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Storytelling and selfhood

Adriana Cavarero

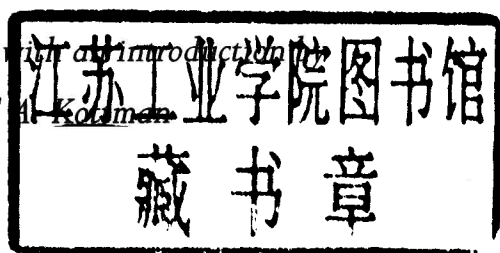
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Storytelling and Selfhood

Adriana Cavarero

Translated and with an introduction by

Paul A. Kottman



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TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

Paul A. Kottman

By a name

I know not how to tell thee who I am

(Romeo and Juliet)

Romeo's problem is, first of all, one of 'introduction.' How to introduce himself, his body, to Juliet; and how to avoid doing so through his father's name, which he, tragically, inherits.¹ His desire, the desire of all lovers, is that Juliet should recognize *who* he is, beyond his name.

To name *who* someone is, without being led astray into naming *what* he/she is, has long been something that the philosophical discourse(s) of metaphysics seem incapable of doing – for *who* someone is eludes philosophical knowledge. Hannah Arendt – whose thoughts provide an indispensable point of departure for Adriana Cavarero's work – notes that philosophy sets out to define or determine Man by establishing 'what' Man is, by enumerating qualities that 'he could possibly share with other living beings.'² Philosophical discourse is therefore unable to determine in words the individual *uniqueness* of a human being. As far as philosophy is concerned, remarks Arendt, 'who' someone is, in all of his or her singularity, 'retains a curious intangibility that confounds all efforts toward unequivocal verbal expression.' Put another way, 'the moment we want to say *who* someone is, our very vocabulary leads us astray into saying *what* he is.'³ 'Who' someone is, therefore, marks a limit of philosophical language, a limit of conceptual definition – a limit that would then appear to make 'who' someone is into something ineffable.

And yet, this is not Arendt's point. 'Who' someone is remains inexpressible in philosophical terms – not because the term 'who' designates something that is absolutely unnameable or 'outside' language – but rather because each person reveals that he or she is absolutely unique and singular. It is this *uniqueness*, this oneness, which philosophy fails to express. Moreover, for Arendt, 'who'

someone is is not ineffable at all, but rather is revealed and made manifest through that person's actions and speech – words and deeds which, *ex post facto*, form the unique life-story of that person. Arendt writes: 'Who somebody is or was we can know only by knowing the story of which he is himself the hero – his biography, in other words.'⁴ 'Who' someone is, therefore, remains inexpressible within the language of philosophy; but does not, as a result, remain utterly ineffable.⁵ Rather, 'who' someone is can be 'known' (although this is not epistemological knowledge) through the narration of the life-story of which that person is the protagonist.

This is an important starting point for Cavarero's work.⁶ When it comes to knowing 'who' someone is, the language of philosophy reveals its shortcomings and limitations, but in a way that shows how the bounds of philosophy do not also limit what is sayable or tellable. Importantly, philosophy is not the only discourse in which we know how to engage; it does not devour all of our language(s). Indeed, words are spoken and tales are told – tales that could never belong fully to philosophical discourse. Cavarero expresses this as follows:

We could define it as the confrontation between two discursive registers, which manifest opposite characteristics. One, that of philosophy, has the form of a definite knowledge which regards the universality of Man. The other, that of narration, has the form of a biographical knowledge which regards the unrepeatable identity of someone. The questions which sustain the two discursive styles are equally diverse. The first asks 'what is Man?' The second asks instead of someone 'who he or she is.' (p. 13 of this volume)

One could imagine the following objection: how would this 'confrontation' between 'philosophy' and 'narration' differ from the old alternative *logos/mythos*? Would not this 'confrontation' between 'philosophy' and 'narration' simply be an old philosophical 'confrontation,' one that relies upon familiar, unquestioned genres, registers, figures and so forth? And yet, I would suggest by way of introduction, that by offering itself as something 'other than philosophy,' the narration, according to Cavarero, also points towards what Jacques Derrida has called 'a genre beyond genre.'⁷ That is to say, the narration here exceeds the opposition *myth/logos*, in so far as it takes on a sense, or reveals a latent potency, that is unforeseen by this opposition, and that cannot be contained by it. This question becomes even more pertinent when we consider that Cavarero suggests narration might be considered as a 'feminine art.'⁸ Again, one could pose an analogous objection: 'if narration is said to be the feminine other of phallogocentric philosophy, is this not simply to figure narration as feminine and philosophy as masculine, in a way that falls back upon the same old binaries and

figures?' Yet, when Cavarero calls narration a 'feminine art,' she is implying that the feminine cannot be reduced to any one of its figurations within the male/female binary.⁹ In this sense, narration – all the more so as something feminine – would designate a set of possibilities that exceed any philosophical opposition that would claim to contain it.¹⁰ Here, these possibilities have precisely to do with the disclosure of an absolutely unique existent, the tale of *who* someone is.

Importantly, immediately after Arendt writes of the 'curious intangibility' of 'who' someone is for philosophical discourse, she links philosophy's inability to determine 'who' someone is to '*politics*.'¹¹ Philosophy's failure to name 'who' someone uniquely is, in other words, also signals a failure of traditional Western politics. It indicates, for instance, the extent to which traditional philosophy and politics respond to universals, rather than to unique persons and their interaction. As a result, the link between narration, and the revelation of 'who' someone is through that narration, offer – for Arendt, and for Cavarero – a new sense of politics, an alternative way of understanding human interaction, as the interaction of unique existents.¹² I will try to outline some implications of this in what follows.

For both Arendt and Cavarero, the uniqueness of each life does not indicate a life lived in isolation, but rather 'the togetherness and intercourse' of these single existents. It is important to understand that what Cavarero has in mind by 'unique existent' here is not the same as the 'individual' championed by modern political doctrines. Political doctrines, from Aristotle to Hobbes, notes Cavarero, all 'respond, in different ways, to the same question: what is Man? This insistence on the *what* to the detriment of the *who* is symptomatically even truer when the "individualist theory" refuses to emphasize the competitive nature of the single, or "dissolves" it into the political principle of equality.'¹³ Indeed, Cavarero criticizes the tradition of 'individualist thought' for the way in which it flattens out the uniqueness of the individual, in favor of a set of universal rights for the individual, which are 'equal,' or 'equivalent.'¹⁴ The 'unique existent' in Cavarero's sense – contrary to the 'individual' invoked in modern and contemporary doctrines of 'individual rights' – is in a constitutive relation with the other, with *others*. Like Arendt, Cavarero begins from the simple fact that the first consideration for any politics is that human beings live together, and are constitutively exposed to each other through the bodily senses.¹⁵ To this, Cavarero adds the fact that each of us is *narratable* by the other; that is, we are dependent upon the other for the narration of our own life-story, which begins from birth. To Arendt's notion of the constitutive exposure of the self, Cavarero thus adds the *narratability* of that self. The 'narratable self' – one of the central notions introduced in *Relating Narratives* – is a self, which, following Arendt, is exposed from birth within the interactive scene of the world (which Arendt calls

'political'). Through this constitutive exhibition, the 'self' comes to desire the tale of his or her own life-story from the mouth (or pen) of another.

The narration of a life-story, therefore, offers an alternative sense to politics, not only because it deals with unique persons, but because it illustrates the *interaction* of unique people. Arendt suggests that the fact 'that every individual life can eventually be told as a story with a beginning and end is the *prepolitical and prehistorical condition* of history.'¹⁶ And Cavarero goes one step further and formulates this 'prepolitical and prehistorical condition' as the 'narratability' of every person, which is in a sense prior to whatever particular story or history that person then lives and leaves behind; prior to politics and history in the conventional sense. The narration of another's life-story, therefore, takes on the revealing and expositive sense that Arendt gives to politics. Cavarero provides a striking instance of this in *Relating Narratives*, through a compelling interpretation of Italian feminist practices of storytelling.¹⁷ The reciprocal narrations of 'consciousness-raising groups' are one scene in which the self is constitutively exposed to the other – an exposure that makes this a *political* scene. In short, narration is political for Cavarero and Arendt first of all because it is *relational*. Furthermore, whereas philosophical discourse functions politically only through the question of 'what' men and women are – their qualities, or qualifications as individuals, citizens and so forth – narration reveals, in a way that totally refocuses the political, *who* someone actually is. Narration, writes Cavarero, is the 'verbal response' to this 'who' – a response which, remarkably, can take on the meaning of a political action.

When Cavarero speaks of a 'narratable self,' therefore, she is not speaking of the classical 'subject,' or about 'subject-formation.' What makes a narration a political act is not simply that this narration invokes the struggle of a collective subjectivity, but rather that it makes clear the fragility of the unique. The uniqueness and the unity of a self, which is disclosed through that self's actions and words, and which is then narrated as a unique and unified life-story, does not display any of the general characteristics of traditional subjectivity: interiority, psychology, agency, self-presence, mastery and so forth. Rather, the 'narratable self' is a unique *existent*, 'who' someone is. Also this 'narratable self' is constitutively *in relation* with others.¹⁸ In this sense, Cavarero's work might be read alongside what Jean-Luc Nancy outlines in his own critique of subjectivity. Nancy remarks that the 'subject' has traditionally called up 'essence' or 'being,' but that this subject also 'designates and delivers an entirely different thought: that of *one* and that of some *one*, of the singular existent that the subject announces, promises, and at the same time conceals.'¹⁹ Nancy, too, uses the pronoun 'who' to indicate an 'existent (and not the existence *of* the existent).' He also adds that this 'who' is indeed what is finally 'called forth' by the traditional philosophical question of essence.²⁰ To put it in Arendt's and

Cavarero's terms, the question of 'what' someone is, which asks after the 'essence' of Man, at the same time calls for the 'who' of the existent in response.

In all of these ways, the priority of the classical subject is displaced, in Cavarero's work, in favor of a self that is narratable. I emphasize this point in order to distinguish Cavarero's thinking from contemporary Anglo-American theories that endeavor to articulate the social, or psychic, or discursive 'formation of the subject.' (To be sure, the phrase 'Anglo-American theories' does not have a fixed referent, but, nevertheless, I trust that the English-speaking reader will allow that, without referring to a homogeneous unity, I might still introduce Cavarero's work as a 'translation,' that is, as something new that is entering an already living discursive environment.) Indeed, in my view, Cavarero's work offers a unique challenge, and thus an opportunity, for a contemporary Anglo-American thought that deals with subject-formation, or for a politics that relies upon revisiting the question of the 'subject.'

In order to better understand some points of comparison and divergence, I will imagine briefly an encounter between Cavarero's work and that of Judith Butler. Butler's work is especially helpful here – *not* because she is representative of Anglo-American theories of subject-formation²¹ (on the contrary, while her work no doubt resonates with larger debates in the United States and elsewhere, and it is exemplary for its insightful innovation and philosophical rigor – not to mention its influence) – rather, Butler's work seems helpful in the context of this introduction, first because her work may offer a familiar point of departure for the English-speaking reader of this book, and second because it shares a number of concerns with Cavarero's work. Beyond the generalities – the fact that both have made significant contributions to feminism, that both are trained in philosophy, and work within a certain tradition of continental thought – I will try to outline some compatibilities and a number of divergences. My aim is not to take sides when discussing these two authors, for this does not seem to me to be a productive way to proceed.²² I would rather, hopefully, create a space for a discussion that would include other voices as well, by indicating where and how Cavarero's work might effectively intervene in – by radically re-orienting – contemporary debates in the English-speaking world.

Butler's work is characterized by a trenchant articulation of the formation of the subject (as well as an articulation of the limits of that very articulation). Taking up Foucault, she understands the 'subject' to be constituted through an 'exclusionary matrix,' which also outlines 'the domain of that subject;' and thus which also produces 'those who are not yet 'subjects.' The subject, in so far as one can trace its formation, emerges through a matrix of power that forms subjects through a process of exclusion: by producing 'a constitutive outside to the subject.' As a result, the subject is understood to be formed through its unavoidable relationship to what becomes excluded in the process of its own

formation 'as subject.'²³ Reminiscent of Hegel's account of the slave's march towards freedom and his fall back into 'unhappy consciousness,' Butler sees the subject as being constituted through 'a repudiation [of an abject outside] without which the subject cannot emerge.'²⁴ In this sense, Butler's articulation of subject-formation, or 'subjection,' emphasizes that one cannot speak of a 'subject' whose 'inside' is not always, already, in some sense inhabited and constituted by its 'outside.' In Butler's account, the repudiated 'outside' returns as a 'threatening spectre,' which reveals itself to be a kind of 'necessary outside' for 'the self-grounding presumptions of the subject' – an 'outside' that turns out, disturbingly, to be 'inside.'²⁵

One might be tempted to see in this articulation a kind of affinity with Cavarero's assertion that, for the 'narratable self,' there is always a *necessary other*.²⁶ In other words, one might be tempted to see an affinity between the extent to which – for Butler – the 'subject' emerges through an inevitable relation with what is excluded as 'outside' the subject, and the way in which – for Cavarero – the narratable self is constitutively related to others. And yet, upon closer inspection, a number of important distinctions become clear – distinctions that open up a host of divergences between the two thinkers.

An initial difference between the 'abject outside,' which is, in Butler's terms, necessary for the emergence of the 'subject,' – and what Cavarero has in mind by 'the necessary other' – is the following. For Cavarero, the 'necessary other' is above all another person, an existent, a unique being. What Cavarero calls the 'necessary other' is therefore not an 'abject outside' that threatens the stability of the narratable self – but is rather simply *an other* narratable self. The relation between the 'narratable self,' as a unique individual, and the necessary other, as an equally unique existent, is above all a relation between singular persons. Moreover, the relation between 'narratable selves' in Cavarero's thinking need not be a threatening, or violent, relationship at all. Indeed, in this book, these relations often take the form of friendships or love affairs.²⁷ In the context of their narrative relation, neither 'narratable self' is reducible to an essence; nor could they be absolutely located in the 'domain of abject beings,' for instance.²⁸ This is one reason why Cavarero insists that the self is *narratable* and not *narrated*. It is an existence that has not been reduced to an essence, a 'who' that has not been distilled into the 'what.' In short, for Cavarero it is the unique, individual existent – who is in constitutive relation with other existents, and who is not yet, or no longer, a subject – who takes 'priority,' so to speak.

Butler's work, too, relies upon a working distinction between 'individuals' or 'persons,' and 'subjects.'²⁹ However, unlike Cavarero, she relies upon this distinction in order to revisit the paradox of subject-formation. Here the difference between 'persons' and 'subjects' is invoked in a way that gives 'priority' to the subject or subjection. Butler begins by asserting that 'subjection'

is the very condition for the intelligibility of individual persons. In order to become 'intelligible' as individuals, she argues, it is first necessary that one become a 'subject,' or undergo subjection. Distinguishing the subject from the 'person' or the 'individual,' in order to treat the 'subject' as something distinct, she writes:

'The subject' is sometimes bandied about as if it were interchangeable with 'the person' or 'the individual.' The genealogy of the subject as a critical category, however, suggests that the subject, rather than be identified strictly with the individual, ought to be designated as a linguistic category, a place-holder, a structure in formation. Individuals come to occupy the site of the subject (the subject simultaneously emerges as a 'site'), and they enjoy intelligibility only to the extent that they are, as it were, first established in language. The subject is the linguistic occasion for the individual to achieve and reproduce intelligibility, the linguistic condition of its existence and agency. No individual becomes a subject without first becoming subjected or undergoing 'subjectivation' ... It makes little sense to treat 'the individual' as an intelligible term if individuals are said to acquire their intelligibility by becoming subjects.³⁰

In this account, subjection is the condition of intelligibility, which in turn is the condition for speaking of 'individuals.' In other words, the 'individual' person acquires the only intelligibility he/she can have – a *linguistic* one – by becoming a subject. Without the linguistic category of the 'subject' to inhabit, the individual remains unintelligible, unsayable. In this sense, Butler's work would operate within that philosophical framework whose dominance Cavarero, following Arendt, seeks to undermine, precisely by illuminating the extent to which 'subjectivation' is not the only 'linguistic occasion' through which the individual can be revealed in language. Indeed, to presume moreover that unique beings can become 'intelligible' only through the 'critical category' of the subject is, for Cavarero, part of a philosophical legacy which seeks to efface the unique, the particular.³¹ By contrast, Cavarero argues that uniqueness, the absolutely particular existent, has a meaning that is revealed through the narration of that person's life-story, precisely in so far as this person is *not* already 'subjected' to philosophical definition, or to the circular paradox of subjection. For Cavarero, as for Arendt, the intelligibility of the unique existent is not 'first established in language,' but rather he/she is a flesh and blood existent whose unique identity is revealed *ex post facto* through the words of his or her life-story.

Interestingly, Butler too refers to a certain relation between the formation of the subject and storytelling or auto-narration. Immediately after the passage I cited at length above, she writes:

The story by which subjection is told is, inevitably, circular, presupposing the very subject for which it seeks to give an account. On the one hand, the subject can refer to its own genesis only by taking a third-person perspective on itself, that is, by dispossessing its own perspective in the act of narrating its genesis. On the other hand, the narration of how the subject is constituted presupposes that the constitution has already taken place, and thus arrives after the fact. The subject loses itself to tell the story of itself, but in telling the story of itself seeks to give an account of what the narration has already made plain.³²

Here Butler too offers 'storytelling' or 'narration' as a way to understand the constitution of the subject. And as with Cavarero, there is a certain circularity to this account, but with some crucial differences.³³ First, Butler notes that the 'subject can only refer to its own genesis by taking a third-person perspective on itself, that is, by dispossessing its own perspective in the act of narrating its genesis.' (I would add that, in so far as the 'subject' in question is a 'linguistic category' and not an 'individual' or 'person,' the 'genesis' in question would not be birth. Nonetheless, like the person who cannot tell the story of his/her birth, the subject cannot account for its own genesis.) In Butler's account the subject does not rely upon another to tell him/her this story – but rather *takes* a third-person perspective upon his or her own subjectivity, and tells the story of the very genesis, which, as the subject of that story, he/she ought not to be able to know. The subject goes outside of itself in order to tell its own story ('loses itself to tell the story of itself'). This, remarks Cavarero, is the 'pretense' involved in the tradition of classical autobiography (which parallels the genealogy of the philosophical 'subject'). It is, Cavarero writes, 'the strange pretense of a self which makes himself an other in order to be able to tell his own story ... The *other* is here the fantasmatic product of a doubling, the supplement of an absence, the parody of a relation.'³⁴ Rather than repeat this classical strategy, Cavarero challenges the autonomy of philosophical autobiography by insisting upon 'an other who really is *an other*.'³⁵

Moreover, Cavarero, in contrast to Butler, makes clear that the 'narratable self' cannot tell the story of his or her own genesis – which is, for Cavarero, not a discursive 'genesis,' but rather springs from birth. The 'narratable self' does not possess this appropriating power of the 'subject,' which can take the perspective of the third-person.³⁶ The narratable self, unlike the subject, does not make of him/herself a third-person, does not go from 'I' to 's/he,' but

rather *desires this story, this story of birth, from the mouth of another*. For Cavarero, this desire is a fundamental feature of every 'narratable self.' (More on this desire in a moment.)

On the other hand, in the above passage Butler notes that 'the narration of how the subject is constituted presupposes that the constitution has already taken place, and thus arrives after the fact.' Here, the subject tells the tale of its own constitution, but in order to tell that tale the subject must already be fully constituted. This side of the paradox, which Butler outlines, in other words, arises from the temporal impossibility of the subject making itself into its own narratable 'object.' The subject, impossibly, *reflects* back upon itself in order to tell of its own formation. (Again, that we are talking about 'the subject' in the context of Butler's text in no way assures us that we are discussing a unique person. Rather, the 'story' in question here appears to be the story of the philosophical subject, the 'linguistic category,' or 'place-holder.' Hence, this 'story' would not be a personal life-story, but rather a 'genealogy.')³⁷

Cavarero suggests that in personal experience, too, the 'narratable self is at once the transcendental *subject* and the elusive *object* of all autobiographical exercises of memory.' But Cavarero insists that this experience of memory is not the same as the 'reflecting' or reflexive structure, which characterizes the constitution of the subject.³⁸ While it is true that the narratable self functions as both 'subject and object' in Cavarero's account, the unreflective, inactive working of memory in the narratable self renders the universality of these terms 'subject/object' irremediably ambiguous. For indeed, in personal experience, the 'terms' *subject and object of the story* lose their generality, and function instead as expressions of the unique self's sense of familiarity within the context of auto-narration. Indeed, *narration* works here to displace philosophically intelligible discourse as the only possibility for speaking of 'individuals' (and, for that matter, of speaking about 'subjects or objects'). Moreover, in the autobiographical exercise of memory, as Cavarero outlines the matter, it is not a question of the self becoming 'intelligible' – but rather the experience that the self has of being narratable, and therefore *familiar*. When formulating what she means by the 'narratable self,' Cavarero does not use the terms 'intelligibility' or 'knowledge,' but rather she insists upon the 'familiar sense' of every self.³⁹ The 'narratable self' does not *make* him or herself into the object of his/her own narration – for instance, by *taking* the third-person perspective – but rather, as Cavarero puts it, *'lives him or herself as his/her own story, without being able to distinguish the I who narrates from the self who gets narrated.'*⁴⁰ Put simply, each of us is familiar with the experience of memory's auto-narration, which continually – and involuntarily – 'tells us our own personal story.' 'The narratable self,' writes Cavarero, 'finds its home, not simply in a conscious exercise of remembering, but in the spontaneous narrating structure of memory

itself.'⁴¹ This is not a temporally reflexive structure, but rather the temporality of a life-span – 'the temporal extension of a life-story which is this and not another.'⁴²

In this way, the narratable self has the innate sense – which springs from having been born a unique being – that his or her life-story is unique and belongs to him or her alone. The 'story' of the birth of each narratable self would thus – contrary to the genesis of the subject – be equally unique and unrepeatable. Furthermore, Cavarero adds that this 'sense' extends towards our perception of others. Just as each of us has the sense that our life-story is unique, so too 'each of us knows that who we meet always has a unique story [*storia*]. And this is true even if we meet them for the first time without knowing their story at all.'⁴³ What is important, therefore, is not a *knowledge* of this story, or a knowledge of its contents or details. *What* the life-story says is not, finally, at issue. The 'intelligibility' of the person that we meet is, likewise, not at stake – for even in the absence of such intelligibility we know that the other is a unique person, with a unique story. We know this, moreover, without regard to whatever category or social place that person may occupy. Even the amnesiac, Cavarero points out, has the *sense* that he or she has a unique life-story – even without being able to recall it.⁴⁴ It is this *sense* of being narratable – quite apart from the content of the narration itself – and the accompanying sense that others are also narratable selves with unique stories, which is essential to the self, and which makes it possible to speak of a unique being that is not simply a 'subject.'

What is more, the 'narratable self' cannot be said to be a *product* of his or her life-story, or an effect of that story's performative force, but 'coincides rather with the uncontrollable narrative impulse of memory which produces the text [of this story].'⁴⁵ This is not to deny that stories have a performative or rhetorical force; rather, it is to suggest that this force is not essential to the 'narratable self.' While the 'narratable self' is not fully distinguishable from his or her life-story, neither is he or she reducible to the *contents* of this story. In other words, *what* this story tells about the person whose life it recounts does not, finally, *produce* or reveal the identity of that person – even if this person depends upon this life-story recounting *something*. 'Put simply,' writes Cavarero, 'through the unreflecting knowledge of my sense of self [*dell'assaporarmi*], I know that I have a story and that I consist in this story ... I could nevertheless not know myself to be narratable unless I was not always already interwoven into the autobiographical text of this story. Such an interweaving is indeed irreparable, and comes to the self as a reifying experience.'⁴⁶ Thus, Cavarero presents us with a narratable self whose identity – while interwoven with *what* his or her life-story recounts – consists in the unreflective sense that this life-story belongs to him or her alone, and that it therefore reveals *who* he or she uniquely is.

Cavarero goes a step further, and claims that this sense of self that results from 'knowing' oneself to be narratable is accompanied by a *desire* for this narration. Again, what one desires in the tale of his or her life-story is not simply the 'information' which that narration tells – for the contents alone do not confer identity. Rather, Cavarero argues that, knowing him or herself to be *unique* and therefore narratable, the self desires 'the *unity* ... which this tale confers to identity.' Everyone, asserts Cavarero, is born both unique and one. However, this unity, which is there at the moment of birth, is lost with the passage of time – a loss that feeds the desire for this lost unity, in the form of the tale of the life-story. If the unity that is there at birth is what is desired, then this tale must logically include the story of birth and early childhood – which, of course, cannot be told autobiographically. As Cavarero demonstrates through an innovative rereading of the *Oedipus* myth, this unity, which the tale of one's life-story confers, can only come from the mouth of another. The desire for this narration, therefore, implies that each of us is exposed to, and narratable by, another. And it implies that each of us entrusts his or her 'unity' and identity to another's tale.

Here again, this desire leads to a constitutive exposition of the self to the others, for we can only come to know our life-story by being exposed to others. And this 'exposition,' following Arendt, is above all *political* (again in Arendt's anomalous sense). Here one might perhaps see a certain compatibility between this constitutive exposure and Butler's provocative notion of 'passionate attachments.' In the course of her articulation of the 'ambivalent' formation of the subject in *The Psychic Life of Power*, Butler offers an interesting thesis about adult-child relations, in which the child's 'primary dependency' upon the adult is offered as one way of understanding how 'this situation of primary dependency conditions the *political* formation and regulation of subjects.'⁴⁷ Although, as Butler points out, the child's dependency upon adults 'is not *political* subordination in any usual sense,' she suggests that the child's vulnerability to subordination, violence, and even death, is a condition for that child's becoming a subject – and thus conditions his or her 'political formation' as well.⁴⁸ Here one might recognize in Butler's formulation a fleeting affinity with Cavarero's sense that the absolute exposure of the newborn prefigures, or *is*, political exposure of a different kind.⁴⁹ Indeed, by attributing *some* sense of politics (even if not 'in any usual sense') to this fundamental dependency of the child upon the adult – a dependency that is a condition of, and thus in some sense *prior to*, the child's becoming a 'subject' – Butler leaves open the possibility of an utterly *different*, *unusual*, politics; indeed, a politics that would not yet beg the question of subjects, subjection, or the ambivalence of agency – the questions that occupy the bulk of her text.⁵⁰ Although Butler devotes only a moment to this child-adult relation, it seems to me that this moment is one place in which the possibility of a

new dialogue, or a new sense, of politics might present itself – one which is founded upon the exposition and vulnerability inherent in each of our entrances into the world.

This moment of compatibility, however, also marks a point of divergence – for the direction for thinking proposed by Cavarero in this present work is radically different from the one proposed by Butler and others interested in revisiting the problem of subject-formation.

Butler's argument goes in one direction, shifting from the vulnerability inherent in every child–adult relation to a more general 'power' upon which one is dependent for one's formation as an adult-subject.⁵¹ In the larger context of Butler's argument in *The Psychic Life of Power*, the child–adult relationship described earlier appears to end up metonymically figuring the way in which 'power acts on the subject ... as what makes the subject possible ... its formative occasion ...' (p. 14 of Butler's book).⁵² In addition to this Foucauldian notion of 'power,' which Butler draws upon and reworks, she also develops her political work in large part through the Althusserian notion of 'interpellation,' and Austin's notion of 'performativity' (especially through Derrida's radical reformulation of Austin).⁵³ That these notions are developed so thoroughly in Butler's texts is an indication of the important role that a rethinking of the relation between the 'subject' and *language* plays in her political thinking. Butler, for instance, continually problematizes the neat separation of the subject from language, in order to illuminate the extent to which the agency of the subject is bound up with the agency of language. Althusser proves helpful in this regard, for 'interpellation' helps us to understand that the 'subject's capacity to address appears to be derived from having been addressed.' Moreover, we come to understand that we cannot even 'imagine [the subject] ... apart from the constitutive possibility of addressing others and being addressed by others ... without this linguistic bearing toward one another.'⁵⁴ Butler understands that the condition for the 'social existence' of the subject is that one enter into 'linguistic life,' that one be called something by *another* – even if the subject then acquires some sense of agency by miming the language through which one gains this linguistic life.⁵⁵ Here, Butler emphasizes – in a manner not inconsistent with Arendt's or Cavarero's sense that the 'self' is exposed from the start to others – that subjects are constitutively *exposed* ('vulnerable') to one another linguistically; and that this 'linguistic vulnerability ... is one of the primary forms' of social relation.⁵⁶ Just as Arendt emphasizes that 'to be alive means to live in a world that preceded one's own arrival and will survive one's own departure,' Butler's notion of 'vulnerability' implies that we inherit a language that precedes us and which we do not own.⁵⁷ And yet, it seems to me that the constitutive exposure of the 'narratable self,' as described by Cavarero in the present text, offers a

quite different understanding of the valences and possibilities inherent in this 'vulnerability.'

Allow me to pause for a moment on this point, which seems to me an important point of productive divergence between Cavarero's work and other theories that treat the problem of language in relation to the formation of the subject, or the self (of which there are, of course, many). Now, the reader of Cavarero's work will of course note that Cavarero, too, is interested in developing a notion of a 'narratable self' that is constitutively *exposed* to others in a manner that is likewise linguistic – namely, her sense that each of us is narratable by another.⁵⁸ Each of us is constitutively exposed to the others' narration of our life-story – an exposure that is a condition for social and political life. What is important for Cavarero, however, is that this *exposure* reveals *who* one is; a 'who' that is in turn disclosed through the tale of a life-story.

However, for Butler, the crucial point is that the 'ongoing interpellations of social life' deal with '*what I have been called*.'⁵⁹ That is to say, interpellation names someone in a way that produces that person's 'social existence' by impacting *what* form that person's social existence will take. In fact, one of the defining features of interpellation is that it works with *indifference* with regard to the one *who* is named. Butler takes note of this alienating effect of interpellation, which often results in a person being confronted with a set of terms or names that do not seem to correspond at all with *who* he or she considers him/herself to be:

Indeed, one may well imagine oneself in ways that are quite to the contrary of how one is socially constituted; one may, as it were, meet that socially constituted self by surprise, with alarm or pleasure, or even shock. And such an encounter underscores the way in which the name wields a linguistic power of constitution *in ways that are indifferent to the one who bears the name*.⁶⁰

Again, interpellation works in relation to the constitutive linguistic vulnerability of the subject, but in a way is indifferent to *who* is being 'constituted.' It is, moreover, this indifferent and alienating effect of interpellation or name-calling that accounts for much of its (often) hurtful or violent impact. This is the case with hate-speech, although this is not exactly the account that Butler goes on to provide. Indeed, by shifting the emphasis on to the fact that a '*who*,' so to speak, is at stake, we can begin to imagine an account of hate-speech and linguistic vulnerability quite different from the one that Butler ends up offering. For the pain caused by the word comes not simply from the fact that one is called a hurtful name, or not solely from the sedimented history or semantics of that name; but moreover from the feeling that *who* one is, is *not* being addressed, and indeed has no place in the name-calling scene at all. In other words, the pain of

hate-speech comes not solely from *what* one is being called, but from the fact that one's singularity, a singularity that exceeds any 'what,' is utterly and violently ignored, excluded from these semantics. Put quite simply, it is the total disregard for *who* one is that makes hate-speech so painful.

In addition, in so far as this disregard prevails, to varying degrees, in *all* scenes of interpellation, one could not hope to *radically* counteract hate-speech without also offering alternative versions of social existence that do *not* rely chiefly upon 'interpellation' as the model for the formation of linguistically vulnerable beings. On this point, perhaps, Cavarero's thinking might offer just such an alternative.

Indeed, it seems to me that Cavarero's work might offer an entirely different perspective from which to understand name-calling, 'interpellation,' or 'linguistic vulnerability' more generally. It is no doubt true, as Butler asserts, that language can hurt us because it also forms us, that the wounding power of words is in large part a consequence of our constitutive linguistic vulnerability, and a consequence of our vulnerability to the interpellative effects of discourse. And yet, there are perhaps other ways of understanding this vulnerability, ways that take into account the uniqueness of the one that is vulnerable. We might begin, following Cavarero and Arendt, to understand this vulnerability as something which exposes each of us, uniquely, to each other. Each of us is open, and therefore vulnerable, to what others tell or call us. But this is a vulnerability that, beyond being a condition for social existence in a general sense, also belongs to *who* each of us is; for we are all uniquely vulnerable, in different ways, to different words, at different times. 'Linguistic vulnerability,' recast in the light of Cavarero's thinking, is thus a constitutive feature of our *uniqueness*. Put simply, this vulnerability – by opening us to be hurt, or affected, by 'what' we are called – might even be that which gives us the sense, through the pain or shock we feel, that *what* we are called does not correspond with *who* we feel ourselves to be.

It should be recalled that Butler's account does not end with interpellation, and that one of the conclusions which Butler draws is that the terms by which one is addressed can be put to (potentially) new uses, 'one whose future is partially open.'⁶¹ This is no doubt true; and in and of itself this claim would be recognizable in much of Cavarero's previous work.⁶² And yet – although Cavarero would hardly disagree with Butler's sense of the subversive possibilities inherent in repetition – in *Relating Narratives* Cavarero offers a whole other perspective on the disjunction between discourse and life.

'Discourse is not life; its time is not yours.' Butler often refers to this axiom of Foucault.⁶³ For Butler, the disjunction between discourse and the life of the subject is precisely what opens a space for resignification, for subversive citation and so forth. Again, Butler suggests that the subject might gain some sense of individual agency by appropriating, and reworking, the terms by which he or she