

***“You are here: in flesh and blood -with a face, a name and a story.”<sup>1</sup>***

***Adriana Cavarero***

Adriana Cavarero is one of the most prolific and influential Italian philosophers of our time. Her work stands out for its originality and lucidity; it is characterized by a refined and subtle, yet relentless effort of ‘undoing’ much of what of the western philosophical tradition has theorized as its central categories of thought over the course of more than two thousand years. Not unlike Penelope, one of the classical female characters she writes about,<sup>2</sup> Cavarero ‘undoes’ a great deal of philosophical discourse. Unlike Penelope, though, she does not weave it back together soon thereafter, or better, she does not weave it back together exactly as it had been. By loosening traditional concepts and by detaching them from the main framework of thought, she allows for new and fecund ways to think about these same concepts which, having become unbounded, reveal themselves in an entirely new light and open new directions. Questions about theory, politics, reality, subjectivity, the body, and sexual difference are just some of the issues she delves into. Her writing proceeds by way of a stringent critique, both demolishing and revealing, a critique of metaphysics and philosophy, but even more a critique of the subject, as it has been defined by the philosophical, metaphysical and political discourse, since “every political model constructs its form by constructing at the same time its subject” and “in Western history, every redefinition of politics is a redefinition of the notion of the subject.”<sup>3</sup> As Cavarero shows, the western philosophical tradition is traversed by an understanding of the self that is deeply problematic. Removed from the here and now, it stands out as abstract, fictitious and wanting.

In her “Foreward” to *In Spite of Plato*, Rosi Braidotti points out that Cavarero’s approach to philosophy brings together various threads: the classical texts of the philosophical tradition, Marxism, Gramsci’s materialism, her closeness to left-wing

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<sup>1</sup>This is a slightly altered sentence that appears in Adriana Cavarero, “Who Engenders Politics?” in *Italian Feminist Theory and Practice: Equality and Sexual Difference*, ed. Graziella Parati and Rebecca West, (Cranbury, NJ: Rosemont Publishing and Printing Corp., 2002), 100. This sentence, in one form or another, appears in a number of different writings of Cavarero.

<sup>2</sup>See Adriana Cavarero “Penelope” in *In Spite of Plato: A Feminist Rewriting of Ancient Philosophy*, transl. Serena Anderlini-D’Onofrio and Aine O’Healy, (New York: Routledge, 1995), 11-30.

<sup>3</sup>Adriana Cavarero, “Who Engenders Politics?” 97.

movements, the women's movement and the theory of sexual difference as developed in the Italian context.<sup>4</sup> Specifically, Braidotti sees Cavarero's work "as marked by a yearning for a radical, woman-centered redefinition of the human."<sup>5</sup> If it is undeniable that sexual difference plays a crucial role in Cavarero's redefinition of the subject, it is also true that it is not completely exhausted with that. More is at stake in Cavarero's search for a new subjectivity and the challenge lies precisely in translating into a cohesive picture the full implications of a self that appears as multiple, yet irreducibly 'unique.' Perhaps, as she recognizes herself, her work is more about opening new directions than providing a full-fledged new understanding of the self.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that her thought has had an impact on the critique of the subject within and beyond Italian borders, as well as within and without theories of gender, feminism and sexual difference.

Within gender theory, feminism and sexual difference, Cavarero highlights the specificity of an Italian or generally "Mediterranean feminist theory" that, in difference from an Anglo-American or North American theory, is less captive to the post-structuralist and post-modern theory of Foucault and Derrida.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, as Gabriella Parati and Rebecca West point out, Italian feminist theory is "anything but monolithic," it is rather "a site of dialogue and difference, if not conflict" and its "inherent plurality"<sup>8</sup> may offer novel insights into the debate between equality and difference.<sup>9</sup> More broadly, Cavarero's critique of the subject pushes us to think beyond the given conceptual framework of such critique; in the words of Paul Kottman: "Cavarero's work offers a unique challenge, and thus an opportunity, for a contemporary Anglo-American thought that deals with subject-

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<sup>4</sup>Rosi Braidotti, "Foreword," in *In Spite of Plato: A Feminist Rewriting of Ancient Philosophy*, vii-viii.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, ix.

<sup>6</sup>In her introduction to *In Spite of Plato*, Cavarero writes: "I simply wanted to choose some threads and sketch out some images. Perhaps, I have sometimes insisted on giving a sense of completion to what is only a fragment. But I know that a *con-text* (a site where a text interacts with other texts) cannot be created by a single woman on her own." Adriana Cavarero, "Introduction" in *In Spite of Plato: A Feminist Rewriting of Ancient Philosophy*, 8.

<sup>7</sup>Graziella Parati and Rebecca West (eds.), "Introduction" in *Italian Feminist Theory: Equality and Sexual Difference*, 15.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>9</sup>For a comprehensive collection of Italian feminist theory and its manifold perspectives, see Paola Bono and Sandra Kemp (eds.), *Italian Feminist Thought: A Reader*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991).

formation or for a politics, that relies upon revisiting the question of the ‘subject.’<sup>10</sup> Hence, no doubt “a unique challenge,” but well worth pursuing.

Cavarero’s critique is radical, yet her position is subtle and not easily captured. She holds on to a notion of a unique and distinctive self, one that is as compelling as it is precarious. She carves out a space for the self that is ‘in-between’ the universal and sovereign self, as found in the western metaphysical tradition and the dispersed, diluted self, as articulated in postmodern thought. Her task is arduous, seeking truly a way between Scylla and Charybdis, but Cavarero appears undaunted by the challenges of her endeavor. As we read her work, the passionate desire for the uniqueness of the self is clearly palpable.

If we wish to grasp the significance of her philosophical endeavor, and thereby fully capture the originality and fecundity of her thought, it becomes crucial to unravel the self as she presents it throughout her work. Cavarero’s self is unique: it is a dynamic self, not a prisoner of an external gaze that defines it, not isolated into a static and rigid being, not self-sufficient, not sovereign and not all-powerful. As she writes: “Every human being is in fact a unique being, different from all those who live, who lived, and who will live.”<sup>11</sup> The self that Cavarero writes about “has a face, a voice, a look, a body and a sex,”<sup>12</sup> and it is constitutively exposed and relational. She calls it a “narratable self,” and an “altruistic identity.”<sup>13</sup> This self is revealed in a life-story, yet never to be found in the confines of a philosophical definition, nor exhausted completely in a text.

### **Dislocation and disfigured relations**

The birth of philosophy as inaugurated by Plato is characterized by what Cavarero calls a problem of “dislocation.”<sup>14</sup> Embracing Hannah Arendt’s critique of metaphysics, Cavarero decries the turning away of the philosopher’s gaze from the realm of human

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<sup>10</sup>Paul A. Kottman, “Translator’s Introduction,” in *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*, trans. Paul A. Kottman, (London & New York: Routledge, 2000), xi.

<sup>11</sup>Adriana Cavarero, “Who Engenders Politics?” 92.

<sup>12</sup>Adriana Cavarero, “Birth, Love, Politics,” *Radical Philosophy Journal* 86 (1997): 19-23, 20.

<sup>13</sup>Cavarero uses these formulas in various writings and particularly in *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*.

<sup>14</sup>Adriana Cavarero, “Who Engenders Politics,” 88.

affairs to the realm of ideas. Deeply concerned with the contingency and unpredictability of human affairs, the philosopher finds the norms that are to govern and order the political sphere in a realm beyond. Hence, 'dislocation' is to be understood here in the literal sense that the normalizing principles of human interaction come from without, from outside the *inter homine esse* and are not inherent in it. Indeed, its *raison d'être* lies elsewhere. As a result of such dislocation, men and women in the concrete are replaced by the abstract notion of a universal (absolute) Man, that is to encompass the many: the many individuals that make up the human world become one undistinguished entity. What Arendt calls "plurality," and Cavarero "plural uniqueness"<sup>15</sup> disappear, swallowed up by the construct of the Universal Subject. The desire to bring order to the political, viewed as chaotic, hap hazardous, even illusionary, remains a constant throughout the entire tradition. In ancient Athens, a good community needs its philosopher king, just as in modern political thought, the 'state of nature,' the preeminent locus of disorder, in Hobbes' words, a "state of war of all against all" where life is "nasty, brutish and short," needs some form of artificial contract to make the living together of human beings bearable and peaceful. The state of nature "corresponds to the sphere of human affairs that Plato places at the back of the cave" and just as it happens in the cave, likewise in the state of nature, only the philosopher can 'save' human beings from their deplorable condition.<sup>16</sup>

With the imposition of a presumed order from the outside, the political does away with the intrinsic unpredictability and the contingency of human action by way of eliminating plurality. The philosopher pretends to 'save' the particular, by subsuming it under the universal. As Cavarero writes, "this task of redemption, however, logically transformed itself in an act of erasure."<sup>17</sup> As a result of this operation, we are no longer confronted with the concreteness and the specific uniqueness of each individual, but with a series of fictitious entities: "Man, the subject, the individual, the person."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Adriana Cavarero, "Politicizing Theory," *Political Theory*, 30, no. 4. (Aug. 2002), 506-532, 514.

<sup>16</sup>Adriana Cavarero, "Politicizing Theory," 511.

<sup>17</sup>Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*, 53.

<sup>18</sup>Adriana Cavarero, "Politicizing Theory," 520.

Cavarero's thought is thus grounded in a radical shift of perspective: from the contemplative gaze that turns away from the realm of human affairs and sets up fictitious entities, to the here and now of human interaction, where plurality, and not the Universal Man in the singular, is at stake. In other words, her point of departure consists in a movement of re-location: the tearing down of metaphysical reality and universal subject means that we are fully here in our full concrete materiality and we are here *together with* many others. Arendt's concern with restoring plurality to the political becomes in the words of Cavarero, "an ontology of plural uniqueness"<sup>19</sup> constitutive of each existent. The gaze of the new viewpoint, in difference from the contemplative vision of the *bios theoretikos*, does not look away from human interaction. As Cavarero explains: "The vision turns, however in this case, not to fictitious entities, but to the *datum* of the human condition: it dares to present itself as a radical phenomenology of the fundamental materiality of human beings who are incarnated singularities, existing here and now, in this way and not otherwise."<sup>20</sup> Here, Cavarero is presenting the *locus* of her theory as being rooted in the here and now of lived human existence and therefore concrete, bodily, sexed, plural and relational, everything that the universal subject is not, since: "Man is a universal that applies to everyone precisely because it is no one. It disincarnates itself from the living singularity of each one, while claiming to substantiate it. It is at once masculine and neuter, a hybrid creature, generated by thought, a fantastic universal produced by the mind."<sup>21</sup>

In rejecting the abstract artificiality of western metaphysics, though, Cavarero does not seem to reject theory as a whole. On the contrary, her position appears to be that philosophy, and all theoretical discourse in general, can be reformed if we start from a plurality of concrete existents rather than the metaphysical and universal subject. In other words, she proposes to bring about a shift in perspective, a readjusting of the vision. In her article titled "Politicizing theory," she points out that: "According to tradition, political theory consists in theorizing politics, or rather in the reduction of politics to the principles of *theoria*. It seems necessary, therefore, to overturn this assumption and to finally think

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<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, 520.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, 528.

<sup>21</sup>Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*, 9.

political theory in terms of *politicizing theory*.”<sup>22</sup> She therefore calls those relations that have ensued from such dislocation “disfigured relations,” that is the “types of relations that are, precisely, disfigured: negating the plurality of unique beings, they fail to recognize that plural relationality that, as an ontological given, constitutes their very matrix.”<sup>23</sup> In other words, political theory, as it has been viewed traditionally, is a disfigured form of relation, one that is grounded in a displacement. By correcting the vision, however, and by restoring the concrete plural uniqueness of each existent as constitutive of human interaction, it will be possible to develop a political theory that reflects an authentic understanding of the self.

Nevertheless, the question needs to be raised whether such disfigured relations can indeed be reformed through a shift in perspective, however radical that may be. In some of her writings, such as *In Spite of Plato*, for instance, this appears to be Cavarero’s position. Rosi Braidotti, in her foreword to the English edition, calls Cavarero’s way of proceeding “a purposeful and deliberate conceptual theft” and a strategic “conceptual pickpocketing,” which entails reappropriating female characters in light of feminist theory.<sup>24</sup> In other words, Cavarero’s method consists in recovering what has been erased, in order to provide a theory reflecting the ontological plural uniqueness at the heart of the human condition. However, in other writings, such as *Relating Narratives*, Cavarero seems to reject philosophy altogether as the proper discourse of the self, and therefore even questioning the possibility of a renewed political and ethical theory that sets as its point of departure some form of theoretical discourse. Here, she proposes instead narration and story-telling as alternative which, she claims, is the only way that ‘cares’ and is able to reveal the uniqueness of *who* we are.

Two different directions seem to be at work in Cavarero’s thought: a ‘reforming attempt’ that tears down the philosophical subject and places ‘plural uniqueness’ as the cornerstone of a new ‘reformed’ theory, and an ‘alternative’ or ‘disjunctive attempt,’ which abandons philosophical discourse altogether since the uniqueness she talks about cannot be grasped by theory as such, but needs an alternative medium of expression. Are both

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<sup>22</sup>Adriana Cavarero, “Politicizing Theory,” 512.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, 522.

<sup>24</sup>Rosi Braidotti, “Foreword,” in *In Spite of Plato: A Feminist Rewriting of Ancient Philosophy*, xiii.

these directions equally pursued by Cavarero in her work? Or do they mark a turning point in her thought, one that would make her project even more radical? When reading Cavarero's *Tu che mi guardi, tu che mi racconti*,<sup>25</sup> the text that more than any other centers on the self, it becomes clear that Cavarero advocates for an alternative to philosophical discourse that expresses this specific uniqueness and irreducibility of the self.

**The narratable self and “il *sapore familiare*” del se’ - the familiar taste of oneself<sup>26</sup>: another kind of dislocation?**

The uniqueness of each one of us is rooted in the crucial distinction between “who” and “what” that Cavarero retrieves from Arendt. *Who* someone is, Arendt writes, refers to the “specific uniqueness” pertaining to each human being, and this ‘uniqueness’ escapes us.<sup>27</sup> To the question ‘who?’ we generally answer by listing the qualities of this particular individual and in so doing we end up saying *what* one is, as a character, rather than *who* she is. It is a sort of a paradox: who one is is revealed yet not fully graspable in and through “what.” Similarly, Cavarero, points to the paradoxical fact that we answer the question “who are you?” by giving our own name, even though many others share that same name, and despite this, we utter it with the conviction that in so doing we announce our own specific uniqueness, which we share with no other.<sup>28</sup> It is precisely this specific uniqueness, *who* one is in his and her “unrepeatable singularity,” defying all attempt at being captured, that Cavarero seeks out. But if who we are in each of our own uniqueness escapes us, how does Cavarero hope to bring it to light?

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<sup>25</sup>Adriana Cavarero, *Tu che mi guardi, tu che mi racconti: Filosofia della narrazione*, (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1997). This is the title of the Italian edition and it expresses clearly a central idea of the self according to Cavarero as this article intends to show. Unfortunately, this fundamental aspect is lost in the title of the English translation: *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*.

<sup>26</sup>“*Il sapore familiare del se’*” is a central notion with regard to the self as Cavarero understands it. Because it is translated differently in the English edition as ‘self-sensing recognition,’ as ‘sense,’ as ‘feeling,’ and as ‘knowledge,’ its relevance risks being dispelled and even create some confusion as to what exactly this notion entails. In the effort to convey the significance of this notion in Cavarero’s understanding of the self as well as maintaining consistence with the Italian text, it is preferable to translate it as “the familiar taste of oneself.” Paul Kottman, translator of the English edition, acknowledges the challenges this notion gives rise to in footnote 39 in his introduction. See, Paul A. Kottman, “Translator’s Introduction,” in *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*, xxviii.

<sup>27</sup>Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), 181.

<sup>28</sup>Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*, 18-19.

Cavarero's answer is as unambiguous as it is puzzling: if our specific uniqueness, that 'flows from the beating of every heart,'<sup>29</sup> lies in *who* each one of us is, then there must be a way to grasp it and for Cavarero this power lies in telling the life-story of someone, pointing to the power of narration, toward which she gravitates in her work. Arendt had already pointed out the story as the only way to reveal this uniqueness: "*Who* somebody is or was, we can know only by knowing the story of which he is himself the hero – his biography, in other words; everything else we know of him, including the work he may have produced and left behind, tells us only what he is or was."<sup>30</sup> Building on Arendt's notion of *who* as distinguished from "what," Cavarero comes to see the "narratable self," as the "house of uniqueness,"<sup>31</sup> that is the source of this distinctive *who*.

In claiming that narration is the only appropriate modality for expressing the uniqueness of the self, Cavarero rejects philosophy and philosophical discourse as inadequate in capturing such uniqueness. As the preeminent discourse of the universal, she argues that philosophy has failed in this regard and is doomed to fail again and again insofar as it continues to aspire to provide a universal and abstract definition of human being. While philosophy is "a definitory knowledge that regards the universality of Man. The other, that of narration, has the form of a biographical knowledge that regards the unrepeatable identity of someone. The questions that sustain the two discursive styles are equally diverse. The first asks 'what is Man?' the second asks instead of someone '*who* he or she is?'"<sup>32</sup> Thus, the knowledge that philosophy pursues, knowledge of the universal, cannot capture *who* one is, since:

knowledge of the universal, which excludes embodied uniqueness from its epistemology, attains its maximum perfection by presupposing the absence of such uniqueness. *What* Man is can be known and defined, as Aristotle assures us; *who* Socrates is, instead, eludes the parameters of knowledge as science, it eludes the truth of *episteme*.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>30</sup>Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 186.

<sup>31</sup>Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*, 34.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, 9.



In other words, philosophy can answer the question “What is a human being?” but the question “Who is Socrates?” is better left to narration and even then the question is not exhausted once for all.

Philosophy, then, in its being uprooted from the context of human interaction and from the concrete materiality of each existent, in other words, aiming at “Man in his disembodied and universal substance,” leaves out precisely this particular man, this particular woman, this unique *who* with a specific name: Oedipus, Ulysses, Penelope, or Antigone.<sup>34</sup> By finding in the telling of one’s life story the only possible way to evoke and render tangible such specific uniqueness, Cavarero abandons “Man, the universal” and talks of Oedipus, Ulysses, Penelope, Emilia and Amalia, whose life stories reveal *who* they are.

Let us consider Ulysses’ story. In one of the most poignant scenes of the *Odyssey*, Ulysses weeps when he hears the story of his life being told by a poet. Why does he weep? Cavarero, echoing Arendt, writes: “he weeps because he fully realizes the meaning of the story.”<sup>35</sup> It is precisely in and through the story that “Ulysses comes to recognize himself as the hero of the story,”<sup>36</sup> and therefore is finally able to grasp *who* he is, his own identity. While he was involved in action, he did not know *who* he was and in this lies a paradox: it “consists in the situation for which someone receives his own story from another’s narration.”<sup>37</sup> In an effort to understand this paradox, Cavarero raises the crucial question: “Why is the meaning of identity always entrusted to others’ telling of one’s own life-story?”<sup>38</sup>

Cavarero’s answer lies in showing that our existence is constitutionally plural and exhibitory. Not only is the world into which men and women are born and out of which they disappear, governed by the law of plurality, many and not one inhabit the world, but also nothing in this world, “insofar as it appears, exists in the singular; everything that is is

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<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, 19-20.

meant to be perceived by somebody.”<sup>39</sup> To exist is *to appear* before others in words and deeds to whom we reveal ourselves. This self-exhibitory urge is not the result of a choice; rather it is the way we exist, it is the way our life has been given to us on earth. Unless one appears to others, one does not exist. Following Arendt’s radical phenomenology that “*Being and Appearing coincide*,”<sup>40</sup> Cavarero writes that existence is “exposure”<sup>41</sup> or in the words of Jean-Luc Nancy: “the un-exposable is the non-existent.”<sup>42</sup>

Cavarero’s originality, however, lies beyond this. It entails identifying this specific uniqueness with the desire for one’s own story as constitutive of one’s own being. It is here that Cavarero parts from Arendt who, according to Cavarero, ‘overlooks’ the hero’s desire for one’s own story. In Cavarero’s reading, Ulysses is not simply a hero who pursues great actions in the hope of acquiring immortal fame. Ulysses is also the man who listens to his own story told by the poet, and while listening, he weeps and “*discovers* that his desire for narration is immediate.”<sup>43</sup> While the hero Ulysses is oriented towards death, the man Ulysses turns to the here and now of the narration and this, writes Cavarero, constitutes a “substantial difference,” one “between the desire to leave one’s own identity for posterity in the form of an immortal tale, and the desire to hear one’s own story *in life*.”<sup>44</sup> Ulysses weeps upon the realization of his desire, here and now, for the tale of his own story, independently from the story itself and aside from its meaning, and with little or no concern for immortal fame. As such, Ulysses comes to discover himself as ‘narratable’ and so “now it is clear to him that narratability belongs to the human existent as something unique.”<sup>45</sup>

It is important to clarify that the narratable self is not a product of conscious choice. Rather, it is more like a spontaneous impulse, a sort of “narrative attitude of memory.”<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>40</sup>Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind: Thinking*, One-Volume Edition, (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), 19.

<sup>41</sup>Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*, 19.

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>44</sup>*Ibid.*, 33

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*, 35.

Cavarero writes: “The narratable self finds its home, not simply in a conscious exercise of remembering, but in the spontaneous narrating structure of memory itself. This is why we have defined the self as *narratable* instead of narrated.”<sup>47</sup> Such desire for one’s own story is a desire that aims toward some kind of unity: “Everyone looks for that unity of their own identity in the story, (narrated by others or by herself), which, far from having a substantial reality, belongs only to desire. The desire orients both the expectations of the one who is narrated and the work of the one who narrates.”<sup>48</sup> In sum, this narrative attitude does not stem from the deeds and words of each human being; instead, Cavarero claims, it is constitutive of each existent in a more fundamental way. But how?

When Cavarero describes the narratable self as a structure of memory, or narratability as being an attitude of memory, is she thinking of something analogous to Kant’s transcendental ego? This is a fundamental activity of the mind that has no content and yet, shapes the way we come to acquire knowledge, and therefore, for Kant, it is the condition for the possibility of experience and knowledge. In the same way, for Cavarero, this desire is constitutive of the self, it is the condition for the possibility of our identity; but at the same time, however, it has become clear by now that it cannot be a purely mental and intellectual activity of the mind, since for Cavarero one’s concrete and embodied existence is at stake. It remains nevertheless unclear how the specific uniqueness of each dwells in narratability if, as human beings we are so ontologically constituted. How to reconcile what appears to be a structure of our existence and therefore inherent in each existent as such, with the claim that it is also the source of the uniqueness of each? How does this unrepeatable singularity stem from what appears to be a universal structure of human existence as such? And even more so, how could one account for this specific, unrepeatable singularity?

What is even more puzzling is that the narratable self is at the same time something ‘*familiar*,’<sup>49</sup> ‘*un sapore familiare*’ Cavarero calls it in Italian, a sense by which each existent ‘knows’ that this, not another, is his or her life-story, without however knowing who he or

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<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>48</sup>*Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>49</sup>*Ibid.*, 34.

she is. In her own words: “With all the inimitable wisdom of a familiar feeling (*sapore*), she knows she is an unrepeatable uniqueness, but does not know *who* she is, or *who* is exposed. ...the unity of the desire,... It is rather the irreflexive object of the desire for the unity of the self in the form of a story.”<sup>50</sup> Thus, the narratable self, the familiar taste of oneself in his or her uniqueness, is described by Cavarero as an unreflective disposition that is constitutive of the self. There is clearly a paradox at work here: “the familiar taste of oneself” is unreflective, unconscious and yet, it provides some form of familiarity with oneself as being this and not another. How then to understand this “familiar taste of the self” since it is not conscious awareness of one’s uniqueness, while at the same time giving rise to some sort of “awareness” (*assaporarsi*)?

It is evident that this desire for one’s life-story is for Cavarero key to the self and that in this lies her originality. She writes: “our thesis indeed adds to the Arendtian horizon the centrality of this desire.”<sup>51</sup> To Cavarero, Ulysses’ tears reveal narratability as a fundamental structure of existence, which, in turn, manifest an impulse to self-narration. If narratability is the “house of uniqueness,” the source of our uniqueness, then autobiography is inevitably already intertwined with biography. Privileging biography over autobiography appears unjustifiable to Cavarero who writes: “it seems that a life-story – while always having its most suited narrator in the other – is not totally foreign to the protagonist, as Arendt would have us to believe.”<sup>52</sup> Hence, she adapts Nancy’s formula about the existent as follows: “precisely because it is exposable, it is also narratable” and she adds “we are talking about the unrepeatable uniqueness of each human being.”<sup>53</sup>

What is relevant here is that some important shifts take place. Cavarero shifts the perspective from heroic action, and exceptional human beings, to each particular existent in his and her life who, no matter how ordinary, is still unique and unlike any other.<sup>54</sup> One

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<sup>50</sup>*Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>51</sup>*Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>52</sup>*Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>53</sup>*Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>54</sup>It should be pointed out in this regard that Cavarero interprets Arendt in a literal sense and against Arendt’s own stated intent. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt writes that “the hero... needs no heroic qualities” and that the term is rather used to refer to anyone willing to act and speak at all, “to insert one’s self into the world and begin a story of one’s own.” In other words, Arendt does not intend this term solely in relationship to exceptional individuals

does not have to be exceptional for there to be a life story, as she writes: “The narratable self is a figure of uniqueness, not of exceptionality.”<sup>55</sup> Along with that, Cavarero shifts the perspective from death to the here and now: the desire for one’s own story is ultimately the desire for some unity that each existent seeks, *while in life*, and not the desire for a posthumous fame after one has died. Moreover, this uniqueness of each existent is concrete and embodied, not a fictional philosophical entity, not the product of a text. Rather it is about *this* “woman who really lived, in flesh and bone, in a time and in a place.”<sup>56</sup>

There remain nonetheless some fundamental questions about this ‘desire’ for one’s own story and one’s unity and individuality. In her effort to hold on to the self’s uniqueness against the dispersion of the self into a myriad of unrelated elements as found in some postmodern thought, does she not run the risk of setting up some sort of artificial entity, that is not all that dissimilar from the abstract entities philosophers have had a tendency to create? Even if she calls it a desire, not a substance, by insisting on unity and singularity as inherent in the self’s uniqueness, and seeing it as constitutive of the self, is Cavarero not sacrificing plurality at the heart of human interaction, yet again? In the end, does Cavarero presuppose what she is looking for, namely the unity and uniqueness of each existent? How does this desire for one’s story, the desire for narrating oneself, not turn into an isolated, solipsistic and narcissistic exercise? Cavarero states that this desire for narration is there regardless of whether a story is created and that the story itself does not exhaust such desire. At the same time, how to account for such unrepeatable uniqueness, if it exceeds narratability?

It is crucial that we explore the many facets of the narratable self in order to be able to address these questions. For one, narratability exhibits the self as inherently relational: at once exposable and narratable, the existent always constitutes herself in relation to another. In a strange way, Cavarero seems to be talking here about another kind of

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who are capable of great actions. On the contrary, any one who is willing to leave one’s own private place and expose oneself is indeed courageous. Cavarero’s claim that Arendt’s focus on heroic action privileges exceptional human beings and death over ordinary human beings, is therefore unfounded. See, Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 186.

<sup>55</sup>Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*, 70.

<sup>56</sup>*Ibid.*, 70.

“dislocation,” one found at the heart of the self. Rather than being contained, enclosed and self-sufficient, the self appears exposed, out of himself or herself. If so, what are the implications of a self that is, so to speak, de-centered? Can Cavarero defend the uniqueness of the self as rooted in a constitutive desire for one’s story while maintaining at the same time, that the self is fundamentally dislocated?

**She, “the necessary other”<sup>57</sup>– You, (Tu), who look at me and tell of me**

The desire for one’s story animates and constitutes the self as an aspiration that seeks the self’s uniqueness and unity. This unity, however, is not the outcome of the narratable self alone and in isolation. While there is an impulse of self-narration at the heart of the self, “autobiography does not properly respond to the question ‘who am I’? Rather, it is the biographical tale of my story, told by another, which responds to this question.”<sup>58</sup> The narration by oneself of one’s own story is always limited, partial and incomplete. It also runs the risk of becoming a narcissistic exercise, where one does not tell the truth about oneself, while claiming to be doing so; in other words, it turns into an exercise in bad faith as Jean-Paul Sartre would call it. Narratability does not mean that “I” by myself can tell my life-story and be able to reveal my uniqueness; this would lead instead to an “absolute unity and self-sufficiency.”<sup>59</sup> On the contrary, my ‘*daimon*’ or my ‘identity’ is best seen by others, with whom I am in relation, since they are able to see what is hidden to me even though this is never a translucent process.<sup>60</sup> Arendt, on the one hand, claims that this can only come about after a life has come to an end. Cavarero, on the other hand, insisting that this desire for one’s unity is constitutive of the self, argues that it is there all along and it accompanies our entire life. In the introduction to *Relating Narratives*, appropriately called “a stork for an introduction,” after a short story by Karen Blixen, Cavarero draws a parallel between the design that appears out of all actions and words

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<sup>57</sup>In *Relating Narratives*, the title of the chapter “the necessary other” appears as neutral, 81. In the original Italian text the “other” is in the feminine: “L’altra necessaria.” See: Cavarero, *Tu che mi guardi, tu che mi racconti: filosofia della Narrazione*, 105. As it will be shown, this is not irrelevant to Cavarero’s understanding of the self.

<sup>58</sup>*Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>59</sup>*Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>60</sup>Arendt draws an analogy between the manifestation of the “who” and the manifestation of ancient oracles which “neither reveal, nor hide in words, but give manifest signs.” This is according to Arendt, expression of the basic uncertainty of human affairs. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 182.

one's life has engaged into, and the unity of a life that lies at the heart of the self. This aspiration to a unifying meaning of a story, is there all along, even though one does not see it or is not sure of it; "it is always another who sees the stork," and even then "the stork is fragile, it is the fleeting mark of a unity that is only glimpsed. It is the gift of a moment in the mirage of desire."<sup>61</sup>

In order to illustrate even more concretely that the desire for one's own story is not a self-enclosed exercise, but one that inherently needs and involves others, Cavarero shifts the scene from Ulysses to Emilia and Amalia, two women who become friends while participating in the 150 hour schools "on the outskirts of Milan."<sup>62</sup> There are no exceptional heroes in the classical sense here; nevertheless, Emilia, like Ulysses receives the tale of her own life from another. Emilia cries when Amalia tells her about her town, her people and her life. Emilia shares her own life story with Amalia as well. Unlike her, though, she is unable to write it down, until one day, Amalia decides to write the story of her friend and gives it to her; Emilia "always carried it in her handbag, and read it again and again, overcome by emotion."<sup>63</sup> According to Cavarero this example concretely illustrates the desire for one's story and for one's own unity that is alive and present throughout one's life. Thanks to her friend Amalia, Emilia is able to see the unity of her own life, and likewise grasps herself as unique, unlike any other, concretely and tangibly in a story. Cavarero argues that, "By writing the story for her (not in her place, but for her), Amalia gives it a tangible form, sketches a figure, suggests a unity."<sup>64</sup>

If this shows "the ontological roots of this desire,"<sup>65</sup> as Cavarero contends, it also affirms the relational nature of the self, *who* appears, exhibits and exposes herself to the other. As already pointed out: without being able to appear, one does not really exist properly speaking. To exist is to show oneself, to be out of oneself, to be seen and to be perceived, in other words, to be acknowledged. There is an impulse to self-exhibition, but

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<sup>61</sup>*Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>62</sup>As specified in note 2 in the chapter titled "On the Outskirts of Milan," these "were schools founded by the Italian Left, in the 1970's, whose purpose was to provide supplementary education in the arts and sciences for workers or housewives who lacked higher education." *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>63</sup>*Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>64</sup>*Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>65</sup>*Ibid.*, 56.

there must also be a space where men and women can appear before one another and therefore exist in a world where being and appearing coincide. Thus, the story of Emilia and Amalia is telling in a number of ways: two women meet and become friends. They tell each other their life stories, and their friendship becomes the stage of appearance for the unrepeatable uniqueness of each to be revealed to one another. Moreover, this story shows that it is not I, but my friend, who sees and grasps my uniqueness, and yet, it is thanks to this friend that I come 'face to face' with *who* I am.

It is not irrelevant nor a mere coincidence that this is a friendship between women, that Emilia and Amalia should find one another and in and through their relationship come face to face with their respective uniqueness. In the context of a patriarchal tradition, where men have been for the most part the protagonists of heroic actions in the public sphere, women, (but not exclusively women), having been denied their identity as specifically embodied and different than men's, find themselves in search of ways to manifest their irreducible uniqueness. The relational space created by feminine friendship is one example of a space of appearance that makes the manifestation of one's uniqueness possible and where someone like Emilia, whose life 'has always been a "no,"' can come "to think that my 'I' exists."<sup>66</sup>

Cavarero is suggesting here that the self's uniqueness is revealed only where a relational space comes into existence. If it is true that the self is expository and requires others to be perceived, the public sphere is not the only, nor the ideal space of appearance, even though it has been so, traditionally. As already noted, without visibility, one does not properly exist; however, Cavarero wants to argue that visibility is closely intertwined with relationality and this means that it is not necessary that there be a plurality of others before whom to appear; rather, wherever a relational space comes into being, as in the context of a friendship, there lies the possibility for revealing one's uniqueness. Here, there is no shining glory of heroic action, but the acknowledging of each other's uniqueness; it is not about attaining immortal fame, but about acquiring recognition of one's existence, which otherwise would remain invisible and therefore "dead" to the world.

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<sup>66</sup>*Ibid.*, 56.



Cavarero is pointing to what has been traditionally obscured, namely that there lies an originary relationship between the self and the community, between the private and the public. In the article "Birth, Love, Politics," Cavarero contends that the opposition between 'individual' and 'community' is rooted in a fundamental misunderstanding of the two where the former is conceived as separate "something *indivisible* that stands by itself," while the latter "expresses the very essence of relation" as intimated in the root '*cum*' (with) of community.<sup>67</sup> Arguing against this, Cavarero shows that there is a *continuum* between these different settings: in each, the self is inextricably tied to another or to a plurality of others. The singular and unrepeatable uniqueness of each existent is constituted not as separate and against the other, but rather in and through relationship *with* the other, where the *with* is indeed integral to both unique existent and community, and where community is not an aggregate nor a fusion of many into one.

For example, in birth there is a fundamental originary relationship between two singular and unrepeatable existents: the mother and the newborn. Birth is the origin wherein lies the originary sense of community, of being always "with" and never apart. In birth the infant is ex-pelled by the mother and this constitutes him or her into ex-istence precisely as ex-posure. The new-born is ex-posed, appears as distinct from the mother, yet *with* the mother. Likewise in love, the two lovers appear in their maximal concreteness and in their nakedness. They love each other in their singular uniqueness, "in spite of their qualities and in spite of their defects."<sup>68</sup> There is no fusion or merging of the two as an age old myth would have it. Rather, the two are repeating the inaugural exposure of birth, in all its fragility and nakedness: the exposure of the who is "total and irremediable: it demands to be accepted, not to be annihilated."<sup>69</sup> Finally, in politics, the existent appears before a plurality of other existents, not simply to a singular other as in love, in his or her embodied existence.

Hence, the relationality of the self is brought into full light as constitutive of concrete and embodied existence. That the political should have become the privileged space of

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<sup>67</sup> Adriana Cavarero, "Birth, Love, Politics," in *Radical Philosophy Journal* 86 (1997), (19-23), 19.

<sup>68</sup>*Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>69</sup>*Ibid.*, 21.

appearance founded on the artificial opposition between the self and community, raises the question whether it is rooted in a condition of amnesia, namely having forgotten the originary relationship, the relationship with the mother, from whom every existent comes. According to Cavarero, Oedipus symbolizes precisely such forgetfulness: “Since Oedipus exists, he was born of a mother (...) *this* and not another.”<sup>70</sup> However, he does not know who his mother is and this ignorance deprives him of his uniqueness. If the fundamental link between one’s birth and one’s identity is lost, then the interconnectedness with another and others is also lost. We forget that this originary relation constitutes us as relational incarnate beings. In other words, our uniqueness is manifested in and through the concrete materiality of our existence and not apart from it.

To Cavarero Oedipus exemplifies the amnesia of western metaphysics, the theoretical discourse *par excellence* that has forgotten that each existent is embodied uniqueness, brought into existence and constituted in and through the other. We all know, how Oedipus’ ignorance leads to his tragic end and this makes us wonder whether something analogously ominous does not lie at the heart of western thought, where the constitutive relational nature of the self has been replaced by an artificial self-sufficient, sovereign and universal subject. What role have universalistic ethics and politics played in shaping our perception of the other as alien and separate from us? To what degree does the effacing of the incarnate self with a face, a name and a story contribute to the pure and simple effacing of unique and incarnate others? Women who, traditionally, have been relegated to an invisible existence, and therefore have endured the burden of an existence that, in the words of Emilia, is a “no,” find themselves particularly well positioned in affirming precisely what has been forgotten, namely that the uniqueness of each existent is concretely embodied and rooted in a fundamental relation with another, where the relationship with the mother, constitutes the originary relation and matrix of all relations.

The friendship between Emilia and Amalia is paradigmatic of the relational space that is necessary for uniqueness to reveal itself and this is not just some form of human interaction. It is a lived intimate relationship, wherein reciprocity is crucial. To narrate the

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<sup>70</sup>Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*, 11.

other requires being in relationship with him or her, being connected through dialogue, since only this provides a space of appearance. In the English edition of *"Tu che mi guardi, tu che mi racconti."* (*You, who look at me and tell of me*), the title "Relating Narratives" cannot be an adequate translation of the original Italian title. The constitutive relational and reciprocal dimension of the self, so central to the self's uniqueness in Cavarero's thought, disappears in the English title replaced by something impersonal, neutral and vague, precisely what Cavarero argues against. While in Italian, the title expresses the relational space by way of the pronoun "tu," in the English title *Relating Narratives*, there is no pronoun indicating that there is someone, let alone a concrete living being whose uniqueness is revealed in relationship with another. This may be explained in part by the fact that the English language does not distinguish between "you" in the singular (*tu*) and "you" in the plural (*voi*). However, in leaving something so central to Cavarero's understanding of the self out of the title, something that is immediately evident to the Italian speaker, a fundamental point is lost, namely that "tu" is the pronoun reserved for personal and intimate relationships, such as with family, friends, lovers. It is not the pronoun used for acquaintances, or with people just met, or for professional type of relationships which, as they are, do not provide the space of appearance where one's uniqueness can be revealed. It is only in the context of a relationship that has reached some degree of intimacy, where the pronoun "tu" is employed, that the relational space can come into existence, becoming the theatre for the self's uniqueness to appear, in a reciprocal manner.

As Emilia and Amalia show, it is in and through a close relationship that one's uniqueness reveals itself, since without reciprocity, such uniqueness is neither shown nor grasped. It is only in close relationships, such as friendship and love, that this occurs. Cavarero writes that this uniqueness is "absolute," every human being is irreducibly different and this is the case "not because she is free from any other; on the contrary, *the relation with the other is necessary for her very self-designation as unique.*"<sup>71</sup> In some way this exposes the self as vulnerable and fragile, and constitutively indebted to the other. At the same time, while constitutively relational and exposed, the self cannot be assimilated,

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<sup>71</sup>*Ibid.*, 89.

reduced or subsumed under a totality. Cavarero writes: “She is the unique existent that no categorization or collective identity can fully contain. She is the *you* (tu) that comes before the *we* (noi), before the plural *you* (voi) and before the *they* (loro).”<sup>72</sup> Thus, “Within the horizon of the narratable self, the pronoun of biography is in fact not *he* (egli) but *you* (tu). The one who tells *us* our story speaks the language of the *you*.”<sup>73</sup>

We can now attempt to answer the questions raised above: how does this desire for one’s story, the desire for narrating oneself, not turn into an isolated, solipsistic and narcissistic exercise? Is Cavarero not sacrificing plurality for the sake of unity and uniqueness? Is Cavarero not setting up an artificial entity, apart from human interaction? It has become clear by now that the self, being constitutively relational, comes face to face with her own uniqueness in and through interaction with another. As such, far from being a solipsistic and narcissistic exercise, it is thoroughly enmeshed in the here and now of concrete embodied existence, which is dependent on human interaction. At the same time, it is true that terms such as ‘desire,’ ‘narratability,’ ‘narratable self’ do not immediately convey “an embodied existing being, unique and unrepeatable,”<sup>74</sup> and so the sense of relational space which is vital for one’s uniqueness, risks fading away. There is undoubtedly a tension at work here: on the one hand, the embodied uniqueness of the self that is also constitutively exposed and relational, on the other hand, the challenge of making this visible and tangible without falling into an overly purified notion that may resemble the universal metaphysical subject, nor reducing it entirely to a mere linguistic problem.

Cavarero sees the friendship between Emilia and Amalia as confirmation of the desire for one’s own story: Emilia is animated by this desire that accompanies her life and her tears upon receiving her own story from Amalia would confirm such desire. However, in light of the analysis above and in keeping with Cavarero’s understanding of the self as embodied uniqueness constitutively exposed and relational, it appears that rather than desire, the relational space, both intimate and reciprocal that comes into being through

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<sup>72</sup>*Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>73</sup>*Ibid.*, 92; my emphasis.

<sup>74</sup>Adriana Cavarero, “Who Engenders Politics?” 92-93.

friendship, is the condition for the possibility of one's uniqueness. The tears Emilia and Ulysses shed in receiving one's life-story "by the mouth of another" ("*per bocca altrui*") are therefore the tangible expression of deep wonder at experiencing what appears very unlikely, namely that someone, completely and irreducibly other, grasps my uniqueness and makes it present to me: a wondrous, unfathomable and unexpected event, even miraculous so to speak. This event truly constitutes the self as deeply relational, who discovers one's uniqueness in and through another and thus is one in and through others. This event also affirms that each existent is exposed, dislocated and therefore without the possibility of holding some key feature of his or her identity, independently from another or others. If one's uniqueness is incontrovertibly tied to being with another or others, then a self-sufficient and sovereign self is not of this world. If the self's uniqueness is revealed to and through the singular other or a plurality of others, then this self's uniqueness does not precede the encounter with another or others, nor does it follow it; it comes alive, unexpectedly and without choice, indeed 'miraculously' with and through another and others. It is an event, not a disposition we have control over, nor something we consciously choose, it is that which comes without being called. If there is such a thing as a "taste of myself," if I am able "to taste myself" (*assaporarmi*), and if this is something that gives me a "familiar" sense of myself without which I am no *one* as Cavarero contends, it comes about only through this unexpected event for which I am deeply indebted to another. Thus the self's uniqueness is rooted in the constitutive relationality of the self, and this means that I am shaped and formed by the other in ways I alone cannot fully account for.

**"Inassimilable, Unsubstitutable, Unrepeatable."<sup>75</sup>**

In difference from the universal and self-centered subject of metaphysics, that encompasses all human beings, the self's uniqueness is "embodied uniqueness," and it is therefore "always and everywhere rooted in the materiality of the context."<sup>76</sup> Every existent's uniqueness is there from birth, unequivocally, materially and physically, it is not a mere spiritual entity, it is incarnate. Cavarero claims that this unity is there all along and

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<sup>75</sup>Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*, 90.

<sup>76</sup>*Ibid.*, 21.

indisputably at birth, when the newborn has not been ascribed a list of qualities that turn him or her into a what, “the baby who is born is always *unique* and *one*.”<sup>77</sup> The newborn is exposed in her nudity and in all her vulnerability, yet her physical, embodied, sexed unity cannot be denied. Precisely that which has been traditionally erased, the material, concrete, embodied and gendered self is that which Cavarero finds to be crucial to the self’s uniqueness and that which cannot be done away with.

Thus, it is not surprising that along with the metaphysical subject, Cavarero rejects the postmodern notion of the self as well. Both speak the language of the “what” not the language of the “who,” and ultimately come to the same conclusion, namely that the specific embodied uniqueness of each existent does not count. The philosophical subject, “strong, self-centered and present unto itself,” swallows up the uniqueness of each, in the same way as the postmodern subjectivity, “multiple, fragmented and without a center”<sup>78</sup> dissipates into a list of qualities. If the metaphysical self is a universal abstract substance for which embodied gendered existence is irrelevant, the postmodernist self is “only an affect of language,”<sup>79</sup> a mere construction of the text. In both instances life, in the form of this embodied uniqueness, is swallowed up by some form of artificial construction. Arguing against both of these positions that nullify feminine subjectivity in her full concreteness, albeit in different ways, Cavarero affirms embodied and gendered uniqueness as “inassimilable, unsubstutable, unrepeatable.”<sup>80</sup>

This self’s uniqueness is vitally dependent on the recognition that we are fundamentally exposed and indebted to another and to a plurality of others. If this fundamental aspect of the self is eclipsed, omitted, erased, so is the self’s uniqueness. When Cavarero calls this uniqueness “narratability,” or “a disposition of memory,” she is not referring to a purely mental disposition, but something that is rooted in the memory of our concrete embodied origins, and that it cannot be fully and exhaustively accounted for.

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<sup>77</sup>*Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>78</sup>Adriana Cavarero, “Who Engenders Politics?”<sup>88</sup>.

<sup>79</sup>*Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>80</sup>Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*, 90.

The self's uniqueness highlights the irreducibility of the who, against all essence. It debunks the theoretical enterprise of traditional ethics and politics, which places a self-sufficient, disincarnate and universal self at its center. Not unlike Oedipus, this enterprise forgets the constitutive relationality of the self, and leads to disfigured relations. Cavarero urges us to think about the full implications of this: how does the understanding of a self's uniqueness as constituted in and through others, rather than a sovereign self, ultimately affect our understanding of ethics and politics? How are notions of autonomy and responsibility transformed in light of a self that is constituted in and through others?

Cavarero's work is about a new radical beginning and not so much about reforming theory. It requires a new language, the language of the 'who,' this embodied uniqueness that cannot be erased; it is the language of the 'tu,' of being in relationship, and constitutively exposed; it is not the language of self-sufficiency and sovereignty. Thus, Cavarero advocates a "relational ethic of contingency" and an "ethics and politics of uniqueness," one grounded in the material embodied existent who is constitutively relational and altruistic, where by 'altruism' Cavarero means "the foundational principle of a self that knows itself to be constituted by another, the necessary other."<sup>81</sup>

Drawing from the experience of women and particularly from the "politics of sexual difference" as it has been thought and practiced in the Italian context,<sup>82</sup> she points to the practice of "*partire da se*" (to start from oneself) and "*relazioni tra donne*" (relationships among women)<sup>83</sup> as examples of practices that create the space of appearance necessary for the self's uniqueness to appear. These practices are promising in that they put at their center the question of the *who*, rather than the "what," where each appears in one's full concrete uniqueness, standing face-to-face with the other and "looking each other in the face."<sup>84</sup> There is no substance "Woman," as some kind of common denominator, here. Just like the essence of the universal man erases this particular individual while pretending to

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<sup>81</sup>*Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>82</sup>"*Il pensiero della differenza*" (the thought of sexual difference), sees the question of sexual difference as one of the fundamental problems of our time and recognizes the relationship with the mother as constitutive of our self, it forms us in ways we cannot fully account for.

<sup>83</sup>Adriana Cavarero, "Who Engenders Politics," 99.

<sup>84</sup>*Ibid.*, 100.

encompass it, in the same way, the essence woman removes the unrepeatable embodied uniqueness of this particular woman. If the self's uniqueness is indeed "inassimilable, unsubstitutable, unrepeatable," then the other is truly and absolutely other. I am not in a position to make him or her my own, there is no higher synthesis of the "I" and "you" into a "we." There is only the relational space of appearance in which who someone can appear in all his or her embodied uniqueness.

Precisely insofar as it is embodied, the self's uniqueness cannot be reduced to a universal substance. As she writes: "the question of the who remains without an answer. And it is right that it should be so."<sup>85</sup> Precisely because the self's uniqueness is manifested in relationship, it cannot be "a complete totality" nor "the synthesis of the all." Precisely, because it is rooted in the relationship with another and a plurality of others, the story is not univocal, but "polyphonic,"<sup>86</sup> yet, while not a complete totality, it is still "irrefutably *her* story."<sup>87</sup> There needs not be an actual story for there to be unity; this unity is never simply a product of the mind, nor a product of a tangible text, rather, it is constitutively embodied and relational, and it is there from birth accompanying every existent till death: "from beginning to end, he or she remains who he or she is: a unique human being that has a face, a name, a story."<sup>88</sup>

Elvira Roncalli, Associate Professor  
Philosophy Department  
Carroll College, Helena, MT

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<sup>85</sup>Adriana Cavarero, "Who Engenders Politics?" 93.

<sup>86</sup>Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*, 12

<sup>87</sup>*Ibid.*, 87, my emphasis.

<sup>88</sup>Adriana Cavarero, "Who Engenders Politics?" 96.



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