

Eleven

Mimetic Inclinations

A Dialogue with Adriana Cavarero

Adriana Cavarero and Nidesh Lawtoo

Introduction

A prominent figure within feminist thought and the thought of sexual difference, Adriana Cavarero is undoubtedly one of the most renowned Italian philosophers on the international scene.¹ Across political and classical philosophy, poststructuralism and gender studies, and even in dialogue with literary studies and art history, Cavarero's thought transgresses disciplinary boundaries to focus on immanent ethical and political problems rather than on delimited historical periods or fixed theoretical paradigms. Often in the company of Hannah Arendt and in critical dialogue with a patriarchal philosophical tradition that lists Plato among its initiators, Cavarero has written influential essays on the theme of human vulnerability, on the role of narrative and the formation of subjectivity, on terrorism, on violence against the helpless. She has developed a relational ontology that is more attentive to birth than death, and to the relationship with the other instead of an autonomous and egocentric subject. Among her published works, translated in various languages, are *Nonostante Platone* (1990), *Corpo in figure* (1995), *Tu che mi guardi, tu che mi racconti* (1997), *A più voci* (2003), *Orrorismo* (2007), and, more recently, *Inclinazioni: Critica della rettitudine* (2013).²

The following interview took place in Verona, where Cavarero taught for several years. We began with one of her more recent books, *Inclinations*, and proceeded to a dialogue about a concept that, unlike “voice,” “story,” “stately bodies,” or disfiguring “horrorism,” does not appear often or explicitly

in her writings, yet an attentive reading will find that it underlines relational ontology throughout her work. This interview seeks to bring to the surface the concept of *mimēsis*, which lies at the intersection between philosophy and literature, two of Cavarero's main interests that are often in opposition within the patriarchal tradition but that Cavarero's thought helps bring into relation. A protean concept, usually translated as "imitation" or "representation," mimesis is at the center of many recent developments within continental philosophy, literary theory, but also the social and experimental sciences that, from different perspectives, are attentive to relational mimetic phenomena (such as identification, sympathy, affective contagion) that bind and, perhaps, incline the self toward the other. Whether mimesis so understood is in fact implicated in Cavarero's relational thought is what this dialogue-interview seeks to uncover.

Ancient Shadows

Nidesh Lawtoo: Let's begin with *Inclinations* in order to talk about mimesis, subjectivity, and politics. Given that the concept of mimesis goes back to Plato, the subject of one of your earliest books, following the thread of mimesis will perhaps allow us to weave in a figure in movement that characterizes an aspect of your thought that is little discussed but informs it implicitly and in a fundamental way nonetheless.

Adriana Cavarero: Gladly. Why don't we start with one of your definitions of *mimēsis* as a reference, to frame our talk, before we enter Plato's labyrinth?

NL: Sure. As you know, the Greek concept of *mimēsis* is difficult to define because it wriggles and escapes, as the god Proteus does, just to recall a Homeric image. In literary studies, for instance, mimesis continues to be thought of in terms of the Aristotelian model of representation of reality and is therefore reduced to realism. This definition is perhaps due more to Eric Auerbach's most important book, *Mimesis*, with the subtitle *The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*,³ than to Aristotle, according to which *mimēsis* is not a representation of reality but of an action (*muthos*), constructed in an organic and unitary way, having a beginning, a middle, and an end. In any event, this realistic conception of mimesis is often mentioned. Less acknowledged is a fact of which Aristotle reminds us at the beginning of *Poetics*. That is, that at its origins, mimesis had something to do with corporeal ritualistic practices such as dance and music, which,

through rhythm and melody, induce mimetic movements that would generate what Aristotle calls a “mimesis of character, of emotions, and of actions.” This second, more archaic definition, according to which *mimēsis* induces the subject to imitate, often unconsciously, the other, and which defines us as mimetic beings (the most mimetic ones!), is the definition that interests me the most. Thus, mimesis can be understood not only as realism or, if we think of Plato, as a copy or a deteriorated shadow of the ideal reality. Rather, mimesis can be considered as a mimetic behavior that is embodied, immanent, contagious, and relational; through it, the I imitates the other, is exposed to the other, maybe is even possessed by the other, so much so that the I becomes a copy, a shadow, or a phantom of the I.

It seems to me that defined in this double sense, understood both as a degraded shadow of an ideal vertical world and as an affective force that has the power to charm and bend the subject, mimesis seems to play a double-sided role in *Inclinations*. Whereas you are critical of the former definition, and of the vertical ontology that underlines it, it seems you might be interested in the second notion because of its power of inclination. Starting with your critique of Plato, which you discuss in an intriguing chapter of *Inclinations* titled “Plato, *Erectus Sed*,” could you articulate the relation that, in your assessment, exists between, on the one hand, mimesis and the Platonic vertical ontological device, which you oppose, and, on the other hand, the inclined subject that you propose?

AC: When I read the mimetic parts of Plato’s myth of the cave, I read them in the Platonic spirit, which implies a negative attitude toward mimesis, and we need to keep this in mind. According to Plato, mimesis is not something that brings us close to knowledge or truth but something that distances us from truth, a distance of a few degrees: the shadows are the furthest degree. In the myth of the cave, reaching verticality would create the greatest distance from mimesis. Thus, within the Platonic framework, where mimesis has a much greater degree of distance from knowledge, whereas knowledge of the good is in fact the summit, the vertical point, what you suggest works wonderfully. This is to say that the Platonic mimesis is closer to inclination in the sense that there is, for sure, an attraction to or a fascination with shadows in the prisoners that are sitting in the cave. Therefore, we have mimesis along with fascination, which are always together in Plato, because mimesis is art, and art succeeds because it deceives and charms. Verticality is instead entirely on another side, because you reach it by leaving this magnetic field of attraction/fascination. This is what I would like to say to frame the myth of the cave.

NL: There is therefore an anti-Platonic tendency in your thought that brings you, *against* Plato, to celebrate what mimesis entails: narration, artistic representations, immanent and affective corporeal relationships. Would you agree that mimesis, similarly to *eros*, has the power to bend the I toward the other, to move the I's center of gravity, and possess it?

AC: Yes, but we need to clarify. I celebrate what Plato condemns, but not so much mimesis as he understands it. I celebrate a type of inclined subjectivity that is not self-created, that cannot be by itself, that needs the other and the inclination of the other in order to be. This is typical, for instance, of maternal inclination, a figure I employ because it is the most well-known and transparent icon. I have recently argued in an essay that in Plato I see the archeology of the foundation of the subject. Obviously, it is inappropriate to apply a term such as "subject" to Plato. The subject is a modern concept, and I am generally against taking the categories of modernity and attaching them to the Western macro-narrative from Homer to our day. Undoubtedly, however, in the myth of the cave, there is already an intimation of the subject, which is the philosopher, who stands up, changes direction, ascends, and then contemplates the sun and stands vertically in the direction of the Good. It is a self-sufficient subject, or, to say the least, its story is the narration of a story of self-sufficiency. In my view, this is the greatest fallacy of the entire Western metaphysics: the idea of the ego, self-created and self-sufficient.

On the contrary, in my theoretical perspective, subjectivity is entirely constituted by others. Therefore, there is a relationship with others that is not something added onto the self-sufficient subject: there is no self-sufficient and autonomous subject to start with. This is the scheme of the social contract: they are all rational, autonomous, and self-sufficient individuals who make a pact to give themselves a government. It is clearly an abstract narrative full of metaphysical fallacies. In my view instead, the subject is originally and irremediably constituted by relationships; we start from relationships, instead of starting from the I. This is why I do not know if what you mean by "*mimēsis*" can fit with my perspective since, in my view, there is no fusion with or substitution of the other. To put it in a more drastic way: the relationship with the other is not a relation tending to a fusion—in such a way that I become other, I otherize myself. In polemic with a certain postmodern usage of the theme of alterity, I want to underline that these embodied and relational subjectivities are distinct and unique among them. I am clearly referencing here what Hannah Arendt calls "uniqueness." In Arendtian terms: there is uniqueness in plurality;

therefore, there is no fusion or confusion or overlapping. I think this is the point you and I need discussing.

Modern Phantoms

NL: Yes, I agree. This is what I wanted to come to. Perhaps in mimesis as I understand it, there is both a risk of fusion and the possibility of maintaining uniqueness, depending on the context. Let me explain. On the one hand, it is true that, from my position about mimesis, there emerges a diagnostic interest in the form of affective contagion that risks, if not completely fusing or confusing, at least radically diminishing or diluting the ontological difference between the self and the other. I do not become completely other in the sense of Rimbaud's "*Je est un autre*"; but in some relational or collective contexts—watching a movie in a room that evokes Plato's cave, for instance—I can become unconsciously receptive, open, and vulnerable to what the other feels. There is a form of sympathy, of *sympathos*, constitutive of mimetic relations that interest me, that is contagious, that transgresses the principle of individuation and ties the I, in the good and in the bad, to the other.

On the other hand, I find some modern philosophical and literary authors who, though anti-Platonic, are inspired by Plato as you are, and who insist on oxymoronic concepts that seem to point to a double back-and-forth movement in this form of mimetic contagion. Let's take, for instance, the Nietzschean concept of the "*pathos of distance*" (*Pathos der Distanz*). This concept is often reduced to the position of distance that Nietzsche takes with respect to the mimetic subjects he condemns (slaves, women, masses, or, as he calls them often, the herd) in order to celebrate instead the sovereign and autonomous individual (the master). Yet he calls this relationship a "*pathos*," an affective concept that is at the heart of sympathy and that, if considered more closely, seems to indicate a vulnerability that makes him, Nietzsche, extremely receptive to the mimetic affects he himself condemns. In his thought, as in the thought of other philosophical or literary authors, I find a double back-and-forth movement, which is central to my conception of mimesis as a double-edged concept: on the one hand, one that relates affectively the I to others, risking to generate simulacra or "phantoms of the ego," as Nietzsche says; on the other hand, this allows the I, although permeable to the *pathos* of the other, to maintain a critical distance that preserves the difference and a degree of individuality, even though this individual is not indivisible but is constituted by the mimetic relationship with the other.

In this, I find an isomorphism, or at least a resonance with your thought, which is, to say the least, twofold. On the one hand, you insist on uniqueness, which you share with Arendt and which brings you to underline the unity of the figure. You show this aspect brilliantly, for instance, in *Relating Narratives*, in your comment on the tale by Karen Blixen and the figure of the stork that is traced on the sand as a unitary figure of the I. On the other hand, the affective dimension of mimesis reveals a relational conception of the subject, which is open, permeable, and vulnerable to the other. Could you talk a little more about this tension between the unity of the figure and its ontological openness to the other, which is characteristic of inclination?

AC: I would not speak of a double movement, because the figure of uniqueness, as I understand it, is structurally open and vulnerable. Just like the self-sufficient and sovereign subject of the tradition, the Cartesian subject, is closed, ideally invulnerable, “hard as a nut,” as Virginia Woolf writes,⁴ so is the unique subject vulnerable. As Arendt says too, uniqueness is ontologically founded on birth, in our first appearing, and it is actualized and expressed with the “second birth” that is action. Action is the total exposure of the self, of *who* you are, to others, while you are totally exposed and bent toward the outside (*estroflesso*): you appear, you show yourself. In this total exposure, there is structural openness and vulnerability. Naturally, we can view this exposure in exhibitionist and Narcissistic terms, which is something well known in modernity. Arendt herself, after all, recognizes that there could be a certain emphasis on such exposure; she says that the Homeric heroes, for instance, reveal themselves in an emphatic manner. But in a non-heroic situation, this exposure is also, in the first place, an exposure to the wound. It marks a constitutive vulnerability, a condition of dependence, which, as I have tried to argue in *Inclinations* along with Levinas, does not lead necessarily toward an ethics of reciprocity; rather, it forces us to rethink ethics in terms of unbalance and asymmetry.

Moreover, I would not confuse unity with uniqueness, because the concept of unity suggests something that is always singularly compact. Certainly, the stork that the protagonist of Karen Blixen’s tale draws with his steps is a unitary figure; but it is so symptomatically, not because he wanted to draw it; rather, because at the end and without his intention, it “results” from the footsteps he has left on the wet ground. In my reading of Blixen, the stork, the unity of a figure that makes sense still remains an ideal goal. In other words, that our life has a unitary meaning is an object of our desire, not a given. No one has a life with a definitive meaning that is complete and closed in a wonderful unity. We can only wish to have

such a life. However, if it is true that the desire of the narratable self is to aspire to the completion of unity, it remains clear in my argument that “uniqueness” is not at all synonymous with closure. On the contrary, in terms of the Arendtian speculation, which I like to resume and elaborate, it is synonymous with openness and vulnerability in the literal sense, that is, openness to the wound.

NL: This desire for a figural unity, even only as an ideal, is perhaps less present in the Nietzschean tradition on which I rely. However, the vulnerability and the openness constitutive of the I, at birth, by way of the other, is something that we share, it seems to me. My problem is that if the I is structurally open to the other, vulnerable to forms of affective contagion, predisposed to a mimesis that is often unconscious and involuntary, the risk of dissolution, of fusion, and of loss of the I remains big. We shall come back to this. For the time being, could you clarify the role that, in your view, the other plays in such a delineation of a figure of the I that is open, yet not unitary?

Mimesis and Narration

AC: This is another fundamental point that I have learned from Arendt: the narration of the self by itself, the autobiography *in primis*, is a falsification. As you know, this is, after all, a commonplace in literary studies as well. A good number of literary critics who comment on Augustine’s or Rousseau’s *Confessions*, for instance, underline that the self narrating itself is substantially a *fiction*. Arendt provides some very interesting philosophical explanations of this autobiographical falsification to which, even according to the postmodern critique, we are drawn. She says that uniqueness, which she calls the “who,” that is, the subject of the question “who are you?” (an altogether different question from “what are you?”), being totally exposed to the other, comes from the other, in that it is only the other who has a vision of this “who.” The only way to see myself would be by looking into the mirror; but in doing so, we would be right in the field of the most ostentatious Narcissism. Arendt says that no one knows *who* he or she is while acting. We can reflect on what we have done, on how we have acted, and we can narrate our actions to ourselves. In doing so, we tend to falsification because no autobiographical narrator has properly seen himself or herself. Following Arendt, it is worth taking the question of vision seriously. The others are also those who see you, you expose yourself to their organ of sight. Where the self is looking at itself, where there is a mirror,

there is in fact a danger of mimesis. But *who* you are, Arendt insists, the narratable uniqueness that your story tells, is structurally entrusted to others.

As a matter of fact, “who is Homer?” Arendt asks. He is the first narrator and the first historian of Greece who tells the story (the history) of Greece, the war of Troy, but also the personal stories of singular and exposed lives: Achilles, Hector, Ulysses, Andromache, Penelope. In narrating these life stories, we can say, he saves them from ruins, in the sense that, as the Greeks and Homer knew well, every life is unique and singular, is a temporary and precarious existence—mortal. The Greeks are obsessed with the theme of death—human beings are called “mortals” (*hoi brotoi*). The narration, which tells a life story, saves life from the ruin of death, that is to say, from oblivion; but it does not save it in the Empyrean or in some place beyond. It saves it for posterity, in the world of human beings, in the fully human sphere of the world. We know the figure of Ulysses, we know his story because Homer has told us this story. It is saved in our entirely worldly dimension. There is no metaphysical salvation in the sense of the self. According to Arendt, the sense of every unrepeatable and singular existence, a unique existence, is historically immanent to the world in which it has appeared by exposing itself to others.

NL: In listening to you and in seeing how you trace your relation to figures such as Plato, Arendt, but also literary authors such as Homer and Blixen, I see a way of philosophizing that seems different from the predominant, patriarchal tradition in at least two ways: on the one hand, in your relation to literature; on the other, in your relation to the models that come before you. These are two themes that touch upon mimesis, often in a combined fashion. In thinking about the relationship between Plato and Homer, for instance, we have a relationship of rivalry, which is the rivalry both of Plato against Homer and of philosophy against literature. This rivalry continues all the way up to our time. Let’s start with your relation to the philosophical models in order to arrive to literature.

In your relation to the philosophical figures that come before you, you distinguish yourself from the paradigm of mimetic rivalry that, within the patriarchal tradition from Plato to René Girard, often leads to violence and death. One of the many virtues of your approach is that you underline birth, affective relations, and life. Arendt plays an essential role in your thought, among other reasons, precisely because she celebrates birth. You even talk about imitating the “Arendtian model,” but you do not do this on the basis of the mimetic rivalry model. There is, nonetheless, a form of confrontation or mimetic agonism that opens a new way of reconnecting to the models that come before us in a creative or productive way, bring-

ing their thought elsewhere. How would you define your relation with the philosophical models from which you draw?

AC: I consciously imitate Arendt's method because I find it very effective. Her method consists in bringing some intuitions, some ideas to their extreme consequences, that is to say, to force, radicalize, and bring a thesis to its extreme. In doing so, obviously one may incur in speculative and interpretive errors. But who does not incur in this type of error, after all? Arendt, however, succeeds in constructing strong theoretical structures, which then become frameworks that are useful to move further, go beyond, and redraw what seems known, if not perfectly known. As a matter of fact, I imitate this method very often. For instance, in *Inclinations*, I recover the significant figure of the mother with child, which is a very famous icon within the European Christian tradition, and, by forcing its stereotypical representation, I push it to its extreme consequences and redraw its meaning. My strategy is fruitful, I hope. I am convinced that by bringing intuitions and images to their extreme consequences, it is possible to attain the result, which I find decisive, of making stereotypes speak differently. Our language is rich in stereotypes, obviously. Those about the masculine and the feminine, for example, are the most well known, and I have been working on them for some time. But there are also the various stereotypical representations of different ethnic, religious, and moral identities; or the formulas that pretend to synthesize the ideas of East and West, and even of good and evil, of just and unjust, and so on. Through the operation of bringing on and forcing the images, these stereotypes, so to speak, are torn apart and enable us to see possible meanings that are often different from or even opposite to those that the stereotype suggests.

Many years ago, in *In Spite of Plato*, I called this method the "technique of theft."⁵ I think that it can still be called so. In my first years of study, when I was young, I happened to encounter Plato's texts. If one begins with Plato, it is difficult to leave him behind, because he is an author still on the threshold of philosophy; it is philosophy in its making, the philosophizing process itself, which constructs itself as a discipline and reckons with its own foundation. Plato is full of ways of reasonings, images, or, as Derrida would say, figural explanations and intuitions that still have an undecidable side. This explains why I look at Plato as an author who, first and before others, has left us images, traces, and pieces of constructions from which we can take and steal, tear off the context, and rearrange, think of, or imagine differently. I think that this is a fecund speculative method, and I always encourage young scholars in philosophy and literature, whether they are men or women, to adopt it.

NL: You adopt the “technique of theft” with respect to the patriarchal tradition . . .

AC: I steal from Arendt as well (she laughs) . . .

NL: Yes, but you are often very explicit in your debt toward her.

AC: Yes, it is true. The dangerous part of mimesis is repetition and, therefore, sterility. If mimesis is done with literary stealing, I think that it becomes more productive and maintains something living in it that does not become congealed. Then there are big treasures, large deposits. Certainly, Plato is a large deposit, and surely Homer is too. But in my view—as you know, because you do the same thing—literature is the largest deposit par excellence. If we, who do philosophy, limit ourselves to the philosophical macro-narrative, we leave out the biggest treasures, which are the literary ones.

Imitation and Gender Relations

NL: Would you say that this method of stealing, which reconnects with literature and therefore with a mimetic tradition, belongs properly to the feminine symbolic order in opposition to the “ideal” philosophical order, often based on the rivalry of a patriarchal mold?

AC: I don’t know if it is feminine. Let’s say that it is feminine if we think of the figure of women gatherers. Or of women embroiderers as great creators of patchworks. That is to say, to be able to take pieces, snatch them, save them, rearrange them, and reweave a different canvas. It is an operation that does not waste the treasure, the literary or figural deposits, but combines them in a different way, and therefore can needle them into an embroidery. It is not by chance that the figure I was inspired by, in my early book *In Spite of Plato*, was Penelope, the weaver, the one who does and undoes. This means that the weaver does not waste but utilizes threads that have already been used for a previous fabric. This does not mean that there are no new threads; naturally, the time and the story, the experience bring in new threads. It means, however, that in order to say new things we can tap into great deposits, we can draw from Homer and from the literature of all times. For example, you and I love to tap into Conrad—it is a deposit that one cannot avoid tapping into, as a matter of fact! Conrad’s imagination is wonderful! Why not take advantage of this

imaginary, which also takes place at such an important historical moment, namely, a time of transition to imperialism, of great technical, social, and political transformations? You yourself take advantage of the great literary deposits . . . therefore you understand what I am trying to say.

NL: Yes, I try to do that, and I find dazzling intuitions about mimesis, about which “my” authors know a lot. I also share your passion for the affirmative—Nietzsche would say “gay”—spirit of your method, a method that could also be called genealogical in the sense that it is turned toward figures of the past: not just for its own sake, but in order to reweave threads or in order to recover figures or concepts of the past, such as that of mimesis in fact, and reweave them in a productive way in view of addressing ethical and political problems of the present and the future. There is a strength turned not toward death, but toward birth—another great Nietzschean theme—in this gesture of yours that leads me to the next question.

You snatch, recover, and reweave the concept of birth, taking it from Arendt; at the same time, you radicalize it by putting the accent on the figure of the mother, in a way that goes beyond Arendt’s thought in order to anchor the category of natality in the life of the body of the mother and of the infant. Very often, when you speak of philosophers of the patriarchal tradition, as in the case of Kant for example, you remind us that we have to deal not just with abstract minds, but also with embodied persons, who have lives, habits, and some experience—or lack of experience. What role does the experience of birth play in your radicalization of this concept?

AC: As I have argued in *Inclinations*, I accuse Arendt—and I think I am right in this—of having been able to give value to the category of birth by placing it at the foundation of her political thought without, however, considering, not even as a theme, that necessary figure, always present at birth, that is the mother—and actually, not even the infant is considered. Arendt speaks of a “newborn,” one who has just been born, who is already congealed in this stage of novelty, beginning, namely someone who always remains a newborn and does not grow. It is clear, obviously, that the newborn will grow, will become an adult, will act, and will experiment that which Arendt calls his or her second birth; but what happens in the meantime, we don’t really know in Arendt’s terms. Therefore, there is a blindness in Arendt in the way she discusses birth as a relational scene between mother and infant, an infant that is a vulnerable creature, exposed both to wound and care and that needs caring in order to grow and become an “actor.” Allow me to insist on the realism, even material realism, of the scene of birth, where there are at least two persons, namely: the mother and the

newborn. What is important to me here is to illustrate the foundation of ontology as a scene that is already constitutionally relational. In other words, the meaning of birth is not given as a pure apparition of a newborn; it is given, rather, as a relationship of the newborn with the mother and vice versa. It is not enough to make of birth a concept: we must conceptualize birth as a credible scene, concrete, avoiding turning it into an abstract category of philosophy.

The experience of maternity is, naturally, the experience of a relationship strictly connected to the body, an experience of tactility, also of vocal and affective correspondences with the infant who, in all evidence, is not the Arendtian newborn, congealed in his or her paradigmatic function of a “new beginning,” but rather a creature who extends his or her existence in a long period of infancy, which is a long period of absolute fragility and vulnerability. Therefore, the experience of maternity is an experience of subjectivity, the maternal subjectivity, which, besides being in herself vulnerable like all subjectivities, is structurally put into relationship with the absolute—and exemplarily helpless—vulnerability of the infant. It seems to me that, in fact, this is a very interesting model for rethinking ontology and, with it, ethics and politics. I add, but this seems obvious to me, that I speak of the mother, and I have in mind an ordinary representation of this figure: namely, a woman who has a child and then raises such a child. But, aside from giving birth, the maternal figure can obviously be substituted by anyone else who takes upon himself or herself the care of the absolutely helpless because otherwise, as Hobbes says, if no one looks after him or her, the infant dies. And let’s not forget that, for Hobbes, the power of life and death is sovereign power. There is something frightful in the originary relationship with the absolute helpless who enters the scene through the experience of maternity. Arendt does not take this into consideration, but, in my view, it is a decisive aspect of the operation of grounding ontology in the human condition of natality.

NL: I find this aspect of a constitutive relationship that you radicalize in Arendt also central to the problem of an affective and unconscious mimesis that, from birth on, ties the subject to the model, *in primis*, of the maternal one or the parents and then to teachers, friends, but also television and movie models, and, increasingly, even virtual models. I agree with you that the mimetic relationship with the other precedes the constitution of subjectivity, or better said, it is the mimetic relationship that, after the first birth, enables subjectivity to emerge in what Plato already calls a second birth. A starting point for me is to think how this mimetic relationship, which is also a relationship of inclination, comes paradoxically from philos-

ophers who are often, and rightly so, considered patriarchal, phallogocentric, and frankly misogynous thinkers, such as Nietzsche or, in a different way, figures such as D. H. Lawrence or George Bataille. Nevertheless, between the lines of their sexism, they describe, often not without admiration, the relationship of nonverbal communication between mother and newborn with great sensibility. They even anticipate recent developments in child psychology that seem to support your thesis concerning a constitutive relational ontology. It has been discovered, as a matter of fact, that newborns respond in a mimetic and reflexive manner to the facial expressions of the parents, the mother first of all, much earlier than was previously thought. The predominant model in developmental psychology came from figures, such as Piaget, who put imitation at a late stage in the development of the infant. Instead, these mimetic reflexes that, for the good or the bad, open subjectivity to the other, happen very early—the records show they happen at around forty-two minutes from birth.

These experiments show that mimesis, not as mirror of reality but as unconscious mimetic behavior, is perhaps at the origin of human subjectivity. They show, based on empirical evidence, that we are a species that, as already Aristotle said, is the most mimetic of all and that, for lack of originality, I call *homo mimeticus*. As I understand it, *homo mimeticus* is also opposed to the traditional figure of *homo erectus* because it reminds us that, from birth on, we are inclined to mimesis and mimesis inclines us, with our body but also with our psyche, toward the other and vice versa. On this point, I think our interests intertwine around what we could call, if you agree, “mimetic inclinations” that—through bodily affective experiences such as facial expressions, touch, voice—from birth on, place relationship as originary. What do you think about these developments?

AC: It seems to me that mimesis as you describe it now says, in more concrete terms, what I was saying in philosophical terms. That is to say, in your own words, mimesis shapes the vulnerable subjectivity. The vulnerable subjectivity is so exposed to the other that it just imitates the other in gestures, voices, sounds, and facial expressions, and, therefore, it is a subjectivity totally formed by the other. I think that, in this, we are very close. I think that my fear to adhere unconditionally to your position comes from the risk of fusion. In other words, in the very concrete and affirmative discourse of the formation of subjectivity, in the constitutive relationship that forms subjectivity, I follow you perfectly. My fear is that, in what comes after that, there is a postmodern drift, falling therefore into a formula according to which “every self is never a self, but always already the other.” Here it is—I do not share this formula or the language that it

evokes. First of all, because I do not share the idea of the subject as the starting point to which that formula is opposed in a decisive way, that is to say, the ghostly idea of a self totally autonomous and sovereign. We are never autonomous, even less at birth, because we are expelled by another body and exposed to the world. In short, there is never an isolated self without the other, and the other is constitutive for the formation of the self.

In my view, being able to recognize the constitutive bond of such a self—namely, the relational function in the ontological condition of subjectivity—as well as to recognize, to put it in your own terms, that mimesis shapes and continues to reshape this subjectivity in time, is important in order not to fall into the verticalizing abstractions of the philosophy of the sovereign and autonomous subject. I am therefore very suspicious toward all postmodern suggestions that risk modifying the relational substance of the self, making the self an alteration of the self-in-the-other. It seems to me that this is an aesthetic game that does not captivate me when it comes to political philosophy. As a political philosopher, as a matter of fact, one of the central categories is, for me, that of responsibility. I need an anchoring subject that does not fuse with the other than oneself; that is, I need a subject that is determined, that is able to receive the interrogation and respond. You understand that now I am not referencing Hannah Arendt but Emmanuel Levinas, who is another of my inexhaustible treasures, one of my deposits!

Masses and Plurality

NL: What you say makes me think also of the ethical implications of this mimetic openness for the dominant models of the contemporary political scene. My preoccupation concerning the dissolution of the self is not so much aesthetic but, as you say as well, ethical and political. In particular, it concerns the problem of the relation between mimesis, which, in my opinion, often works in an unconscious and involuntary way, and the masses, a relation that accentuates the permeability of the self and makes it very vulnerable to leaders and their ideological suggestions. If we think of Plato's old distinction, that mimesis can function both as therapy and as poison, we could say that, on the one hand, the mimetic inclination leads to a living openness if the models are good but also, on the other hand, to a potentially pathological one if the models are harmful, as seen in the relation between populist leaders and the masses in the age of Twitter.

AC: This is the dangerous, demagogic, and populist mimesis, a theme about which we understand each other well! It may be because I am a Platonist,

but I fear this version of mimesis deeply, also because I have studied the phenomenon of totalitarianism. I fear mimesis, contagion, attraction, and the dissolution of subjectivity. This too means, for me, to shake off one's responsibility: all guilty, no one guilty.

NL: Yes, we share this sentiment of consciousness of the power of the masses that dissolves, influences, and conditions the individual often in a pathological and unconscious way. When I say unconscious, I do not mean this on the basis of a repressive Oedipal hypothesis but on the basis of those mimetic involuntary reflexes that are visible in infancy but also in adult masses, and that I collect under the category of "mimetic unconscious." At the same time, you propose the notion of a "plurality" that does not identify with mimetic masses. By way of conclusion, could you reflect on this relation between masses and plurality in connection with the projects you are working on now, and perhaps even tell us about them?

AC: At the moment, I am reflecting exactly on the difference, if not opposition, between plurality and masses. Masses are a form of collectivity in which subjectivity dissolves and, through a mimetic process, becomes only one enormous and amorphous subject that is called, in fact, masses. Plurality—a category that I take from Arendt—is the exact opposite. It is the paradoxical plurality of unique beings, namely, in Arendt's terms, the human condition *par excellence*. Not only does individuality not dissolve in the plurality; on the contrary, it is exalted in the sense that uniqueness and plurality go together. If we are unique, it means that our collective form is the plural form; if our collective form is plural, then it means that we are unique. In Arendtian terms, uniqueness and plurality are just two categories that implicate one another reciprocally. In this sense, they are the opposite of the masses.

Moving from this distinction, at present, I am reflecting on the sonorous and acoustic aspect that is manifested in the difference between masses and plurality. We are dealing with two phonospheres, two soundscapes about which literature—our famous literary treasure!—provides us with punctual descriptions. For example, the typical example of the voice of the masses is the singing of the national anthem, but we could also mention, to make this more modern, the singing of hymns at soccer or football stadiums. On the voice of the masses, I have found some very interesting things in the novels by Émile Zola but also in Elias Canetti and, obviously, in the writings of Georges Mosse. The voice of plurality is instead a more difficult theme, but I have found interesting analyses in autobiographical texts by Canetti himself and by Roland Barthes. What interests me is that vocal

plurality as well as vocal masses have also to do with the word, and not just with pure sound or a roar. Since in plurality everyone is unique, the ideal voice of plurality, as Roland Barthes says, suggests that every one of these unique subjects has a different speech, or that there is a plurality among many different dialogues, between me and you, between two others, and so forth, maybe simultaneously. From the acoustic position of the one who listens, the result would then be a kind of cacophony. I, on the contrary, try to argue that it is instead a *pluriphony*, in the sense that the vocal plurality emits its own particular noise or buzzing, in which it is possible to perceive the uniqueness of the voices that constitute it; it is a particular noise, a kind of distinctive phonosphere that is profoundly different from the voice of the masses, which sounds tendentially in unison, both in form as in roar, as well as in the national anthem. Canetti says that the voice of the masses is like the voice of the sea: a repetitive rumble and a roar, a wave, something that is sweeping.

I fear that the recent surge in populism, both in Europe and in the United States, is a return of the masses. For sure, it is for the most part a dispersed mass, connected through the new media and social media; and this too, as you know well, is a problem of mimesis! As you yourself have written, it is symptomatic of the contagious mimesis of the masses, above all in the totalitarian form, as well as in a sonorous mimesis. In my opinion, the sonorous dimension conveys this contagion very well, this *reductio ad unum*; namely, it makes it very effective and easily perceptible. Crucially, in the case of plurality, the mimetic element understood as contagious is not there; however—and this is the concept I make allusion to when I speak of pluriphony—it seems that the unique voices tune in at a specific level of sonority.

NL: It seems that in this dialogue, on the one side, tied to mimesis and, on the other, in opposition to it, we find an original journey that draws a figure of your thought as it moves. We started with your early works on Plato, passing through your relationship with Arendt, your passion for literature, and we have come to your most recent projects. Images change, but you continue to weave and reweave the threads that are constitutive of mimetic phantoms that project a shadow on the present and on a plurality that, we can only hope, opens the I to the future.

A word of thanks—Nidesh Lawtoo wishes to thank Adriana Cavarero for accepting to weave a mimetic thread that we “picked up” informally at Grand Central Station in New York in June 2017, we rethreaded more

calmly at the Università di Verona, in April 2018, and allows us to continue to dialogue.

(Translated by Elvira Roncalli)

Notes

1. This project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program (grant agreement No. 716181: HOM).

2. See Adriana Cavarero, *In Spite of Plato: A Feminist Rewriting of Ancient Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 1995); *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood* (New York: Routledge, 2000); *Stately Bodies: Literary, Philosophy, and the Question of Gender* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002); *For More Than One Voice* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005); *Horrorism: Naming Contemporary Violence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008); *Inclinations: A Critique of Rectitude* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016).

3. Eric Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013).

4. See Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (London: Hogarth Press, 1929), chapter 6.

5. Cavarero, *In Spite of Plato*, 5.

