

Book Reviews

Identity and Storytelling

Adriana Cavarero: Tu che mi guardi, tu che mi racconti. Filosofia della narrazione. Milano: Feltrinelli, 1997.

Adriana Cavarero teaches Political Philosophy at the University of Verona, Italy. She is a prominent figure of the Italian Feminism, in which she has been theoretically active since the early 1980s. *In Spite of Plato* (Polity Press 1994) was her first internationally recognized book, a feminist re-reading of four 'female figures' of the Greek tradition: Penelope, the Thracian Maid, Demeter and Diotima. Adriana Cavarero's thought shares with Luce Irigaray's the assumption, material and factual, of the sexual difference and develops it further combining this political assumption with the reinterpretation of themes and figures from Greek antiquity and early modern age. In *Corpo in Figure* (Feltrinelli 1995), her next book, Cavarero explores the ambiguity of the body-politics metaphor in the texts of Sophocles, Plato, Aristotle, Hobbes and Shakespeare. In her most recent work, *Tu che mi guardi, tu*

che mi racconti. Filosofia della narrazione, Adriana Cavarero shifts her 'displacing focus' and engages in a propositive theory of the self.

In this interesting and challenging book Cavarero explores the possibilities of storytelling or narrative and applies them to the identity question. In times of post-modern fragmentation and proliferation of identities Cavarero vigorously affirms that identity is not multiple but one, besides, if the Subject is dead it might not be the same for our own, real, sense of uniqueness. The book is primarily a 'Philosophy of Narrative', that is, the attempt, paradoxical and complex as it may be, to give a philosophical account of storytelling. In times of 'philosophical exhaustion', when the debate around the main themes of philosophy seems to vanish into the great game of deconstruction, Cavarero attempts a recovery of these themes from a notoriously anti-philosophical perspective (as Plato teaches us), namely that of narrative.

Paradoxical but still convincing is Cavarero's attempt. First because of the innovative perspective, which, assuming (consciously) an 'ingenuous realism' as horizon, revisits the main themes of our tradition (from Oedipus and Ulysses to the Subject and Metaphysics) with a delicate but incisive argument. Cavarero is able to bypass the many layers of speculation that surround the matter by pretending to be a Thracian maid who observes the world with simple and realistic eyes. The Thracian maid tries to explain that behind every life there is a story and that this story is unique and not exchangeable or replaceable with any other. The uniqueness that testifies of our individuality is not exceptionality, not the heroic uniqueness of Ulysses or Achilles, but simply and plainly the matter of fact that each one of us is 'this and not another' from birth, as Oedipus strenuously affirms.

Birth and uniqueness are terms that remind us of Hannah Arendt. Cavarero openly pays the tribute to

Arendt's thought, but develops further its implications. Arendt states that birth and uniqueness are two fundamental aspects of our 'being in the world', they are the foundations of the *vita activa*, the public, concrete and shared dimension of politics as opposed to the isolated and abstract dimension of philosophical speculation. Philosophy deals with 'the Man', politics with the plurality of men. According to Arendt no philosophical definition is able to capture the unique and unreplaceable consistence of 'who' somebody is. Philosophy deals with qualities, with 'what' Man is, according to the empty and abstract category of 'human nature'. Storytelling, on the contrary, is a practice that stems from the common shared world of men. The real 'who' that appears in the public sphere is 'representable' only through the telling of his/her story. Only in the story of a life can all the infinite contingencies that characterise each single being be fairly assessed. According to Arendt the meaning of a life is its story, the natural result of action. Actions produce stories, as naturally as the craftsman produces objects. The public sphere of politics escapes time and futility through storytelling, each individual receives from the public sphere her/his identity: the story that somebody will tell about their actions. According to Arendt only the storyteller can fully grasp the meaning of actions as they are enacted in the public sphere; the acting agent cannot understand thoroughly the meaning of her/his actions while she/he is performing them. This is why the 'nature' of our identity is relational: we are only inasmuch as others see and hear us. Only if we expose ourselves to the public light of politics, to the presence of others can we gain a complete sense of reality and of ourselves.

It is this *exposed* feature of our being that Cavarero radicalizes, by positing the uniqueness of our being as a feature that is visible from birth. We are constitutively exposed to the glance and touch of others: first of all to the

glance and touch of the mother. The frail and contingent character of our appearing to the world gains reality only through the relationship with the other. The importance of this recognition becomes tangible in the story. This is the new and interesting aspect that Cavarero develops: not only are we unique beings from birth, not only is our identity visible to others (as in the Arendtian paradigm, where the complete sense of our actions become visible only after our death, only when our path is completed can the storyteller give a complete account of our life); as a consequence of our exposed frailty we need and desire somebody who tells our story. We perceive ourselves as *narratable*, as protagonists of a story that we want to hear from others. This desire for a story, for our story to be told, becomes the guiding element in the new approach to identity that Cavarero here offers. Our identity is not possessed in advance, as an innate quality or inner self that we are able to master and express. As Arendt says, the 'who' is visible only to others, it stems out of what we do and say in front of others. Cavarero adds: we have a primary need to receive this 'who' from others in the form of a narrative. Moreover: the narratable self longs for a story to be heard here and now since it is through the fulfilment of this desire that it perceives itself as real. Ulysses cries when he hears the story of his life told by the bard at the Phaeacian court; he perceives himself as a unity in the words of somebody else. Oedipus, in spite of the misfortunes that his story will bring him, is anxious to know his provenance, he desperately desires to hear the story of his origins from the blind Tiresias and from the other characters who know Oedipus' story. Both heroes react vigorously to the words of the storyteller, the desire becomes clear to them in the moment they perceive themselves as 'narratable', protagonists of a single and unreplaceable story.

The desire for narrative becomes, in this perspective, the foundation of a new kind of identity, which, with a

simple and clear gesture, gets rid of the abstract criteria of the philosophical Subject, its definitory normative, its supposed self consistency and autonomy. By needing the other as a fundamental part of reality, the desiring self does not postulate the other, defining her/him according to abstract criteria, but reciprocally interacts with her by telling her story as well. In this giving practice of exchanging life-stories (Cavarero calls it 'ethics of the gift' – *'etica del dono'*) identity is entirely dependent upon the reciprocal relation between You and I. 'Who I am' is an external feature, it is created by the other, by the story told. Who I am, therefore, depends upon the many relationships I establish with others. Even if I perceive myself as unique and one I cannot be self-sufficient by telling myself my own story. Autobiography is banned from the narrative scene of reciprocity, since it is a 'narcissistic practice', an illusion of the memory, nurtured by the illusion of a self-sufficient and consistent Subject. Only the biographical practice is truly innovative, since it calls for the other, the concrete and present 'other' that I encounter and face, in order to understand who I am.

Cavarero does not doubt, as the Thracian maid wouldn't doubt, that the 'who' is unique and one (*'unico e uno'*) since she is always the protagonist of her story. From a narrative perspective, therefore, the unity of the self does not imply a strong and compact subject, identical with itself through time. The unity is simply the narrative permanence of the protagonist ("This and not another") throughout life. The protagonist of many facts and contingencies – no matter how incoherent and discontinuous – will endure throughout the story; its uniqueness is indeed linked to such contingencies, since they obviously are different from the contingencies guiding another life-story. Paradoxical is the fact that this contingent and fluid aspect of each life-story is the necessary precondition of uniqueness. Not only is each life-story unique, that is,

different from any other, but as a result of its being exposed to the world, of its frailty, the story is also *one*. The paradox is easily solved: in spite of the incongruous and incoherent events that guide my life, its story will preserve the uniqueness and oneness that from birth has made me the protagonist of my life-story. I am the protagonist of my life-story in the sense that I am 'this and not another' from birth. My qualities and skills may change, evolve or disappear, but nonetheless I will always be part of a story. The unity that Cavarero posits is not psychological nor metaphysical, it is simply the permanence of a story whose protagonist recognizes herself as always present in it. The visibility and tangibility of the story become reality when others tell myself my own story. The voice and narrative of the other is the sole guarantee of reality for the desiring narratable self: only in the story that others will tell I do see my uniqueness and unity.

Cavarero applies these reflections to many texts, from Oedipus to Borges, from Homer to Karen Blixen, but, interesting enough, the text as 'content' is totally unimportant within the desiring perspective. Not only is the author dead, as Roland Barthes teaches us, but, according to Cavarero – who firmly goes against the French predominance – also the text as independent entity is dead. The narratable self is constitutively independent from the content of the narrative. The form, the unique and one life-story that we want to hear, is vital to our self-perception, to the revelation of our 'who', while the content becomes secondary. The narrative, the 'text' comes after the lived experience, it is not a product of the text, nor a rhetorical construct. The self must not be necessarily 'narrated' but it is constitutively 'narratable': perceiving ourselves as narratable means perceiving the unity and uniqueness of our life-story. In order for this perception to become real and tangible, there must be somebody else who actualizes this potentiality and creates a story out of our life.

The language of storytelling allows a different perspective on reality; it allows a recognition of differences and a respect of them. By paying a tribute to the art of storytelling, by exploring the paths of a different language (“a language that does not know general nouns”) Cavarero offers us a new and refreshing insight into old but still unresolved philosophical issues.

Olivia Guaraldo