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## Book Reviews

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*For More than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression.* Adriana Cavarero. Trans. Paul A. Kottman. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005. Pp. 262. \$65.00, hardcover; \$24.95, paperback.

Adriana Cavarero's most recent book, *For More than One Voice*, offers the reader a critique of Western metaphysics that challenges the hegemony of speech's relation to thought within politics. Revisiting Aristotle's *Politics*, Cavarero examines the famous definition of man as "*zoon logon echon*"—usually translated as "rational animal." She is critical of the tradition that renders *logos* here as "reason" or "rationality," modeled on the abstract and disembodied Platonic idea. Reading the *Politics* alongside the *Poetics*, she brings politics into a distinctly rhetorical sphere, and therefore figures *logos* as "*phone semantike*." In this light, man is a "speaking animal," an animal who speaks with a voice (*phone*) that is meaningful (*semantike*—an adjectival form that qualifies the voice itself). Cavarero's argument is that voice and meaning—phonic and semantic—must be sharply distinguished. The history of Western philosophy, she contends, has effaced this vital difference and focused instead on speech as a unitary phenomenon in which the vocalic and the semantic are always already joined as meaningful signification. In this way, the singularity of the vocalic itself has been elided in favor of speech that strongly privileges meaning. She therefore wishes to deliver us from language, as it were, through a recuperation of the force of the vocalic, the acoustic, the resonant and sonorous auditory quality of *phone*.

Absent in the history of Western philosophy, this sonorous aspect of the vocalic stands as a corrective to our logocentric metaphysical tradition that singularly values the visual over the acoustic, semantic content over vocal utterances, and an abstract, anonymous "what" over a particular, embodied "who." Cavarero claims that the vocalic is an "anti-metaphysical" force that exceeds and challenges signification. In other words, the vocalic immediately communicates the uniqueness of the speaker without recourse to the signifying content of his or her speech. The voice is essentially relational—a relation that is described as "the condition of every communication. . . . the communicability of the communicable, or the significance of signification" (29). Indeed, for Cavarero the voice is that which "precedes, generates, and exceeds verbal communication"

(29–30). In this way, remarkably, Cavarero refigures the voice as a presymbolic origin that is both temporally and ontologically prior to signification, as that which is a condition of possibility for signification, and as that which is never exhausted by any signifying speech act as such.

The voice is the expression of one unique, embodied individual to another. This expression, a “reciprocal invocation” founded in the sonorous, rhythmic, and resonant materiality of the voice, constitutes a “duet,” a musical exchange of voices in and through which individuals mutually invoke one another. Cavarero resists inscribing such a relation within the symbolic realm; yet for her this relation is a “wordless language” that takes place in the paradigmatic scene between mother and infant. Here, in this originary scene, there is not yet the movement of language or speech as such, but the rhythm and cadence of demand and response—the voices of mother and infant that invoke one another. Drawing on Hélène Cixous’s and Julia Kristeva’s well-known work on the maternal *chora*, Cavarero demonstrates that the cadence of the “la-la melody” exchanged between mother and infant “configure[s] a reciprocal dependence” (170) that takes a structural form in the movement between demand and response.

For Cavarero, the “scene of infancy” enjoys a primacy: it is both ontologically and chronologically prior to the institution of language and law. The maternal *chora* is figured as that which invisibly underwrites what will be understood as the law of the father—a law that is said to mark the inauguration of language. But if the law of the father is rational and semantic, the maternal should not be conceived as simply irrational and pure sound. For Cavarero, the maternal vocalic demonstrates its own reason through its rhythmic and musical resonance. The mother is therefore not simply the “other” to the “philosophical” father, but is a force in her own right, meaningful on her own terms—and not necessarily destined for speech as such. In the scene between mother and infant, the uniqueness of each existent is constituted and distinguished as a self—a self-in-relation—rather than as the abstract speaking subject of philosophy who refers to himself as “I.” Cavarero therefore deconstructs the traditional philosophical gender binary, and draws on a refigured sense of the maternal to understand both vocalic relationality and the politics she imagines it will foster.

In her critique of Western metaphysics, Cavarero offers us a genealogy of how “logos lost its voice.” Reviving a rhetorical dimension of human life and action, Cavarero’s work promises a more pluralistic and inclusive form of sociopolitical relations. Significantly, she teaches us that any progressive politics will demand that we redeem this voice in its manifold uniqueness *and* plurality. This quite possibly is her most important lesson. She refigures the Aristotelian relation between speech and politics through her discussion of the

vocalic, presenting a vision of politics as a set of radically local interactions in which individuals address one another in their uniqueness. Drawing on the work of Hannah Arendt, she shifts our attention in the political scene from “what” is being said to “who” is speaking. In this shift to “who” is speaking, we find a politics that recognizes the singularity of each human life before the human becomes an abstract category, an identity whose meaning relies on language. The political act is therefore not a matter of fashioning or communicating norms, but instead returns us to the structure of the vocal address itself. Cavarero names the “space” of this voice “the absolute local,” which she describes as “a taking-place of politics that has no predefined borders, nor any fixed or sacred confines. It is not a nation, nor a fatherland, nor a land. . . . It is a relational space that happens with the event of this communication and, together with it, disappears” (204–5). She demonstrates, therefore, that political life is ephemeral; expanding beyond the borders of national identities, it appears only to disappear.

Cavarero’s politics of voice appears within a deep paradox of place. It is understood both as universal and as radically particular. This place, a being “structurally *for* the other” (171), is described as a texture. An embodied form, it appears most clearly in the cadence and rhythm of the mother and child’s “duet”—an exchange Cavarero treats as the paradigm of a politics that enables “a reciprocity of speaking and listening” (175). But it is difficult to excavate the basis of political life from such a scene. Indeed, the “first cry of the infant” is a poor model for political life if we read in such a cry “an invoking life that unknowingly entrusts itself to a voice that responds” (169). While Cavarero eschews the law of the father in favor of the blissful relationality of the maternal *chora*, and while she privileges “the originary bond between mother and child” (171), it is difficult to see how such a model could offer a binding force for political life, a force that would join the one with the many. Her vision presumes that the cries of the infant are met with the response of *the good mother*. Responsive and attentive, the good mother is always already bound by the demands of her infant. If Cavarero is, as she claims to be, not seeking to recuperate this originary moment in a wholesale fashion, then it is unclear how the good mother translates to political relations between strangers. We are left to wonder, first, what constitutes the infant’s cries as destined for her ears, and, second, what obliges the mother to respond.

One of the underlying difficulties is that Cavarero does not fully appreciate Arendt’s complex notion of what it means to appear to another. She treats this relational politics as if we have already arrived on the scene—as if we are already in the movement of demand and response, the event of taking-place. Cavarero construes the “scene of infancy” as “the site of an imaginary that gives us an

opportunity to rethink the maternal link between speech and voice” (180). And although the imaginary and, with it, the aesthetic, are important, she nevertheless begs the structural question of how two unique existents could appear to each other in the first place. The movement of demand and response—figured as resonance and repetition—both expresses *and* constitutes the uniqueness of each individual, as well as their interrelationality. The vocalic structure is rendered, problematically, as both cause *and* effect. Cavarero thus risks supplanting the “absolute local” with the tyranny of the local absolute—a localization that leaves open the question of what occasions political action, and whether politics must always emerge from the traumatic break with the mother.

According to her own terms, what Cavarero offers us is a political vision that is neither “utopian” nor an “ethics of good will.” Unable to account for *how* this relational politics appears or takes place, however, Cavarero’s work opens the question of whether this project can be realized without an ethics, or, more strongly, whether the elision of an ethics does not in fact render it utopian. The occasion of politics in Cavarero’s text seems to be a reaction to a violent event that has been inscribed through and through by the semantic—the insemination of law through the phallogocentric violence of the father. In this case, for Cavarero, the presymbolic will never appear except through both real and symbolic—rather than merely “imaginary”—instantiations in political relations, the occasion for a politics of *ressentiment*. There is then an implicit danger in the utopian temporality of Cavarero’s politics: that, on the one hand, we will hearken back to past origins that never, strictly speaking, occurred, but for which we nevertheless remain nostalgic; or that, on the other hand, we will be thrown forcibly into an inchoate future that is still to-come, and so the occasion for political action will always fail to seize the *kairos* of the here and now.

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