

*Bodies, Voices,  
Relations: Thinking  
with Adriana  
Cavarero*

*Edited by*

Federica Castelli,  
Marco Piasentier,  
& Sara Raimondi

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

**Alberica Bazzoni**

### **Abstract**

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

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

### **Biography**

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

in *Goliarda Sapienza's Narrative* (Peter Lang, 2018), recently published in Italian in a revised edition with the title *Scrivere la Libertà* (ETS, 2022), and is co-editor of *Gender and Authority Across Disciplines, Space and Time* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020) and *Goliarda Sapienza in Context* (Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 2016). Her main research areas are modern Italian literature, literary theory, and feminist, queer and decolonial studies, with a focus on temporality, power, embodiment and desire.

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

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

## Contemporary Literary Criticism

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Adriana Cavarero and Goliarda Sapienza: Anti-Essentialist Ontology

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

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

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

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

<sup>5</sup> On Maria Giudice, see Cutrufelli, 2022.

<sup>6</sup> For a biographical account of Sapienza's life, see Providenti, 2010.

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

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

### **The Narratable Self**

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

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

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

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

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

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

## The Voice

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

### **The Emergence of a New Female Subject**

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

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<sup>7</sup> See Ross, 2012; Bazzoni, 2018; Rizzarelli, 2018; Morelli, 2021.

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Conclusion

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

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

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

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

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

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

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