

# Narrative as Action: Paul Ricœur and the Emancipatory Power of Interpretation

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## 1. The Narrative Journey of Comprehension

Self-recognition is at the price of a difficult apprenticeship acquired over the course of a long voyage through these persistent conflicts, whose universality is inseparable from their particular localization, which is, in every instance, unsurpassable. Ricœur<sup>1</sup>

Paul Ricœur's onto-anthropological thesis leading this reflection claims the emergence of oneself as an always singular experience of self-appropriation. Such reflective path is arduous, i.e., it is not the fruit of a sudden position of the subject, but the result of a reflection mediated by the symbolic and cultural plots that determine the reception of oneself. Namely, "The *self* is implied reflexively in the operations, the analyses of which precedes the returns toward this self" (Ricœur, 1992, 18). The ambition of a full and immediate consciousness of oneself without opacities, according to the Cartesian tradition, has been disrupted, as we know, from Nietzsche onwards (Ricœur, 1990, 22), by the philosophies of suspicion and deconstruction, which uncover concealed areas inherent to the subject's way of being. Phenomenology also walks through this demystifying path, which makes a decisive inflection that places the subject in an -open and intentional- relationship with the world and enhances the incarnated and bodily condition of this co-belonging. Authors such as Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Sartre and Heidegger contribute to this task (Guenancia, 2018, 7). The well-known turn of Ricœurian phenomenology in its hermeneutic inflection, developed around the 1950s (Grondin, 2003, 87), responds to the complexities arising from human will and its fallible condition, which cannot be thematized directly and deserves to be deciphered through hermeneutics. Along these lines, the phenomenon of human fallibility is discovered in its affective roots and is interpreted in the language of the symbols and myths of evil. The structures gained in such an analysis yield clues about the possibilities and limits of human action. Ricœur continues the ontological exploration of the fallible human condition, beyond affective fragility and its misery, towards an interpretation of the imaginary potential of the capable man from the 1980s onwards (Ricœur, 1986). This philosophical path still follows the initial objective of searching for the comprehension of oneself. In *Oneself as Another*, Ricœur intensifies this quest with his hermeneutics of the capabilities (the power to say, to act, to narrate and to be self-imputable), which construct the living plot of the acting and suffering human being (Ricœur, 1990, 28). Narrative occupies a relevant existential place among the capacities, since it exercises the threshold function of all ethics (Ricœur, 1990) and, by the same token, constitutes the key interpretative mediation for the thematization of personal identity.

The crucial role of narrative, a key element of this analysis, refers to the imaginative potential of literature as a "true laboratory" where appreciations, evaluations and judgments about the approvals or disapprovals inherent to the action are tested (Ricœur, 1990, 139). Ricœur underlines the clarifying virtues of narrative due to its imaginative variation (Husserlian motto), capable of contributing unprecedented experiences that operate beyond the frontiers of philosophy. From the narrative instance, possibilities are opened up for the recognition of oneself in its identity, i.e., as Ricœur argues: "[...] in many narratives the self seeks its identity on the scale of an entire life..." (Ricœur, 1992, 115). Stories are mediations that forge historical consciousness and possess an indirect revela-

tory potential; they reveal modes of original correlation of oneself with the world and others, only accessible through mimetic imagination. However, the dialectic between selfhood and otherness also raises decisive ontological questions about another dialectic that links activity to passivity. Ricœur contributes from the hermeneutic arena to uncover the opacities inherent to such otherness, through a fine ontology of a triple human passivity, the passivity of one's own body/flesh, the passivity implied by the strange other, and the more intimate passivity of consciousness and its inner voice (Ricœur, 1990, 368). He thus refers to the alterity of the self and the stranger: an alterity that is structural to oneself because of its involuntary, bodily and embodied anchorage, which constitutes its mixed internal condition. Moreover, this otherness refers to its social and political anchorage, where the social institutions of language and intersubjective relations, collective interactions and common learning forge a social and political coexistence, not exempt from tensions and exposed to the conflict of rival interpretations. In this context, the comprehension of oneself and the impossibility of a definite appropriation remains a major challenge for the French philosopher, since it is rather a question of a continuous birth of oneself that crosses these dialectically interconnected poles of social belonging and personal identity.

On the other hand, the existential character of this experience of "self-narrative", inherent to the process of *giving an account of oneself*, speaking in Butler's terms (2012, 25), confronts us with the responsibility of self-recognition. This process comes from the need to distinguish the imposition of more or less explicit restrictive norms, rooted in our dependence on the social and political world. "In such a sense, narrative capacity stands as a precondition for giving an account of oneself and assuming responsibility for one's actions through that medium" (Butler, 2012, 25). From an existential ontological stance, the possibilities of emancipation of subjectivity start from the thrownness condition belonging to an unchosen facticity. (Heidegger, 1984, 175). Existence is experienced on this level as a burden, that is, as a demand to *have to be* and *keep* existing as a nondelegable task. To this burden we may add the ethical weight of being responsible for putting together an identity that is forged narratively and choosing its adhesion or rejection to the constituted world embedded in this new plot. Ricœur's hermeneutic-narrative approach relies on the possibility of plotting one's own story in order for personal and collective identity to emerge, favoring certain coherence in the midst of life's discordancy. However, this coherence is culturally anchored in tradition, which determines the limited possibilities of interpretation of each time. The problem caused by this involves the possibility of distancing required to free oneself from the unreflective belonging to tradition and even more, to respond to the emancipatory will of action. The hermeneutic tension between distancing from and belonging to tradition, between tradition and a critique of ideologies, long discussed by Gadamer and Habermas (Grondin, 2008, 97), places Ricœur as an intermediary. On the one hand, he subscribes to the confidence in the hermeneutic reading of the "naïve" or amplifying consciousness of the sense, which bases its exploration on the possibility of interpreting sense. On the other hand, he adheres to the vigilant and critical attitude of ideologies in their objectifying aspect, which warns against the power of ideologization or domination that conceals any convention (Grondin, 2008, 114). At the same time, Ricœur's diacritical hermeneutics (Kearney, 2004, 205), that is to say, his confident, open yet not naïve attitude towards the irreducible and decisive relationship with otherness, constitutes, in my opinion, a proposal that develops a virtuous bridge between philosophy and literature. The story as an act of the imagination is the bearer of new world proposals that widen one's own understanding and determine what Ricœur calls *narrative intelligence* (Ricœur, 2008, 261), which is closer to practical wisdom than to the theoretical use of reason. This clarifying *mimesis* of narratives of universal aspects of human action is, likewise, a pathway to one's own identity, since the power of narrative builds a passage to oneself, to temporality, to language, to action and life itself. In short, we connect with our own story through narratives, we remember it and we can transform it by unveiling the invisible symbolic obstacles of comprehension ruling our historical consciousness.

Reminiscing is in a sense a form of intellectual effort that we call memory, even more fundamentally a way of gathering, of continuing ourselves, in order to acquire this identity we can call narrative identity. (Ricœur, 2002, 13).

Personal identity is the fruit of a path of appropriation of oneself, as we said at the beginning of this chapter. The narrative component is part of this process of self-comprehension or, as Ricœur states, identity is narrative. To conclude this part, I rely on the thesis developed by Ricœur in his narrative theory of the *threefold mimesis* focusing mainly on *refiguration* (Ricœur, 1983, 144). This represents the culminating step in the creative process of narration. It is time for the reader or spectator to intervene, to put into action the receptive appropriation of the *world* proposed by the text, i.e., his or her capacity to model the experience. Refiguration is of fundamental importance for the reading hypothesis we are developing in this analysis, since, according to Ricœur, the reader appropriates or internalizes the proposal of the text, that which *speaks* in the text. In doing so, the possibility of widening one's own world is opened, because in this act the closure or fulfillment of the creative process carried out by every authentic narration is fully realized (Ricœur, 1985, 171). Analogically, something similar occurs with the idea of *katharsis* in tragedy, following the *Poetics* of Aristotle, since this purifying moment allows the spectators to end the tragic staging through an aesthetic, that is, poetic, experience of the feelings of compassion and dread, allowing them to understand the plot and live it *as if* it were "real". This hermeneutic transposition allows us to integrate the mimesis of the story into our own and through this operation we are able to cognize and recognize ourselves. Finally, *katharsis* has a political dimension since it "instructs" men on the depths of the passions constituting the chaotic human bonds that run through the life of the polis. Ultimately, *katharsis* reveals an "[...] elaboration of this "foundational disorder", not its domestication, let alone its eradication" (Revault d'Allones, 2010, 112).

Next, I will show the scope of the narrative refiguration of personal identity through the analysis of an exemplary tragic tale, *Antigone*, analyzed by Ricœur in *Oneself as Another*, giving some counterpoints from Adriana Cavarero's feminist interpretation.

## 2. The Modeling Power of the Story: Antigone

Ricœur insists on the importance of a regulated and non-arbitrary interpretation, since the act of poetic configuration –Ricœur's inspirational model– is arbitrated by a plot that gathers discontinuous episodes. Moreover, the plot folds the inconsistencies which constitute the human experience of an eventful life in a certain concordance or emplotment: the '*mythos* in Aristotelian terms or the *intrigue* in Ricœurian speech (Ricœur, 1990, 168–169). Narrative thus responds to a configurative logic that bears witness with mimetic, that is, imaginative, verisimilitude to those characters that describe agents as protagonists of their action. Ricœur's thesis about tragic wisdom and its power of indirect instruction of sensible action has been beautifully exposed in *Oneself as Another* in his Ninth Study (1990, 290), with his analysis of Antigone, Sophocles' tragedy<sup>2</sup>. Ricœur's analysis in that interlude evaluates the profound meaning of the complex conflict regarding human life expressed in the poetic register (Ricœur, 1990, 290), from the point of view of its power to broaden the ethical reflection regarding action. Considering this purpose, Antigone represents an exemplary universal story about the contradictions that crown human existence, opposing irreconcilable forces that produce terrible outcomes, in which there is no good solution but a most valuable teaching that only yields consolation afterwards. Ricœur's interpretation does not elaborate on the specifying elements of gender differences that could explain the intention of the protagonists or their cultural biases, it throws nonetheless certain clues on the contradictions of the social, moral and political levels that can be productive for the present analysis.

To synthesize the well-known plot of the play, this tragedy confronts Creon, the ruler of Thebes, who must bury Eteocles with honors and punish his brother, Polynices, depriving him of a burial

(both brothers murdered each other). Polynices goes from friend to enemy for his betrayal of the city, and the posthumous punishment will be to leave his body exposed to the open winds to become food for the beasts, to obey the laws that guide political justice. However, this punishment violates the unwritten, eternal, divine laws of the fraternal obligation to bury a relative. Antigone, sister of the convicted, is sentenced to the death penalty for rebelling against the laws of the city and obeying the unwritten laws of family loyalty. She cannot but comply with the subterranean funeral laws that appeal to another immutable justice, beyond Zeus and whose mandate is fraternity. Antigone is discovered in the funeral rites of her brother and Creon sentences her to be buried alive. To make the plot more dramatic, her fiancé, Hemon, Creon's youngest son, pleads with his father to remove the punishment and come to his senses, but none of this happens and he commits suicide next to his beloved. When his mother discovers the tragedy, she commits suicide inside the king's palace. Creon belatedly discovers the tragic outcome, the loss of his wife and son, all as a consequence of his tyrannical and reckless action and his lack of clemency.

This tragedy exhibits a conflict between horizontal and vertical, political, religious and family orders that intersect. The transcendent level of divine laws responds to the mythical origin of the laws of the polis, which orders the ruler to comply with the common good. On this same status, Antigone is obliged to comply with the laws of the gods beyond the grave which impose the fulfillment of the funeral rites of mortals. On the horizontal level of political life, Antigone puts forward a moral quality of *philia* that expresses piety as an affective bond and reveals the insufficiency of the civic bond as the only criterion, wielded by Creon, for the relationship between rulers and ruled, bringing to light the limited human character of earthly institutions (Ricœur, 1990, 284).

It is remarkable, however, that Ricœur favors Antigone, despite acknowledging, following Nussbaum (2002), the inhumanity of her radical decision, due to the painful consequences for those left behind after her death. Ricœur tries to explain his position by reasoning about the factors that incline him, some of which are worth mentioning: "Is it the woman's vulnerability in her that moves us? Is it because, as an extreme figure of nonviolence in the face of power, she alone has done no violence to anyone? Is it because her sisterhood reveals a quality of *philia* that is not altered by eros?" (Ricœur, 1992, 245). These questions reveal an empathy that hints at a consideration that goes beyond the logical level of analysis and appeals to considerations of an affective order. That is to say, it exhibits a tacit level of valuation of the affective domain, not explicitly developed by Ricœur's analysis, which is rooted in cultural and social factors. These determine the roles and consequently the difficult choices of the protagonists, as embodied and fragile actors, victims of a cruel fate, who stir our own affective capacities of compassion for their suffering, beyond the agonistic character of human action reflected in the play. Likewise, Ricœur analyzes the inadequacy of Hegelian analyses in a charitable but no less firm way, by showing the fragility of Hegel's solution in the face of the tension of contradictions. In order to overcome contradictions on a higher scale of realization, Hegel places this way out on the level of the dialectic of overcoming (*Aufhebung*) of the powers of the spirit, subject in their genesis to passing through the stages of unilaterality of human character. (Ricœur, 1990, 288). In my opinion, Ricœur digs out an even deeper paradox, which refers to the inevitable conflict of moral principles confronted with the complexity of the ethical meaning of life. This complexity is exposed in social evaluations, in the considerations of justice and equity distributed on opposite and irreconcilable levels, which fall into the "ruinous alternative of univocity or arbitrariness" (Ricœur, 1990, 290).

Following this thread of thought, Ricœur underlines the rigid distribution of moral estimations and social roles, which impoverish the capacity for a more inclusive dialectic of the human variables of life. This determines antagonistic, incompatible points of view, which leave out the possibility for the political to broaden the virtues that govern it, to combine political justice with affective and family justice, giving a more tinged and complementary place to the affections. Such affectivity influences not only private but also political decisions, but also motives or reasons of action on whose extreme polarity many deeply rooted values of our western culture have been built.

Ricœur questions the possibility of eradicating conflict from human life, and in this we see the instructive function of tragedy, for the story operates with a pre-moral “logic” that builds the plot of the action without taking moral sides, for or against the heroes, since they cannot be judged with a single criterion. Since in tragic *mimesis*, unlike ethical reflection, deliberate decisions are mixed with the obligations that come from destiny, this ambiguity allows the chorus and spectators to feel the compassion proper to *katharsis*. That is to say, a deep sense of tragic wisdom lies in showing the reversible dimension of agent and patient that determines the heroes; a constitutive fragility of the passions, which cloud the action and trigger painful experiences of suffering despite the good intentions of the protagonists.

In this perspective, the hermeneutics of oneself draws key notions from the pheno-menology of capacities that allow Ricœur to go beyond the scenario of fallibility by finding segments of clarity “favorable” to the understanding of the action symbolized in Antigone’s decision.

To conclude, I will take a key concept from Ricœur’s hermeneutic phenomenology of capacities that refers to the ethical character of ipseity. Personal identity as the ontological core of the responsive capacity of oneself, schematizes the highest power of attestation of oneself in the compliance of a promise, which designates the confidence of humans in being or not being able to do or act. The attestation tests the approval of the other, who depose the suspicion and encourages the agent’s own confidence, attesting oneself by remaining faithful to the given word. Antigone shows the most hyperbolic dimension of ipseity in its ethical capacity for solicitude. The sacrifice of one’s own life is the radical point of the human response to the other’s request. Here the fraternal bond is the symbol of this unwritten promise to bury the body of the diseased brother. This obedience or compliance exhibits an ipseity that has a “supra-rational” mandate, that is to say, an ethical adhesion whose anchorage is affective and is subject to laws of a supra-political order, to an *eros* that arises from a vertical axis. This decision combines elements of an affectivity whose wisdom comes from a source of solidarity or respect for the other that transcends the horizontal norms of political life. This separation of the rational and affective domains, of political and fully rational life and the private sphere of life, feminine, domestic, family, is also a mark of Western culture, as we will see below with Cavarero. A second element that integrates this analysis of Antigone’s decision refers to *courage*, as a symbolic Ricœurian concept to the ontological sense of elevated human passion.

The Platonic *thymós*, which has served as the basis of Ricœur’s analysis, is registered in a hermeneutic key, but without ignoring that Sophocles is pre-Platonic and does not carry the latter’s separatist dualism of body and soul. With this reservation, for Ricœur the role that the *thymós* has is clarifying as an emblematic passion of the heart, which can be identified with courage, i.e., the express representation of the affective anchoring of one’s own decision in human action. One could interpret the strength of the conviction that guides Antigone’s action in a Ricœurian code as a response to tragic wisdom. The sister accepts the sacrifice of her own love for the love of her brother, responding to the call of the heart she cannot refuse, keeping the promise to bury her beloved sibling. This conviction is not only anchored in reason, since the force that keeps her in the sacrifice of her own life is not blind, but it is strengthened by the courage which responds to a non-renounceable promise. Then, more than obedience to a cause, it is the command of the heart.

### 3. The Feminist Reading and its Emancipatory Force

The conflict exposed in *Antigone*, as shown, derives from the obedience to conflicting orders, where the protagonists are thrown by fate into circumstances they have not chosen and which force them to make decisions whose terrible consequences are irreversible (Ricœur, 1990, 281). A more penetrating reading of this story in ethical-political terms is achieved from a feminist point of view, complementary to the preceding analysis. The perspective that guides me is inspired by the hermeneutics of inclination developed by Adriana Cavarero (2014) as a counterpoint to a logic of power

based on war and domination. In order to narrow down a much more complex topic –that could be extended uncontrollably– I will address only two points of her analysis<sup>3</sup>. The first refers to the symbolic place given to the body by Sophocles in *Antigone* and the absent mention of the human soul, as an anomaly that distinguishes itself from the worldview of the burial rites related to the final journey of the souls, described from Homer to Plato. Namely, “On the hermeneutic plane of evidence, *Antigone* seems to express this problem in a strikingly absent psyche, thus in an unusually central body that, given the psyche’s absence, can function onstage as absolute symbol.” (Cavarero, 2002, 18). We will see below some of the implications of this vision that favors corporeality presented by Sophocles. The second point, linked to the previous argument, refers to the configuration of political life that exhibits the separation of the rational and affective spheres, which Sophocles registers in this tragic worldview. This division exhibits a separation of worlds that do not intersect, of roles that are separated, of external and internal human spheres that do unify. An ontology of separation and polarity that even marks the territories, places, the possibilities of action, as a background for assigning roles through categories of gender and power that delimit the human being and describe its borders. Let us look at both points in more detail.

### a. The Symbolic Centralism of the Body

In Cavarero’s view, synthesizing much of her analysis, in the ancient Homeric world, conscious life is rooted in the body and its materiality by virtue of which we identify ourselves as persons with a name and a history. That is, our existence is this corporeality that dissolves with the disappearance of the body.

“A bit of this conscious history returns to the bloodless ethereal simulacrum only. Through drinking the eminently corporeal, and therefore vital, matter of warm blood. In short, life consciousness, and self-identity in the Homeric universe are bound within a corporeality that will come to refer to a simple constellation of meaning, one that encompasses, at its margin, also the psyche.” (Cavarero, 2002, 20)

This archaic conception that situates the body within the dimension of existence undergoes an inflection in the classical era (Cavarero, 2002, 21). Through several myths, Plato sublimely describes this displacement that loses the localized side of bodily existence and entrusts the most decisive role to the soul. Following Cavarero, this displacement opens an estrangement of our bodily and sensitive anchorage, and the bodily experience is thus charged by a negativity that leaves indelible traces in Western culture. This vision inaugurates a dichotomy between “[...] a disincarnated persistence of the self and a contingent flesh tormented by death” (Cavarero, 2002, 21). In this perspective, only the soul is immortal and acquires a sense of indisputable transcendence. Returning to *Antigone*, the dispute between the two main characters, *Antigone* and *Creon*, is related to the body – or rather: the body is the symbol of the problem and affects these two orders of the polis (*Creon*) and the family (*Antigone*). This question offers more complex issues as well, such as the bonds of consanguinity and incest (Cavarero, 2002, 25), which we will not address here. Here, at least, we need to imagine, making a variation “in the style of Husserlian eidetics”, – as proposed by Ricœur in his analysis of affective fragility (2009, 198) –, an origin of the bodily, or embodied, existential experience, which restores the carnal dignity of the affective. This makes it possible to integrate the human actions of affective experience as expressions of care and veneration with their own existential nobility<sup>4</sup>. In this perspective, *Antigone*’s decision can be interpreted not only as the fruit of an obedience to divine law, but as the expression of an ethical mandate that responds to the care of oneself, of the other and of the bonds that are rooted in a symbolic and real experience of respect for the body<sup>5</sup>. The vulnerability of the body, its exposed being, from birth to death is affectively revealed to us. Ricœur states “[...] affectivity reveals my bodily existence as the other pole of all heavy and dense existence in the world. In other words, it is through feeling that one’s own body belongs to the subjectivity of the cogito” (Ricœur, 2009, 118).

To draw the corollary of this attempt at interpretation, I turn to the second focus of the analysis, in which the hermeneutics of Cavarero's aforementioned inclination is outlined. Sophocles' tragedy refers to a world before Plato in which *hybris* displays its powers of attraction/repulsion of evil, expressed by the Greek concept of *deinon* (Revault d'Allones, 2010, 91), which brings together the admirable and terrifying passions in unison. The actions of Antigone and Creon are inscribed in this contraposition. The separation of orders of political and family life does not only respond to a political expression but expresses the ethical dimension that sustains interhuman ties. The value of bravery, war and the defense of the State coexists with other values that allude to more horizontal relations of solicitude. In this way, Cavarero brings a critical view of the agonistic values that found the relations of modern individualism, which is forged on this logic of struggle between human beings, in the style of Hobbes' political philosophy<sup>6</sup>. An opposite reading of the experience of destitution described by the Hobbesian state of nature, could exhibit another matrix of symbolic interpretation derived not from egoism, but from trust. A trust that is determined by an affective receptivity born of the human precariousness.

Cavarero proposes a notion of relationality that has a bodily or spatial anchorage, in a non-geometric sense, and based no longer on the simple exposure of one to the other on an ideal level of horizontality or reciprocity, but rather, as she points out "[...] a scene of dependence, as is that of natality, which instead foresees an unbalanced, structurally asymmetrical relationship between its two protagonists" (Cavarero, 2014, 33). A significant point is the fact that it proceeds from an a-topic stance, in other words, it arises neither as an opposition to the logic of selfish competition, nor as a recovery of a relationship of simple horizontal reciprocity. Instead, it examines another form of "spatial geometry" that recovers the possibility of dissymmetry in human ties as nourishing and fundamental. Subjection to others exhibits a "virtuous" dependence that has its anchor in our fragile and exposed body and alludes, like Sophocles in *Antigone*, to the existential destitution that conditions our vulnerable existence from birth to death. This subversion of the ethical parameter of correspondence, revealed by Cavarero (2014, 33), offers an ethics of cooperation based on the reversible passivity of agents, dethroning the perspective of autonomy from its privileged position.

On the other hand, Lévinas can be a referent of the master of justice, which Ricœur interprets, when he reverses the roles between a powerful and compassionate self and a destitute other who becomes a master of justice (Ricœur, 1990, 379). The "geometry" that intersects the levels of horizontality and verticality is present in Ricœur as an expression of the overabundance of response in the Christian model of *agape*, developed in *The Course of Recognition* (2004, 345). The bond of mutuality is the only one that superimposes itself on the relation of measurable reciprocity, implicit in all ethics. The category of the solicitude can widen its scope of exercise when there is a "suspension" of the measure of equivalence, which does not imply forgetting the dissymmetry forged by a consented imbalance between demand and response, but instead accepting it as overabundance (Ricœur, 2004, 354). This openness to the *poetics of agape* is an alternative, but it does not exclude the *prose of justice* intrinsic in the model of reciprocity, nor does it in any way discount its merit, which is indispensable in political life (Ricœur, 2004, 348). Rather, it places the bonds of human interdependence in a supra-ethical framework based on the dialectic of the overabundance of love.

The positive effect of this logic, to end this roundabout and recover Cavarero again, does not cultivate the other's destitution as the advantage of a struggle for recognition. The loving bond of the newborn and the mother, for example, does not annul the need of both parties, one determining the other in a circle of mutual dependence. The mother's unmeasured self-giving is aroused by the disproportion of the parties, the destitution of the fragile and the obligatory responsibility of the receiver. Moreover, Butler recovers this capacity to feel obligation towards others, expressed by Ricœur in an exemplary way in his phenomenology of capabilities, in the condition of *receptivity* inherent to human fragility. She states, "According to this perspective of ethical obligation, receptivity is not only a precondition for action, but one of its foundational features" (Butler, 2014, 54).

### b. A *Geometry of Inclination*

Returning to Cavarero, her interpretation can remarkably support the preceding analyses of Antigone with her hermeneutics of inclination. Expression does not refer, as is evident, to an objective spatiality, but rather develops a critique of the vertical, self-founded, independent and unconnected subject, representative of the free and autonomous self of modernity – nicely represented by Hobbes, Kant, Canetti, Schmitt (Cavarero, 2014, 23). The logic of dominance and its meaning of virility are expressed in the airy, erect posture of the capable subject as warrior. Exploring there a second signification, she underlines the meaning of *wound*, which comes from the Latin *vulnus*<sup>7</sup>, no longer as an expression of the violent blow delivered in the scene of the fight, in the “conceptual chain of wound, death, murder” (2014, 27). Cavarero develops her analysis of the essential nakedness of the human, of the wound as a sign of the exposed skin, of defenseless, that is, without weapons. The wounded human being becomes the archetype of the exposed body, replacing the virility of the warrior with a hirsute body. This interpretation does not fail to suggest parallels with the character of Antigone and her attitude of inclination and reverence towards the deadly wounded body of her brother.

The inclination can be illustrated by the image of the Madonna in the scene of the mother bending over the child. Cavarero refers to two words to make up this hermeneutic, *inermis* and *inclinatio*. The first means “unarmed”, which interpreted in the key of inclination and not of verticality, does not mean “without the possibility of defending oneself”, but rather refers to the impossibility of offending or hurting. Antigone finds herself in this position, as Ricœur emphasizes and as we have seen. She is not capable of any violence and can only exercise her action as resistance through the ritual act of her brother’s burial. The inclination refers back, following a suggestive semantic exploration, to a spatial stance, retrieved from Arendt: “[...]every inclination tends outward, it leans out off the self” (Cavarero, 2014, 34). Namely, the scene of the maternal relationship illustrates the responsible self, that which turns outside of itself by its “leaning out” to the outside, by the exit of its own self, by its inclination to the other that questions it. From this perspective, the polarized tension between verticality and horizontality, between wounding and healing, is displaced, considering its structural presupposition of decentralization. Inclination refers to: “[...] the postural archetype of an ethical subjectivity already predisposed, or rather, ready to respond to the dependence and exposure of the naked and defenseless creature” (Cavarero, 2014, 36).

### Conclusion

Poetics finds an ethical fecundity in the common idea of *receptivity*. It can be understood as an affective *attitude* that exhibits inclination as a loving gesture of veneration and care. The same care for the dead that Antigone is forbidden to perform. Her rebellion is, on the other hand, a response of courage, refusing the laws imposed by the ruler, and conscious to the inclination of the request: she gathers in the same act the adhesion to the irrecusable and the rebellion towards the intolerable. The instruction that tragic wisdom provides has a high cost that cannot be ignored by practical wisdom. We deal with the difficult crossroads of accepting one’s own convictions and the risky costs of the will’s yielding to unwaiverable forces. The inclination as an incitement to trust rescues a model of ethical response that legitimizes the acceptance of an interpellation that inclines us, that *touches* and strips us of our verticality. It is a hermeneutic that offers a spatial grammar based on the primordial loving bond. This pole of inclination is what Cavarero’s double reading offers with the image of the Madonna in art, and which in my opinion finds echoes in Ricœur’s notion of solicitude, whose affective basis is also a significant element of his ethical proposal. Inclination as a gesture of surrender, of disarmament, according to Cavarero, allows us to think of an intersection between philosophy and literature. In this line, the poetics of inclination find echoes in the ethics of consent. The emancipating force of the story provokes a widening of the sense of ethical equivalence, by exhibiting an interpellation that inclines us with another kind of obligation that comes from feeling-with, a *consent* to the request of the other by an affective spring of acting. Poetics, and this is the point of an

imperfect but productive intersection with ethics, delves into the deepest dimension of caring whose powers overflow direct reflection, while ethics channels that undecipherable *deinon* through *phronesis* that gives courage a more lasting orientation.

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### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Paul Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey, Chicago: UC Press, 1992. p. 243.
- <sup>2</sup> Antigone has elicited innumerable analyses and commentaries in every century, which exhibit her emblematic character to represent the tragic human conflict and the irreconcilable laws raised by human existence. Cf. my book, *Practical wisdom in the ethics of Paul Ricœur* (2012), §13, p. 274.
- <sup>3</sup> Adriana Cavarero delivers a thorough study to the question of the body and its symbolic dimension, not only in this tragedy by Sophocles, but in the broader cultural vision of Greek tradition. Cf. Cavarero (2002).
- <sup>4</sup> For a detailed analysis of the distinction between body and flesh in Ricœur, cf. David-Le-Duc Tiaha (2009).
- <sup>5</sup> Here I follow Judith Butler and her rehabilitation of the body and its ethical-political dimension. Namely, “[...] ethical demands arise from bodily life *per se*, a bodily life that is not always unequivocally human... If we try to understand in concrete terms what it means to commit ourselves to preserving the life of the other, we are invariably confronted with the bodily conditions of existence, and thus committed not only to the bodily persistence of the other but to all those environmental conditions that make life viable.” (Butler, 2014), 72.
- <sup>6</sup> Some of the ideas I develop below have been reworked, and were raised at Atelier Paris, *Fonds Ricœur* and EHESS in April 2021.
- <sup>7</sup> “Vulnerability, if we do not want to neglect its dominant etymon, is still an index of the wound, but it is now plausible that the obverse of this wound is the caress...”, (Cavarero, 2014), 27.

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