

**Thinkers that Matter: on the Thought of Judith Butler and  
Adriana Cavarero<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract**

In this article I propose a comparative analysis of Judith Butler's and Adriana Cavarero's major theoretical works to show how both thinkers, albeit stemming from different traditions of thought, are presently engaged in a radical rethinking of the theme of subjectivity in order to deconstruct the modern notion of liberal individualism. By drawing extensively on Cavarero's work on narrative ethics (Cavarero [1997] 2000) and on Butler's latest book on the impossibility of a consequential narrative account of oneself (Butler 2005), this article discusses Butler's and Cavarero's reciprocal influences and aims at showing that the central issue on which the two thinkers diverge

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<sup>1</sup> A shorter version of this article has appeared in Portuguese in the Brazilian Journal «Estudos Feministas», vol.15 no.3, Sept./Dec. 2007, pp. 663-677, under the title: *Pensadoras de peso: o*

is the question of social transformation. Nevertheless, I claim that the task they have set themselves – and successfully achieved – through an ongoing dialogue, is that of contesting the hidden ethical and epistemological violence inherent in the tradition, in order to open up spaces of political and ethical agency that are essentially relational, based upon an undeniable exposure to otherness and vulnerability.

**Key words:** feminist theory, sexual difference, narrative identity, relationality, vulnerability

## 1. Introduction

*How to be a feminist without remaining one:* this might be the motto one could use to describe the intellectual path of two important – and one might add groundbreaking – thinkers of the present. If there is something that Judith Butler and Adriana Cavarero share, among other things, is exactly this: their being feminists, leading intellectual figures of the broad and variegated Western feminist landscape, albeit having re-oriented their recent research outside the field of specific feminist issues. To put it differently, they would both – and proudly – say of themselves that they are feminists, even if they have gained visibility outside the so-called feminist research. This does not mean, nonetheless, that they have undergone some kind of *Kehre* or turn, thereby renouncing and forsaking their previous feminist works. On the contrary, their respective research has the merit of having taken the situated, feminist perspective onto higher ground.

As a matter of fact, Judith Butler and Adriana Cavarero belong quite differently to feminist theory. Butler, since her first major work, *Gender Trouble* (Butler 1990), has

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*pensamento de Judith Butler e Adriana Cavarero.*

been a fierce critic of the so-called heterosexual essentialist matrix of French feminist thought, while Cavarero – in that same year – proposed a feminist genealogy of thinking, *in spite of* the overwhelming tradition of masculine metaphysics (Cavarero [1990b] 1995). Butler deconstructed and criticized the implicit practices of abjection at work in feminist thought, thereby uncovering a structuring bias internal to feminist discourse, that of heterosexuality. Cavarero, a political philosopher herself, deconstructed the patriarchal paradigm of political thought, denouncing the untenable amnesia at work at its core, namely that of sexual difference (Cavarero 1992). Both were, so to say, playing the role of *advocatae diaboli*, deconstructing the potentially liberating modern spheres of agency: feminism, liberalism, Marxism. At the time they were not alone, of course. My claim is that they have, nevertheless, made themselves conspicuous ever since, by virtue of a progressive abandonment of the limited sphere of feminist studies, aspiring to a broader, or deeper, philosophical reflection on politics and ethics. This does not mean that the feminist standpoint has ceased to be. It simply means that it has been taken where it should belong: the feminist, or situated, standpoint of *difference* has become the stepping stone for a radical rethinking of subjectivity.

## **2. Adriana Cavarero**

Given the patriarchal, oppressive, phallogocentric origins of modern ontology (the «individual» predicated by modern political discourse is a rational being in charge of himself, independent and sovereign, as long as it posits a dependent, irrational, non-sovereign being to rule), Cavarero, in her recent works, envisages the possibility to pose the question of subjectivity differently: what comes after the Subject, one could say, paraphrasing Nancy? What follows, in other words, once the fiction of the modern individual has proven to be insufficient to account for, and to include in the political sphere, different modes of being? The question is not only political but mainly

philosophical: in order to rethink politics, says Cavarero, we must rethink ontology. Not simply a separate – feminine – ontology, but an ontology that has learned from the thought of sexual difference the constitutive importance of the symbolical sphere: without a symbolical order able to represent bodily sexual difference – not simply biological difference – there is no possibility of exiting the reifying paradigms of philosophical and political discourse.<sup>2</sup> This is why Cavarero's intellectual endeavor becomes progressively centered on the necessity of philosophically questioning the tradition, crucially starting with Plato, not only in order to criticize it, but to speculate on the possibility of *saying* the body in ways that do not constrict it into the binary opposition posited by metaphysics, nor in the organic, impersonal ways in which some postmodern thinking has celebrated it.

In her *Corpo in figure* (Cavarero [1995] 2002) Cavarero reads the history of political thought as characterized by the constant attempt to elaborate models of political order in which the body is expelled, refused, obliterated through discursive strategies of erasure and concealment. Crucially, says Cavarero, the absent body structures and paradoxically legitimizes that political order from which it is excluded. Needless to say, the preeminent paradigm of such excluded body is that of the woman: from Antigone to Ophelia, the female body is endowed with dangerous, irrational features that legitimize the need for a disembodied political order based on fictitious entities that radically deny their maternal, therefore feminine *and* bodily, origins. The order of the *polis*, as well as that of the State found their legitimacy, Cavarero suggests, on the need to regulate, order and rule a potentially feminized world of attachments, passion, foolishness (Cavarero [1995] 2002).

One can easily see how the original feminist issue of thinking sexual difference

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<sup>2</sup> This general assumption is at the basis of Cavarero's earlier works within the philosophical community of Diotima, active since the early '80s at the University of Verona. Cavarero, one of its founders together with the Italian feminist thinker Luisa Muraro, left the research group in 1992. See, among others, the following essays in which Cavarero thematizes the problem of saying sexual difference and embodiment within the symbolic order of patriarchy (Cavarero 1987, 1990a, 1991).

(Irigaray 1985) is present and working, a deconstructing tool able to detect to which extent the history of philosophy, as the theoretical matrix of the history of political thought, has at once denied and exploited the body, and with it its sexed nature. Deconstructing or reading differently the history of philosophical and political thought does not simply mean, for Cavarero, denouncing its patriarchal nature, but also testing the limits of its legitimacy, both philosophical and political. In line with the tradition of feminist thought inaugurated by Luce Irigaray, Cavarero is convinced that to criticize and expose patriarchy does not necessarily lead to celebrate equality, but involves a more radical questioning of the very mechanisms of the theory (Irigaray 1985).. Her approach to politics remains, therefore, characterized by an essentially theoretical *élan*, which, as in Irigaray, cannot fully attain its radical scope unless it is eager to abandon the traditionally 'cold' logical reasoning typical of philosophical discourse. To interrupt the philosophical machinery at the origins of a denial of sexual difference and embodiment means to explore paths of thinking that discard the dichotomical approach to knowledge at all levels: not only content but also form is therefore in need to 'become undone' via expressive and cognitive means that do not necessarily fully belong to the severe discipline of philosophy<sup>3</sup>. In Cavarero's texts, ever since *In Spite of Plato*, the disembodied language of thought is contaminated by theatrical, poetic, literary and visual elements able to express the inadequacy of philosophical, abstract discourse to articulate embodiment without reducing it to a mere substratum indispensable to state the primacy of the mind. By so doing, Cavarero uncovers layers of prejudice and unfairness that, far from producing a rational and transparent subject, testify of the masked and oppressive nature of any abstract noun that purports to represent humanity in its entirety.

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<sup>3</sup> In this respect, Cavarero, albeit remaining strongly theoretical in her thinking, owes much of her most interesting insights on embodiment and sexuality to the poetical thinking developed at various times and with different aims by some key figures of a *hidden tradition* of female thinking, which enlists, among others, María Zambrano, Karen Blixen, Ingeborg Bachmann, Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray herself.

This is why the original feminist perspective is the starting point of Cavarero's enquiry, but it is at the same time overtaken and theoretically changed, in a more universal direction. In Cavarero's subsequent works, in fact, the question of embodiment is not abandoned, but transformed, so to say, in the proposal to think subjectivity in terms of an embodiment that is not simply a common feature of femaleness – and, as such, oppressed, concealed, exploited – but becomes inserted upon a dimension of radical singular difference. Cavarero develops therefore the interesting notion of «embodied uniqueness» («*unicità incarnata*»). The feminist need to give preeminence to the body, to speak from an embodied standpoint that is the site of female political subordination and oppression is transformed into the possibility to think a radically new kind of subjectivity, where what is at stake is a provocative notion of the human, based primarily on a singularity which is, in body and mind, «this and not another» (Cavarero [1997] 2000). The symbolic order to which Cavarero aims, therefore, is neither matriarchal nor simply feminist, but stems from the feminist need to radically criticize universalistic propositions that cancel out bodily existence and sexual difference. At the same time, though, the quest for that symbolic order lies in the challenge to overcome the binary oppositions upon which patriarchy has founded its efficacy, highlighting possible ways of conceptualizing the subject that do not erase embodiment, nor confine it to a pre-semantic sphere. The aim is ambitious, and is based on a daring combination: Hannah Arendt and the thought of sexual difference.

In *Relating Narratives* (Cavarero [1997] 2000), she explicitly refers to Arendt's critique of the 'sovereign subject' in developing a notion of selfhood that is essentially relational, that is, based on a constitutive dependency of the self upon the other. The human condition of dependency is visible from birth, where the newborn's fragility is exposed to the caring gaze of the mother, but also to the possibility of vulnerability. To thematize exposure, fragility and vulnerability as starting points of a relational notion of the self means, for Cavarero, to find a significant existential scene in which this human

condition of dependency comes mostly to the fore. She identifies it in the common practice of telling life-stories. The practice of narrative is a preferred scene of relationality and reciprocity: not to tell somebody my story, but to tell somebody *their* story means to deliver them their identity- to respond to a necessary need for unity that each person perceives as essential to their being. Identity in the form of a story is the outcome of a relational practice – between the I and the you – not an essential feature of each singularity. Identity is therefore something given to me by someone else, in the form of a life-story, a biography.

Crucial to this proposal of narrative identity is the fact that Cavarero strongly criticizes each attempt to locate identity in autobiography, as if the need for unity and meaning could be resolved by the subject taken as separate and ‘in charge of herself’<sup>4</sup>, as if, in other words, the self could account for her life from an individual perspective. Far from delivering the need for unity and meaning to the narcissistic practice of the self in telling her own life, Cavarero’s proposal of narrative identity locates the source of meaning in the other, the one who tells me my life story. As a result, identity is located in a relational practice that Cavarero expresses through a telling oxymoron: «*identità altruistica*», «altruistic identity», where self and other do not exclude each other but construe a different notion of identity, where the coherence of the self with itself cannot but come from outside, from another self who responds to the self’s desire for unity by telling her story, by putting into narrative the apparently senseless path of her appearance in the world.

Arendtian echoes are hardly avoidable, insofar as Cavarero relies entirely on Arendt’s fierce critique of identity as sovereignty over one’s own acts and deeds. The Arendtian concept of the self as uniqueness is Cavarero’s point of departure; uniqueness, for

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<sup>4</sup> On this, see also the decisive anti-essentialist, and rather Nietzschean, reading of the Arendtian category of uniqueness, done by Bonnie Honig (Honig 1993). One should add that Honig’s reading of Arendt has opened up a series of rather innovative appropriations of Arendt’s thought, among which one should include Linda Zerrilli’s (Zerrilli 2005) and Lisa Disch’s (Disch 1994), see also Honig (1995).

Arendt, is the primary feature of each human being but it is not the synonym of exceptionality: each human being is unique, not in the sense that each possesses unique qualities, but conversely insofar as she/he can give birth to the unpredictable. Uniqueness, for Arendt, can come to the fore only in action, only in front of others, and it is strictly dependent upon the testimony of others in order to be. One can see how Cavarero's rejection of autobiography stems exactly from this Arendtian emphasis on the self as necessarily related to others, to an 'outside' able to set the scene for the appearance of the 'who'. It is exactly this 'who' which expresses the uniqueness of a person, whereas the 'what a person is' does not catch, so to say, the distinctive features of singularity. 'What I am' can be told by an abstract language which replaces my uniqueness with common features: woman, white, middle class, European, and so on. 'Who I am' can be told only in the form of a narrative recount of my appearance in the world. To appear means to stand before somebody else, and to depend upon that somebody in order to receive in return a confirmation of my existence. A life in solitude, says Arendt, is «literally dead».

The shift Cavarero operates with respect to this Arendtian category of uniqueness is that of inserting into it the unavoidable element of the body. While for Arendt «the sound of the voice» and the «appearance of the body» are something we all have in common, for Cavarero uniqueness cannot be thought of independently of embodiment. In other words, uniqueness alone cannot fully account for the radical difference that shapes each singularity, insofar as bodily differences contribute to shape «who someone is».

«To use Arendt's terms, it must be decided if the fact that I am a woman and not a man belongs to the order of my qualities (*what* I am), rather than to my uniqueness (*who* I am). At the heart of the first alternative there is a subject, unique and unrepeatable, which nonetheless is born 'neutral' as far as sex goes and thus can make of its feminine quality a hypostasis that can be entrusted to the realm of representation. At the heart of the second alternative there is a uniqueness, equally



unique and unrepeatable; birth shows who the newborn is – namely sexed, and given over to the contextual and relational realm of expression [...] From birth, the uniqueness which appears, and which provokes the fundamental question ‘who are you?’, is an embodied uniqueness and therefore sexed» (Cavarero [1997] 2000:61).

The shift testifies of Cavarero’s original combination of the feminist perspective with the Arendtian one – the latter overtly linked to a phenomenological approach that owes more to Heidegger than to Merleau-Ponty, and as such rather blind to the problem of embodiment. The radicalization of the question of embodiment proceeds in Cavarero’s subsequent and most recent work, *For More than One Voice* (Cavarero [2003] 2005), where the aim to locate embodied uniqueness in the physical element of the voice is at stake. Every voice is singular, unique, different from every other, and as such it is the material element which testifies of the embodied uniqueness and its undeniability. Through a rereading of the history of philosophy as a «history of devocalization», Cavarero proceeds in her deconstructing project started with in *Spite of Plato*, highlighting philosophy’s proverbial refusal to come to terms with the material element of embodiment. The voice becomes, in her perspective, the cipher of an embodied uniqueness that, as such, cannot be thought of in neutral terms, since it immediately announces the sexed nature of the speaker. Moreover, though, the human voice – necessarily sexed and unique – is not pure sound, as the body is not pure flesh, impersonal and irrational. One of the main merits of Cavarero’s enterprise is to keep a position of originality with respect to both the modern and the postmodern approaches, insofar as, while denouncing the disembodied nature of traditional philosophical discourse and its contemporary epigones, she does not embrace the post-modern ambition to overcome the human and celebrate impersonal versions of subjectivity that risk an excessive aestheticization of the question of identity. The voice, therefore, is the sign of human uniqueness insofar as it is material, soundly embodiment that can take the form of uniqueness because it is *destined* to speech. «Speech is not only voice, but

precisely in the voice it is already given as that embodied uniqueness that the metaphysical ear does not want to hear» (Cavarero [2003] 2005, 206).

The quest for an ontology of relationality, namely an ontology that discards the philosophical fictions of Man, the Individual and the like, in order to take its bearings from a body materially dependent, from birth, from others, becomes, in Cavarero's latest works, the endeavor to force the language of philosophy towards a material acknowledgement of embodiment, where embodiment, as such, is primarily a relational event, rather than a social one. If there is still a scope for philosophical discourse, that scope is that of accepting, within its frames, the material datum of embodiment not simply to celebrate a falsely liberating «philosophy of the body» – the aim of which is essentially contained in the structure of the proposition, where philosophy will inevitably subsume, delete, or 'idealize' the body in its muteness – but to produce a notion of subjectivity that keeps together voice *and* speech, embodiment *and* uniqueness, self *and* other, and where, so to say, relation comes before identity.

### **3. Judith Butler**

Interestingly enough, the issues at stake in Judith Butler's later production reveal a very strong affinity to those elaborated by Cavarero. Since the publication of *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997), Butler has thematized 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. Something in agency exceeds the possibility to explain, rationally and exhaustively, the conditions of emergence of the self. Even if there have been previous attempts at deconstructing the apparently self-possessed nature of the Subject, as in Nietzsche and Freud, Butler seems to acknowledge the need to go beyond even the apparently anti-dogmatic or 'liberating' attempts of a 'genealogy of moral' and psychoanalysis. The parodical notion of drag

celebrated by Butler in *Gender Trouble* (1990) as a way of contesting and resisting the heterosexual frames of intelligibility and celebrating the post-structuralist fall of a solid and transparent self, has given way, in her latest works, to a more reflexive and ‘tragic’ way of dealing with the questions of identity and subjectivity. Identity is, for Butler, a complex combination of overarching normative structures – which, as such, need to be deconstructed in their supposed universality – and singular, existential occurrences that, as such, unavoidably shape our selves. To come to terms with this combination of normativity and contingency does not mean, for Butler, to resolve the question of identity in the narrative practice of story-telling, as does Cavarero, but to acknowledge the impossibility for the subject to tell her own life story insofar as the first part of that story remains opaque to the self as such. While Cavarero finds in the mutual act of telling life-stories a way of partially resolving the question of self-identity through the notion of «altruistic identity», thereby structuring the «otherness» to which the self is from birth related as another concrete person, Butler poses the problem of «otherness» or exteriority in different terms.

For her, the problem lies in the structuring normative field in which we all are born, as she maintains in one of her recent works, *Precarious Life*:

«Constituted as a social phenomenon in the public sphere, my body is and is not mine. Given over from the start to the world of others, it bears their imprint, is formed within the crucible of social life; only later, and with some uncertainty, do I lay claim to my body as my own, if, in fact, I ever do» (Butler 2004, 25).

The «social conditions of embodiment» are an essential aspect to Butler’s entire production: her approach to the question of identity does not accept to resolve relationality in a dyadic relationship between the *I* and the *you*, but scatters, so to say, the constitutive otherness in a normative, social dimension that, as such, cannot be avoided. The «world of others», for Butler is not simply a world of other selves, but a

social dimension in which ‘others’ also stand for the structuring social and cultural norms. In this respect, Butler’s perspective shows an intellectual debt to the Foucauldian analysis of power and knowledge. The primacy of a, so to say, structuring impersonal domain – that of language – over dyadic relationships (the *I* and *you* of which Cavarero speaks) in shaping both body and identity, ascribes Butler to a philosophical tradition that is very different from that of Cavarero. The roots of Butler’s thought are post-structuralist and deconstructionist (Michel Foucault *and* Jacques Derrida), but behind them one can easily detect the Hegelian matrix.

Butler’s insistence – from *Gender Trouble* onwards – on the primacy of a set of norms and regulations (both visible and invisible) in shaping identity and embodiment, can be read as the attempt to emphasize the idealistic dimension of embodiment, rather than the material one. For Butler, in fact, there is no possibility of accessing the body in its materiality insofar as the body is from the start «trapped» in a network of meanings and values that even contribute to shape the physical contours of the body itself (Butler 1993). Gender is part and parcel of this structuring framework, when not the matrix of all frames. Gender comes before the possibility of an *I*, it is a sort of gate to reality through which human beings must pass in order to achieve full humanity. What happens to those who do not comply with the gender binary? The answer to this question, says Butler, lies in the work of critical thinking, with questioning the apparent naturalness or inevitability of the structuring frames of gender intelligibility, undoing their supposed fixity in order to facilitate those who do not conform to any existing gender norm to acquire a level of *viability*. This is why Butler would respond to Cavarero’s assumption that each human being is unique and sexed (thereby assuming that the sexes are two) via a radical questioning of that assumption, of its «matter of fact» nature: there is no possibility to access the rock of stumbling of reality, for Butler, insofar as reality is always impinged on by an ideality which determines what is real and what is not.

In Butler’s thought, in other words, (and this seems to be a constant starting point) one

can perceive the inaccessibility of the body «in flesh and blood»– its always being part of a frame of intelligibility – not as the idealistic reduction of materiality to ideality, but as the necessary awareness that every «order of discourse» on the body cannot aim at telling the truth of the body. There is no truth of the body, no undeniable matter of fact – as Cavarero would, contrarily, define the *datum* of sexual difference – but only a series of discursive strategies that produce bodies according to certain truth regimes. The problem, therefore, lies in undoing these truth regimes not in order to ‘liberate’ the body once and for all – Foucault *docet* – but to produce progressively inclusive, emancipative frames of intelligibility that, as such, are susceptible to change, revision, amendment (Butler 2004a).

Nevertheless, as mentioned before, Butler is intelligent enough not to reduce the problem of subjectivity to a social sphere that totally constructs the self. In her book *Giving an Account of Oneself* (Butler 2005), she reflects more philosophically on the «nature» of this otherness to which the self is constitutively related and, drawing intensively from Levinas, poses the question of the Other as something that does not simply embody social norms and structures. The original relationality which shapes our bodies and selves is marked, from the beginning, by an address posed to us by another. This other comes before me and makes requests upon me, thereby structuring my being from the start. This Levinasian interlocutory scene is for Butler the proof that the subject is never self-made, autonomous, independent, but ‘given over’, from the start, to an exteriority that can be personated, namely take the shape of the «visage», the face of another human being.

Yet, Butler does not fully accept the Levinasian proposal, insofar as she aims at defining this otherness also in psychoanalytic terms. By combining the ethical philosophy of Levinas with the psychoanalysis of Jean Laplanche, Butler affirms that this interlocutory scene, the rhetorical structure of address as a way of conceiving original relationality, has a lot to do with the originary impressions made on the infant

by the adult world<sup>5</sup>.

This otherness, though, must not be essentialized, says Butler, nor consigned to the concept of «absence» or «void» of Lacanian origin. By drawing intensively on Jean Laplanche, Butler aims at defining this otherness as something that is constructed within the self in infancy through the impressions of the adult world. These impressions, given over to the infant who does not have instruments to deal with them, become repressed and therefore constitutive of the unconscious.

«Jean Laplanche, within a psychoanalytic vein, argues something similar [to Levinas] when he claims that the address of the other, conceived as a demand, implants or insinuates itself into what will later come to be called, in a theoretical vein, *my unconscious*. In a sense, this nomenclature will always be giving the lie to itself. It will be impossible to speak without error of *my unconscious* because it is not a possession, but rather that which I cannot own. [...] To understand the unconscious, however, is precisely to understand what *cannot* belong, properly speaking, to me, precisely because it defies the rhetoric of belonging, is a way of being dispossessed through the address of the Other from the start» (Butler 2005, 36).

The opaqueness of the subject to itself therefore has also to do with a primary relation of the infant not simply with a mother – Butler, by the way, never uses that name – but with a set of adult persons, and it is the relation with such adult world that structures an

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<sup>5</sup> The knot of psychoanalysis seems to constitute an unbridgeable gap between the two thinkers, given also their different intellectual backgrounds. As regards the question here at stake, one could summarize the gap as follows: for Butler psychoanalysis cannot be avoided, since it is a mode of understanding the way in which the self cannot fully account for herself by seeking to locate the opaqueness of the self to itself in a repressed - or unconscious - dimension. The ethical task of psychoanalysis is, for Butler, that of bringing to light the unavoidable ties that constitute the self, not in order to overcome them, but to be able to deal with a certain degree of anxiety that the primary relations of dependence – and their asymmetry – might instil in the forming *I*. Cavarero, on the other hand, seems to consign the failure of total accountability or narratability of the self to a dimension that, as such, remains immanent to the relation itself, without seeking to be resolved, made more comprehensible via a history of repression that, as such, is for her an article of faith. For an interesting dialogue on these topics between the two thinkers, see Butler, J. and Cavarero, A. (2005). For a thorough account of the relation between Butler's work and psychoanalysis,

unconscious dimension of the self. These initial impressions are not simply of care, but can also be violent.

«The self that I am yet to be (at the point where grammar does not permit yet of an *I*) is at the outset enthralled, even if it is to a scene of violence, an abandonment, destitution, to a mechanism of life-support, since it is, for better or worse, the support without which I cannot be, upon which my very being depends, which my very being, fundamentally and with an irreducible ambiguity, *is*. This is a scene, if we can call it that, to which we return, within which our action takes place, and which gently or perhaps violently mocks the posture of narrative control» (Butler 2005, 53).

Vulnerability is the core of the relational self, the self one cannot fully account for: to be exposed to others, *to be this very exposure* is what qualifies the human as such. One can easily detect here echoes of Cavarero's notion of exposure, vital to her notion of altruistic identity: each human being is at birth exposed to the world, but primarily to the gaze of the mother, to whom the baby refers as the first «exteriority» at disposal. This maternal scene of gaze and voice, reciprocal and pre-semantic, is what Cavarero explores as the possible suggestive metaphor able to powerfully approximate the notion of a relational ontology. The fallacy of autobiography lies exactly in this blindness to exposure: the autobiographical subject is unable to accept the fact that our constitutive being exposed, from birth, to others obliterates the possibility of a self-transparent, self narratable subject<sup>6</sup>. Exposure, vulnerability and dependency upon others are exactly

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see Bernini, L. (2009).

<sup>6</sup> It is worth mentioning that when Butler discusses thoroughly Cavarero's notion of narrative identity she seems to be partly misled in her reading. She, in fact, confounds biography and autobiography, as if Cavarero's notion of narrative identity had to do with a simple autobiographical impulse to unproblematically recount oneself: «In her [Cavarero's] view, one can only tell an autobiography to an Other, and one can only reference an *I* in relation to a *you*: without the *you*, my own story becomes impossible». It is not clear whether Butler correctly understands Cavarero's position, insofar as it seems that she thinks Cavarero proposes an autobiographical practice, directed to an indispensable you, yet autobiographical. I stress this apparent misreading insofar as what Butler says subsequently seems to strongly echo Cavarero's position: «This exposure, for instance, is not precisely narratable. I cannot give

what renders impossible an «account of oneself»: this is what both thinkers strongly stress. And this is their connecting point: from *Giving an Account of Oneself* to *Precarious Life*, Butler's production has progressively centered her reflections on the possibility of a responsible subject in spite of the constitutive impossibility of the subject as such to «account for itself». The central question to Butler's endeavor is the following: Is there a possibility of an ethics that does not presuppose a totally autonomous and rational subject? Again, Butler's answer is fully Levinasian: exactly because ethics comes before ontology, the *I* is the effect of an interlocutory scene where the Other makes claims upon me, calls for my being responsible for her. This interlocutory other is what shapes my subjectivity – an *I* that calls me into question, asking for an answer, a word, a gaze, a touch. Subsequently, *I* am the effect of these structuring relations: not only as a conscious subject, says Butler contaminating Levinas with psychoanalysis, but also as a subject who is aware of being unable to control, master, discipline herself totally. The unconscious is also the effect of this undeniable relationality: it is the untold *and untellable* story of my dependency.

«Indeed, if we require that someone be able to tell in story form the reasons why his or her life has taken the path it has, that is, to be a coherent autobiographer of oneself, it may be that we prefer the seamlessness of the story to something we might tentatively call the truth of the person, a truth which, to a certain degree, and for reasons we have already suggested, might well become more clear in moments of interruption, stoppage, open-endedness, in enigmatic articulations that cannot be easily translated into narrative form» (Butler 2005, 43).

Stoppage, open-endedness, interruption are the features of a narrative impossibility

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an account of it, even as it structures any account I might give. The norms by which I seek to make myself recognizable are not precisely mine. They are not born with me; the temporality of their emergence does not coincide with the temporality of my own life. So in living my life as a recognizable being, I live a vector of temporalities, one of which has my death as its terminus, but another of which consists of the social and historical temporality of those norms by which my recognizability is established and maintained» (Butler 2005, 24).



that, as such, is nevertheless pursued, insofar as it is quite difficult to live outside any kind of structure or coherence. The ethical claim made by Butler in both *Precarious Life* and *Giving an Account* testifies of the need to rethink ethics as a radical critical move against a politics which is progressively assuming the tones of an ethics of principles, where identity, sovereignty, truth, freedom and justice have become fortified matters, unquestionable yet ambiguously used to justify violence, aggression, retaliation and preventive war<sup>7</sup>. To pose the question of a relational ethics – «I am from the start dependent upon you, we are both vulnerable to each other but also to the structuring effects of social norms and values» – in the light of a need to rethink politics, is what both Cavarero and Butler seem to share most closely. Challenging the political project of modernity – especially its individualistic corollaries: unrelatedness, self-sufficiency and sovereignty – both thinkers embark on the effort of radically re-thinking the human moving from its essential condition of dependency, precariousness, vulnerability. Their theoretical move, in this respect, has to do with a displacement of politics away from the immune individual – a fictitious entity that, as such, has nowadays finally ceased to convince even within the boundaries of its «fictional» narrative – in order to relocate it in the vulnerable – and therefore exposed to others – self. Politics and ethics must be thought of within the context of an undeniable violence that, at the same time, is the cipher of an undeniable relationality.

The political worth of these ethical premises is at present difficult to discern; they remain strongly utopian insofar as violence and sovereignty still seem to be the only available worn out tools used to – unsuccessfully – resolve the new and undecipherable conflicts of the present<sup>8</sup>. These premises can become political only when vulnerability

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<sup>7</sup> This is the aim Butler sets for herself mainly in *Precarious Life* (Butler 2004).

<sup>8</sup> Adriana Cavarero's latest work (Cavarero 2007) thematizes contemporary forms of violence (body bombers, preventive war and its *collateral damages*) via the neologism of *horrorism*, insofar as *terrorism* is too broad a term, too unspecific, too linked to the modern notion of politics and therefore unable to grasp the unprecedented nature of contemporary violence. Cavarero suggests that *horrorism* might better suit the understanding of forms of violence that are *crimes* which «offend the human condition at its

will be acknowledged not only singularly, but above all socially. Yet this depends exactly on how and when the *I* and the *you* can transform into an *us*. And this is the crucial question on which the thought of Butler and Cavarero diverge.

#### **4. Cavarero, Butler and the question of social transformation**

It goes without saying that, for Butler, the question of social and political transformation is linked to the critical and ethical dimensions of an agency which is never solitary, exactly because nobody exists by her/himself.

In this respect, Butler's critique to Cavarero's idea of «embodied uniqueness» as a way of conceptualizing a different ontology of the human touches exactly on the theme of political transformation. According to Butler, in fact, there is a need to relate the intersubjective perspective elaborated by a more «continental» tradition of thought (Cavarero and Lévinas) to that of social constructivism (Foucault). Butler perceives Cavarero's notion of «irreplaceable uniqueness» as «bound up with existential romanticism and with a claim of authenticity» (Butler 2005, 23).

Nevertheless her main critique is not linked to the notion of uniqueness, but to that of dyadic relationship, which for Cavarero is essential to the narrative ethics proposed in *Relating Narratives*. Here is the quote from Cavarero which Butler extensively reports and discusses:

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ontological level« (2007, 34). Cavarero therefore moves from contemporary forms of horrorism in order to continue in her elaboration of an ontology of relationality, of which vulnerability would be, from the viewpoint of violence, the unavoidable condition of human life. She therefore proposes to call this ontology one of *vulnerability* – a reciprocal exposure in which we are given over to either the other's care or harm, «almost as if the absence of harm or care were not even thinkable« (2007, 32). Vulnerability, in other words, is the main target of *horrorism*, insofar as it is the alternative between care and doing harm – and not some «pure, gratuitous cruelty» – that is the «generative nucleus« of horror. This ontology of vulnerability has as its political goal that of displacing the use of violence from the traditional, still modern viewpoint of the *warrior*, in order to locate it in the perspective of the vulnerable, defenceless victim (the casual victim of body bombers and the *casualties* produced by supposedly *intelligent bombs*).

«The *you* comes before the *we*, before the plural *you* and before the *they*. Symptomatically, the *you* is a term that is not at home in modern and contemporary developments of ethics and politics. The *you* is ignored by individualistic doctrines, which are too preoccupied with praising the rights of the *I*, and the *you* is masked by a Kantian form of ethics that is only capable of staging an *I* that addresses itself as a familiar *you*. Neither does the *you* find a home in the schools of thought to which individualism is opposed – these schools reveal themselves for the most part to be affected by a moralistic vice, which, in order to avoid falling into the decadence of the *I*, avoids the contiguity of the *you*, and privileges collective, plural pronouns. Indeed, many revolutionary movements (which range from traditional communism to the feminism of sisterhood) seem to share a curious linguistic code based on the intrinsic morality of pronouns. The *we* is always positive, the *plural you* is a possible ally, the *they* has the face of an antagonist, the *I* is unseemly, and the *you* is, of course, superfluous» (Cavarero 2000, 90-91).

According to Cavarero, the real challenge in rethinking subjectivity is that of displacing the *I* from its pedestal of autobiographical (and theoretical) narcissism, by relocating it in the relationship with the *you*. The shape this relation will take is always unique and irreplaceable, since unique and irreplaceable are its terms. The reciprocal uniqueness of the two terms, though, can become *real* only in the form of a relationship. What politics and ethics should take into account is the way in which relationality contributes to shape a notion of subjectivity, which is linked, from birth, to the indispensable presence of another human being. Each embodied uniqueness can become a part of the world by virtue of a relation, says Cavarero, as it is visible from birth, in the very exposure of the infant to the gaze of the mother. Cavarero emphasizes therefore the centrality of a dyadic relationship between the *I* and the *you* as a way of contesting the individualistic paradigm upon which the modern notion of subjectivity is founded.

The problem for Butler lies exactly in the exclusiveness of this dyadic relationship, grounded on the notion of uniqueness, which she criticizes by claiming that it allows little or no room for social transformation. Only insofar as uniqueness is construed as

«empty category», claims Butler, can it become a precious theoretical tool for radically rethinking subjectivity. But by so doing, says Butler, the very notion of uniqueness as irreplaceable – or, in philosophical terms, unrepresentable – becomes undone.

«Insofar as ‘this’ fact of singularizing exposure that follows from bodily existence is one that can be reiterated endlessly, it constitutes a *collective condition*, characterizing us all equally, not only reinstalling the ‘we’, but also establishing a structure of substitutability at the core of singularity [my emphasis]» (Butler 2005, 24).

Butler maintains that if the aim of a radical critique – which does not have mere epistemological aims but strives for ethical and political change – is that of contesting the way in which, in a Foucauldian vein, subjectivity and power have been conceptualized in modernity, it is hardly possible to further this critique by simply relying on the dyadic relationship between the *I* and the *you*.

For Cavarero, on the other hand, relationality is irreducible to the larger political and social dimension, insofar as, by so doing, the primacy of embodied uniqueness would lose its radical quality and become weakened in a supposedly collective empathy, in a super-human – and therefore fictional – «identity of the many».

Cavarero’s strong refusal of the impersonal, collective dimension constitutes for Butler a double-sided problem. On the one hand, by virtue of the impersonal structures – language, norms and regulations – by which we all become subjects, and without which we could not exist, there is no uniqueness in the *I*. On the other hand, the irreducibility of the dyadic relationship to the collective dimension – as if every relationship were unique and irreplaceable – according to Butler impedes political efficacy to the «relational turn». The challenge for Butler is to acknowledge the structuring function of norms and attempt – critically, relationally, «in concert» (Butler 2004, 3) – to deconstruct them from within, contesting the norms that display «ethical violence»<sup>9</sup>, that

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<sup>9</sup> The titles of both German and Italian translations of *Giving an Account of Oneself* (*Kritik der Ethischen*

is norms that hinder *viability* to different forms of subjectivity. The challenge is an infinite critical task, never completed, constitutively bound to the historicity, sociality and plurality of norms and subjects produced by them.

To criticize «ethical violence» means to move in a domain of norms, trying to contest, deconstruct, transform them while at the same time being aware of their structuring function. A double-sided attitude towards norms (dependency upon them *and* refusal) is what determines the possibility of critique but at the same time it is also that which prevents this very critique to be *once for all* liberating. To be critical and ethical means for Butler to participate collectively in a never ending labour against – and within – truth regimes that exclude and oppress. Whereas for Cavarero embodied uniqueness is «an end in herself» – unrepresentable according the discursive parameters of traditional philosophy and politics, therefore irreplaceable in her/his public appearance and agency – for Butler political agency is impersonal insofar as each subject is the result of impersonal structures of substitutability that perform her/him, that render her/him representable. The Butlerian subject, therefore, by virtue of this substitutability, cannot expect to do away with the truth-regime that renders her possible but can act within that truth regime contesting, displacing, parodying the very order of representability.

By so doing she will also automatically act in the name of others, opening up the rigidity of collective ethos to further and different appropriations, to a potentially transformative critique able to allow new *claims to representability* from those who have been excluded from visibility and viability. The possibility of contestation, though, is dependent upon an interlocutory scene, a scene of address where the relationship between the *I* and the *you* is, so to say, a structured – and therefore impersonal – form of relationality:

«When we come up against the limits of any epistemological horizon, and realize that the question is not simply whether I can or will *know* you, or whether I can be

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*Gewalt* and *Critica della violenza etica*) clearly display the centrality of the issue of critique.

*known*, we are compelled to realize as well that *you* qualify in the scheme of the human within which I operate, and that no *I* can begin to tell its story without asking, «who are you?», «who speaks to me?», «to whom do I speak when I speak to you?». If this establishes the priority of rhetoric to ethics, that would be a salutary effect of these meditations. The mode of address conditions and structures the way in which moral questions emerge. The one who makes a claim upon us, who asks us, as it were, who we are, what we have done, may well have a singularity and irreplaceability, but they also speak in a language that is impersonal and that belongs to historically changing horizons of intelligibility« (Butler 2005, 87).

Butler is here trying to merge together the intersubjective – or relational – approach developed by Cavarero via Hannah Arendt’s notion of uniqueness, with the post-structuralist primacy of language, discursive strategies and their historicity and sociality. The personal and the impersonal become intertwined, in the complex effort of transforming the *I* and the *you* into an *us*.

It is easy to see a continuity between Butler’s works on feminism and the performative theory of gender (Butler 1990, 1993) and the more recent «ethical» production: the meticulous revision of the frames of intelligibility of the subject (the Foucauldian heritage which Butler develops in a very original feminist key) is never separated from the will to a political agency – aware of its fallibility, amendability and dependence on a mesh of social relations, but nevertheless vigorous. The critical work upon oneself – the revolutionary gain of feminist activism of the 70’s – is never separated from a simultaneous work on truth regimes of intelligibility and political representability. The personal dimension (the work on oneself, on one’s own *difference*, which for Butler is never irreplaceable uniqueness) becomes impersonal, almost collective, in a sort of re-enactment of the *consciousness raising* activity of feminist groups in the 70’s. The collective dimension to which Butler refers is always reminiscent of the GLBQ community and their recent activism known as «New gender politics» (see, for an extensive discussion of it, Butler 2004). This «gender activism» is the *file rouge* which

connects Butler's earlier works to the present ones. In my view the critical attitude was already present in the practice of parody and displacement of gender norms and roles: to be «disloyal» to a regulatory code, to perform it via disloyal citation of its functioning is the way through which the gendered subject can both become aware of the contingency of norms and appropriate them critically. There is, in this avowal of parody and critique, the hypermodern disenchantment towards any utopian form of liberation, the acknowledgement that gender identities are nothing more than fetishes. It is as if, today, Butler kept telling us to become aware of the impossibility of a secular eschatology, a final liberation from oppression, exploitation, discrimination, but at the same time remain consistent in contesting the violence which is hidden in any truth-regime that pretends to be exclusive, unique.

In my opinion what Butler is slowly but consistently elaborating is some kind of «tragic ethics», conscious of the constitutive ambiguities of self and world, but at the same time devoted to making this awareness as public as possible. To state that the self is from the beginning split, opaque to itself, unable to account exhaustively for its own actions means to avow a new horizon in which sovereignty and «total and final control» over one's actions are not the main criterion to judge (and legitimate) political agency. As in Greek tragedy, the «agent» is a doer trapped in a set of pre-existing norms that cannot be avoided: nevertheless he/she acts, since in fact the motor, the essence of tragedy itself is action (see Aristotle in Grube 1958). Similarly, passivity and activity are both present in Butler's notion of agency, where the *relationship* between the subject and its «constitutive otherness» (be it the *face* of another human being or the set of norms on which I depend) is the necessary frame for the «possibility of an I». The price to pay, in this tragic ethics, is that of the unattainability of identity as a «final product», of control over oneself and transparency to oneself, of a «new order» established once and for all. This is, maintains Butler quoting Foucault, a result of modernity: even if the subject knows his/her own truth she/he cannot be saved by it.

The paradox upon which the ethics of the non-sovereign subject – of which both Cavarero and Butler speak – is founded, is therefore the following: the lack of control over oneself, the dispossession, the destitution imposed upon us by others is that which makes a non violent political action thinkable – and perhaps feasible. In force of my «non-freedom», always paradoxically acted in relation to others – in the forms of dependence, address and dispossession – I am able to welcome the other's «non-freedom», her dependence upon me and my responsibility towards her suffering:

«Violence is neither a just punishment we suffer nor a just revenge for what we suffer. It delineates a physical vulnerability from which we cannot slip away, which we cannot finally resolve in the name of the subject, but which can provide a way to understand the way in which all of us are already not precisely bounded, not precisely separate, but in our skins, given over, in each other's hands, at each other's mercy. This is a situation we do not choose, that forms the horizon of choice, and it is that which grounds our responsibility. In this sense, we are not responsible for it, but it is that for which we are nevertheless responsible. We did not create it; and therefore, it is what we must heed' (Butler 2005, 66).



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