti* (*Relating Narratives*) as a starting point to analyse a "recurrent aspect of these Italian narratives, namely their metanarrative structure and the intertwining of the mother's voice with the daughter's" (Giorgio, 2002: 122).[1] Drawing on Cavarero's articulation of the relational constitution of the self, Giorgio highlights how "the daughters' narratives [...] illustrate the intricate nature of the two-way exchanges between mothers and daughters by which they legitimate each other both emotionally and symbolically" (*ibid.*). Similarly, in the introductory chapter to *Corporeal Bonds: The Daughter–Mother Relationship in Twentieth Century Italian Women's Writings*, Patrizia Sambuco reconstructs a broad map of feminist thinkers engaged in redefining and critiquing psychoanalytical accounts of sexual difference, among whom Cavarero's distinctive contribution is identified in her focus on "the reciprocal relationship between women" (Sambuco, 2012: 43), as opposed to a more hierarchical understanding of the mother–daughter bond. Such an emphasis on reciprocity offers a key to interpret texts by contemporary women writers where the daughter's perspective interacts and contends with that of the mother's in search of a mutual recognition.[2]

In more recent years, Cavarero has become a direct source of inspiration to writers. A special case in this respect is that of Elena Ferrante, whose worldwide success with the four-novel saga *L'amica geniale* (*My Brilliant Friend*) has sparked unprecedented interest in contemporary Italian women

[1] Giorgio's chapter is an impressive large-scale survey of the theme of the mother–daughter relationship in contemporary Italian women's writings, including works by Elsa Morante, Fabrizia Ramondino, Elena Ferrante, Francesca Sanvitale, Mariateresa Di Lascia, Clara Sereni, Carla Cerati, Tina Merlin, Edith Bruck, Helena Janeczek, Elena Stancanelli.

[2] Sambuco's corpus follows the path opened by Giorgio, and includes works by Elsa Morante, Francesca Sanvitale, Maria Teresa Di Lascia, Elena Ferrante, and Elena Stancanelli.

writers. In her collection of essays and interviews, *La Frantumaglia*, Ferrante cites *Tu che mi guardi, tu che mi racconti* by Cavarero as one of the works that most influenced her as a writer (together with Donna Haraway's *A Cyborg Manifesto* and Elsa Morante's *Menzogna e sortilegio*). In turn, Cavarero has discussed Ferrante's work, stressing the ways in which *L'amica geniale* represents a relational paradigm of narrative. She comments in an interview:

> If there is anything in my work that may have inspired Ferrante [...] then it is the paradigm of *relating narratives.* It seems to me that, especially in the four Neapolitan novels, Ferrante uses this kind of structure: the narrator, Elena Greco, is a woman who narrates the life of another woman, her friend Lila, and is narrating at the same time the lives of others and other people's narrations of the other woman. The two women have a very close relationship, and they produce biographical narratives of each other. [...] What permeates Ferrante's tetralogy and characterizes its originality is in fact the biography of a *relationship in progress* (Pinto, Milkova, Cavarero, 2020: 239).

Reflecting specifically on Ferrante's original construction of a relational narrative paradigm, Isabella Pinto claims that "Ferrante re-activates the work of Adriana Cavarero", in that the philosopher "connects the desire for narration to birth rather than death, thus configuring a narrative-theoretical element that we find again in Ferrante's writing" (*ibid.*: 11).

As these examples show, Cavarero's philosophy has deeply influenced contemporary Italian literary criticism, providing insightful tools to articulate a discourse on the writers' search for a new symbolic which transforms the patriarchal script, starting from the fundamental relationship of mutual recognition between mothers and daughters and the reconfiguration of the subject as ontologically relational.[3]

[3] Many more studies where Cavarero's thought plays a central role could be cited, such as for example essays on Anna Maria Ortese (Seno Reed, 2009); on Fabrizia Ramondino (Lucamante, 2019); on Elena Stancanelli (Karagoz, 2006); on Donatella Di Pietrantonio (Karagoz, 2016); on

Adriana Cavarero and Goliarda Sapienza: Anti-Essentialist Ontology

Having sketched the coordinates of Cavarero's influence on contemporary Italian literary criticism, I move on to a more detailed exploration of the work of Goliarda Sapienza and its multi-layered resonances with Cavarero's philosophical import.[4] Sapienza was active as a writer from the 1960s to the 1980s, but her success, launched by the French translation of her masterpiece *L'arte della gioia* (*The Art of Joy*), came only posthumously. Sapienza is now increasingly regarded as a major figure in 20th-century Italian literature, enjoying a high degree of popular success and attracting critical attention.

Born in Catania, Sicily, in 1924, Sapienza was the daughter of Maria Giudice, a socialist and feminist activist and an extraordinary figure in her own right, who is also currently being rediscovered after the success of Sapienza's writings.[5] Sapienza studied acting at the Academia D'Arte Drammatica in Rome, where she moved with her mother at the age of seventeen, having obtained a scholarship, and where she lived most of her life.[6] She took part in the armed resistance against Nazism, and then after World War II she worked for many years as a drama actress and in several jobs in cinema. She was afflicted with a serious depression and tried to kill herself twice; after the second attempt, she was subjected to electroconvulsive therapy and partially lost her memory; she recovered thanks to psychoanalysis and writing, managing to publish some novels, which were met with favour on the part of critics but had limited success in terms of readership. Since the posthumous republication of *L'arte della gioia* by Einaudi in 2008, which followed its international success, interest in Sapienza has rapidly grown and spread, leading to the re-issuing of previous

Elisabetta Rasy (Romero Guarro, 2019); and on Antonella Cilento (Antelmi 2018), to name but a few.

[4] For an extensive analysis of Goliarda Sapienza's work also in relation to Cavarero, see Bazzoni, 2018, and Trevisan, 2016.

[5] On Maria Giudice, see Cutrufelli, 2022.

[6] For a biographical account of Sapienza's life, see Providenti, 2010.

works and the posthumous publication of new ones, including poetry and plays.

Sapienza's works represent characters who are engaged in painful processes of identity formation and negotiation, and who carry out a strenuous struggle for freedom. They are often semi-autobiographical figures who experience at the same time deep suffering and radical rebellion, a determination to fight against social conditionings and political forms of oppression in order to carve out spaces of solidarity and joy. Cavarero's theoretical work offers relevant insights to appreciate some of the most challenging and innovative aspects of Sapienza's artistic production. Drawing on "Per una teoria della differenza sessuale" (1991), *Tu che mi guardi, tu che mi racconti* (1997) and *A più voci. Filosofia dell'espressione vocale (For More than One Voice)* (2003), I highlight three major elements of affinity between Sapienza and Cavarero: the narrative constitution of identity; the role of the voice as the embodied, contingent and relational dimension of language; and the emergence of a new female subject. Through the use of several markers of orality, also influenced by her experience as an actress, Sapienza brings the corporeal and desiring dimension of the voice into language. Her writings also engage with a highly original form of autobiography, exploring the past repeatedly in different novels according to its evolving meaning in the present, and positing relation as ontologically constitutive of the self. Sapienza's project of an "autobiography of contradictions" (Providenti, 2010: 171) creates a dynamic relationship between past and present, and configures the process of subjectivation as intrinsically narrative. Finally, in the representation of female characters who struggle to reconstruct their own identity and radically criticise any normative structure, Sapienza seeks to re-imagine the female subject, very much in line with Cavarero's project of a subjectivity that deserts and subverts the patriarchal symbolic system.

The Narratable Self

Lettera aperta (*Open Letter*), published in 1967, inaugurates Sapienza's literary activity. Narrated in the first person, it

recounts a double formation, of Goliarda as a child and young girl in Sicily and of Goliarda as a mature woman in her forties in Rome, who is reciting her story in front of an audience – the readers – as she composes it. The narrator engages with the memories of her parents, her siblings, her friends, and her unorthodox education within fascist, catholic and deeply patriarchal Sicily. Episodes and figures from her childhood compose a multifaceted and fragmented portrait of a young girl's troubled upbringing, and of an adult woman's endeavour to free herself from the weight of an oppressive past. Having survived two suicide attempts and partially lost her memory due to electroconvulsive therapy, Sapienza embarks on a journey of self-reconstruction, revisiting her childhood in an attempt to recompose her disrupted memory and regain contact with herself as a desiring subject.

Expressing the ongoing work of repairing a shattered memory and self, the narrative discourse is subject to intense fragmentation: events are linked through analogical rather than chronological associations, and characters, voices and episodes overlap to the point of becoming indistinguishable, as the narrator is caught in the middle of the process of recollecting her past. The sense of a disrupted memory, with its incoherencies, gaps and analogical associations, is performed through the narrative discourse.

The lively connection established between the process of recollecting and the narrator's search for identity in *Lettera aperta* differs significantly from the stable relationship between present and past set in "classical forms of autobiography", which are "commonly registered in some famous masculine prototypes; especially Saint Augustine, Rousseau and Goethe" (Cavarero, 2000: 68). In those works, the past is presented as concluded, detached from the present and exalted in its exemplarity. In Cavarero's words, in traditional autobiographies "the implied theory is that there exists in the first place a self-conscious subject who, setting [out] to write his life-story, translates in[to] words the substantial reality of the 'I' – which precedes and is independent of the text" (*ibid.*: 68). According to Cavarero, the traditional (male) subject uses narration to detach the present from the past. In *Lettera aperta*, on the contrary, the past is not concluded, but acts on the

present of the narrator who interacts with it. The act of remembering and narrating in turn affects the past itself, as this is dismantled and explored repeatedly, according to the mutable meaning it assumes in the present.

In *Lettera aperta*, Sapienza exhibits the process through which the self constructs its own story, a process that, in Cavarero's perspective, is intrinsically narrative, for "the self makes her home, so to speak, in the narrating memory – the inalienable dwelling of her *living her/himself, remembering herself"* (Cavarero, 2000: 34). Sapienza's writings explore the self in its ongoing metamorphosis, radically innovating the traditional autobiographical paradigm as a discourse enunciated by a subject who has reached a fixed identity and speaks from a time located after the events narrated. In Sapienza's autobiographical journey, as in Cavarero's notion of the narratable self, narration does not represent the formation of the self; in fact, it realises it.

The Voice

In the creation of a present *in fieri* – an ongoing, living present – the oral dimension of narration plays a crucial role. Sapienza's experience as an actress, first in theatre and later in cinema, is audible in all her writings. In *Lettera aperta*, narration is represented as an oral performance, which memory after memory and through the dialogue with the readers (re)creates the narrator's own identity. The act of narrating is qualified throughout the text as oral speech, pronounced in front of an audience: narration is a "sproloquio" (rambling speech) (Sapienza, 1967: 31); to think and to remember is "parlare, comunicare" (to talk, to communicate); to read is "ascoltare" (to listen) (*ibid.*: 53) and to conclude narration is "tacere" (to fall silent) (*ibid.*: 159). *Il filo di mezzogiorno* (*Midday Thread*) is also a dialogical text marked by orality, as the narrating voice intertwines with that of her psychoanalyst with whom she is sharing her endeavour of self-reconstruction. *L'arte della gioia,* Sapienza's best-known work, is a first-person narration told by its fictional protagonist Modesta, and is similarly populated by voices. Drama deeply influences the narrative structure, especially if we consider that more than half of the novel

consists of pure dialogues. The other characters are mainly present on the scene through their voices, the defining qualities of which Sapienza carefully notes. In some passages, the attraction of orality is so powerful that the other characters are able to "hear" the narrator's thoughts and respond to them.

To qualify narration as irreducibly vocal entails attributing to intersubjective communication a crucial role. In *Lettera aperta*, for example, Sapienza directly addresses the readers, who are invited to participate actively in the process of "tidying up" the narrator's room, which parallels the act of "tidying up" her memory: "Scusate ancora, ma ho bisogno di voi per essere in grado di sbarazzarmi di tutte le cose brutte che ci sono qui dentro. Parlando, dalla reazione di chi ascolta, puoi capire cosa va tenuto e cosa buttato" (I'm sorry, but I need your help in order to be able to get rid of all the ugly things in here. As I'm talking, I can see what to keep and what to throw away based on the listener's reaction) (Sapienza, 1967: 16). In *A più voci*, Cavarero develops a philosophy of vocal expression centred on the intersubjective and embodied dimension of the voice: "In the etymology of the Latin *vox*, the first meaning of *vocare* is 'to call,' or 'invoke'. Before making itself speech, the voice is an invocation that is addressed to the other and that entrusts itself to an ear that receives it" (Cavarero, 2003: 169). In Sapienza's representation, the readers actually respond to her invocation, since the narrator is able to perceive their reactions to the text as she narrates: "Vedo dai vostri visi che questa morte vi ha affaticati" (I can see from your eyes that this death tired you out) (Sapienza, 1967: 36). The narrating voice in Sapienza's texts performs her physical presence in a performative space that she shares with the readers/audience. In this way, she brings a corporeal dimension into the text, refusing to dissociate language from the body and thought from communication. Sapienza's literary operation recalls Cavarero's argument in favour of the voice – the physical and uniquely personal voice – as opposed to the abstract, universal and ultimately disembodied representations of thought and language. As the philosopher puts it: "Unlike thought, which tends to reside in the immaterial otherworld of ideas, speech is always a question of bodies, filled with drives, desires, and blood" (Cavarero, 2003: 134).

The voice constitutes the embodied and relational dimension of language, for it is always someone's voice; it links together speaker and listener, and roots language in a material exchange. The voice is also, in Cavarero's philosophy, the marker of a person's uniqueness, an ontological ground which resists the universalising feature of disembodied rationality: "In the uniqueness that makes itself heard as voice, there is an embodied existent, or rather, a 'being-there' [*esserci*] in its radical finitude, here and now. The sphere of the vocal implies the ontological plane and anchors it to the existence of singular beings who invoke one another contextually" (*ibid.:* 173). In her literary works, Sapienza constructs the text as if she were speaking in front of an audience. Through the qualification of narration as oral speech, she seeks to create with the readers an inter-corporeal and empathetic community, rooted in the vocal dimension of communication – what Cavarero articulates through the notion of "resonance". Differently from the dimension of the voice, abstract and universal rationality ties together individuals by virtue of its laws, and erases the bodily and unique existence of each individual. The centrality of the voice has, thus, a political dimension, for it grounds communication in the embodied dimension of language and the mutual recognition of singular and unique subjects. Like Cavarero, Sapienza puts the body back at the centre of individual and collective existence, as a foundation for the possibility of agency and resistance.

The incipit of *L'arte della gioia* provides a striking example of Sapienza's performative use of narrative. In this novel, and especially in the characterisation of the protagonist Modesta, the corporeal dimension plays a crucial role. From the powerful and abrupt opening of the novel, the body is exposed in its material existence and experienced in its physical perceptions:

> Ed eccovi me a quattro, cinque anni in uno spazio fangoso che trascino un pezzo di legno immenso. Non ci sono né alberi né case intorno, solo il sudore per lo sforzo di trascinare quel corpo duro e il bruciore acuto delle palme ferite dal legno. Affondo nel fango sino alle caviglie ma devo tirare, non so perché, ma lo devo fare. (I'm four or five years old, in a muddy place, dragging a huge piece of

> wood. There are no trees or houses around. Only me, sweating, as I struggle to drag that rough log, my palms burning, rubbed raw by the wood. I sink into the mud up to my ankles but I have to keep tugging. I don't know why, but I have to) (Sapienza, 2008: 5).

In this properly existentialist incipit, in which a little child finds herself thrown into the world without mastering the conditions of her existence, nor its meaning, Modesta exposes herself to the readers' recognition, first and foremost in the material, perceptive and perceived dimension of the body – "ed eccovi me", which literally translates as "here I am in front of you" (an element that is unfortunately lost in translation). This passage resonates closely with Cavarero's Arendtian description of the "human condition": "I think that ontology is not related to human nature, but rather to the human condition. Our condition is that of corporeal, unique, vulnerable human beings, dependent on one another and reciprocally exposed" (Bertolino and Cavarero, 2008: 137). In *L'arte della gioia*, the identity of the protagonist is immediately presented through its physical and relational presence in the world, as the addressed "you" is the ontologically necessary other that recognises her coming into the world. The body is thus put by Sapienza at the centre of an endeavour of redefinition of the subject, which in her narrative is itself at the centre of a project of radical social transformation. In this process, the embodied and relational dimension of the voice plays a pivotal role.

The Emergence of a New Female Subject

In her writings, Sapienza gives centre stage to female subjects, investigating patriarchal and heteronormative forms of oppression, and seeking to create and foster a new subjectivity for women. Her works tend towards an anti-essentialist and fluid representation of gender identities and sexuality, which are suitably read through queer theory;[7] at the same time, such identities and sexualities are firmly rooted in a context of

[7] See Ross, 2012; Bazzoni, 2018; Rizzarelli, 2018; Morelli, 2021.

heteropatriarchal oppression which rests on sexual differences. Sapienza's works give voice to a strong desire for subjectivity, a desire that characterises subjects – women – who occupy a subaltern position and are engaged in an emancipatory struggle, fighting to access a speaking position and to create their own symbolic worlds. The problem of female subjectivity is indeed central to all Sapienza's works, from her own autobiographical self-reconstruction, to the extraordinary protagonist of *L'arte della gioia*, to the depiction of female prison in her later works. While Sapienza's works deconstruct normative identities and aspire to sexual and gender fluidity, they also engage firmly in the construction of a female subject and the struggle against patriarchal power. This is a third way in which Sapienza's works come close to Cavarero's philosophy. For subjects in a subaltern position, postmodernist discourses on fragmentation, fluidity, openness and weakness of the self carry quite a different meaning than they do for subjects in a dominant position. The idea of a weak subject indeed can be used by subjects in a dominant position to keep the weak subjects weak. In Cavarero's words,

> For man who has placed himself and who has understood himself for thousands of years as the strong subject – this recuperating of a weakness generously left in the custody of the "more of the less" woman is indeed the flirting of a subject who does not uproot the foundations of his own representation (and why should he?) but replaces quite freely the categories of his logic. The path of "*pensiero debole*" is not the path by which a woman can arrive to speak herself, to think herself, to represent herself (Cavarero, 1987: 48).

In her approach to deconstruction, Cavarero, together with thinkers such as Rosi Braidotti and Monique Wittig, takes into consideration different positionalities with respect to power. They qualify theories and practices, including deconstruction itself, as endowed with different power–values, because descriptions of identities are themselves political. Such a perspective allies with minorities' emancipatory struggles and instrumental identity politics, while nonetheless remaining

radically anti-essentialist. Similarly, the type of subjectivity Sapienza looks for throughout her narrative is configured as an open self, sustained by its constantly renovated contact with the vitality of a living body and therefore subject to continuous evolution and change. Cavarero's words once again provide relevant insights into the kind of subjectivity represented by Sapienza's works:

> From a relational and expositive identity, which is immersed in the flux of existence and which is unpredictable by definition, the life-story of a self whose identity gives itself as a *simple* unity, as the coherent development of an immutable substance, certainly cannot result. This unity is rather the temporal succession of *an* unrepeatable existence, which, continuing to appear, made a story for herself – or, rather, the temporal configuration of an *ipse* (Cavarero, 1997: 72).

Projected towards the future and yet rooted in the desiring matter of the body, Sapienza's narrative responds to the political and artistic challenge posed by post-structuralism by creating new ways of thinking the relationship between the self and the world that, without replicating an essentialist and logocentric understanding of the subject, are still able to produce agency and emancipation. In its deconstructive and constructive inspiration, Sapienza's literary work resonates profoundly with Cavarero's philosophical enterprise.

Conclusion

Cavarero's philosophy has deeply influenced, and continues to influence, discourses on literary works by women in contemporary Italy. In the interpretation of literary texts, her work is used together with that of several feminist thinkers who seek to deconstruct the patriarchal symbolic order and make space for an alternative imaginary that may give voice to women's experiences, from Luce Irigaray to Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva, Elizabeth Grosz, and Luisa Muraro – to name but a few. If there is a distinctive element in Cavarero's work that

has been particularly influential in the literary field, this consists of her constant attempt to go beyond a deconstructive approach, without ever replicating a metaphysical and essentialist outlook. "By speaking of one's uniqueness and material singularity within feminism", writes Elisabetta Bertolino, Cavarero "theorizes a feminism beyond the essence of the feminine, a sexual difference beyond sexual difference, and an ontological approach beyond ontology itself" (Bertolino and Cavarero, 2008: 132–3).

Cavarero's poetic framing of philosophy and philosophical framing of literary discourse is an essential methodological element of her anti-essentialist ontology. Such an attempt to *create a symbolic* without *founding an essence* confers an originally "positive" spirit upon Cavarero's work, which has made it particularly useful in reading those innovative elements of women's writings that are striving precisely to give rise to a new subjectivity, beyond the critique of an existing order of affairs. Cavarero's "phenomenological horizon" brings her close to the open and embodied inspiration of much literature by contemporary women writers:

> literature is a polysemous language that undoes the arrogance of every system claiming stability. [...] Philosophy is constructed by removing from language the liveliness of the body, the communicative sense of its resonance and, consequently, the voice that invokes another voice before and beyond what is said (Bertolino and Cavarero, 2008: 161).

This is particularly relevant for Sapienza, whose work is positioned at the intersection of feminist-materialist discourses and post-structuralist ones. Through notions such as the narratable self, ontological relationality, and the embodied dimension of the voice, Cavarero's work offers important elements to trace the coordinates of the emergence of a female subject as a historically subaltern subject who carves out a space of self-expression. An emerging female subject whose trajectory is incommensurable with that of the male subject represented in literary histories, who dictates the aesthetic and ideological values of contemporary literature. Cavarero's philosophy gives

us a vocabulary with which we might begin to tell this different story.

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Reclinations and Reckless Inclinations in Amelia Rosselli's Poetry of Resistance

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Abstract

The long-standing work of Adriana Cavarero has provided an original and insightful perspective to investigate the poetics of Amelia Rosselli. The many theoretical and ethical challenges posed by Adriana Cavarero throughout her career have enabled an intensified and deeper understanding of the reasoning beyond poetic creation and, above all, of the ethical posture Rosselli assumed. The aim of this article is to observe and analyse the intertwining textual and sexual politics in Rosselli's production, in light of the most recent theories offered by Adriana Cavarero on the concept of inclination, particularly in the dual acceptions of *emotional* inclination and *poetical* inclination, both to be interpreted as political postures, so as to reconstitute into a *unicum* what has been historically separated in and by the patriarchal discourse.

Keywords: Amelia Rosselli; gendered mimesis; inclinations

Biography

Dr. Marzia D'Amico is a Junior Researcher (FCT) at the Centre for Comparative Studies (CEComp) at the Universidade de Lisboa. Their research explores the interplay between tradition and experimentalism in its forms, expressions, languages, and codes, with a focus on the socio-political implication behind non-male's production of poetry verbally, vocally and visually. Besides scholarly articles, they have had their poems, prose, and contributions on literature, queerness, and feminisms

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Con la sua morte si è riposata la fatica, si è stesa la lotta.
(Amelia Rosselli, *Impromptu*)

I don't want to lean in: I want to lie down.
(Ali Wong)

Mimesis, Gender, and Gendered Mimesis

Received ideas and practices have ineluctably marked the general trend of common academic thought, often in a totalising manner. In the cracks laboriously generated by the existence and production of the subaltern subjects of *universalising* thought, cross-disciplinary studies have become a fundamental instrument for revision. This is the case for (political) philosophy and entwined branches of studies such as literary theory. Not surprisingly, as womxn and scholars, we owe Adriana Cavarero many of the steps taken in the direction of awareness, which she initiated and pursued with impeccable precision and solidity.

The interdisciplinary approach of this article wants to contribute to the ongoing elaboration of a paradigm shift in thinking of the world and knowledge, rather than applying feminist critique to traditional disciplines. However, still nowadays, hegemony's continued impact defines the spaces open to and for feminist debates and projects, which tend to be still isolated and undervalued in the broader academic context, and often encounter obstacles or even controversy due to an outdated but still fashionable scepticism, as remarked by Nidesh Lawtoo. In an interview with Lawtoo (2021), Cavarero clearly summarises concepts that have been explored in depth since the publication of *Nonostante Platone* in the 1990s to the present day. As Cavarero writes in *Inclinations*:

> [i]n my theoretical perspective, subjectivity is entirely constituted by others. Therefore, there is a relationship with others that is not something added onto the self-sufficient subject: there is no self-sufficient and autonomous subject to start with (Cavarero, 2016: 11).

Despite the difficulties encountered, Lawtoo insisted on developing a debate on gendered mimesis in order to problematise the masculine and supposedly autonomous subject, and the related assimilation of alternative subaltern subjects (e.g. the female subject): "[a]mong the various geometries of modernity, the prevailing one involves precisely the individualistic ontological model, which can be found in Kant" (*ibid.*).

This function is imposed in a patriarchal order within which, willingly or unwillingly – but more carefully, we will observe, unwillingly – non-male subjects find themselves in a forced condition that equates to homologation by assimilation (in which, however, sexual difference is nevertheless recognised and valued as a negative feature), or to the conscious choice not to reproduce this apparently solid monolithic, upright identity that expresses a solitary power through its verticality. Without wishing to take up too much space here,[2] it seems important to present here a series of keywords indicative of and supplying insight into culturally rooted human behaviour since at least the 19th century and with a media resonance that is particularly worrying for today's context.

In order to circumscribe the concept of mimesis to our specific interest here, and to be able to more accurately employ the feminist lens necessary to understand the gender dynamics that are enacted within and beyond philosophical discussion, we will refer to Adriana Cavarero herself who, on several occasions, with her ability to speak the language of philosophy in transversal public contexts, reminds us that *mimesis* is a Greek word that we translate, approximately, as "imitation". The

[2] We refer to the careful analysis conducted by the aforementioned research group, and in particular to the free online lecture and discussion presented by Willow Verkerk (see References, video last checked on 31st July 2022).

concept of imitation – to be considered in the structured and cultural behaviour of the subjects that make up the social community, rather than the use of techniques to represent ideas, as Plato employed the term – is closely linked to today's policies that push non-male subjects to imitate forms of existence proper of male subjects, emulating masculine behaviours instead of creating new paradigms. In the current system, one is compelled to *mimic* behaviours to succeed, and the most synthetic form of thinking is that condensed in the "lean in" philosophy promoted by Sheryl Kara Sandberg, an American business executive, billionaire and COO of Facebook (2013).

Despite the use of the verb *to lean* – which could confuse the discourse of inclination hereby presented through the reasoning of Adriana Cavarero – the most currently widespread "feminist philosophy" that the mainstream media has promoted in the system of capitalistic and patriarchal order guides non-male subjects to the emulation of poses considered the only ones possible in the social scheme of things that allow for the achievement of success. Obviously, in order to understand how deeply interconnected these truths that are given as natural actually are – and to address them in their function, which is, the continuous re-presentation of a pattern of oppression and exploitation – a careful deconstruction of each of the elements is necessary.

Instead of reinforcing individual actions, which entail a homologation to the given system and a personal path to success that does not change the context of oppression, *de facto* limiting and hindering the collective struggle for liberation, Cavarero shifts the focus to a non-mimetic form of existence that breaks the cycle of reproduction of today's dysfunctional mechanisms. Underlying this educational model, which refers to the form and formula of inclination, is the concept of empathy, which is fundamental to centralising the relationality of subjects beyond the individualism proposed as a positive horizon by the Kantian, capitalist, patriarchal model:

> emphasizing vulnerability is not a matter of correcting individualistic ontology by inserting the category of relation into it. It is rather to think relation itself as

> originary and constitutive, as an essential dimension of the human, which – far from limiting itself to putting free and autonomous individuals in relation to each other, as the doctrine of the social pact prescribes – calls into question our being creatures who are materially vulnerable and, often in greatly unbalanced circumstances, consigned to one another (Cavarero, 2016: 13).

In this article, it will be argued that Amelia Rosselli, by refusing to emulate male behaviour and by offering an alternative to the latter's "bellicose" modalities, is showing us a path for a communal existence based on reciprocity, and suggests a new posture in the world and an ethical behaviour to the readers.

Amelia Rosselli

Amelia Rosselli was born in 1930 in Paris, where her family was sheltering under the status of political refugees. In that same city in 1940, her father and uncle – respectively, Carlo and Nello Rosselli – founders of the anti-fascist party Giustizia e Libertà, were assassinated under the direct orders of Benito Mussolini. At the time only ten years old and already a refugee in France, Amelia was uprooted once again and began a journey that took her to England, the United States, then finally to Italy – the place she held closest to her heart – and then back to England (to study), and Florence (at her grandmother's). She spent the last years of her life in Rome, specifically in Via del Corallo, where she died on 11 February 1996, choosing to throw herself out of the window of her flat on the same date on which thirty-three years earlier Sylvia Plath had committed suicide. Between the 1940s and the 1950s, she devoted herself to composition, ethnomusicology, and music theory, not without compiling a few essays on the subject. In the meantime, in 1948, she began working for various publishing houses in Florence as a translator from English. Later on, through his fraternal friend Rocco Scotellaro, whom she met in 1950, she became acquainted with Carlo Levi and other prominent names in Roman literary circles, coming into contact with the artists who would generate the avant-garde Group 63. In the 1960s, she

joined the Italian Communist Party, while her texts attracted the attention of Pier Paolo Pasolini, among others. In 1963, she published twenty-four poems in "Il Menabò", and it is on that occasion that her name was indelibly associated with the term "cosmopolitan", as defined by Pasolini in the introductory note to her poems. However, as she claimed and strongly affirmed:

> The definition of cosmopolitan goes back to an essay by Pasolini that accompanied my first publications in "Menabò" (1963), but I reject this appellation for us: we are children of the Second World War. When I returned to Italy, I attached myself to Rome. Cosmopolitans are those who choose to be. We were not cosmopolitans; we were refugees (Zacometti in Cortellessa, 2007: 220).

The nomadism practiced by the Rossellis, in fact, was not a form of freedom and liberation but rather a continuous state of escape (from war, persecution, repression) that inevitably became part of her poetics because it was an imposition that fell from the public domain onto the personal one. Her experience as a stateless person – *apolide*, as she preferred to define herself – was the result of the condition of exile that she experienced at length. The historical and collective trauma permeated the family context, her personal growth, and regularly returns and is returned to in her writing.

In the anthology, *Poeti italiani del novecento*, Pier Vincenzo Mengaldo includes one woman only: Amelia Rosselli. Mengaldo defines Rosselli's experimentalism as the expression of something "intensely informal, in which for the first time that drive towards the absolute reduction of the language of poetry to the language of the private sphere is realised" (Mengaldo, 1981: 995). Like Pasolini, Mengaldo also reduces Rosselli's voice to the expression of a language that is "feminine" and therefore, inevitably, confessional and irrational, where it is not even a direct expression of illness. The choice of adopting Italian as a "lingua d'elezione" – the language of his father, a martyr in the very first resistance to fascism – rather represents a political as well as an affective stance, and it is a strongly conscious choice. The particular education she received did not allow Rosselli to have an idiom of reference that could be considered a "mother

tongue"; at the same time, however – unlike her older brother, John, often defined as an *enfant prodige* – Amelia's familiarity with languages in a structured manner was absolutely reduced, a manifestation of the precariousness in which she lived, and which found a new form and controlled expression in her poetic writing. Famously, she spent most of her life pursuing a universal form of poetic communication; in the critical-theoretical text entitled "Spazi Metrici" (1964), Rosselli theorises a rhythmic-phonetic regulation that offers a universalising system of poetic language:

> The language in which I write from time to time is a single one, whereas my logical and associative sound experience is certainly that of all peoples, and reflective in all languages. And it is with these concerns that I set out at a certain point in my adolescence to search for universal forms (Rosselli, 2012: 1245).

The essay focuses on the use of geometric concepts in relation to the ideal material of words: their graphic permanence and sonorous enunciation must be chosen carefully by the poet, because these elements will trigger a response beyond the purely visual and sonorous: poetry activates thought.

Inclinations

As previously mentioned, the work of Adriana Cavarero has been enlightening for approaching the poetics of Amelia Rosselli in many ways. For this investigation, we have chosen to focus in particular on the concept of inclination that is so widely discussed in *Inclinations: A Critique of Rectitude* (2016). In this book, as so often in Cavarero's ways of understanding knowledge and critical thinking, many references to the arts are present, offering suggestions as to ways in which to implement the connections between philosophical thinking and applied reading. Cavarero's combative and tellurian ability to describe political thought as inextricably an expression and an action of communal relational existence finds a new lease of life in the belligerent choice to entrust poetry with the ethical as well as

the aesthetic communication of Rosselli's political thought. This combination of successful intentions makes the terrain particularly fertile.

Before exploring the relationship between social geographies and poetic geographies, it is important to emphasise that the role assumed historically by the poet has a strongly male-dominated history. The very concept of the *madwoman*, in the various meanings explored in detail by the seminal text "The Madwoman in the Attic", offers us a narrative and critical cataloguing of the deviances imputed to female subjects practising ways of writing and, in particular, poetry. The status of poet rather than writer has remained fortified in its masculine sense, this because – as suggested – the role of the poet in European societies was a privileged one, and a "quasi-priestly role";

> How then – since poets are priests – can women be poets? The question may sound sophistic, but there is a good deal of evidence that it was consciously or unconsciously asked by men and women alike as often as women suffering from "the poetic passion" have appeared in the antechamber of literature (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979: 546).

The latter reflection is an elaboration of Virginia Woolf's well-known thought on the canonical absence of Judith Shakespeare, a pindaric yet exact critique of the formation of an alternative genealogy of existence and writing practice. As Cavarero comments on Woolf's further note,

> the "I" is straight, lone, self-sufficient, independent, domineering, deadly, and prevaricating. Focussed on itself and wrapped around the rigid vertical axis of his erect posture, the "I" does not need others (Cavarero, 2016: 40).

Although a similar grammatical consideration cannot be applied to the Italian language, in which the first person is indicated by "io", I believe that the reasoning behind such an intuition remains nonetheless valid when it comes to analysing the profound solidity of the poetic subject and the authorial subject. This, however, is particularly true for the poet intended

as a man, developing a poetics of the singular subject, expressed in the first person, that claims for itself the right to universality instead of working towards a flowering of co-presences and co-existences, of elaborating a potential (poetic) self that stands out in its uniqueness but remains open, relational, and consciously chooses not to stand out by emulating the male tradition.

Emotional Inclination(s)

In this section of the article, dedicated to emotional inclination(s), it is my intention to consider two specific passions: the first filial – with a critical focus on the relationship with the dead, as per biographical and poetic data – the second erotic-amorous. Although both themes can be traced in the Rosselli's *opera omnia*, we will dwell here only on the poem *La Libellula (Dragonfly)* in order to circumscribe this first reading operation – that could be extended in the future – and to put the initial hypotheses to use.

(Always) A Daughter. Rejection of verticality with respect to the dead

As it is well known and as I previously mentioned, Rosselli's life was marked by tragic deaths since her early childhood: personal, such as the murder of her father, and collective, such as the Jewish persecution and the victims of the Second World War. The political nature of her father's all-too-brief existence ineluctably links the personal and political levels, placing Rosselli before the inevitable mingling of the two already at a very young age. It would then be limiting to place the political and poetic reasoning of the author – who is continually confronted, in verse, with her survivor's guilt – solely in the direct relationship with the trauma of her father's death.

Amelia Rosselli continuously absorbs and re-enacts the moment of trauma, rather than working towards overcoming it. If in part this is a melancholic function, as Freud would have it, the choice to write in total adherence to this condition manifests an awareness that reaches the essential, and allows one to hypothesise a political choice of not letting go, of

continually reintegrating the trans-generational and collective trauma, that would otherwise risk being forgotten. This is clearly not a form of paranoia similar to those Rosselli experienced due to her mental condition; in fact – and unfortunately – although we promised as a community never to let genocides happen again, the historical conditions in which we find ourselves are a sad testimony to the fact that human memory is, actually, all too often, too short.

> Definitively encapsulated in his selfish verticality, when the survivor enjoys the moment of triumph over death, he also experiences an elating "sense of invulnerability" (Cavarero, 2016: 83).

In Rosselli's extensive poetics, however, we find above all a positioning of the poetic subject as lying in the grass ("io ero stesa nell'erba putrida"/"I was laying in the rotten grass", v. 14, in that same position of "le salme dei nostri morti"/"the corpses of our dead", v.7, *La Libellula*), anchored to the earth, sometimes kneeling ("non posso più muovere le ginocchia pieghe"/"I can no longer move the bent knees", *Serie Ospedaliera*). The gaze cast upon the world always comes from below, if not from a horizontal position, equal to that of the dead resting beneath the earth. Thus, vulnerability becomes a chosen positioning, a human and ethical posture through which to let the sense of collective history flow in the relationship between subjects. What is particularly interesting in Rosselli is that the relational subjects through which she constitutes her own self are as much the living as the dead, if not more significantly the latter. A movement of exchange is demanded of the ghosts who have not said their farewells, and towards them Rosselli herself moves.

> She embodies the bridge in between these worlds, something towards which the poetic subject of Rosselli also seems to aspire. Rosselli, in fact, articulates a relational poetics with the dead, to the point of establishing a literally named "Dialogo con i Morti" (Dialogue with the Dead) in which the poetic subject is, once again, a *daughter*. In this poem, the poetic subject invites a plural "you" (in Italian, explicitly "voi") to descend and reach for her with open

> arms: "scendete voi, abbracciate questa vostra | figlia che annaspa"/"come down, from you, embrace this daughter | of yours" (D'Amico, 2022: 98).

A clear example of the assumption of the role of daughter as a poetic statement is the recurrence of three figures from the Greek mythical pantheon, nominally: Electra, Cassandra, and Antigone. The disquieting presence of death in their youth is what Tandello calls the recurrence of a Persephone's curse (Tandello, 2007); the maidens are invoked not as muses but as possible doubles who enact a cyclical recurrence of the archetypal experience. This continuous attempt to relate to a female pantheon affirms a practice of alignment with tradition within the perspective, however, of reformulating its characteristics for a conscious, debated, and rich identification with authorial agency.

Moreover, Cavarero's analysis of the dual etymology of the word "vulnerability" lends itself in both meanings to this reading. If, on the one hand, the eternal daughter – girl, la fanciulla, figlia – is an example of the "human body in its absolute nakedness, without hair, covering, or protection" (Cavarero, 2016: 159), the sought-after vulnerability understood as an open wound is a perfect metaphor for the contamination that Rosselli undergoes in the beginning, and that then, consciously, germinates by transforming it into hybridisation. The language of the adolescent, of the girl in becoming, is a metaphor for language itself, which only partially identifies with the forms of the past, and therefore aspires to free itself from constraints. Rosselli's poetic language, in its hybridisation of languages, music, styles, aspires to be communitarian. For it to be so, the uniqueness of the expressions of the many that make up the community must be recognised. Rosselli's community of reference is the inclusive one that, not by chance, speaks to the people and speaks the "[d]ifficult language of the poor!" (*La Libellula*, v. 474).

(Actively) A Lover. The passionate turn that makes one dance

One quality of Rosselli's poetry is certainly that of choosing to put herself at stake in the poetical context of love lyrics, without

eschewing but indeed confronting the European and more specifically the Italian tradition (just think of the Petrarchan songbook that is the Document), through an elaborate rewriting constituted by homages and critical attacks, dispossession and re-appropriation. Love is a neuralgic point in Rosselli's writing, as much as the death drive, which is a specular theme. The amorous inclination, driven by passion, is a central element that is never repudiated but rather selected as a theme of confrontation with the historical-literary context of patriarchal imprint.

The challenge to the lyrical amorous hegemony that always sees the woman as the object of the male's desires is analysed by Tandello in her studies on the Campanian *calchi* in the poem *La Libellula*, and which presents one of the greatest experiments in the inversion and subversion of amorous and erotic tensions and drives in the classically heteronormative dynamic.

Io non so se tra le pallide rocce il tuo
sorriso m'apparve, o deo dalle fulvide chiome
o cipresso al sole io non so se tra le pallide
rocce del tuo sguardo riposavano l'incanto e
la giovinezza. Io non so se tra le ruvide guance
del tuo sguardo riposavano gli addii o la pietà.
Io non so ringraziarti e non so la tua dimora
e non so se questo grido ti raggiunga. Io non
so se l'infante che ti cerca è la vecchia che
ti tiene in balìa
(*La Libellula*, vv. 248–56).[3]

As established by Tandello, for a woman writer, engaging in amorous discourse, whether in its erotic or stilnovistic forms

[3] I know not if among the pale rocks your / smile appeared to me, O god of radiant locks / O cypress in the sun, I know not if among the pale / rocks of your gaze rested enchantment and / youthfulness. I do not know if between the rough cheeks / of your gaze rested farewells or pity. / I do not know gratitude and I do not know your abode / And I do not know if this cry reaches you. I do not / know if the infant who seeks you is the old woman who / keeps you in her thrall. (*Where not otherwise indicated, all translations are the author's own).*

(the two designated major modes), presents significant challenges. It entails adopting a discourse that positions her as the desired object and muse rather than as the creator herself, "and it implies the problem of establishing a poetic identity through the dialectic of desire and response" (Tandello, 1989: 33). Through a series of correspondences and just as many mismatches, Rosselli's literary product plays on the instability of the male and female subject in an interrelation that breaks away from the previous literary datum that saw the feminine as a symbolic you – only a receiver, an object, never subject – and brings it into the centre of the scene, finally granting agency to the female subject. This is certainly the case for the re-writing of Scipione's "Sento gli strilli degli angioli", one of the most explicit passionate passages of the poem.

Calpestata io l'avea. Nella tua barca, l'unica
tua. Nel tuo cuore, nel sangue olivastro e già
imbrattato di amore! Abbracciata io l'avea! Io
l'avea abbracciata! La tua serena stanca voce
da uomo che carpisce: io ti cerco e tu lo sai!
Io ti cerco e tu lo sai e non muovi l'aria per
raggiungermi! Sento gli strilli degli angioli
che corrono dietro di me, sento gli strilli degli
angioli che vogliono la mia salvezza, ma il sangue
è dolce a peccare e vuole la mia salvezza; gli
strilli degli angioli che vogliono la mia salvezza,
che vogliono il mio peccato! che vogliono ch'io
cada imberbe nel tuo sangue strillo di angelo.
Sento gli strilli degli angioli che dicono addio,
l'ho sverginato io, ritorno questo pomeriggio
(*La Libellula*, vv. 332–46). [4]

[4] I had trampled it. In your boat, the only one / yours. In your heart, in your olive-coloursed blood, already smeared with love! I embraced her! I / embraced her! Your serene, tired voice / of a man who grasps: I seek you and you know it! / I seek you and you know it and you do not move the air to / reach me! I hear the cries of angels / that run after me, I hear the cries of the / angels who wish my salvation, but the blood / is sweet to sin and wants my salvation; the / shrieks of the angels who want my salvation, / that want my sin! that want me / fall inexperienced in your blood shrieks

However, in the few chosen verses, how can we perceive the desire of the author to explore and let the female lust explode in verse ("Io ti cerco e tu lo sai e non muovi l'aria per / raggiungermi!", which states clearly her desire, and also adds the passionate swirling movement to reach her lover who, on the other hand, does not move the air – he remains instead motionless: indifferent, or waiting); a lust that is often dominated by a sense of guilt ("Sento gli strilli degli angioli / che corrono dietro di me, sento gli strilli degli / angioli che vogliono la mia salvezza", the angelic figures hold back the sweetness of carnal sin and the explicit desire, they attempt to contain the passion to keep the subject in the position of the innocent, saved and sanctified maiden); and which indelibly marks the tradition of female (rather than male) education in the various religions, and which, in turn, have also marked the secular socio-cultural context.

Eros & Thanatos: the passionate maiden, the dead maiden

To conclude this first part of the investigation, a further example from *La Libellula* comes in handy, which – more explicitly than in the cases presented above – holds together the threads of childhood inclinations, to be read equally as erotic drives and death drives and to be observed, jointly, as feminist rebellion.

In *La Libellula*, we find the case of Hortense, the maiden of Rimbaud's text who is not only "a misogynistic representation of the feminine governed by the more than vaguely sadistic symbolist iconography of erotic waste" (Tandello, 2007) but also, Rosselli herself observes, an emblem of the social misery within which the female condition is forced. At the root of this denunciation is Rosselli's rewriting, which subtracts the feminine from the functionality of every relationship – even the sexual one – restoring the dimension of reality in her verses, and the noble expression of desire as an autonomous and valid form.

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of angels. / I hear the cries of angels saying farewell, / I have deflowered him, I will return this afternoon.

In the text, this image gets challenged in two main ways: first, the interpretation reclaims Hortense as an unequivocal feminine symbol, eliminating any ambiguity; second, it reappropriates the feminine fender as a symbol associated with female symbology (Tandello, 1989: 74).

Trovate Ortensia: la sua meccanica è la solitudine
eiaculatoria. La sua solitudine è la meccanica
eiaculatoria. Trovate i gesti mostruosi di Ortensia:
la sua solitudine è popolata di spettri, e gli
spettri la popolano di solitudine. E il suo amore
rumina e non può uscire dalla casa. E la sua
luce vibra pertanto fra le mura, con la luce,
con gli spettri, con l'amore che non esce di
casa
(*La Libellula*, vv. 430–8).[5]

Having completely erased the idea of the enchanting receiving love figure, Hortense's physicality, as presented to us by Rosselli, is composed of "monstrous gestures" (v. 433), and her amorous passion "rumbles and cannot leave the house" (v. 435). By emphasising the abnormality of the movements and the declared physical constriction, Rosselli undertakes to "unmask the 'suppression' of the *fanciulla-in-fiore* as a conduit to the Beyond by a narcissistic and voyeuristic male subject" (Tandello, 2007: 60), restoring agency (and desire) to the poetic female subject instead.

The solution to this narrative node lies precisely in the transition from inside to outside, a classic *topos* of female confinement and a socially imposed "natural disposition" to private life, and in what we might imagine to be the passage from a vertical to a horizontal position. In fact, as early as v. 450, we find Hortense "[s]miling and fragile among the lilacs of the valley", where the direct relationship between the maiden and

[5] Find Hortense: her mechanism is ejaculatory / solitude. Her solitude is the ejaculatory / mechanism. Find Hortense's monstrous gestures: / her solitude is populated by spectres, and the / spectres populate her solitude. And her love / ruminates and cannot leave the house. And her / light therefore vibrates within the walls, with the light, / with the spectres, with the love that does not leave / the house.

death is not interrupted but rather takes on a more intense nuance, reinforcing the fundamental link between the abandonment of the aforementioned "ejaculatory solitude" (now open to relational possibilities) and a horizontal position reminiscent of that same Rosselli – a poetic subject stretched out like the dead, who refuse vertical participation in a certain existence.

> Rosselli inhabits the burial home of her father, and exposes her poetic subjectivity, constituted by a multiplicity of selves and languages, those of victims and exiles: she maintains, in fact, that history lives in the fragmented subject. In such poetic labour, her voice strives to penetrate the inner core of language itself, only to denounce its precarious existence, on the brink of collapsing into the meaninglessness and foolishness of destructive and annihilating acts and events: the triumph of the death drive. Nonetheless, hers is a chant full of volcanic passion, compounded by the intermingling of Eros and Thanatos, whose revolutionary power subverts, parodies and dismembers well-established, institutionalized discourse; it is power fuelled and nourished by her only reliable love, her love of the phonosyllables (Antinucci, 2017: 1342).

Poetical inclinations

Another aspect relevant to the investigation suggested up to now is the discourse on the political value of reclaiming one's authorial role – as a woman – in the literary field, as well as of assuming a position (expressed in verse) of difference with respect to the masculine, within both the literary and the political tradition. It will once again be useful to examine the verses of the long poem *La Libellula*, with some inserts from poems in English[6], and then move into the wheat fields of the only other long poem written by Rosselli, *Impromptu*.

[6] These are extensively analysed by Zungri in her doctoral thesis (*Il corpo insonne. Ritmi e visioni nella poesia in inglese di Amelia Rosselli,* Scuola

Authoriality rather than authority: violence and power do not belong in the new paradigm

Once again in the poem *La Libellula*, we find a fundamental statement for the deeply ethical interpretation of the inexorable combination of the personal and the political, the literary and the communal.

[…] Io sono una che
sperimenta con la vita e non può lasciare nessun
rivale toccargli il cuore, le membra insaziabili.
Io sono una che lascia volentieri la gloria agli
altri ma si rammarica d'esser trattenuta dagli
infelici nodi della sua gola. Io sono una fra
di tanti voraci come me ma per Iddio io forgerò
se posso un altro canale al mio bisogno e le
mie voglie saranno d'altro stampo!
(*La Libellula*, vv. 209–17).[7]

The insistent repetition of the subject's being expresses not only the state of pure essence but also awareness of it. It is the subject herself who defines the subject, and acknowledges her central position in the narrative, by outlining the very qualities of being and her actions. "I am", in fact, "one who experiments" (v. 210): experimentation, in life as in art, is resolved here in an intricate experiential correspondence. Experimentation itself becomes a vital act, and an expression of the desire for extroversion: it experiments "with life" and with the text. And yet this experimentation, this extroversion, is sometimes held back by an act of censorship operated by the subject herself, a behavioural education systematically demanded of the female

Normale Superiore di Pisa, 2019), not yet published at the time of the release of this volume.

[7] […] I am one who / experiments with life and cannot let any / rival touch their heart, their insatiable limbs. / I am one who willingly leaves the glory to / others but regrets being held back by the unhappy knots in her throat. I am one among /so many voracious like me but by God I will forge / if I can another channel to my need and / my cravings will be of another mould!

gender and here internalised – and elaborated in the signalling of the same – so much so that she suffers its not total expression; what makes the subject suffer is not the possible absence of glory, but the regret that to moderate her own inspiration and consequently her own success is her "being held back / by the unhappy knots of her throat" (vv. 213–4). The solution seems to be found in the next verse, in which Rosselli as an author partly escapes the agony of the male-descended battle, and defines the space for a new expression – one that develops in the consciousness of tradition but also in the autonomy of the female subject: "another channel" (v. 216). An original channel of expression that can only be reached through that desired extroversion, by placing the awareness of one's own existence in the relational function with one's fellow man (the community) but in a perspective that is, at last, as conscious as it is mutual: achieving a completeness of existence that occurs not *against* the Other – according to the patriarchal tradition – but together with it.

As mentioned, in the studies conducted on the poems in English, we find examples that articulate what has been proposed, and that usefully serve as steps in the reconciliation of such a vast and well-defined poetics as Rosselli's. In particular, Zungri here proposes an interesting reading of these short verses, which are chosen as a mirror of what was anticipated in the analysis of *La Libellula*.

Why cry, why stamp
your feet on this hot ground, rain
ridden, of the tears which fall beloving
on your hot head
(*Sleep*, p. 994).

In her wider study of Rosselli's poetry in the English language, Zungri comments on the selection of this verse:

> The subject wonders [here] to whom their rebellious, miserable and material poetry is directed, and what use is there in violently stomping the ground to leave one's footprints on the earth, which is only moist because it is watered by a universal weeping and not really fertile. The

> question, then, is where does the desire for revenge against the injustice and slaughter of the world lead [...]? (Zungri, 2019: 315).

That same blasphemous glory, made up of fighting among peers to get to the top of the social-literary hierarchy is dismissed. How can the poet worry about their own glory and stamp their feet on the ground offended at not being recognised as high and as important as they believe themselves to be, when that same ground they tread is wet with the tears of the victims of the society within which the poet writes? What is instead the opportunity to stand out, poetically and politically, in this context of vertical elevation and aggressive grandiosity?

"Paesani zoppicanti" and the "clown faunesco": a political and poetical metaphor

Amelia Rosselli's writing is not without further postural poses of the poetic subject that largely differ from phallic verticality. This observation of solid, vertical development often returns in the architectural structures (such as the Eiffel Tower "che / non resta in piedi se non fosse per la sua permessa / bruttezza", towering over Paris with its ugliness, as mentioned in *La Libellula*), that impose themselves in the context and imagination of the author. A limpid example of male personification with the verticalisation of elements, in this specific case "natural" rather than architectural, is a passage dedicated to her fraternal friend, Pier Paolo Pasolini, towards whom gratitude is never lacking but with whom an intellectual diatribe remains suspended, fuelling a continuous poetic and political reasoning that is tested precisely in the pose/position assumed in the world.

[...] al sole di tutti i splendidi
soldi che hai riconosciuto
nella Capitale del vizio

che era Roma? E tu frassine
oh lungo fratello d'una volta
chiamato Pierpaolo, un ricordo

soltanto ho delle tue vanaglorie
come se in fondo fosse l'ambizione
a gettar l'ultimo sguardo
dall'ultimo ponte
(*Impromptu*, 2).[8]

The political invective is here combined with the poetic invective, and the generic "you" is transformed into a specific nominal "you": Pierpaolo Pasolini. Against the backdrop of a malignant Rome that corrupts souls with vice, a theme already present in *La Libellula*, the "long brother of once upon a time" (v. 2.16) stands out: the poet, friend and companion, is directly called into question despite the death of the latter separating them. The choice of staging the possible decisive dialogue with the dead in verse is not an occasional choice in Rosselli's poetry, but a real pillar of her poetics. The dialogue is not limited to the personal and political level of the two poets; Rosselli also makes this text interact with *The Ashes of Gramsci* through a series of intertextual references (first and foremost, the use of the word "brother") that create a horizontal dialogicity. The botanical reference itself ("ash tree" 324, v. 2.15) contains significant twinning: firstly, the wording contains the correct, or at least the current variant ("ash tree") as a note in the margin of the documents preserved in Pavia – despite the fact that the final choice is to maintain a "dead" version of the term; at the same time, the English translation of *frassino* is "Ash Tree" – the reference to ash contained in the English equivalent insists on the mortuary theme, and it more explicitly refers to the Gramscian ashes addressed by Pasolini (a poem which opens a dialogue similar to that undertaken here by Rosselli). "But 'vanaglorie' and 'ambizione' deny it the 'reverenziale' aura that surrounds the figure of Gramsci. If the tone is still affectionate, it is also bluntly critical" (Tandello, 1989: 193).

Far from seeking glory, Rosselli here seems to be pointing the finger at her poet friend who – subjugated by the vain (and

[8] [...] in the sunshine of all the splendid / money you recognised / in the Capital of vice // that once was Rome? And you, oh ash / oh long-time brother / called Pierpaolo, a memory // only I have of your vainglories / as if after all it were ambition / to cast the last glance / from the last bridge.

useless and evanescent) aspiration of poetic glory – loses sight of the truth of political action. The glory of poetry is inevitably linked to vanity, but also to its inconsistency. Rosselli thus reflects on how far poetic action can really act on the context of the real, or how far it does not recreate alternative worlds that distance it from the truest being of the real. Pasolini is the "long ash tree" that stands out, who is recognised, celebrated (and in fairness, also attacked) because he is able (and above all, allowed) to stand in that vertical position which is the one required of poets for success, in order to gain a presence in the events of literary history. A phallic position that, despite his queerness, Pasolini assumes for the sake of glory, prioritising the patriarchal structure to which he can be assimilated more easily than Rosselli, who is instead "storta come un ramo" / bent like a branch (*Serie Ospedaliera*).

Rosselli's posture, on the other hand, is clearly ascribable to a rejection of verticality to be understood as a dominant force, as an ascension of rectitude. Rather, it is important to focus on the statement in verse that comes from the same poem that mentions Pasolini in the second section quoted above, *Impromptu*.

… E se paesani
zoppicanti sono questi versi è
perché siamo pronti per un'altra
storia […]
(*Impromptu*, 13).[9]

This short extract condenses the teaching received from the poet and friend Rocco Scotellaro, the socialist and anti-fascist lessons of her parents, the fine work applied to the language in an attempt to make it truly completely accessible, and the aspiration – if not, in fact, the conviction – that the time is ripe for a new history, literary and material.

It is the villagers, the common people, the workers (probably of the land) who inhabit the small marginal spaces that are called upon, rather than the big cities' structures and

[9] And if limping / fellow countrymen are these verses it is / because we are ready for another / (hi)story.

residents that, as in the case of Rome – mentioned above and repeatedly addressed in her work – often lead to political corruption and exclusionary intellectual salons that reinforce the dynamics of hierarchisation of knowledge and exclusion of minorities. The key word, however, remains that *limping*, a true indicator of an apparently flawed poetics and posture. Making limpness one's own posture is a cultural and revolutionary act that breathes new life into the possibility of constituting structural and social alternatives, a way to embrace a more uncertain trend and slowed-down mobility. In a social dimension within which showing oneself to be vulnerable corresponds to a risk of total overpowering, Rosselli chooses to identify her own existence with this manifested vulnerability, and with the strength that comes from enacting this practice of vulnerability and sharing of the same.

At the same time, it is made explicit how the linguistic counterpart is a fundamental component of the poetics: it is Rosselli's verses that find form in the "limping villagers". The correspondence between human and poetic postures remains intrinsically related; it is therefore useful here to return to a discussion of Pasolini's famous note introducing Rosselli's poems in 1963.

> Uno dei casi più clamorosi del connettivo linguistico di Amelia Rosselli è il lapsus. Ora finto, ora vero: ma quando è finto, probabilmente lo è nel senso che, formatosi spontaneamente, viene subito accettato, adottato, fissato dall'autrice sotto la specie estetica di una invenzione che si fa da sé (Pasolini, 1963: 66).[10]

However, Pasolini's intuition denies the work of caring for the words that takes shape between the mind and the action of making the word choice poetic and public, effectively removing authorship from Rosselli's considered choices both on the surface and in the linguistic substratum – a personal baggage

[10] One of the most striking cases of Amelia Rosselli's linguistic connective is the slip. Now fake, now real: but when it is fake, it is probably so in the sense that, as it forms spontaneously, it is immediately accepted, adopted, fixed by the author under the aesthetic species of a self-made invention.

that, however, binds her to the historical trauma of (forced) dislocation caused by the second World War. Instead, by looking at the option of the slip of the tongue as a term that opens up the authorial choice of adapting language to understanding rather than vice versa, we can better understand the intent of formulating a limping linguistic path as it is really common, a linguistic vulnerability of mixture and exposure of the trauma through which we might recognise each other in the attempt at a direct, intense, horizontal connection.

Another valid example of the rejection of verticality and masculine solidity in the poses and postures assumed by Rosselli's poetic subject can be found in the figure of the Shakespearian fool, as extensively investigated – *inter alia* – by Chiara Carpita, whose figure of the truthful jester also recalls that of the nominally mentioned "clown faunesco". Through an interesting analysis that, as intended here, makes ample reference to Cavarero's theories and in particular the text *Inclinations*, Chiara Carpita proposes her own reading of the staging – which almost coincides with a real putting into play – of Rosselli's poetic self.

> The Rossellian self in the various literary masks assumed, in the confusion of I/you and the male/female exchange, is always characterised as a voice from the margins, the fool who speaks out against the power of logos and violence, the social injustice of the polis (Carpita, 2017: 23).

In her punctual investigation published in 2019, Sara Sermini also develops a relevant contribution to the definition of the Shakespearean fool in Rosselli's poetics, dating it to a letter to Scotellaro written in 1952. In Rosselli's work, the fool resembles the figure on the tarot card: a wondering subject, unafraid to experience the world and to describe it independently from societal constructs. Through this double, the poetic self finds the freedom that is necessary to report on the world, and reaches the most truthful ways of (re)presenting it in its radical unfairness and mystical devastation. By adopting the mask of the fool for itself, the poetic self can unveil society's masquerade, and challenge the restrictive norms through irony. This parodic pose of the poetic self offers an alternative way to

overcome the inadequacy and the political injustice that affects the marginalised elements of society. Through numerous quotations from Rosselli's *opera omnia,* Sermini tracks the disenchanted literary artifice of *creating* a fool by presenting her poetic self *as* a fool, as a "clown faunesco". As Sermini shows, these methods of Rosselli's poetic practice reveal her authorial approach to the question: "And are you crazy really?" (*Sleep*).

Against the backdrop of these very solid investigations already conducted by Carpita and Sermini, this contribution intends to reinforce their theories by also mentioning a passage from *Variazioni Belliche* (1964). Although the connection to the fool or "faunal clown" of the *Impromptu* poem is not immediate, we find the poetic subject here performing unusual and playful movements: literally, somersaults.

Se per il caso che mi guidava *io facevo capriole*: se per
la perdita che continuava la sua girandola io sapevo: se
per l'agonia che mi prendeva io perdevo: se per l'incanto
che non seguivo *io non cadevo* [...]
(*Variazioni Belliche*, p. 84, my emphasis).[11]

A different form of instability than limping, and yet providing for the same rejection of the stoic male posture. In the paradoxical framework constituted by the concatenation of sentences that follow one another in a presumed logicality dictated by "if"..."then", the poetic subject performs astonishing gestures of physical freedom, disarray, mayhem: an act of (an attempt at) joyful time. In a whirling movement that takes up the entire poetic narrative (as indicated by fortune – the wheel, on closer inspection another card of the major arcana like the fool – and the pinwheel), assisted by the somersaults, the subject manages not to fall despite the agony and in the context of loss, precisely thanks to his whirling non-conforming movement.

[11] If it was the destiny that led me, I somersaulted; if it was the ongoing whirl of loss that I comprehended; if it was the overpowering anguish that claimed me; if it was the awe I refrained from chasing, I did not falter. [...].

Conclusion

Just as in Cavarero, who uses art history and in particular the figurations of Artemisia Gentileschi as a starting point, similarly we will start from the bourgeois framework within which the Rossellian scene painted in the poemetto *Impromptu* occurs. In the 10th section of the poem, the actions performed by the subject and nature are articulated according to concession: the grammatical structure functions as that of the hypothetical generating consequence. In verses 10.1–4 we read: "If I allowed my knee to / touch the earth, it was with the permission / of the corn that bowed / to my passage"; the subject's induced action of kneeling is mirrored in the action of the corn. The relationship between the female subject and nature is direct, honest: to rest and recollection (kneeling recalls the religious theme of prayer, but also a refusal of the verticality of the aggressive crossing of the fields like militia), nature indulges the act and responds with extreme respect and supports and celebrates (with a similar bow) the subject's choice of inclination.

Nonetheless, the cornfield in which the subject finds "rest with / her legs not in the air but spread" (v. 10.8-9) is not a true place of abandonment, and her body burdens the "belly of that pictorial / field made of others" (v. 10.10-11). This painting of which her image is a part therefore does not belong to her, and indeed it is that plural you (voi) that represents the otherness that created it – painted it – in an attempt, once again, to control the frame of its existence. Every perception is distorted, the place itself is unreal for those who observe it from the outside (aware now that it is a painting: "[…] rimane curva nel salotto / borghese del campo squadrato del pittore in borghese", vv. 11.1-3) but also within it; in this orchestrated to the detail: staging of roles, actions, and responses, the person who works the field is absent. The gaze of the bourgeois erases the truth of the world from his representation of the world.

The field is "squared", as the frame that contains it wants it to be, and has been painted by a "pittore in borghese", which,

playing on the polysemy of the term,[12] emphasises the condition of the class criticised in the poem, but also adds to it a feeling of mistrust given by the attempt not to pass as such. In this fragment, the choice of declining the composing figure to the masculine ("the painter" is explicitly "il pittore", who imposes his gaze and handles the context within which the female subject is enclosed) becomes of particular relevance. The choice is therefore not only to define the collective universal through the masculine but rather to create a distance between the binary expressions of gender.

In particular, the descriptive experience of the pictorial image stratifies the encroachment on several levels: not only horizontally between the arts, but also vertically between the different dimensions of the real (and unreal); and above all, this continuous encroachment is dictated by the female subject's ability – both poetic and authorial – to use nomadism (as per Rosi Braidotti) to her own advantage. The subject responds to constraint with mobility: on the one hand, she exercises her alterity outside the frame, outside the ranks, outside the categories, outside pure lyricism. On the other hand, dispossession as a constitutive practice of a new social formulation, as well as the encroachment of gender – sexually, literary, and artistically – and as an aspiration to represent the universal, are but further ways of "experimenting with life", to quote Rosselli herself. But it is always an experimentalism of commitment, aimed at reconstituting the meaning of the word and of being in the world. As observed by Mengaldo, in his introduction to the anthology *Poeti Italiani del Novecento*, when confronting Rosselli's poetics it can be observed:

> Rejection, far more immediately existential than programmed, in short, of a general alienation and (self-) marginalisation from the upper levels of history and culture where Capital and Power dwell (Mengaldo, 1981: LXI).

[12] The expression is played on the ambivalence of the meanings of both the bourgeois painter and the painter in disguise.

However, Mengaldo is once again missing the point when it comes to highlighting the substantial gender-afflicted constrictions which Rosselli is forced into.

> Rosselli's poetry claims precisely [the] need for a relational ontology that opposes the logic of violence. Rosselli's poetic "I" is a decentralised subject, which rejects binary oppositions and is not afraid of its own vulnerability, which indeed becomes a political instrument of denunciation, "mute resistance" as Cavarero says (Carpita, 2017: 30).

That is the case expressed in *Impromptu*, in which what is not at all improvised is in fact the use of the movement between inside and outside (from time, from space, from the frame) to indicate the extraneousness from the History of the winners, and at the same time reinforcing the principle of internal/external dichotomy that afflicts the female subject in her position as a lyrical object.

Lo spirito della terra mi muove
per un poco; stesa o seduta guardo
non l'orologio; lo tasto e lo
ripongo al lato della testa, che
non sonnecchiando ma nemmeno
pensando, si rivolse al suo dio
come fosse lui nelle nuvole! Rinfiacchita
l'infanzia muraria di questi versi
non sono altro che pittorica immaginazione
se nel campo di grano rimango
a lungo stesa a pensarci sopra.

Con la sua morte si è riposata la fatica, si è stesa la lotta
(*Impromptu, 12*).[13]

[13] The spirit of the earth moves me / for a short while; lying or sitting I watch / not the clock; I touch it and / place it by my head, which / isn't dozing but nor is it / thinking, turned to its god / as if it were in the clouds! Weakened / the walled childhood of these verses / are nothing but pictorial imagination / if in the cornfield I remain / long stretched out

The access to the dimension of *Impromptu* occurs, as demonstrated, through painting, an image – giving art that is an imitation of reality. Likewise, poetry is an imitation of the real world, and as such can be devalued to mere representation incapable of activating change, but Rosselli, as we have seen, stages this imitation, and recognises its limits; above all, however, she shows its layers of investigation, of breath, of access to forms of thought otherwise difficult to discuss. As it can be guessed, despite the relaxed pose that the poetic subject takes on in the context of the poem, contemplative philosophy does not interest the author. This false pose of letting the world happen is in fact the result of a public presence and a political and *authorial* choice.

Rosselli does not make herself a model to follow but makes herself recognisable, observable; she exposes herself and thus becomes a model. Unlike the masculine model that forcibly induces emulation for survival, Rosselli does not impose but suggests her own postural choice: she teases the reader's unconscious and conscious mind through emotional and cultural stimuli. Compassion and politics come together to create a new system of existence, a performance of gender and action different from that of men, which opens up the possibility of a queer revolt.

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thinking about it. // With their death the toil rested, the struggle stretched out.

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Judgement, Freedom, Solidarity: Thinking with Arendt

Judith Butler[1]

Abstract

This contribution interrogates practices of judgement, freedom and responsibility, and puts them to the test of experience in contemporary political life. The text questions the idea of responsibility as an exclusively individual matter, and points out how methodological individualism both produces moral narcissism, and, in its most exacerbated and liminal forms, fuels the recent spreading of violence, fascism, and femicides. The proposal is to move away from an individualistic view of morality and embrace ethical relationality, that is, subjectivities in connection: living creatures in relationship with others, interconnected on a living planet. By beginning with this shift, it is possible to think of judgement and responsibility beyond the individualistic vision, whilst maintaining the focus on singularity: a judgement that is concerted action, plural and performative, acted by plural (which does not coincide with collective) subjects.

In dialogue with Hannah Arendt (and in particular her *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and *On Civil Disobedience*) and Adriana Cavarero, the text attempts to establish another framework, based on interdependence, interlocution, and reciprocity.

Keywords: responsibility; judgement; singularity; Arendt; Cavarero

Biography

Judith Butler is an American philosopher who has made important contributions to the fields of feminism, queer theory, political philosophy, and ethics. Butler is Distinguished Professor at the Graduate School and formerly Maxine Elliot

[1] This piece was presented by Professor Judith Butler in Madrid and UNAM in October/November, 2022. It has been originally edited for publication in this volume with the author's permission.

Chair at the Department of Comparative Literature and the Program of Critical Theory at the University of California, Berkeley, and holds the Hannah Arendt Chair at the European Graduate School (EGS). Butler's major works include *Gender Trouble* (1990), *Bodies that Matter* (1993), *Antigone's Claim* (2000), *Precarious Life* (2004), *Frames of War* (2009), *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (2015) and *The Force of Nonviolence* (2020).

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When we seek to determine responsibility, we usually ask: responsible for what? But also, responsible to whom? Presupposed is a set of actions as well as someone who is affected by it, and there is generally an "I", a subject, who is asked to take responsibility or is held responsible, regardless of whether or not they accept their own responsibility. We generally understand responsibility to be bound up with prepositions: we are responsible *for* the earth, or we are responsible *to* someone, or to an entire group or class of people. And we think of responsibility in relation to failure. In English, we take responsibility, or we fail to take it. We say that responsibility is mine. We can certainly talk about the responsibility of institutions to abide by policies, or states to pursue just laws, or to protect and empower those on the margins.

All that assumes that some set of actions should ideally be taken, and that the failure to act in certain ways is a failure of responsibility. And yet, in many of these instances, the subject who takes responsibility for something, or even for others, whether human or animal, is very often conceived as an individual. At least in some parts of the world, responsibility is framed within a methodological individualism. If I am most concerned with taking responsibility and not failing, then I am concerned with myself, my good name, my sense of having done what I should have, what I was called upon to do. The moral discourse that asks me to take responsibility for any number of issues or people, for that matter, is also the one that can make me more self-concerned, and this self-concern can become, under certain circumstances, a form of moral

narcissism. And the self-blame or self-judgement that holds me irresponsible can become, as we know, a form of negative narcissism, a self-absorbed concern with what I have failed to do.

And yet, if we look at our world, whether we consider climate change or femicide, rising fascism and police violence, it is more important than ever to emerge from moral self-preoccupation to respond to the events as they unfold, and to the kind of world that emerges when those committed to a politics of hatred are elevated and empowered. We rightly feel that we *must* respond, and we do, but we cannot respond well if we remain within the framework of individualism, or if we respond to every moment without an analysis of the forms of power that pervade our lives. When one denounces an injustice in order to show that one is a person who denounces injustice, whether or not we are effective, whether or not we are in solidarity with others, then we act only as individuals, and our denunciations fade almost as soon as they are enunciated. If my purpose is merely to show that I oppose emerging fascism, that is not quite enough. We will not make a new world through taking moral stances that only fortify individualism, and take us away from collective action.

Of course, I accept that there is a singularity to each of us, as Adriana Cavarero has shown, and I oppose forms of collective identity that deny that singularity. At the same time, we have to challenge our very sense of discrete selfhood when we come to understand ourselves as living beings, related to other living beings, and to the living earth that is now threatened with destruction or, rather, is being destroyed as we speak. We have to let that discrete selfhood be challenged in coming to understand our basic obligations to others as defining, in part, the ethical bond between us, a bond that operates in and as social relationships. I may enter into a contract with you, or I may promise you something, but prior to any contract or promise, I am already in relation to you. I do not start life as an individual. If anything, I become individuated in time, and even that remains an always tentative situation. And if you are a living creature like me, as I assume you are, and we are living creatures among other such creatures, depending on life processes that constitute the earth, then already we are

in a complex set of relations when we set about deciding how to act, and how best to take responsibility. If I separate myself from you when I decide how best to honour the responsibility I have to treat you well, then I have already taken distance from the ethical relationship that binds us. If we give priority to this point of view of ethical relationality over methodological individualism, then the way we think about responsibility changes. It may be that I become less preoccupied with whether this "I" has taken responsibility than with changing the very way we think about living on earth with other earthly creatures; if our lives depend on each other's lives, then the nature of our obligation to one another changes, as does our obligation to the living planet.

How do we make judgments under such conditions? Do we act as individuals when we judge, inspecting our conscience and acting alone? Or are we related to others in the act of judging, responding anew to the circumstances of the world? Most of us who read Hannah Arendt have been concerned with how she formulates judgement, for it is clear that when we judge, we are not simply applying a principle to a set of situations. We are also responding to a situation that often demands that we judge in a new way. We are judging what is right and wrong, justified and unjustified, but our judgement is a response, and it depends on our responsiveness. Although many have argued that the rule of law is what we most need to affirm, they do not always distinguish between the kinds of legal regimes that are worth supporting, and those that demand our opposition. When legal regimes become corrupt, or when they are complicit in the murder of those who are exercising rights of assembly, expression, or protest, then we are surely right to stand in opposition to such laws. And yet, when we stand in judgement of the law, when we, for instance, decide that a set of policies or, in fact, a legal regime is a criminal one, then we have to ask, are we outside the law, or against it, or are we, sometimes unwittingly, exercising a principle that has not yet been embodied by the law, but should be?

In the eyes of some states, we become criminals when we challenge the law, when we ask that the law embodies justice. If we oppose the law because we have judged the law to be unworthy, or harmful, or even criminal, we are engaged in

judging. To judge is not simply to show how a specific instance fails to conform to a general norm, but to interrogate the very norms that have defined the field of action and responsibility under the law. For Arendt, such forms of critical judgement were not the prerogative of individuals acting alone; judgement required a political understanding of what our relations to one another are, and what they should be. And it was bound up with history, for in the wake of the murderous Nazi regime, there were new crimes, new historical configurations of criminality, that were executed by laws in the service of a genocidal regime. And now, if we consider the ongoing destructive force of extractivism; the destruction of the earth for the purposes of profit; the rise in violence against women, trans, indigenous, and lesbian and gay peoples, of racial minorities of all kinds, of religious minorities as well; if we consider the way that hatred itself has been elevated to a political position, we are compelled to judge the situation together and in a new way. To judge, to judge the law, is to respond to new forms of legal power and legal violence, and to find forms of collective responsiveness in which we can both think and act together.

If we ask where do we stand when we make judgements about new forms of destruction that are affecting the planet, the answer is not just in this particular location where each of us is, for our locations are now intertwined; each location implies the others, that destruction of the rainforests in one part of the world affects the ecosystems in all parts of the world. We are, as it were, outside of ourselves, and rightly so, when we judge and act, for one acts not just for oneself and one's own history, but for the world in which that history can be told, the earth without which no common endeavour is possible.

Whoever "we" are must be elaborated theoretically and politically; our historical responsibility is to encounter a changing and ever more destructive world with new practices of judgement, ones that we craft and enact in common, and that fundamentally changes the sense of the common in which we are living, or trying to live. For we can only persist as living creatures in this world if the world, the earth, regenerates itself as a complex, dynamic, inter-relational, and living set of processes. Where we are positioned is already *within* that world and outside of ourselves, dependent upon an earth and a world

that are no longer separable from one another, if they ever were. It is already as an interconnected and interdependent life that I seek to preserve life, and this means that the "I" who would hold itself separate and discrete is already failing to grasp the task at hand. When we ask who judges, or where judgement is happening, we are asking about all the ways that we seek to think together about our world, about the form that thinking takes when we undertake it collectively. In line with Arendt, I would say that judgement is a kind of action, even a concerted action, one that we undertake in common, and not only in relation to what the common has been, but what it can be. So, dreaming and wishing are part of our judging, anticipating a new world, perhaps a new form of law that recognises our interdependence.

For instance, at the end of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Arendt delivers a judgement against Eichmann, one which she believes the Israeli courts failed to execute properly. She writes, "you have carried out, and therefore actively supported, a policy of mass murder" (1963: 279). Eichmann's final crime is that he acted as if he had the right to decide with whom to share the earth. In accord with the policies of the Nazi regime, he represented those who thought that they could determine with whom to "share the earth", and who decided that they did not need to share the earth with the Jews. We should add the Roma, the communists, the gay and lesbian people, the disabled, the ill, and the poor, among others. Arendt's brutal conclusion is that Eichmann deserves to die because no member of the human race "can be expected to share the earth with you" (*ibid.*). I do not share her support for the death penalty, but I find her reasoning instructive, and it may lead us to a different conclusion than the one she defended.

Let us consider what Arendt is doing when she judges in this way. First, she judges not simply as herself, but in the name of the so-called human race. Arendt makes clear that moral judgement is not the same as legal judgement, and even asserts that legal regimes should be judged within broader moral frameworks. Significantly, she also claims that Eichmann failed to exercise judgement, and holds him personally responsible for that failure. In judging him, she exercises and enacts the kind of judgement that he failed to exercise. And yet, in the

scene that she creates at the end of this book, she delivers a death penalty, thus affirming the death penalty as legitimate and appropriate. When she voices the judgement, she speaks as a plural subject, as a "we" who is invoked at this moment, suggesting that judgement is not simply an individual act, but an implicit or explicit recognition of plurality itself. But what kind of plurality is this? Can we take our cues from her own use of the plural "we" in this final sentencing?

When Arendt says "we", when she judges as a plural subject, she is positioning herself as part of a larger humanity. That humanity is plural, which means that all those who are part of it are at once singular or distinct but also bound together in a living, differentiated, and connected way. When Eichmann and the Nazis acted to kill whole populations, by their very action they sought to distinguish between a set of humans with the right to persist on this earth and those who lacked any such right, that is, the right of some to belong to the earth, while denying the right of others to that same belonging. This demographic distinction was not just a mental event or a written policy, but a set of actions, a systematic form of state conduct, genocidal in nature. So, the distinction drawn is also a form of conduct, a social and political policy. The crime he committed was to attack plurality itself. For Arendt, there can be no human outside of plurality (and we have to ask about animals, for she excluded them from the plurality she defended). Hence, a crime against humanity is an attack against plurality, that is, an attack on the very complex and open-ended character of what I would call social bonds. She is speaking with a plural voice, if not the voice of humanity, which takes revenge against the man who has attacked humanity.

Of course, Arendt is originally writing these lines in a journal, and lacks all legal power to actually sentence Eichmann to death. Her judgement is not only plural, but performative. It takes place in an imagined scenario, a hypothetical scene, a subjunctive voice: in other words, if she had had the power to sentence him, this is the judgement she would have made. She judges in the name of plurality those who would destroy it, but she is also depending on an imagined scene to deliver her judgement. In some sense, she represents that plurality; in another sense, she is trying to articulate what that plurality can

be. She is not unified with that plurality because, first of all, plurality cannot be unified, and there is no way to fully overcome the singularity of perspective that is hers alone, the distinct way she gives voice to a plural condition. Similarly, she does not let Eichmann stand for all Nazis. She is asking why he failed to disobey genocidal laws, for disobedience was his moral obligation. He should have exercised judgement, exposing and refusing the illegitimate character of a genocidal legal regime. The Israeli courts are also to blame because they speak in the name of the nation, and their trial was a form of nation-building. As Arendt makes clear, plurality cannot be defined by the nation-state; in fact, plurality operates as the alternative to the nation and to nationalism. The crime at issue is neither committed by an entire nation nor committed against an entire nation, but commits a breakage or rupture of that plurality that, by definition, cannot know nationality, cannot be bound by nationality, and finally ought not to be.

To some degree, Arendt seeks to install a post-national framework for conceiving of plurality, one that would then serve as the basis for legal decision-making about crimes against humanity, a basis she finds nowhere actually instantiated in the law of her time. Judgement here emerges at the limit of law, and in the wake of its failure. The "we" she seeks breaks with the "we" circumscribed by the nation-state, any "we" that belongs to the nation. Plurality not only names differences and inter-relations, but serves as the basis of judgement and the form of its enactment. It is not only the multivalent voice through which legitimate judgement takes place, but a form of concerted action. Regarded as a spontaneous and even creative act, judging "produces its own principles by virtue of the judging activity itself" (Arendt, 1963: 27). Let us note, judging is here a collaborative activity, and it is not one that you or I can undertake alone.

As I mentioned, Arendt's theorisation of judgement takes place at the limit of law. On the one hand, in the postwar years, legal systems left stranded many who expected that law would be a bulwark against racism and fascism, anti-Semitism, and systemic genocide. On the other hand, the courts could not rightly judge these unprecedented crimes precisely because existing law could provide no precedents for these catastrophic

events. As a result, judgement must do something other than apply a law to an existing case. It must both imagine and create the principles or criteria that would be able to grasp the crime, but also specify why this crime is a crime against humanity. In turn, humanity has to be thought anew not on the model of individualism or nationalism, but as an unwieldy form of sociality, what Arendt calls plurality, which makes our political lives complex, conflictual, and open-ended.[2]

I would add, we each approach the common world through a perspective that is invariably upended and revised through its encounter with other perspectives. We do not occupy or defend "a position" that belongs to us alone, or that remains fixed in time regardless of every challenge. Indeed, none of us has a fully informed understanding of the world, for only an understanding built through multiple perspectives stands a chance of gaining that understanding. To have a point of view, to make a fully individual judgement, is thus to offer a perspectival and revisable view, to enter into a form of public discord that alone can yield a better understanding, a fuller picture. Indeed, the point is not just to get the existing world right, to give an adequate account, but also to criticise destructive power through recourse to an imagined plurality that knows its living character is bound up with the diverse forms of living on earth.

Cavarero puts it differently, noting that democracy emerges through a plural voice, which is not one voice, but a scene in which every speaker enunciates a "vocalic uniqueness" (2021: 74) as well as an "echo of a resonance" (*ibid.*). Politically, this plurality has to be understood as interactive, and though I emphasise the discord among perspectives that inevitably follows, Cavarero draws our attention to demonstrations and events of surging, insurgent democracy where "an interactive

[2] Linda Zerilli, in her book, *A Democratic Theory of Judgement*, argues that the capacity to judge is a defining feature of democratic citizenship. This capacity emerges "in the absence of a concept or rule" (2016: 265), and can never be conditioned by membership in a nation-state. She remarks further, "for Arendt, to belong to a democratic political community is to have a 'common world'" (*ibid.*) which is precisely not to share a single view of that world, but to approach it perspectively, to set forth an array of perspectives characterised by discord.

plurality that expresses its ontological and relational status through the physical uniqueness of single, embodied voices" (*ibid.*) that can speak or sing in unison, but who are neither absorbed into a collectivity nor left isolated in their individuality. What is created is "a common space of interaction" (*ibid.*) and so a positing of political form. In this way, judgement draws on the plurality of concerted action, and creates, by its very action, a new space and feel for democracy.

I began this part of the discussion by referencing what is living, not just the living character of every person, but the living bond between people, and the way that our lives depend upon the living and regenerative understanding of the earth, or the planet. Judgement itself is a living activity, plural and unwieldy, constantly faced with an historical world whose shifts demand new forms of political engagement, response, and improvisation. Early in Arendt's essay "On Civil Disobedience" (1972), she distinguishes between the conscientious objector – the individual who refuses to serve in the army – and the civil disobedient. Interestingly, the former is an individual who generally acts according to the dictates of their conscience, but the second is actually never an individual. The one who engages in civil disobedience is not one, but also, in her view, a member of a group, an organised minority, or even a mass movement. So, although we can isolate the individual acts of civil disobedience, those acts establish that individual as part of a group, if not a collective brought together through what she calls "a community of interest" (*ibid.*: 55). Civil disobedience in its most general form is a refusal to follow the law, but that refusal is not my refusal or yours, but one in which we are linked, an action that we might, with Arendt, call concerted action, a term that allows her to sidestep the more Marxist conception of collective action. The civil disobedient is never a hero, never the one who stands out from the crowd; the civil disobedient is the one whose action is not one's own, who is already bound to others in and through the act.

Significantly, Arendt is not interested in conscience, understood as the higher law found in the internal subjective life of the individual. The kind of disobedience we call civil is one that takes shape in social life, and gains its meaning there. Arendt is interested less in moral purity or in the individual's

private relation to the law, than in the broader political problem, that is, the world in which a wrong has been committed; the future of the world that is affected by the wrongs that have been committed (*ibid.*: 60). In other words, if I ask, what kind of conduct can I live with, then my ability to live with myself becomes the highest norm, and the problem of conduct becomes not only a form of moral purism, but moral narcissism. She is less interested in identifying "good men" or "good humans" (*ibid.*: 65), since their goodness, if understood as a moral virtue, a consistent relation of self to self, always runs the risk of losing sight of the world, even becoming politically irresponsible. She worries that when "conscience" is invoked by those who wish to practise civil disobedience, they generally act according to rules that are negative: they stipulate actions that one ought not to do, but they do not "spell out certain principles for taking action" (*ibid.*).

Arendt goes part of the way in helping us establish another framework. The one who acts in defiance of unjust laws cannot act merely as an individual in accord with conscience and still be political. Rather, one has to act with others who are acting in the same way, and there has to be a relative anonymity in that action, for it originates in the space between us, in the relationship itself. If several people act in accord with their own conscience, does that make a difference? Yes, it does, but they no longer act from conscience, but from their bond with one another. They have forfeited the individuality of their action not to become an undifferentiated mass, but rather to become a differentiated collective. If several people act as disobedients, then none of them act from their individuality. Indeed, whatever else civil disobedients are doing, they are taking issue with the social form of individualism; they are refusing heroism; and in this way, they are refusing both a masculinist form of individuality and moral narcissism in the name of political action. There are ways of reading her that expose the risks of military heroism and its masculinisation now.

However, Arendt seems to fail us when she turns to the question of police powers. She insists upon a distinction between criminal disobedience and civil disobedience. Apparently, criminals break the law in ways that radical social movements do not. She clearly opposes criminal violence, and

praises police power when she writes "criminal disobedience is nothing more than the inevitable consequence of a disastrous erosion of police competence and power" (*ibid.*: 74). And yet, can one develop a stable typology according to which criminal and political forms of disobedience are distinguished? One reason typologies like this do not work is because "criminality" is sometimes tactically attributed to groups as one way of destroying their mobilising powers. The attribution of "criminality" to a social movement is a tactic that threatens its members with prison or expulsion or police violence. As we know, social movements are often called "criminal" when they go against a legal regime or its policies, and this means that the very definition of "criminality" changes according to the tactics of the state and its own acts of censorship. We might defend Arendt here, pointing out that she is precisely saying that radical movements engaged in civil disobedience should be treated as criminal. If she wants to say that, she would have to show first why they are sometimes treated that way, and why it would be wrong to do that. But she gives no account of why that criminalisation of dissent and disobedience does take place as often as it does. Criminality does not exist by itself, but only in relation to a specific legal regime. And that is one reason why there is no criminality as such. I am willing to call certain actions criminal. But when we do that, we are referring to a legal order, whether an existing or a potential one. There is no criminality outside the law. And yet, any critical position taken toward a given regime of law can be called criminal. In the end, if every political form of disobedience can be cast as criminal, can we ultimately distinguish between political and criminal disobedience? When civil disobedience is itself criminalised, then the very distinction upon which Arendt builds her case seems to come undone.

The problem, of course, is that civil disobedience generally assumes an existing legal regime as its background. It is, after all, the disobedience of certain laws. Etienne Balibar makes the point that because legal regimes require obedience to the law, they presuppose the possibility that disobedience is possible, and therefore must be contained. Actually, Balibar puts it in this way: "without the possibility of disobedience, there is no legitimate institution of obedience" (2007: 735). Seen that way,

disobedience is required for institutions of obedience to emerge and to make sense. Yet, Balibar stays within a dialectical framework, whereas Elena Loizidou (2013) asks whether we might think of civil disobedience as the emergence of forms of community that are not defined by the state or its laws, indeed, if the collective action that begins as civil disobedience becomes a way of imagining a future, imagining beyond the temporal and spatial horizon of the state and the market. Similarly, Robin Celikates (2016) demonstrates that civil disobedience has been framed within a liberal model, and thus fails to grasp the power of the practice – which includes a critique of the liberal model of politics in favour of a more substantial and radical political opposition to social inequality.

Arendt remarks that civil disobedients are neither with the law nor against it, but outside of it. She writes:

> Civil disobedience arises when a significant number of citizens have become convinced either that the normal channels of change no longer function, and grievances will not be heard or acted upon, or that, on the contrary, the government is about to change and has embarked upon and persists in modes of action that show legality and constitutionality are open to grave doubt (1972: 74).

Let us be clear: there are right-wing and reactionary groups that can, and do, act as civil disobedients, constituting themselves as "concurrent majorities" (*ibid.*: 76). She points out that pro-slavery groups committed civil disobedience, dissenting from anti-slavery laws. Thus, it makes no sense to romanticise civil disobedience as if it always, or necessarily, generates political consequences we want to affirm. And yet, it does suggest that forms of association and collectivity can emerge on the side of government, constituting a problem for state legitimacy. The civil disobedient, in her view, is neither a rebel nor a traitor. They have left the social form of individuality and, in so doing, open up a space of collective practice and imagining unrestrained by liberal politics and existing legal norms. In their practice, they take issue with legal positivism, which claims that one should follow the law because it is the law. For positivists, there is no outside to the law: for civil disobedients, the outside

of the law is opened by the refusal to follow the law. It is thus a refusal not in the name of a higher law or even necessarily a better law, but in the name of the community bound together in the act. Not only a displacement of individualism, narcissism, and masculinism, but the initiation of a form of collective imagining that moves beyond the constraints imposed upon the political imagination, that is, in other words, that very movement.

Further, it is a way of thinking about the kind of reciprocal trust and consent upon which legal orders depend. Where there is consent, there is always the potential of dissent. Arendt writes that "all contracts, covenants, and agreements rest on mutuality [...] [and] this mutuality binds each member to his fellow citizens" (*ibid.*: 86–7). She imagines the reciprocal action of promising, a form of making a bond with another that establishes the social connections without which contracts and agreements make no sense. This is an ideal moment in Arendt, one that seeks recourse to a pre-political community or society without which politics itself is impossible. "This is the only form of government in which people are bound together not through historical memories or ethnic homogeneity, as in the nation-state, and not through Hobbes' Leviathan, which 'overawes them all' and thus unites them" (*ibid.*: 87). Her point is that people are not bound by cultural or racial identification nor by nationalism, nor by the fear inspired by state violence, but through "the strength of mutual promises" (*ibid.*).[3]

This account of how people become bound to one another relies on a conception of freedom, for if we do agree to follow laws, we do so, Arendt argues, by virtue of a tacit consent. Indeed, she writes, "we all live and survive by virtue of a *tacit consent"* (*ibid.*: 88). This is not the consent that I give to you or to a set of laws, and neither is it one that you, as an individual, make; rather, it is a mutual consent that we give to one another that is prior to any codification in law, that may be said to be

[3] Balibar puts it this way: "individuals reciprocally grant each other rights in the public sphere, the right to speak, to begin with, which is perhaps the 'concrete' anthropological figure of the 'right to have rights', the right to claim rights" (2007: 734).

the condition of possibility of any such codification.[4] In other words, whatever freedom this is, it emerges between us, in and as the exchange, in and as a form of mutuality, and it does not have to be vocalised to become binding. In contrast with Gramsci's view that the state manufactures consent, and that a mix of consent and constraint is required by hegemonic state structures, Arendt followed what is called the "associationist" view, drawing on Tocqueville's account of voluntary forms of association. If we suspect that consent is a counterfeit term, that we only think we are consenting to structures coercively imposed upon us, then we give the state perhaps too much power to determine our freedom and desire.

When Arendt refers to freedom "rightly called", she means freedom accounted for without recourse to subjective motives and causality. We cannot illuminate the obscure dimensions of freedom by looking inwards, because freedom does not appear in the realm of thought – it requires another medium, that of politics (1961: 146) and, specifically, in the realm of action. In this way, freedom is worldly, belonging to the sphere of appearance, and not an inner reality, or a subjective disposition. It appears, and operates, only in an "interrelationship with the world" (*ibid.*). "We first become aware of freedom or its opposite in our intercourse with others, not in the intercourse with ourselves" (*ibid.*: 148). Thus, those who have sought to build a political philosophy on the basis of freedom were right to make freedom into a presupposition, but wrong to assume that they understood how best to define it, variously seeking recourse to inner life or causal sequences.

Indeed, one of her worries in her essay on freedom (*ibid.*) is that the idea of an inner freedom, which for her is emphatically a "non-political freedom" (*ibid.*) has predisposed

[4] One should also note that to understand each other, we rely on translation. And in every translation, something obdurate remains, something foreign. But calling something foreign presupposes a non-foreign place from which that call is made. But what is familiar in one place is foreign in another, which means that the foreign is always relative, and it is always there when we lay claim to what is familiar. What we call "the foreign" is actually the medium in which we live together, the enigmatic basis of our worldly connection with one another. It is in us, and between us, and we do not exist for ourselves or others without it.

philosophical thinking about freedom in some seriously errant ways. As a result, she spends some time clarifying what freedom is *not*: for instance, it is not "an attribute of thought or a quality of the will" (*ibid.*). When she first starts to provide the positive contours of what it is, she refers to the "free man's status" (*ibid.*), understood first as the freedom to move and the freedom to gather: it "enabled him to move, to get away from home, to go out into the world and meet other people in deed and word" (*ibid.*). The implicit contrast is slavery or indentured servitude. As a result, freedom first becomes clear in the context in which constraints are thrown off, when the ability to act in public first becomes possible. The constraint might be the private sphere where women and the aged are deprived of public freedoms, the prison, or slavery, but in general terms, freedom is first understood as the liberation from a constraint presumably legal and forcible. And yet, even if that is the story through which we learn about freedom, or the paradigmatic image of freedom in public culture, Arendt insists that this version does not suffice to understand freedom. For freedom to be true freedom, that is, to be "rightly called" freedom, there must be a common public sphere, or "space" (*ibid.*), as she puts it. This is not to say that all forms of common space are free, or that they condition freedom automatically. But wherever we make freedom, we produce at the same time a space of appearance. Moreover, the principle of freedom is only apparent in the act of freedom, in the free acts of people who claim or make the space for their own appearance. This is what happens when queer and trans people take to the streets with their feminist and cis allies to demand the right to appear without discrimination and violence, to demand access to health care, to demand changes in education and public policy that recognise and honour their rightful place in a democratic society.

How do we come to know this freedom in public and collective action? How do we describe it, and how can we distinguish truly free from manufactured consent? Arendt writes: "The inspiring principle becomes fully manifest only in the performing act itself" (*ibid.*: 152). In other words, principles are not extricable from their embodiment. They cannot be known in advance. A principle of freedom is not realised in some external form and then vanishes. No, freedom is, in her

words, inexhaustible, which means it is open to an infinite iteration of "performing acts" (*ibid.*). Freedom becomes manifest through action, and only through action. It neither arrives from a separate domain nor can it be known apart from the action that is its emergence: freedom cannot be examined apart from its enactment through action. Once again, she makes clear: "the appearance of freedom, like the manifestation of principles, coincides with the performing act" (*ibid.*: 152–3). As she puts it, "the accomplishment lies in the performance itself and not in the end product which outlasts the activity that brought it into existence and becomes independent of it" (*ibid.*).

Philosophers and sociologists have argued that people must first be authorised before they can make changes in this way, that the performative act of speech is only creative or effective if authorisation has been granted to those who are speaking. But if we are outside the law, even against the law, authorising one another, just as we were engaged in a practice of mutual promising – just consider how we have seen students gathering together to oppose femicide; how large groups of feminists have taken to the street to oppose harassment, rape and murder; how the indigenous have reclaimed land that the government has stolen; how climate activists have stopped machinery without any prior authorisation; the family and friends of the Ayotzinapa 43 in Mexico and all the other people who cannot find the traces of those they have lost – all of these people have gathered without authorisation, held governments and police accountable; they are the people who have exercised collective judgement through word and deed to bring about justice – a justice that has arrived, is arriving still, and will surely arrive if we continue to lend our support. And now the young people in Iran race through the streets expressing a freedom that gains its power precisely because it is not authorised. We do not say that that is useless unless we believe that violent state power always wins. No, we see the animation of uprising, of potential revolution, and no law or state authority gave any such permission for uprisings such as these.

What I have offered here is a performative account of politics in Arendt's view, one which I believe is relevant for our time. But I would be remiss if I did not point out that reactionary forces have often made use of civil disobedience,

breaking the law in the name of their own higher purposes. There is nothing in the concept of civil disobedience that keeps it from being co-opted by political forces that seek to destroy the future of democracy, a future that depends on the materialisation of rights and power for all the disenfranchised. We could simply state that in light of these right-wing movements in our times, some of which are clearly fascist, we should adhere to the rule of law. I am tempted to say yes, but should we not be asking which rule of law, and which forms of rule are just and unjust?

When we start with the question of responsibility, and then move to judgement, we find ourselves in a scene of interdependency and interlocution, a way of addressing each other that aspires toward reciprocity. If we judge, that means that we are in some sense free, but also that we are collaborating and even experimenting, working with one another, and nothing could be more important in these times as we oppose war and the rise of fascism, as we seek to stop and reverse climate destruction, and violence against the marginalised, to find and make solidarity, even when we disagree – or perhaps, precisely then. Our forms of solidarity must honour our differences and recognise how generative those differences are. We are looking to enhance our strength as we oppose both state violence and the myriad forms of violence with which the state remains complicit. It makes no sense to think about our collective action as an expression of love or as the working of a single collective mind. No, we will argue, and we must, for there are those who seek to put an end to all open public argument, especially about the legitimacy and policies of the state. But if we let our arguments destroy one another, then we have become the instruments of the very death drive we oppose. So, our task, it seems to me, is to live, to think, to act in collaborative and experimental ways, but for forms of life which will be liable for all of us, for an earth and an overlapping set of worlds that will be inhabitable for living creatures, one in which violence is diminished and one day disappears into oblivion. For we live in a time in which we can no longer take for granted the environment that has so often served as the background of our action. No, the living processes of which we are a part deserve

our best thinking and action, and none of that can happen without one another.

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The Great Mother

Adriana Cavarero
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Abstract
The piece analyses the relationship between nature and the maternal body that is found in archaic cultures. In the mythical and artistic figures of women displaying their pregnant features, ancient cultures captured the unique bond between the body of the mother and *physis*, or nature, which, in the act of giving birth – to other human beings and to the fruits of nature respectively – partake in the same principle of generativity. The philosophical tradition later inaugurated by Plato and Aristotle, however, has erased the maternal body and the link to procreation from its understanding of nature, and rather put an emphasis on the eternal regeneration of the species. This movement of abstraction from the materiality of the body has eventually been transposed to the realm of *logos* and of immortal ideas, via the metaphor of the labour of thought. By engaging with a range of diverse references such as the aforementioned classical thinkers, Hannah Arendt, and more recent anthropological studies around archaic matriarchal societies, the piece calls for a more generous reading of the role of the maternal body in relation to *physis*: this more capacious approach would not only enable to positively rethink the theme of maternity within the feminist imaginary, but also to recuperate a conception of nature as a generating force which encompasses all the living, human and non-human, in a single cosmos.

Keywords: maternal body, birth, physis, Arendt, Plato, Aristotle, matriarchal societies, Gimbutas

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Biography

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Cavarero's major works include *In Spite of Plato* (1995), *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood* (2000), *Horrorism: Naming Contemporary Violence* (2008), *Inclinations: A Critique of Rectitude* (2016), *Surging Democracy: Notes on Hannah Arendt's Political Thought* (2021).

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> The god of *zoe* was the only one among the gods who came into the world as an embryo, as a being whose first movement in the womb was the most direct manifestation of life, something which only women can experience.
> (Kerenyi, *Dionysos*)

In the churches and walls of Ireland and elsewhere in Europe, we often find the image of a crouched female body who keeps her gigantic vagina open with her own hands in display. Her name is Sheele-na-gig (Rohades, 2010), and she is a symbol of procreative power in pre-Christian cults. The newborn comes into the world through the mother's body, which opens itself up to give birth to another body, another singular living being that has dwelt and has grown in her womb, and that now comes into the world through her vagina. The figures of women showing their vulva is common in archaic cultures. For instance, in Ancient Greece, we find Baubo, a woman portrayed with her gown lifted in the act of showing her pregnant body and genitals, who is connected to the myth of Demeter and of Mother Earth. Friedrich Nietzsche defines Baubo as the female double of Dionysus in the "Eleusian mysteries, [where] the

female sexual organ is exalted as the symbol of fertility and a guarantee of the regeneration and eternal return of all things" (Kofman, 1988: 197). However, it is not only in Ancient Greece that we find a link between the mother's body and the natural cycle of regeneration, the cycle of *physis*, or, to use Karl Kerenyi's words, the endless cycle of the eternal and indestructible life named *zoe* (1996: 80–2). Sculptures and ritual statuettes of women showing their womb and breasts – which appear to be deliberately portrayed as disproportionate in comparison to the rest of the body – are found everywhere in the archaic world as a symbol of the fecundity of the female body, which itself symbolises the fecundity of nature embodied by Mother Goddess, or Mother Earth: a primigenial deity that is variously named as Rea, Cybele, Inanna, Ishtar, and Astarte, among other names. However, the disproportionate open vagina of Sheele-na-gig carries a specific meaning, and thus, becomes hyper-visible when compared to the size of the breasts and the womb found in other artefacts. More than female fecundity and procreation, it is the very act of giving birth that is foregrounded in Sheele-na-gig, that is, the very fact that a living body rips and opens itself up to give birth to another living being, and then continues to proudly exhibit this rupture and opening after the act, *post partum*, so to speak. Even Mother Earth, which folds and cracks to generate the flower buds, partakes in this experience of giving birth, in its act of opening itself to release its fruit. It is no coincidence that both the Greek word *physis* and its Latin equivalent *natura* derive from verbs meaning "being born" (*phuo*, *nascor*). What is at stake in nature is the process of generation and procreation; correspondingly, what is at stake in viviparous animals – the class to which the human species belongs – is the very act of birth. To put it rather drastically, nature itself is named after those who are born from the maternal body, that is, after those that are born through the vagina. It is thus hardly surprising that figures which display large vaginas and that celebrate the generative power of the female body with their large wombs and breasts are so common in the worlds of archaic art and culture. The complicity between women and nature is established through birth, in an event that actualises and accomplishes the very principle of generativity.

"*Deinon to tiktein estin*" – "giving birth is terrible *[tremendo]*, incomprehensible" – says Clytemnestra in Sophocles' *Electra* (2001: 20, 79)[2]. Those who are familiar with Greek literature cannot overlook the centrality of the word *deinon*, whose semantic weight is notoriously impossible to translate in modern languages. Even the term "terrible" grasps it only inadequately:[3] a better translation is "uncanny". Birth is defined as "uncanny" since it generates a feeling of awe and wonder which surpasses fear. Whilst women's act of giving birth is a familiar fact, it still provokes astonishment. If we linger a little longer on the etymological analysis, it is worth noting that the Greek verb *tiktein*, giving birth *[partorire]*, literally translates into "giving birth to offspring" *[figliare]*, as we find also in the word *tokos*, which can take the meaning of both "offspring", and that of "birth" or "fruit" (Plato, *Rep.*: 507a; see also Benveniste, 2016: 147). There is something uncanny in the act of giving birth and procreating as it is experienced by the singular body, which during birth is overwhelmed by the productive power of *physis,* and becomes itself part of the generative power of nature, almost as if it was determined, possessed by it, under the effect of nature's intrinsic laws. If nature embodies the proliferation of living beings, the birth of new lives and a generative process which is general and at the same time always singular, it is in the more specific act of giving birth that the human body, and the mother's body in particular, realises its contact with nature, and uncannily so. Or, put differently, with birth, the body itself fuses with nature, and thus becomes the junction – material, animal, consciously alive and vigilant, if dispossessed – of the generative process of Mother Earth. The latter is the earthly force which in the organic world manifests itself in the birth of every being, and prepares the pregnant bodies for the act of giving birth. Not all women become mothers, nor are they bound to do so, as the Greek myth reminds us with its figures of proud and powerful virgins like Athena, Artemis and Hestia.

[2] Taking some liberties but hitting the mark, Virginia Woolf (2018) translates: "There is a strange power in maternity".

[3] This has been adjusted from the original, where it reads: "Even the Italian *'tremendo*' grasps it only inadequately". The translator follows Anna Carson's translation in Sophocles, *Electra*, which renders the term as "terrible, incomprehensible" in English (***translator's note***).

However, only the female body can give birth. Ultimately, nature, which in the human language is specifically intended to evoke birth in its very name, depends on the body that opens itself up during birth.

Hannah Arendt makes reference to this very openness of the body in an interesting comment that may appear surprising, if it is read in the context of her wider thought. Although Arendt contemplates the Greek concept of *physis* at several points in her *oeuvre* – and although she identifies natality as the very foundational category of her political theory – she remains remarkably indifferent to the theme of maternity. However, we find an unexpected exception to her reticence around this theme in a short discussion of pride in her *Denktagebuch*.

Superbia (pride) – Arendt writes, using the Latin word – must be distinguished from *hubris,* since it refers exclusively to the body. *Superbia* "concerns the integrity of the person […] [the latter] is essentially corporeal" (Arendt, 2003: 330–1). As Arendt continues in another entry from the same notebook, "the *superbia* of remaining intact" (*ibid.*: 525) finds a paradigmatic example in the figure of Achilles, who proudly exhibits a corporeal integrity which reflects his extraordinary state of invulnerability. The Greek hero, however, expresses his pride only as an excess, the same excess that leads him to drag Hector's body onto the battlefield and shred it into pieces. In fact, *superbia* does not belong to Achilles alone, but pertains to all men as males. It is a type of pride in one's own physical integrity that, as Arendt explains, bears a wider meaning because "it is actually specifically masculine […]. The body of the woman is by nature unable to remain intact; its law is the rift of copulation and birth. Hence *superbia* is actually 'masculine'" (*ibid.*)[4].

Even in its brevity, Arendt's argument clearly highlights the specificity of the female body, which is naturally prone to the "rift" and to the rupture, that is, to the opening experienced when giving birth. As many of her readers point out – and not to run into a premature excitement – it is good to remember that, for Arendt, not only is the bodily dimension of life merely

[4] On this topic and for a deepening of the question of the biological understanding of the body in Arendt, see Liesbeth Schoonheim (2019).

biological; the very biological realm, that is, the organic life of *zoe,* is governed by the order of *necessity*, and clashes with the *freedom* that pertains to the sphere of action. This contrast, which is pivotal to an understanding of Arendt's political thought, is further restated in the aforementioned reference to pride, where Arendt highlights that everything which concerns the body escapes our capacity to determine it. What pertains to the realm of *physis* falls beyond our control. Arendt never ceases to remind us that the life we hold as living beings, as bodies, is governed by the inescapable laws of nature, which work independently from us and escape our will. In our bodily existence, we find ourselves in the realm of necessity, not that of freedom. To put it in the language of Arendt, we are in the realm of the biological life of *zoe*, and not of *bios*, which instead pertains to unique beings as capable of action (Arendt, 1963: 76). The pride in the body which maintains its integrity is "essentially physical" precisely because the very corporeality of the body is *physis,* organic life, *zoe*. The female body cannot perform pride, since "its law is the rift of copulation and birth"; as such, it sits in the realm of necessity that pertains to corporeality. In fact, it belongs to it even more than the male body does, and undoubtedly so.

Arendt argues that, while the male body can rest in the certainty of its invulnerability, and proudly picture itself in its integrity, the female body, which is by nature – that is, by the very law of *physis* – fit to the rift of copulation and birth (*der Riss der Begattung und der Geburt*),[5] cannot take pride in the integrity of the body. On the one hand, this statement might appear very sensitive, since copulation, by implying the rupture of the hymen, if not the very act of penetration, risks establishing a constitutive violability of the female body. On the other hand, however, it also raises important points for reflection. By connecting copulation with birth, Arendt does not refer to the female body in general but more specifically to the body of the mother, that is, the body whose "rupture", whose tearing and rifting every human being is born from. No-one of us would be in the world – or, as Arendt would have it, would have *appeared* into the world – if a woman's body had not experienced a

[5] Quoted from the notebooks in German (Arendt, 2003: 330–1).

"rupture" in the act of giving birth, as part of the natural cycle of regeneration, that is, of the necessity of organic life. Whilst Achilles's body can metaphorically swell with pride at its integrity, and could even claim that this integrity glimmers in beauty, the mother's body is an open, ruptured body, and it literally swells and opens itself up in order to bring other bodies into the world. After all, are the archaic female figures that display their vagina not the symbol of this rupture? Is it not the very necessity of *physis* that is there on display? Is there any pride for the ruptured female body? Unfortunately, Arendt does not pursue this kind of questions. And perhaps she cannot pursue them, since the *physis* she focuses on has now abandoned the realm of myth and has crystallised in a pure philosophical concept.

In order to argue that the corporeal realm, and nature more generally, belong to the order of necessity, Arendt draws on the concept of *physis* that we find in the great Greek philosophers, Plato and Aristotle. Whilst the word *physis* carries many meanings, Aristotle strives to define it with his usual precision. As he writes in *Metaphysics*, in one of its main meanings, *physis* is "the production of things that grow" (*ton phyomenon genesis*), that is, the process of birth and growth that is common to all living beings, both in their multiplicity and in their individuality. For "living is the being of living things" (Aristotle, *DA*: 415b). And for the individual living being, it is crucially so only for a delimited period of time. Similar to other animals and plants, each human being is, exists, and lives in the span of time that runs between its birth and its death. Each singular being *is* while it is alive, and thus only for a limited time. *Physis,* as the process of birth and growth which is common to all living beings, also includes death in its meaning. And it is precisely on the contrast between the perpetual regeneration of *physis* and the mortality of the individual being that the philosophical gaze is now focused.

The latter is a crucial distinction that marks the difference between the being-forever of nature and the being-for-a-limited-time that pertains to living beings. Only the individual living being, in its mortal state, is bound to the unfortunate destiny of existing just for a limited time. *Physis*, on the contrary, is forever. *Physis*, by encompassing the multiplicity of all living

beings, is the eternal process of birth and growth which constantly regenerates itself. Its etymology is thus confirmed: birth by way of new births, proliferation of living, regeneration. As Arendt highlights, building on Aristotle to a certain extent, living beings also partake in the being-forever of nature: their "being-forever corresponds to *aeigenes*, procreation" (Arendt, 1961: 42). By procreating, living beings, which are themselves mortal in their singularity, enable the continuous regeneration of nature. Thanks to procreation, and "through the recurrent cycle of life, nature assures the same kind of being-forever to things that are born and die as to things that are and do not change" (*ibid*.). For viviparous animals, to which humans belong, the pregnant body of the mother should then appear as an essential component of the ever-generative process of *physis*. In all truth, Aristotle's concern, like Plato's before him, is rather directed to the fact that through procreation, human beings propagate themselves as a species. It is the human species, like any other species of living beings, animal or vegetal, that realises the forever-being that pertains to nature. Even if the individual being is mortal, the species becomes immortal. Plato was so invested in this argument that he transposed the immortality of the species enabled by procreation to the much nobler realm of immortal ideas, which are themselves generated by the soul after the required philosophical labour.

"All human beings are pregnant, Socrates, in body and in soul, and when we reach maturity it is natural that we desire to give birth", we read in Plato's *Symposium* (206c). Pregnancy, procreation, giving birth: even in the Greek text, the language is deliberately technical, and refers to the sphere of the maternal body which generates the new born, new bodies. If we leave aside the question of the soul for a moment, as far as the body is concerned, Plato's sentence would better be read as "some women", instead of "all human beings" (*pantes anthropoi*). As we can draw from the wider context of the argument, with the reference to "all human beings", Plato wishes here to indicate the totality of human beings as a species. Not dissimilarly to other animal species, humankind propagates through the birth of new living beings which perpetuate the species and, crucially, for Plato, make it immortal. If "mortal nature seeks as far as it can to exist for ever and to be immortal", this is accomplished

by means of continual generation (*genesei*), "the process by which it always leaves behind another new thing to replace the old" (*ibid.*: 207d). Plato acknowledges that something divine is present in the processes of pregnancy and procreation: "it is an aspect of immortality in the otherwise mortal creature" (*ibid.*: 206d). Since we are bodies, we are mortal, however, through the birth of new generations, the species becomes immortal. It is precisely this immortality of the species or, we can say, of "all human beings", that is of interest to Plato. His emphasis is put on the fact that, whilst they generate bodies that are mortal, pregnancy and procreation perpetuate the species.

The fundamental thesis that Plato wishes to put forth here is bold but rather simple. It is built on the analogy between the acts of pregnancy and procreation via the mother's body on the one hand, and those performed by the philosophical soul on the other: whilst the mother's body generates mortal bodies that yet render the species immortal, the philosophical soul, which is itself already immortal, generates ideas, discourses, *logoi;* in virtue of their being true, the latter are not only immortal, but also eternal. It is well known that, in a passage from *Theaetetus*, Plato describes Socrates's philosophising as a maieutics (Plato, *Theaet.*: 149a–151d). As the son of a midwife himself, Socrates helps generate – if amongst the unavoidable sufferings – the ideas around the beautiful and the right of which the souls of his interlocutors are pregnant. With different formulations, this analogy is certainly common in Plato's work, and, as such, the passage in the *Symposium* is not an exception. However, what is exceptional is that, in this specific passage, the analogy is articulated with a great wealth of detail through the use of the technical language of pregnancy and procreation, and yet, without either the mother or the maternal body ever being mentioned. Even though we are aware – as Plato is – that the maternal body lies at the centre of this scene, no reference to it can be made. Even if we witness a maternal body that swells up and gives birth, the reference to its sex cannot be proffered. There is, however, an important note that must be raised: in the fiction of the dialogue, Socrates is the one who speaks, recording a speech from Diotima, the minister of Mantinea, whom Socrates had heard in his youth, and whose words he is now repeating. Thus, in the passage, Plato stages a very

sophisticated ventriloquial game. In the texts, a woman's voice – mediated by Socrates' words, which express Plato's ideas – proffers a speech that celebrates and emulates, and at the same time diminishes and erases, the maternal body. This is an argumentative device that, whilst drawing from the female experience of pregnancy and procreation, not only aims to show the superiority of philosophy in "giving birth through the soul" over "giving birth through the body". The speech also excludes the very protagonist of the act of giving birth. We could talk about a mimetic appropriation of the act of procreation by means of degradation and erasure, if not through a symbolic matricide.[6] In fact, the abundance of the technical language around birth and pregnancy in the text renders the erasure of the mother's body so extreme as to almost make it unbelievable.

"All human beings are pregnant (*kuousin*) in body and in soul, and procreate (*gegontai*) when they reach maturity, because our nature itself (*physis*) strives to give birth (*tiktin*)", utters Socrates, recording the speech from Diotima. These are technical terms that frequently return in the following argument. More specifically, the Greek verb *kuein* captures the swelling of the pregnant womb and, by extension, the increased volume of the body.[7] The meaning of the term *gignomai* on the other hand is wider, since it points to the act of procreation that applies to nature generally, and to the world of living animals and the vegetal in particular. *Tiktein*, finally, returns to the specific language of "procreating", which again foregrounds the act of giving birth. It is perhaps worth mentioning that, in Latin, the words for giving birth (*partum)* and part (*pars*) share the same root, and they both refer to a part, a portion that is separated from the whole of the unit to which it belongs. Philologically, the technical language used by Plato is thus very realistic. It describes a body whose womb becomes swollen and opens up in order to give birth to that *part of itself* which is the body of the newborn. The reference here is obviously the female body. Plato seems to suggest that it is precisely the maternal body that "generates" the immortality of the species, but does not say it

[6] I developed this topic in *In Spite of Plato (*Cavarero, 1995: 91–120).

[7] See the comparison with Benveniste (2016: 457).

explicitly. The complicity between the mother's body and *physis* cannot be spoken about. In fact, even the famous *chora* found in the *Timaeus* – a sort of mother/matter that, Plato suggests, cannot be defined or conceptualised due to its shapelessness – resides in the darkest corner of the cosmogonic analysis, and Plato calls it a "receptacle" or a "nurse" (Plato, *Tim.*: 49a, 50a). Ultimately, the *physis* of the philosophers is a *physis* that "likes to conceal" its origin in the maternal body, from which it derives its very name.

As is evident, the renowned shift from myth to *logos*, which is the object of concern of many studies on ancient Greece, is a shift that also points to two different understandings of nature. One is the archaic understanding of *physis* focused on the worship of the Great Mother and the mother's body, represented as swollen and open, and manifesting nature's generative power. The other meaning is the philosophical conception of the natural process of the reproduction of the species, whereby the reproductive capacity of the mother's body has an instrumental function, and thus loses its centrality. In his biological studies, Aristotle looks at the female body with scientific detachment: he reduces the womb to a mere container that nurtures the male sperm, which impregnates it with the embryo of the newborn, and as such, already exists in its wholeness, so to speak. The removal of the mother's body from the acts of gestation and birth that we find in the *Symposium* is, on the other hand, so surprising that it suggests that Plato's philosophy had not yet come to terms with the archetype of the Great Mother. As such, Baubo and the other female figures who show their open vagina appear only as a hidden trace in the texture of Plato's *logos*, and invite derision and mockery, rather than laughter – as one version of the myth would have it.

Whilst it is appealing to think of an original matriarchal system which was then defeated and supplanted by the patriarchal society, such a hypothesis can only partially explain the disinterest that philosophy displays towards the theme of birth from the maternal body. And in fact, the multi-layered universe of the myth – which already absorbs the story of the defeat of matriarchy – speaks not so much of an archaic society led by women, or of an ancient matriarchal lineage, but of the worship of the Goddess Mother that exalts the mother's body as

a symbol of fecundity and regeneration. This tradition is attested not only by the figures of the women with swollen wombs and breasts displaying their genitals, but also in a series of stories which were eventually translated from the world of myth to that of tragedy and which, in the attempt to portray the unique bond between the maternal body and *physis*, evoke some disquieting images of hyper-maternity. One example is the proud figure of Niobe, who praises herself for giving birth to seven girls and seven boys; or the multitudes of the Bacchantes, who, after being possessed by Dionysus, return to the wilderness to feed the young deer and wolves. Not to speak of the incredible power of Demeter who, hurt by the kidnapping of her daughter, halts the very regeneration of nature. There is indeed an excess in these figures of mythical mothers, whereby the abundance of their maternity becomes hyper-maternity, something that is natural, but that, precisely because it is natural, also becomes uncanny in the intersecting of birth and *physis*, of reproduction and *zoe*, which is unique to the maternal body. In fact, this overabundance is found in the very figures of Sheele-na-gig, who keep their gigantic vaginas open with their own hands.

Around the mid–1800s, Johann Jakob Bachofen formulated the thesis of the original matriarchate, understood as a stage of evolution of human history, which was then revisited by James Frazer in the first decades of the 1900s (Bachofen, 2008).[8] The thesis has consequently gone through different stages of appraisal in modern scientific studies, until it reached a stalemate and risked disappearing completely. In such a journey, the very term "matriarchate" has been used less as a technical term and more as a shorthand catchword for the multiple cultural models that are variously defined as gynocratic, matrilinear, matrifocal or matricentric, in academic language. For instance, the culture of the "Old Europe", illustrated by the Lithuanian archaeologist and linguist Marija Gimbutas, is defined as "matristic". Gimbutas's innovative work

[8] In fact, Bachofen speaks of *Muttherrecht*: the right of the mothers; whilst Frazer calls "matriarchate the social system in which lineage and inheritance are established only through the mother" (Frazer, 2014: 27, *our translation*).

had the merit of reviving interest in the theme of the matriarchate, and was met with great popular success in the 1970s and 1980s. Since 1974, Gimbutas had published a series of books on the cult of the Great Goddess in the neolithic age in Europe based on archaeological findings, amongst which the small statuettes of pregnant women bear particular significance (Gimbutas, 1974; 1989). Without going into the details of a complex research – which is enriched by a multidisciplinary approach that mixes myth and folklore – Gimbutas's core thesis claims that, from 7000 to 3500 B.C., human settlements found in what she calls the "Old Europe", a world of villages distributed between the Balkans and the Eastern Mediterranean, were characterised by a matricentric culture in which female goddesses were worshipped as symbols of the natural cycle of birth, death and regeneration. This was a peaceful, egalitarian and artistically sophisticated society, which functioned in harmony with nature; the latter was itself understood primarily in terms of fecundity and interconnectedness amongst all living beings, including animals and vegetal. Gimbutas argues that, after multiple raids of hordes of men coming from the Northern steppes, this civilisation was destroyed and replaced by Indo-European peoples, whose culture was dominated by male figures and displayed aggressive characteristics, a hierarchical organisation, and a tendency to worship heroes over the vital cycle of life. Gimbutas points out that, at a certain stage, crucially, swords start to replace the statuettes of pregnant women amongst the findings of archaeological excavations: weapons replace the "thousands of statuettes which, due to the disproportionate sizes of their buttocks, were defined as 'neolithic Venuses' or 'steatopygiae', and which were preserved and revered on domestic shrines and in other places of worship" (Trevi, 2012).[9]

The work of Gimbutas is interesting not only for its contents, but also because of the peculiar circumstances of its

[9] The quotation is taken from a timely and endorsing review by Emanuele Trevi ("The equal opportunities of Prehistory" ["Le pari opportunità nella preistoria"], published in *La lettura*, 19 agosto 2012) of the Italian translation of Marija Gimbutas's book *The Civilization of the Goddess: The World of Old Europe* (1991).

reception. Gimbutas's work has been aggressively criticised by the academic community, which quickly reacted by making Gimbutas the "black sheep" of the discipline, and still rejects her thesis; her name soon disappeared from university courses and bibliographical collections, almost as though a sort of "academic veto" removed her from the scene (Spretnak, 2011). On the other hand, though, the author has received extraordinary popular acclaim, and she has been welcomed with enthusiasm by a large set of feminist studies in various spiritual, artistic, and ecological branches, which have been considerably influenced by Gimbutas's writings (Leslie, 1989). Even here, though, things have not gone entirely smoothly. A critical position soon emerged within feminist studies that has not only questioned the scientific accuracy of Gimbutas's theory; above all, it has objected that her thesis could be deployed to ideologically support the liberating aims and strategies pursued by contemporary feminism (see Tringham and Margaret, 1998).[10] Do we really need mother-goddesses? Is it really useful to continue to identify women with maternity – a move which itself supports the patriarchal imaginary? Have we not had enough of thinking of motherhood as a necessary biological destiny? By celebrating women's reproductive power, do we want to once again relegate women to the enclosure of the domestic sphere? These are key questions which cannot be underestimated since, besides their specific application to the issue of matriarchy, they risk impacting on the scope of feminist research, by restricting its horizon as under the effect of a veto. Ultimately, the main veto concerns the theme of maternity and the legitimacy of any research that tries to rethink it positively or, in fact, in true *feminist* terms. As Fanny Söderbäck rightly points out, since Simone de Beauvoir's critique of patriarchy as a system that reduces women to mothers and confines them to the realm of reproduction, "feminists have been wrestling with the question of whether birth and motherhood pose a threat to or promote women's liberation" (Söderbäck, 2019: 186). Women's "troubling for

[10] Exemplary amongst the feminist critiques of Gimbutas is the title of Cynthia Eller's book, *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory: Why an Invented Past will not Give Women a Future* (2000).

making other bodies", to use a very effective expression of Donna Haraway (1991: 253), risks imprisoning them in the trap of reproducing the species, that is, in a biological function that turns into a normative dispositive. It follows that any discussion on procreation becomes immediately suspicious, if not dangerous and, in all cases, politically wrong, and even more so if it focuses on the mother's body – such as we find in the works of Kristeva and Irigaray, which Söderbäck rereads very poignantly. It is as if giving birth, or the reproductive function to which women have been relegated by the patriarchal tradition, traps us in a new epistemological straitjacket of feminist making from which we cannot escape. Or as if mentioning the mother's body, from which we were born, and perhaps reflecting on its symbolical force, were counterproductive to the free construction of feminist subjectivity. The situation is undoubtedly very complex, and deserves attention due to the censorship that it can produce. Any discussion that, in spite of Plato, tries to foreground the figure of the mother and to highlight its power, or to describe its unique experience, cannot but confront itself with this veto, which itself works as a dispositive to enforce conformity, or as a mere invitation to silence. The matter becomes even more difficult when the object of investigation is not so much motherhood more generally, or the matriarchate system that can be inspired by it, but rather the mother's body itself, and the act of procreating and giving birth, that is, the biological substance that brings us close to the animal, a living flesh that becomes swollen and opens up, a womb.

Recently, in a scientifically ambitious and remarkably original book entitled *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity,* the anthropologist David Graeber and the archaeologist David Wengrow have rescued Marija Gimbutas's work from academic oblivion, and from the vetoes and posthumous vilification that weighed upon her, and not only within feminist circles (2021: 222 and after). Gimbutas's thesis on matriarchy – understood as the culture and social organisation built around the model of the mother – has found an unexpected reassessment. More specifically, the authors of this "new history of humanity" shows several pieces of archaeological evidence – which is strengthened by the now

available analysis of ancient DNA – of the link between the biodiversity pertaining to the ecology of the neolithic era, where we find proof of the first crops and of the pharmacological use of herbs, and the ritual figures of the pregnant female body. Further evidence, the authors argue, reveals a contrast between a cultural scheme whereby artistic and ritual expressions are organised around the theme of a "predatory male violence" (*ibid.*: 252), and a cultural scheme centred instead on the "science of the concrete" and on female symbolism. Going into more detail, according to the authors, contrary to the male model that celebrates heroic warriors and relies on hierarchical organisations, the female model is instead characterised by examples of egalitarianism, and does not show signs of "major violent conflict" (*ibid.*: 248). This not only confirms the "sweeping historical argument" (*ibid.*: 224) of Gimbutas, by reassessing its scientific accuracy, but would also seem to reinforce the claim that the famous war-driven Amazons found in the myth are a later invention of a patriarchal mentality. Conversely, the representation of the female body as a hyper-motherhood is rather the trace of a cultural tradition that understands power not as conflict and violent subjugation, but rather as the event, most familiar and yet extraordinary – and, thus, uncanny, *deinon* – of procreation, that is, of the regeneration of *physis* itself through the human beings who are born from the woman's body.

In fact, this means not only to admit that, in human history, or in its primordial steps, if we like, there was a cultural scheme defined by a type of egalitarian and non-violent organisation in which women played an important role. From the perspective of the history of philosophy, it also means recording the presence of a conception of nature understood as birth, as a generating force which encompasses all the living, human and non-human, and which, in ancient times, was not yet invested with an anthropocentric tone. In this, Arendt's insistence upon the order of necessity that pertains to *physis*, which appears to elude human control, is illuminating, Arendt perfectly captures the philosophical interest in the primacy of the human world in its various political, ethical, and aesthetical expressions and so on, in conjunction with the realisation that there is a natural world to which we belong as living beings

along with other living beings – we could say, a world of *zoe* – which escapes our will and, crucially, our undisputed control. What Arendt calls the *necessity* of nature, the biological knot that ties all bodies, linking every thing to another, living or not living, within a net of uninterrupted regeneration, is perceived more as an object of wonder and worship, and less as an obstacle to human freedom in the archaic era. And it is precisely this necessity, which manifests itself as an entanglement of all the living in a single cosmos, or in a single planet – as today's environmentalists would put it – that the mother's body accomplishes, humanely, in her own flesh. It is as if, starting precisely from the mother's body, and perhaps following the traces of its archaic celebration, we could finally bring ourselves to conceive of the human condition in terms of a materialist bio-ontology – or better, zoontology – which strives to free the plurality of the living from the anthropocentric grip that traps it in its predatory web.

Of course, the archaic realm is not a receptacle of truth. It does not merely hide truths that can eventually be disclosed. If anything, it suggests possibilities of interpreting our being part of the world, living among the living, on which we could reflect in order to make room for a biocentric perspective that dares to venture into a radical ecology.

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Review: Marco Versiero, *Leonardo. La natura allo specchio*

Mauro Zanchi

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Dove si possono individuare aspetti estensivi - o aperture "magiche", secondo l'accezione della filosofia naturale della cultura neoplatonica – nella pittura di Leonardo? Forse nella sospensione del pulviscolo atmosferico sugli sfondi voltati all'azzurro, nello sfumato e nel non finito dei suoi paesaggi, nella luce che custodisce il sogno di perfezione del Rinascimento, nella coscienza di chi ha saputo contemplare la qualità effimera del reale e l'irripetibilità degli istanti estatici, nella bruma in lontananza che aleggia nell'epifania del divenire. O forse nella mutevolezza della realtà fenomenica e fisica, nell'intervento dell'eterno nelle parvenze del reale, nelle esplorazioni delle ombre, nell'attimo che sta per incrinarsi poco prima di rivelare un mistero.

Un riferimento tangibile è nel paesaggio montuoso sullo sfondo di *Sant'Anna, la Madonna, il Bambino e l'agnellino* (1510-1513 ca.), ora al Musée du Louvre, esemplare per rendere quello che ho cercato di evocare con le parole: le presenze della bruma e del pulviscolo nell'aria conferiscono al paesaggio un'evanescenza che è più vicina al magico e all'irreale, oltre il tempo e senza età, in una dimensione "altra", che attinge alle forze ctonie e alla sacralità della materia terrena. Nel *Ritratto di Monna Lisa del Giocondo* (1503-1504 e 1510-1515) il paesaggio che si profila dietro le spalle dell'effigiata è abitato da un'atmosfera glaciale e remota, dove le acque e le rocce sono pervase però da una luce tonale calda e diffusa. E che dire del paesaggio roccioso, orchestrato come se fosse un'architettura metafisica, e il chiarore numinoso che si scorge in lontananza, nelle due versioni della *Vergine delle rocce*. Il paesaggio di Leonardo evoca la *natura naturans*, il continuo mutare della materia, il suo passaggio dallo stato solido a quello liquido e poi a quello gassoso, e così via. Ciò che mi ha sempre affascinato nelle opere

di Leonardo è la lirica declinazione del cangiante, dell'instabile, negli eventi emozionali di ogni trasmutazione, la forza evocativa dell'invisibile nella vita. La percezione immagina di poter immergersi nel macrocosmo naturale e cogliere una ultrasottile smaterializzazione del colore nella luce, nei filtri atmosferici che si interpongono al digradare verso l'orizzonte, nella prospettiva aerea che incontra "i perdimenti cromatici", così che «l'ultime cose viste in quella, come sono le montagne, per la gran quantità dell'aria che vi si trova infra l'occhio tuo e la montagna, quella pare azzurra, quasi del colore dell'aria» (*Libro di pittura*, §262).

Leonardo mostra insieme il veduto e l'indiscernibile, la proporzionata armonia e la bellezza del mondo attraverso uno scientismo poetico. La finestra dell'anima si apre, con intatto stupore, sui misteri della natura e del paesaggio: "la natura è piena d'infinite ragioni che non furono mai in isperienza". I problemi di scienza e conoscenza sono indirizzati verso le cose del mondo e tradotte in immagini attraverso l'arte e la sapiente imitazione: "la pittura rappresenta al senso, con più verità e certezza, le opere di natura, [...] è composizione di luce e di tenebre insieme mista colle diverse qualità di tutti i colori semplici e composti" e "il pittore è come lo specchio, che in sé imita tutte le a sé contrapposte cose, senza cognizione d'esse".

Leonardo perviene piuttosto a ineffabili raffigurazioni della metamorfica vitalità del mondo naturale, percepito come un'entità in perenne e continua trasformazione nella millenaria scansione e successione delle ere cronologiche.

Attraverso l'osservazione diretta della realtà, Leonardo constata che ogni elemento esistente in natura non è contornato da una netta linea di demarcazione ma avvolto da un sottile pulviscolo e dalla luce, che insieme uniformano le tonalità e rendono i confini meno definiti. Le eteree brume azzurrognole che aleggiano in sospensione sulla terra, in lontananza, alla base delle montagne nei paesaggi, testimoniano uno sposalizio tra l'umido della terra e l'aria, attraverso l'evaporazione e il contatto con la temperatura dell'aria e dei raggi solari. Leonardo da Vinci ama i toni smorzati, i paesaggi a perdita d'occhio, dove le sottilissime gradazioni luminose e i delicati passaggi chiaroscurali conferiscono un effetto morbido al dipinto, la sospensione nella trasparenza dell'acqua evanescente,

naturalmente innaturale, telecinetica, in un rapporto di empatia con gli esseri viventi e con il paesaggio. I vettori d'ombra qui paiono presenze misteriose e affascinanti. Anche lo sfumato leonardesco rientra nella dimensione dell'infrasottile? Il paesaggio sullo sfondo di *Sant'Anna, la Vergine e il Bambino con agnellino* è circonfuso da un'aura nebbiosa, che fa fondere le montagne e il paesaggio con il cielo. Una visione ravvicinata constata lo sposalizio di colori non coprenti applicati per infinitesimali velature sovrapposte. I paesaggi pulviscolari appartengano all'estremo della percezione e del discernibile, sono una presenza al limite, una ulteriore possibilità reale, una coazione di due presenze che si coniugano dando vita a una terza realtà da cogliere, forse quella magica. La bruma e lo sfumato nel paesaggio sono interpretabili sia come visione non euclidea, al limite della percezione e di dimensioni infinitesimali, sia come massa tangibile – anche se eterea – che si può percepire sensorialmente. Lo sfumato di Leonardo è relegabile al limite retinico della pittura o va oltre? Sono fenomeni o materie, stati o concetti più che sottili, percepibili ulteriormente con uno spostamento nel campo immaginativo, speculativo o concettuale? Leonardo ha innescato un'estensione della nostra capacità di percezione, rendendo visibili le cose impercepite e altre qualità del reale.

Si intuisce che vi sia un'analogia tra le strutture dell'universo e il corpo/pensiero umano: l'artista fa affiorare nei suoi ritratti i "moti dell'animo", la dinamica espressiva delle emozioni e dei sentimenti, la creatività complessa del mondo onirico, che essuda nell'ambiente tessuto con una trama di pensieri e oggetti assunti a simboli.

Memore della struttura polisemica dei manoscritti medievali più interessanti, Marco Versiero nel libro *Leonardo. La natura allo specchio* (Mandragora, Firenze 2019) dipana la sua indagine filologica sull'opera del maestro rinascimentale attraverso una efficace coazione tra testo e ipertesto, tra linguaggio verbale e rimandi visuali, dove le glosse sono un corredo di didascalie approfondite, che estendono la lettura del saggio verso ulteriori aperture semiotiche e approfondimenti storico-artistici, pagina dopo pagina, nei collegamenti e confronti diretti con le immagini, entro una progressione che permette al contempo letture aggiuntive a quella lineare. La

disposizione compositiva che nel libro connette testo, ipertesto e immagini riesce a rendere visibile e chiara la complessità su cui si fonda l'indagine polivalente di Leonardo, dove arte e scienza sono da intendere come trama e ordito di un tappeto su cui si va a costituire un disegno complesso. Versiero orchestra scrittura e immagini come fossero collegati da link ante litteram e sottili connessioni, che permettono letture multilineari e multisequenziali. I fruitori sono accompagnati in questa continua apertura verso la coazione tra l'umano e la Natura. Nei tre capitoli (*Una vita «varia et indeterminata forte»*; *L'«alitare» del mondo*; *L'occhio nei sogni*) la trama dei temi trattati dà voce continuamente a frasi autografe estratte dai codici leonardeschi, a definizioni filologiche, alle dinamiche immaginative presenti nei raffinati cartoni preparatori a carbone e sanguigna, puntinati e forati nei contorni in vista dello "spolvero" per il riporto su tavola. Anche il non detto, l'inespresso, l'invisibile, il non realizzato, il rimando evocativo, l'abbozzo, l'idea interrotta, si scorgono nello specchio che Versiero rivolge nella sua indagine. E seguendo questa apertura riflessiva, scorgiamo che Leonardo ha cercato di sondare il senso dell'invisibile, inteso come una realtà che può essere studiata e compresa attraverso metodi scientifici e filosofici, ciò che non può essere visto o rilevato attraverso i cinque sensi: concetti astratti, studi della geometria euclidea, connessioni matematiche, sentimenti che non possono essere visti, emozioni sottese, l'anima della natura, i flussi sottili. Quale è il comun denominatore di tutte le sue esperienze conoscitive, che lega la pluralità dei disparati interessi e la versatilità dei suoi talenti?

Nel libro vengono indicate tracce, sia cronologiche sia collocate in una dimensione che va al di là delle questioni temporali, che conducono alla formazione e alle radici di una costruzione per immagini, fondata sull'idea che tutto sia perennemente in metamorfosi. Ma iniziamo l'analisi dal formarsi di una visione del mondo attraverso lo scorrere dei giorni, dalla nascita in un determinato luogo geografico, dallo stare in uno specifico corpo di un individuo che ha preso forma dalla relazione tra due persone, dagli incontri con maestri, dalle letture, dalle esperienze formative, dalle iniziazioni intellettuali.

Leonardo nasce il 15 aprile 1452, dal rapporto tra il notaio ser Piero da Vinci e la serva Caterina, recentemente individuata

da Carlo Vecce come una schiava circassa. Il figlio illegittimo fu impossibilitato ad accedere a un regolare corso di studi umanistici, e costruì da autodidatta la sua visione, partendo evidentemente da una insaziabile curiosità e da un talento naturale. Giovanissimo, attorno al 1464 cominciò a costruire il suo percorso di indagini nel fiorente laboratorio di Andrea del Verrocchio, dove ebbe una formazione politecnica lavorando a bottega per circa un decennio. Dal 1472 risulta iscritto al registro dei pittori presso la Compagnia di San Luca in Firenze. L'alunnato alla scuola di verità dell'esperienza, gli avrebbe infine consentito di padroneggiare a tal punto l'osservazione e riproduzione della realtà, da arrivare a concepire realisticamente persino invenzioni puramente immaginarie. Tra il 1476 e il 1478 frequenta umanisti, intellettuali e artisti del giardino di San Marco, sotto l'egida di Lorenzo il Magnifico, dove ha anche potuto conoscere e studiare i capolavori classici della collezione medicea, unica nel suo genere, che rielabora in modo originale mettendola a confronto con i modelli donatelliani e con ciò che aveva precedentemente appreso attraverso il plasticismo della scultura verrocchiesca, accanto a una meditata riflessione. L'«orto dei Medici» era il luogo in cui Lorenzo il Magnifico custodiva le pregevoli raccolte familiari di sculture classiche, che erano accessibili agli artisti di quel tempo.

La cultura neoplatonica, i precetti albertiani in tema di "pittura di storia", la fascinazione per le *Metamorfosi* di Ovidio e per i poeti antichi che avevano saputo cogliere i misteri della Natura, una progredita conoscenza della statuaria antica, e la visione filologica degli umanisti presenti nella corte medicea entrano nel suo bagaglio culturale, aiutandolo a maturare una visione estetica e filosofica, una concezione del mondo e una maniera in grado di conferire organica verosimiglianza alle forme studiate e poi tradotte attraverso disegni e opere pittoriche. Anche quando si trasferisce a Milano, inviato dal Magnifico in qualità di valente musico e abile maestro di arti militari nell'ambito di delicati scambi diplomatici con gli Sforza, trova un ambiente fecondo per far progredire le sue conoscenze scientifiche e le indagini artistiche. Attorno al 1496 Leonardo viene iniziato a Milano dal matematico Luca Pacioli, frate francescano autore del trattato *De divina proportione* (1498).

Nell'edizione veneziana a stampa del 1509 Leonardo realizza i disegni di poliedri platonici per le tavole illustrative.

In tutta la sua vita, l'ingegno dell'artista si modula sulla continua ricerca del vero, riflette sull'universo naturale, lo indaga cercando tracce di sublimi aperture estensive, corrispondenze micro-macrocosmiche, nel rapporto continuo tra intuizioni, letture, sperimentazioni scientifiche, traduzioni formali del reale, «a similitudine dello specchio, il quale sempre si trasmuta nel colore di quella cosa ch'egli ha per obietto» (*Libro di pittura*, §56).

Lo sguardo attento è inteso nell'accezione di una "finestra" del corpo umano, aperta a cogliere le innumerevoli sottigliezze del mondo per godere della bellezza, per assorbire le sue forme come in uno specchio. Versiero individua che «l'abilità del pittore, tra tutti gli uomini, consiste però nell'amplificare il fenomeno del rispecchiamento, facendone – al di là di una mera e meccanica operazione di duplicazione speculare – una visionaria "trasmutazione", capace di generare uno sdoppiamento della realtà». La percezione della realtà attraverso la vista e gli altri sensi è sottoposta a una elaborazione mentale immaginativa, dove l'atto del cogliere la luce della verità è una emersione da qualcosa che precedentemente è confinato nelle ombre, nell'oscurità della mente. L'immaginazione attiva nell'ingegno del pittore attinge dal fertile serbatoio di invenzioni oniriche: «vede più certa la cosa l'occhio ne' sogni, che colla immaginazione stando desto» (*Codice Arundel* cc. 278v – 271r, 1503-1504 circa). Le apparizioni e le immagini che si colgono nei sogni a volte possono essere più veritiere di ciò che si può fantasticare da svegli, "perché l'occhio nei sogni offre alla pittura (non solo come forma di espressione artistica ma anche e soprattutto in quanto modello e strumento di conoscenza) una terza modalità di percepire «la vera effigie della tua iddea» (in altri termini, il simulacro dell'intelletto)". Quindi l'artista visuale, che è da intendere al contempo come filosofo naturale e artifex, attinge dalle visioni oniriche (portatrici anche di enigmi che giungono dal non conosciuto e dall'inconscio), da ciò che assimila dalla realtà attraverso l'esplorazione conoscitiva ottico-sensoriale; introietta le forme naturali, per poi rielaborare tutto per mezzo di una invenzione creativa da cui far scaturire una "seconda

natura", attraverso una visionaria "trasmutazione" in grado di generare uno sdoppiamento della realtà, con una "scienza" così veritiera che il pittore può confrontare il proprio ingegno persino con la creazione divina, svelando le potenzialità "demiurgiche" del suo operare: «La deità ch'ha la scienza del pittore fa che la mente del pittore si trasmuta in una similitudine di mente divina» (ivi, §68).

La rielaborazione creativa di una "seconda natura" è possibile attraverso il passaggio dalla mente alle mani, dal concetto alla traduzione formale, mediante il disegno, inteso come "verbo figurativo" che nomina le immagini e queste si concretizzano nella istantaneità del loro stesso prodursi nel pensiero: «ciò ch'è ne l'universo, per essenzia, presenzia o immaginazione, esso l'ha prima nella mente e poi nelle mani, e quelle son di tanta eccellenzia, che in pari tempo generano una proporzionata armonia in un solo sguardo qual fanno le cose» (ivi, §13).

Per Leonardo il disegno è parte di un flusso di coscienza proiettato sul mondo, che viene reso visibile in modo concreto, al contempo un mezzo e un gesto attraverso cui dare rappresentazione di quanto viene osservato nella compilazione potenzialmente sterminata di un repertorio del conoscibile, un progetto di indagine e interpretazione, che va a costruire un "archivio della visibilità", tra universo esteriore e dimensione interiore dell'artista-scienziato.

Nel capitolo *L'«alitare» del mondo*, Versiero concentra la propria indagine sulle propagazioni delle concentriche risonanze del suono attraverso l'aria – "Sì come la pietra gittata nell'acqua si fa centro e causa di vari circuli, el sono fatto in nell'aria circolarmente si sparge" (Parigi, Institut de France, Ms A, c. 9v) -, sugli spostamenti delle onde acquatiche [si veda: *Studi di gorghi d'acqua*, 1508-1510 circa, tracce di gessetto nero, penna e inchiostro su carta non preparata, cm 29 × 20,2. Windsor, Royal Library, inv. 12660 verso], sugli espansi riverberi prodotti da fulmini, folgori e saette nei cieli, sulla proiezione delle onde mentali nell'incommensurabile dimensione dell'universo, sul dipanarsi dei moti interiori e delle propaggini emotive.

Alla fine della quasi ventennale permanenza alla corte milanese degli Sforza (circa 1482-1499), Leonardo considera

l'acqua come vitale umore e veicolo della metamorfosi cosmica, che percorre il corpo della terra costituito da innumerevoli vene, e che scorre anche nelle persone, intese dagli antichi come fossero mondi minori, entro cui si manifesta continuamente una cangiante morfologia dinamica. V'è una equiparazione tra la fisica degli elementi e la fisiologia corporea degli umani: "imperò che, siccome l'omo è composto di terra, acqua, aria e foco, questo corpo della terra è il somigliante. Se l'omo ha in sé ossi sostenitori e armadura della carne, il mondo ha i sassi sostenitori della terra. Se l'omo ha in sé il laco del sangue, dove cresce e discresce il polmone nello alitare, il corpo della terra ha il suo Occeano mare, il quale ancora lui cresce e discresce ogni sei ore per lo alitare del mondo. Se dal detto lago di sangue diriva[no] vene che si vanno ramificando per lo corpo umano, similmente il mare Occeano empie il corpo della terra d'infinite vene d'acqua" (*Cominciamento del trattato dell'acqua*, Parigi, Institut de France, Ms A, c. 55v); "L'acqua percossa dall'acqua fa circuli dintorno al loco percosso. Per lunga distanzia la voce infra l'aria. Più lunga infra 'l foco. Più la mente infra l'universo. Ma perché l'è finita non s'astende infra lo 'nfinito (Parigi, Institut de France, Ms H, c. 67r).

Il testo *De anima* allude alla vitalità del "corpo" terrestre, interpretato come macrocosmo naturale in corrispondenza con il microcosmo umano, testimonia la universale concezione naturalistica di Leonardo, "che riconosce decisivi e reciproci nessi e analogie tra l'essere umano e il mondo naturale considerato nella sua interezza". Su diversi piani, ogni azione riceve e mette in moto riverberi – dalla mente a tutto quello che appartiene al percepibile e all'impercepito, e viceversa – nella contemplazione dello spazio smisurato dell'universo, proprio come le onde si dilatano indefinitamente sulla superficie dell'acqua dal punto dell'impatto di un sasso.

L'esistenza dell'uomo (un «mondo minore») è intesa come un vitalistico riverbero del respiro universale del mondo universale, essere partecipe della vita cosmica e del ritmo scandito dalla pulsazione del suo respiro. L'anima intellettiva è concepita come un quinto elemento – sintesi e risultante delle coazioni tra i quattro elementi della fisica aristotelica, un valore aggiunto di matrice spirituale -, pulsante nella materia del

corpo, che anela a un eterno ritorno all'entità cosmica primigenia dalla quale discende.

Nella chiosa di questa recensione lasciamo che il nostro sguardo contemplativo si lasci portare nei flussi e nelle dinamiche tradotte da Leonardo nei disegni *Studi di gorghi d'acqua* (1508-1510 circa) e *Diluvio* (1517-1518 circa), ora conservato alla Royal Library di Windsor (inv. 12380), nel rapporto tra casualità e regole scientifiche, nei "gradi della pioggia cadente in diverse distanze e in diverse oscurità", portati dentro la confusa coltre di nubi temporalesche nel turbinio della precipitazione della pioggia, dentro e oltre ogni grado di oscurità nella percezione visiva, nell'accadere di vortici d'acqua che mettono in moto una forza distruttiva, resa in alcuni brani nel disegno con una stilizzazione estetica molto "simile ai riccioli di una capigliatura", efficace correlativo oggettivo di qualcosa che sta al contempo nei livelli fisico e metafisico, nella visione lirica e scientifica. Viene esemplificato un transito elementale, il moto di variazione e mutazione naturali da uno stato all'altro. Nel libro di Versiero, come nella coazione tra scritti e disegni di Leonardo, l'analogia è sottoposta a un'accelerazione vorticosa, che si trasmette da un concetto al successivo, da una citazione a una apertura semantica, da un segno a un rimando, da un'idea alla connessione con le immagini nelle pagine. L'autore riesce a dare corpo visibile alle intuizioni e alle visioni di Leonardo, rendendo partecipe la nostra lettura nei rimandi ai lampi presenti nei suoi quaderni fitti di appunti e osservazioni, che via via esplicitano il progressivo diramarsi dei suoi interessi.

I disegni dei *Diluvi* testimoniano un'esasperazione formale del segno grafico, dove forse le certezze naturalistiche cominciano a mettere in circolo i gorghi dei dubbi e dei ripensamenti della maturità, divengono correlativi oggettivi dell'incontrollabile dinamismo degli elementi naturali. Versiero coglie una processualità che in modo lucido e chiaro giunge a una consapevolezza estrema, una tipologia che ancora oggi cattura il nostro sguardo e muove lo spirito contemplante: "Leonardo comprende nei suoi ultimi anni che l'artificio pittorico della verosimiglianza totale deve potersi avvalere di una illusoria abolizione di tratti e segni, affinché l'arte possa

generare l'unità di ombre e lumi secondo una "sfumata" continuità di trapassi, «a uso di fumo»".

Negli anni della sua avanzata maturità, Leonardo si lascia condurre da una lucida visione pessimistica, da una preveggenza profetica, dove i *Diluvi* e gli eventi naturali (come tempeste, uragani e cataclismi) vengono immaginati come forze primigenie, che vanno oltre la storia e la presenza di ogni figura umana e di ogni vestigia della civiltà. Le masse potenti dei gorghi e dei flussi estremi fluiscono con enormi cascate sui disequilibri causati dall'umanità, sull'*homo faber*, che non è più artefice e "misura" della propria vicenda nel mondo. Oltre a tutte le sue invenzioni note, non è improbabile che il genio dell'epoca rinascimentale abbia progettato un dispositivo della preveggenza, una sorta di cronovisore o una macchina del tempo, in grado di mostrare quali fossero le sorti dell'umanità nel futuro, che anche noi ora vediamo sempre più prossime. Negli ultimi anni della sua vita, Leonardo si sente all'ingresso di un antro misterioso, inteso come immagine dell'umano smarrimento di fronte alla vastità del mondo conoscibile e al timore che tutto possa essere portato via da forze oscure e indifferenti.

Review: Corrado Claverini, *La tradizione filosofica italiana: Quattro paradigmi interpretativi*

Tim Christiaens

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How beautiful is sunset, when the glow
Of Heaven descends upon a land like thee,
Thou Paradise of exiles, Italy!
(Percy Bysshe Shelley)

While the label of "Continental philosophy" supposedly refers to the entire European Continent, it is often implicitly restricted to the combination of German philosophy and French theory. It is rather unusual to find a "Continental philosophy" syllabus that engages in depth with Russian, Spanish, or Scandinavian authors, even if figures like Shestov and Berdyaev, Ortega y Gasset and De Unamuno, Kierkegaard and Naess, have had a tremendous impact on the European philosophical tradition. However, around the year 2000, this Franco-German focus was suddenly expanded with the rise to prominence of Italian Thought. Philosophers like Giorgio Agamben, Antonio Negri, Umberto Eco, Gianni Vattimo, and Paolo Virno took the world by storm. Roberto Esposito's notion of "Italian Thought" quickly became a commonplace for classifying and distinguishing these authors from the wave of French theory that had dominated the American literary studies department since the 1980s. Esposito's approach especially, which expanded "Italian Thought" to encompass the entire Italian philosophical tradition, seemed to offer a political practicality and historical depth crucial for the times. While Agamben's speculations on *homo sacer* and Negri's musings on the multitude inspired resistance movements against the War on Terror and capitalist globalisation, Eco rejuvenated mediaeval semiotics and Esposito reinterpreted Machiavelli for a new generation of scholars.

However, over the years a backlash has emerged against the term. Some have argued that the promotion of "Italian Thought" is nothing more than 'a good marketing strategy'.[1] Many are bothered by the label insofar as it looks like a vehicle for academic self-promotion and a thinly disguised variation on the "Made in Italy"-brand that right-wing Italian governments use to sponsor Italian tourism and exports of its goods and services. Under the dark shadow of marketisation, "Italian Thought" looks like a brand name that reduces philosophy to just another export product of the Italian knowledge economy. The critics specifically object to two discursive effects of the framing of "Italian Thought". On the one hand, the term risks flattening the internal heterogeneity of Italian philosophy into a single, streamlined tradition in which all Italian philosophers are supposed to converge on the fundamentals of their thought. If Italian Thought marks a homogeneous school of thought, then the central attributes of each individual philosophy are flattened to fit the mould. Yet Italian philosophers – even the big names of today – persistently disagree with each other. On the other hand, the emphasis on *Italianità* risks playing into the hands of right-wing nationalism. The term seems to fetishise Italian particularity as an antidote to the philosophical cosmopolitanism of global elites. It might reinforce those political forces that wish to put forward a particularist Italian identity as superior to other cultures.

In this quagmire where genuine criticism and petty resentments almost inextricably mix, Corrado Claverini's *La tradizione filosofica italiana: Quattro paradigmi interpretativi* offers much-needed clarity. The debate around the specificity of Italian philosophy has an elaborate history, and Esposito is not the first to inquire into its character. Claverini's book offers a well-researched and astute history of Italian philosophers reflecting on the nature of Italian philosophy itself. He focuses on four paradigmatic thinkers – Bertrando Spaventa, Giovanni

[1] Sandro Chignola, *Da dentro: Biopolitica, bioeconomia, Italian Theory* (Roma: DeriveApprodi, 2018), p. 12 [my translation]. See also Augusto Illuminati, "Eatalian Theory", *DinamoPress*, 30 March 2015 (https://www.dinamopress.it/news/eatalian-theory/) or Pier Paolo Portinaro, *Le mani su Machiavelli: Una critica dell'Italian Theory* (Roma: Donzelli, 2018).

Gentile, Eugenio Garin, and Roberto Esposito – who have contemplated the status of Italian philosophy as an individually identifiable tradition. Central in Claverini's exposition is the complex dialectic between the universal aspiration of philosophy and its historico-geographical particularity. Philosophy aspires to articulate eternal truths yet can only be conducted within concrete socio-historical circumstances by finite human beings. Move too much in the direction of universality and you end up with an ahistorical simulation of philosophical conversation where all arguments are stripped of their context until nothing but the bare bones of formal logic remain; but move too much in the direction of historical particularity and you fall into absolute historicism, which reduces philosophical texts to museum pieces at which we can marvel but which will inevitably get buried under the dust of desuetude. According to Claverini, all four paradigmatic thinkers have actively resisted this drifting apart of philosophy and its history. For them, the history of Italian philosophy is not a mere museum of outmoded curiosities but a resource for revitalising the present. From the depths of the past, a clamour emerges that insists on what Machiavelli termed a *'ritorno ai principì'*. At critical moments in time, the static actuality of social life returns to the primordial chaos from which it came and in which the new can arise. For Machiavelli, "changes which bring such bodies back to their principles are healthy. The ones that have the best organisation and live the longest are, however, those that can renew themselves often through their own institutions, or that come to such renewal through some circumstance outside these institutions. […] The method of renewing them is, as was stated, to bring them back to their principles".[2] What counts for politics here also applies to philosophy: at critical junctures, a return to the living principles of thought embedded in history pushes philosophical thought forward into new and unexplored terrain.

The Hegelian thinker Bertrando Spaventa enacts such a *ritorno ai principì* during the Italian *Risorgimento*. His 19th-century

[2] Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy,* trans. by Julia Conaway Bondanella & Peter Bondanella (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 246.

reconstructive history of Italian philosophy gives a clear lineage and role for Italian philosophy in the development of European modernity. He reads the progression of European history and philosophy as a series of stages from the authority of divine transcendence in the Middle Ages to the claims of this-worldly immanence in modernity. The Universal, in this story, manifests itself in a dialectical progression of particular national moments building toward fully modern immanence. Italy plays a fascinating role in this self-objectification of the World Spirit. In the Renaissance, Italian philosophy marks the beginning of the rupture between mediaeval transcendence and modern immanence. Spaventa reads thinkers like Bruno and Campanella as initial rejections of mediaeval obedience to otherworldly authority in favour of modern self-determination. Italian Renaissance thinkers thereby appear as early precursors to the giants of modern philosophy, like Descartes and Kant. In Renaissance Italy, a circulation of ideas is set in motion that expresses the self-actualisation of the World Spirit and that will come to fruition in 19th-century Idealist philosophy. However, Spaventa argues that Italy itself largely disappears from this Odyssey after the Renaissance. The power of the Church proved too oppressive for the flourishing of modern philosophy, so the World Spirit moved elsewhere to perfect its self-objectification. Only in the 19th century was it able to return to Italy.

Giovanni Gentile redoubles the stress laid on the speculative and teleological elements in Spaventa's historiography. He also reads the history of Italian philosophy as a progressive immanentisation of Spirit towards late-modern Idealist philosophy. Whereas his former mentor and philosophical opponent Benedetto Croce stresses the dialectic between the universal rationality of philosophy and the particularity of the human individual, while dismissing anything else as senseless nationalist rhetoric, Gentile champions the Italian national tradition of philosophy as the particular carrier of the Universal Spirit of modernity. Building on Spaventa's work, he constructs a more detailed and convincing history of Italian philosophy from the court of Federico II of Sicily up to his own school of *attualismo*. Compared to Spaventa, the story is richer and contains fewer

gaps, but the dialectic between universality and particularity also shifts slightly in a more nationalist direction. For Spaventa, the motor of history is the Universal Spirit of modernity, which acquires embodied existence in a progression of European nations; for Gentile, the nation is itself directly spiritual and articulates its own universality through the objectification of its spiritual contents in concrete history.

In the middle of the 20th century, Eugenio Garin explicitly rejects this speculative approach to the history of Italian philosophy. His *Cronache di filosofia italiana* and *Storia della filosofia italiana* are still standard references in the historiography of Italian philosophy. They leave more room for the heterogeneities and discontinuities in the history of Italian thought insofar as Garin refuses to fit the Italian tradition into a singular narrative running from transcendence to immanence. Italian philosophers are, moreover, not interpreted as precursors to other, better (?) non-Italian philosophers. If Garin accepts a common lineage or characteristic of Italian philosophy at all, it is not on the level of its philosophical content. According to Claverini, Garin's links to the Gramscian project of constructing a national-popular culture under Togliatti's *Partito Comunista d'Italia* puts him on a different track. Garin stresses the political pragmatics of Italian philosophy, emphasising the shared ethico-civil proclivity of many Italian thinkers. Italian philosophy is marked by an involvement in the turbulent political history of Italy, in which many philosophers have paid a heavy price for their public involvement. From Campanella and Bruno to Gentile and Gramsci, Italian philosophy has been deeply enmeshed in the *tumulti intra i nobili e la plebe* (tumult among the nobles and the plebeian).

With this background information excellently explained in Claverini's book, Esposito's notion of Italian Thought appears as more than mere marketing. It builds on the historiographical tradition of Spaventa, Gentile, and Garin, reconfiguring elements from each thinker into an original reinterpretation of Italian philosophy. In *Pensiero vivente* and *Da fuori,* Esposito rearticulates elements such as the emphasis on this-worldly immanence and the political impetus of philosophical reflection, but he also respects Garin's appeal for

a non-nationalistic historiography of Italian philosophy. Esposito presents Italian Thought not as a national(ist) tradition rooted in the ethnic identity of the Italian peninsula but as a trajectory of territorialisations and deterritorialisations of concepts and ideas circulating through the Italian territory. This explains, for example, Esposito's repeated references to non-Italian authors like Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, and Benedictus de/Baruch Spinoza in his presentation of Italian Thought.[3] "Italian Thought" does not name a tradition expressive of the Italian national Spirit but a network of interactions that finds its paradigmatic exponents today in a circle of philosophers like Agamben, Negri, and Esposito himself, who come from the Italian territory. The *Italianità* of Italian Thought does not reside in the nationality of its representatives but in their participation in a network of conversations, criticisms, and influences passing through the Italian territory. In this network, the major ideas and attitudes of Italian Thought are communicated. To give a simple example, there is nothing inherently "Italian" about the (post-)workerist reading of Marx's 'Fragment on Machines' in the *Grundrisse* with its key signatures like the general intellect, the real subsumption of labour under capital, and the virtuosic? potentialities of living labour. Yet, this text has become a classic of Marxist thought through its translation and dissemination in Italian Marxism. Ever since its publication in the *Quaderni rossi* by Renato Solmi, the text has travelled through the Italian network until it became one of the central texts of contemporary Marxian scholarship and activism. Esposito presents Italian Thought as a close-knit network through which the dissemination of philosophical ideas takes place. Through their continuous interactions with each other and the outside world, the philosophers of Italian Thought diffuse a unique set of approaches that influence philosophy and politics far beyond the Italian peninsula. The Universality of philosophy is, in this optic, not a spiritual substance that animates particular occurrences of philosophical thought, but the product of a

[3] See, for instance, Roberto Esposito, *Da fuori: Una filosofia per l'Europa* (Torino: Einaudi, 2016), pp. 157-195.

network of particular individuals spreading their philosophies until they reach the level of universality.

At this conclusion, Claverini's defence of Italian Thought shines at its brightest. He not only describes but also shows a method of doing philosophy that resists today's one-dimensional globalisation of academic philosophy without fetishising nationalist identities or particularities. Contemporary philosophy suffers from a kind of globalisation that confuses the global dissemination of ideas with the unilateral imposition of American customs across the globe. Under the hegemony of American Ivy League universities, academic philosophy is often reduced to a single language (English), a single tradition (the standard overview of philosophy from Plato to Wittgenstein from American textbooks), a single practice (publishing in American peer-reviewed journals) and a single framework (analytic philosophy). Pursuing a career in philosophy today often equates with conforming to these expectations. Even initiatives for diversifying or decolonising philosophy often boil down to adding feminist or post-colonial papers by American Ivy League professors to the reading lists. That might diversify the philosophical curriculum in terms of gender or race, but it has a deleterious effect on the institutional pluralism of philosophy. Whoever is not closely "in the loop" on developments at US college campuses, is mercilessly cast aside.

Claverini shows that another form of globalisation is possible. There is value in a more horizontal network of universalisations, where more ideas than just those from a handful of American universities have the power to spread across the globe. Such an approach to globalisation stresses the need for diversity in linguistic and philosophical traditions without moving to the opposite extreme of atavistic philosophical nationalism. Rather than submitting to American hegemony or hopelessly protecting one's national heritage, an open network of philosophical influences can spread ideas in a more horizontal and even manner. By confronting his readers with the tradition of Italian Thought, Claverini already shows the potential of such a *ritorno ai principi* for resituating the impact of contemporary Italian philosophers. Esposito's notion of "Italian Thought" is not just a marketing brand for American

universities, but a rearticulation of a rich tradition of Italian self-reflection. And now, we readers are called upon to ensure that this return to first principles gives birth to new beginnings for the philosophical republic of ideas.