The Souls Whose Tales We Tell, Or, Education in Death

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Introduction

A man, who lived by a pond, was awakened one night by a great noise. He went out into the night and headed for the pond, but in the darkness, running up and down, back and forth, guided only by the noise, he stumbled and fell repeatedly. At last, he found a leak in the dike, from which water and fish were escaping. He set to work plugging the leak and only when he finished went back to bed. The next morning, looking out of the window, he saw with surprise that his footprints had traced the figure of a stork on the ground.

At this point Karen Blixen asks herself: 'When the design of my life is complete, will I see, or will others see a stork?' We might add: does the course of every life allow itself be looked upon in the end like a design that has a meaning?

Thus begins Adriana Cavarero’s exploration of a relational ontology populated by narratable selves whose lives are oriented from others—that is to say, relational from birth—rather than towards death. Yet, as we know, each and every person does in fact die, regardless of whether one imagines them to be relationally unique, as liberal individuals, or as some third option. So what does Cavarero’s orientation toward natality and relationality have to offer readers in relation to questions of death and dying, and what educational contribution might her orientation make in this regard?

I seek to answer this question by first briefly sketching my interpretation of Cavarero’s relational ontology. Then I turn to two theorists, Lisa Guenther and Alison Stone, who take up Cavarero’s work specifically to consider how her relational ontology might shift our understanding of death. Third, I offer my own reading of the relationality of death in Cavarero’s work through the example of a man named Joseph E. Ledden and his wife, my Aunt Mil. Their relationship complicates the idea that death, from a relational perspective, should be seen as an (abrupt) event and instead allows for the consideration of death as marking the end to a protagonist but not the end to the story of his or her life-story. I argue that, seen in this way, a relational view of death is eminently educational because it entails the possibility of a story, absent its protagonist, which can be passed on and therefore continue to come into the world.

Cavarero’s Relational Ontology
Cavarero’s relational ontology has its roots in Italian feminism, and especially in the feminist re-reading of Hannah Arendt undertaken by the women’s group Diotima. Concretizing Arendt’s notion of natality as constitutive of politics, Cavarero rejects Arendt’s abstraction of natality from the physical process of being born. Instead, for Cavarero (and to borrow a phrase from Guenther), each person’s uniqueness “comes-from-others” quite literally, in being born by a mother. Through this move, Cavarero also radicalizes Arendt’s perspective that the human condition is natal before being mortal. In Cavarero’s view, by remembering that the embodied unity of each person does not spring from nothingness but rather comes into the world relationally, philosophy can be rethought with an orientation from birth rather than towards death. As she describes it,

it is one thing to describe humans as finite, or destined to die. It is quite another to describe their finitude as a sense of being brought into the world as a result of a mother’s decision . . . . Indeed, in this case finitude is the particular and determined ‘here and now’ of my own existence. It involves everything that is accidental (but in fact irreversible) in finding myself to be the way I am.

For Cavarero, the temporariness and finitude of life is linked to having been brought into the world from a mother (and, as Stone points out, by a father as well) as a unique corporeal whole who, prior to birth, did not exist and whose life is unrepeatable. The process of having been given birth to is irreversible such that the life of the existent must take place in the particular here and now into which he or she has been born. Because he or she has been born from a mother (and father), the unique existence that has been given is immediately relational.

Not only does Cavarero understand the condition of coming into being as immediately relational, but, following Arendt, the human condition is relational as well. Each unique existent is understood as a whole of mind and body, with a face, a name, and a life story which, in relation, exposes who someone is rather than merely what he or she can be described as. This ontological status of the who is “totally external,” and is necessarily relational in that it requires an other to appear. Plurality and relationality thus are not contrary to uniqueness, but prerequisites for its appearance. Appearing as unique in this sense is neither reflective nor does it involve the dialectical recognition of the you in myself. Rather, it is an uncontrollable exposure of a “you that is truly an other” whose story, no matter the similarities, is never my story. Further, unique existents are political in their relational desire for their story to be told by
an()other. In this way, Cavarero conceives of unique existents as political not insofar as their stories are narrated (à la the Arendtian hero) but insofar as they are desired. Unique existence is therefore characterized as being a “narratable self,” by the desire to hear the tale in which the figure of oneself as protagonist is exposed.

This desire for narratability is echoed by Karen Blixen’s question, quoted above: ‘When the design of my life is complete, will I see, or will others see a stork?’ The figure, of course, need not be a stork. Nor does one’s life need to be complete for the figure of one’s life-story to be drawn, one’s tale told. One’s tale can be told as a unity at any point in the story, though it can never be rendered as the totality of the self. This is because of both the relational dependence of the life-story’s narratability and because the complete story, from birth to death represents “the lifetime that death cuts off” but not the fullness of the tale.

Interpreting Death via Cavarero’s Relational Ontology

Being-from-others: Inheritance

Lisa Guenther, in an essay aptly subtitled “Reading Heidegger After Cavarero,” contrasts Martin Heidegger’s account of Dasein as a Being-toward-death with what she terms Cavarero’s Being-from-others. Guenther’s task, she tells us, involves choosing what she will inherit from Heidegger, just as Cavarero seems to have chosen what to inherit from Arendt. Inheritance, in fact, is the key point Guenther contests in reading Heidegger’s account of existence after Cavarero. Whereas, “Heidegger is not very interested in what happens to Dasein after death,” Guenther is concerned with what she calls “the material conditions of inheritance:” what happens to her body, her belongings, her offspring?

In considering the materiality of inheritance, Guenther maintains, with Heidegger, the solitariness of death, but not that this event marks the completion of existence. Instead, she distinguishes between the paternal tradition of inheritance she finds in Heidegger, a tradition “in which the son must claim the father’s legacy as his own in order to receive it properly,” and the maternal inheritance she reads in Cavarero’s description of the gift of birth.

This maternal gift, Guenther argues, “forms the fundamental condition of all other forms of inheritance or even existence,” and thus requires a re-consideration of existence and death to include it. Thought through the maternal gift, the material conditions of inheritance, at least, are often given rather than chosen. A person can give instructions as to how she would like her body
to be interred and her funeral to proceed. Both before and after death, a person can give away his possessions and designate the distribution of his estate. Yet for someone else to inherit this legacy, the giver must also be lost. Inheritance, in this sense, like birth, can never be returned, but only passed down, “in a new generation of giving.”

The requirement of loss which accompanies inheritance involves an irreplaceable sacrifice (one must die for oneself) but also leaves a remainder. There is always something left behind by life, even if only a lifeless body. This remainder represents, for Guenther, a final exposure of the existent, intersubjective in ways that he or she can neither choose nor control, but which constitutes an aspect of Being-with-others. Even while the unity of the body begins “to dissolve,” this does not compromise the singularity of the life it once (literally) embodied and which continues to be narrated by other existents. What does change is that the dissolving body no longer involves a someone, but rather what Guenther calls a “disindividualization” or a “dehumanizing” of that material space. Death, as the primitive phenomenon of the dispersal of the embodied existent, is thus a neutral event. It neither individualizes the existent in time nor serves as the measure of a life—as that measure is linked to the existent’s relational condition from birth, rather than to the final event of his or her death. In this view, as Guenther writes, “death is not just an end for me but also a transformation and partial continuation of my particular relation to the world, at least in those respects that touch upon the Dasein of others.”

In my view, this refocusing of death as a transformation of a relation to the world for those who go on living, rather than simply as the extinguishing of one’s own singular relation, is important because it opens up an educational possibility within a relational view of death. I return to this point below, after bringing in Alison Stone’s position as a contrast to Guenther’s.

**Webs of Relations: The sociality of death**

Stone, in her reading of Cavarero, disagrees with Guenther that a relational death is a neutral event, arguing instead that it is something to be feared. She takes a critical view of the approach to death she reads in Cavarero, and argues for her own relational conception of death, based on Cavarero’s orientation from birth. Reacting to Cavarero’s impersonal, or dehumanizing, as Guenther described it above, description of death, Stone desires to “reconceive death as relational rather than exclusively either personal or impersonal.” Here I will attend to
Stone’s birth-oriented, Cavarero-inspired relational view of death, rather than her critique of the discrepancies she sees in Cavarero’s framings of birth and death.

Stone reads Cavarero’s relational ontology in what she calls a strong sense, as describing singular beings as *constituted* by relations, both interpersonally and sub-personally. This reading is distinct from a possible weaker reading of Cavarero’s relational ontology as merely interpersonal, e.g., as conceiving of singular existents as relational in that interpersonal relationships constitute the *meaning* of singular actions and lives. In the strong reading Stone proposes, each person is the singular concrescence of a particular, unique, web of relations with others, rather than merely having the meaning of their lives exposed via the relations they are in. Each person *is* only, in this sense, the embodied design, the “stork,” that their unique collectivity of others sees of his or her life, with no interiority.

As she summarizes her understanding of the consequences of this relational view,

If someone’s birth is their entrance into a shared world with others, then their death must equally be their irreversible departure from this *shared* world. The significance of someone’s death to the extent that they anticipate it, then, is not that they will cease to be there as such, but that they will cease to be there with these others.

What is to be feared, in Stone’s view, is the anticipated loss of relational contact with our particular others. For Stone, this fear is personal to the self, and the loss of contact is abrupt. In other words, the webs of relations by which each unique person is constituted are in some sense fixed. Once my *self* no longer is, my web of relations disappears. Thus, in Stone’s view (and, it seems to me, tautologically), it seems that not only are singular beings the concrescence of a unique web of relations, but that singular beings also constitute that unique web such that when a person no longer embodies his or her web it ceases to exist (this is a view I challenge, below). Because of the singular and constitutive importance of one’s unique web of relations, Stone argues that death is experienced (and anticipated) not solitarily but socially. In other words, because a self is constitutively relational, when a person dies, an aspect of everyone else in that person’s web of relations also dies.

As Stone frames this relational view, when I die, each story I have told of another person, the uniqueness I have exposed in my relations with others, also ceases to exist. And since each person is constituted by these stories, their loss is more than metaphorical; in some way the bereaved loses a constitutive dimension of his or her existence, too. In this sense, Stone writes,
it is always “we who die: a death shared, communal, collective.”\textsuperscript{43} At the same time, there is obviously a difference of scale here. While the bereaved loses a part of her self, the deceased’s self comes to an end.\textsuperscript{44} Stone seems to draw an inverse conclusion to the one Guenther drew, above. Death \textit{does} involve the end of existence, but it is social rather than solitary. Death, on this relational view, becomes a segue, a loss of a particular web of relations, such that persons “exist less the more we are bereaved.”\textsuperscript{45} And, precisely because death involves a relational loss, it is to be feared. It is to be feared for the loss of the embodied singularity who ceases to be, for the loss of the shared history of his or her unique web of relations, and for the partial loss of each person entwined in that web.\textsuperscript{46}

\textbf{Being-From-Others, Webs of Relations, and Aunt Mil}

Against these two readings of a Cavarero-inspired relational view of death, I would like to introduce two figures, whom I invite you to call my Uncle Joe and Aunt Mil. My Aunt Mil (Millie as she was known to friends), was a crossword puzzle enthusiast, a Yankees fan, a rare books librarian in the SUNY system, and the most independent woman I have ever known. At the same time, Aunt Mil chose to present herself publicly as Mrs. Joseph E. Ledden, inviting questions about who Uncle Joe was and offering others to come to know him.

Shortly after Aunt Mil died, my brother and I had a disagreement about Uncle Joe. He was a pianist, my brother insisted. No, I’m sure he was a philosopher, I maintained. We were both right. Joseph E. Ledden, as I know him, was an accomplished pianist and an Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Mount Holyoke. He was an analytic philosopher and a positivist, and “a teacher who gladly taught.”\textsuperscript{47} In the spring of 1948 he died, in the home where he regularly entertained students, of a heart attack caused by a birth defect. He was 27, and he had given a piano concert earlier that evening. His wife, my Aunt Mil, had just turned 28.

In a sense, my Aunt Mil lived \textit{for} Uncle Joe; carrying him with her, in her independence, verve and laughter, and in her choice to be called Mrs. Joseph E. Ledden for another sixty years. This was truly a choice by Aunt Mil. There was no strong family tradition of taking one’s husband’s name as one’s own, and Aunt Mil was a decidedly independent woman with progressive ideas about gender equality. Nor was this a sacrifice of her own subjectivity for the sake of his, but rather the opposite. By living her life fully, she commemorated his.\textsuperscript{48}

I introduce Aunt Mil and Uncle Joe to you because their relationship, and my relation to each of them, complicates Guenther’s and Stone’s relational approaches to death. Drawing on
their relationship, through Cavarero, I argue that Guenther is correct in her reading of inheritance, but that in her focus on the material conditions of inheritance she ignores that a person’s web of relations can also be passed on.

I also argue that Stone’s understanding of how singular existents are constituted by their webs of relations is too rigid. These webs are fixed neither in life nor in death, though in death they are transformed. Rather than offering the relational exposition of a protagonist, upon death these relations become the bearers of a life-story absent its protagonist. This means, similarly to Guenther’s view, that the story becomes impersonal, but not that it ceases to exist. In addition, as exemplified by Aunt Mil’s lifelong commemoration of Uncle Joe via her choice to present herself publicly as Mrs. Joseph E. Ledden, it is possible for new people to join one’s web of relations, even after one has died. One of the meanings her figure traced was to pass on Uncle Joe to a new generation.

Clearly I know a lot more about what Uncle Joe (especially) and Aunt Mil were like, rather than who they were. And certainly all I can relate to you here is their whatness. Yet in my view this does not mean, as Stone argues, that their unique web of relations has disintegrated. Firstly, I know Uncle Joe because Aunt Mil invited me into his web of relations even after he had died. I know who he attracted to him, and at least some of the people with whom he forged friendships. And this reveals something of who he was. Stone rejects the idea of some kind of post-mortem survival on the grounds that the bereaved cannot maintain the deceased’s unique web of relations, and therefore his or her uniqueness must be lost. Yet her reading seems to pose the total web of relations as necessary for a unique existence to survive. In my view, this ignores the important distinction Cavarero makes between the unity of a relational uniqueness from birth, and the totality of a being-towards-death—the latter of which she rejects.

Secondly, and connected to Guenther’s discussion of inheritance, I have access to Uncle Joe’s life-story not only because Aunt Mil passed on his web of relationships but because she passed on some of the material conditions of his life. As an adult I inherited his books. Their spines give me some sense of his interests, but it was sitting down with one of his books in my hands one afternoon that gave me a sense of him. Flipping through the pages, the sweet smell of tobacco unexpectedly wafted toward my nose. The scent was so tangible my eyes watered with longing for the figure who had once been smoking. I spent the next hour sniffing books, trying to decipher chicken scratch in margins, wishing I could fill in the embodied contours of my uncle. I
desired his narration. As I read it, this desire represents a curious reversal upon death, a reversal which removes the protagonist from the story, but does not stop the tracing of the meaning of his or her figure. It is no longer the particular narratable self which desires to hear the tale of his or her life-story. Indeed, for the embodied protagonist, now deceased, the story has become inaudible. Rather it is those who remain within, or join, that web of relations who carry on, and pass on, the desire for the deceased’s life-story. The story is passed on, now absent its protagonist. This desire does not correspond with any personal desire for heroic immortality, but is rather the relational desire of an other to continue drawing the figure of a now impersonal existent. It is not a what but a who that is desired in this figure. This desire exposes another layer to the transformation of existence which remains implicit in Guenther’s relational framing of death. Whereas the living existent is a narratable self, in death the narratability of the existent—that is, the desire for his or her story to be told—can be passed on just as material possessions can be. Appropriately, this passing on cannot be controlled or chosen by the deceased.

Thirdly, death can sometimes serve to tighten, rather than disintegrate, webs of relations—even though their protagonist is now absent. Think of estranged, or even merely distant, family members who find themselves reconnecting upon the death of a loved one. Aunt Mil, for example, tightened her own web of relations in this way. After her death, when it came time to clean out her apartment, I had my first phone conversation with another aunt of mine, Elaine. I have known Elaine, distantly, all my life. Now when I’m in town we have dinner and tell family stories. The design, or figure, which Aunt Mil left behind in her web of relations was strengthened in this sense by her death, reinforcing the gift of her life-story.

Admittedly, maintaining a unique web of relations becomes more complicated upon the absence of its protagonist. Certainly they need not always be maintained and can be lost. And very often they are transformed in some way, even as they continue to transform us. But this is not the same as saying that either the web of relations or the uniqueness which appears through it abruptly disintegrates and comes to an end. As Cavarero notes, in the Karen Blixen story which opened this paper the figure of the stork lasted for a morning before being washed away. This may suggest that life-stories absent a protagonist fade rather than—as death is commonly conceived—ending abruptly. How quickly these stories fade surely depends upon the unique web of relations in which they are entwined. When such a web breaks apart or (better) dissolves, so
too does the figure of the life-story dissolve and fade. Yet, importantly, these webs of relations are not fixed even after their protagonist is deceased. Not only is it true that these relations can dissolve, but it is also possible that new existents can be added to the web post (the protagonist’s) mortem. This is what Aunt Mil offered to do for Uncle Joe. In carrying his name as her public persona, in keeping his books and conference proceedings, in maintaining strong relationships with his family, Mrs. Joseph E. Ledden commemorated his subjectivity and maintained his web of relations. This to the extent that even after her death, in the distribution of his things, it was possible to come to know at least some of the figure of his life, a trace of who he was, well over 60 years after his story became absent its protagonist.

**Education in Death**

In my view, this Cavarero-inspired relational view of death might be understood as educational in two ways. These educational aspects of death might be framed by the two principles Cavarero takes from Italian feminism: relations among women and starting from oneself.

The first way in which a relational view of death frames death educationally is already implicit in Guenther’s discussion of inheritance: death involves a transformation of existence, but not its end. Yet Guenther’s focus is on gifts of materiality – one’s body, one’s possessions. What Aunt Mil’s life offered to pass on, by contrast, was not primarily a material legacy but an invitation into a web of relations, a coming into the world. These relations cannot give life to the deceased, but they can continue to draw the unity of the life-story, to trace the stork in the sand. Aunt Mil’s invitation shifts focus from the transformation of existence that occurs with death toward the exposure of uniqueness the living might experience via the relations and life-story now absent their protagonist.

This invitation involves an entry into a particular set of relations among men and women, a coming into the world. It carries with it an unenforceable responsibility to continue to pass on an other’s life story and, to the extent possible, his or her web of relations. Yet this invitation also involves a forced transformation; it is irrevocable and unavoidable. Cohering with a particular life-story, this web necessarily involves exposing who(m) one is within it, and therefore involves the transformative, educative, relational experience of exposing who one is absent that web’s protagonist.
Secondly, though the deceased is absent, the design of his or her life-story continues to require a you, a necessary other. Yet, after death and with the protagonist absent, it can no longer be said that the narratable self desires his or her story. Rather, this desire is transformed: I desire your story, not as mine or as like mine, but as your own. The narratability of the life-story becomes impersonal in the sense that it no longer belongs to the protagonist, but to those who, each in their own way, pass on the desire for the deceased’s life story. Educationally, this desire is a manifestation of curiosity, passion and sociality. Passing on the narratability of the deceased’s life-story, while it certainly in some sense can be framed as loss, can thus also be understood as an awakening of a desire to trace the figure of an other, to listen to and learn the contours of his or her life-story. This desire for the other’s narratability now starts from oneself, and comes into the world in one’s relations with others.

NOTES


7 Ibid., 82-3.

8 Alison Stone, “Natality and Mortality: Rethinking Death with Cavarero,” Continental Philosophy Review 43, no.3 (2010): 353-72, 357-8. However, Cavarero qualifies that, “a father takes part in conception, but . . . it is always a mother that generates, that procreates, that brings into the world another being.” See “Doppelganger,” 199.
Cavarero, *Relating*, 94. See also Hannah Arendt, *Human*, 97. As Cavarero discusses elsewhere, this is true even in the hypothetical case of cloning. See “Doppelganger,” 198, 201.


12 Ibid., 88, 92.

13 Ibid., 92.


16 Here one may wish to raise Strawson’s critique of narrativity against Cavarero’s relational ontology. In my view, it is fair to say that Cavarero’s relational perspective of coming-from-others implies some sense of having existed in the past and being connected to that existence (in line with a diachronic rather than an episodic perspective), and that a desire for one’s story to be told seems to indicate at the very least a desire to consider one’s life as “fitting the form of some recognized narrative genre.” At the same time, however, Cavarero makes no claim that the narratable self tells his or her own story. In fact, in *Relating* she claims that a person is unable to fully narrate his or her life, and is not therefore a narrative self. Instead, when a person’s story is told by an()ther it serves to illuminate a meaning of his or her life. This illumination of meaning does not, in my view, exclude the narratable self from potentially holding an episodic outlook, beyond a basic acknowledgement that his or her body came from a mother. In other words, Cavarero relational ontology does not imply a universal requirement that a person live life narratively, merely the possibility that stories can be told by others about that life. See Galen Strawson, “Against Narrativity,” *Ratio (new series)* 17, no. 4 (2004): 428-542, 442, 440.

17 Ibid., 3.

18 Ibid., 87.


20 Ibid., 104, 110.

21 Ibid., 108.

22 Ibid., 103, 113.

23 Ibid., 112.

24 Ibid., 112.

25 Ibid., 109.

26 Ibid., 113.

27 Ibid., 111.

28 Ibid., 111, 112. Cavarero refers to this as an “impersonal” space, and differentiates it from nothingness. See *Plato*, 114, 115.


30 Ibid., 111, 112.

31 Ibid., 108.


33 Ibid., 354, 359.
34 Ibid., 361.
35 Ibid.
36 Stone borrows this term from Arendt, Human, 183.
38 Ibid., 363; see also Cavarero, Relating, 89.
40 Ibid., 362.
41 Ibid., 363.
42 Ibid., 363, 364, 368.
43 Ibid., 364.
44 Ibid. It is unclear whether Stone considers such partial death permanent or temporary. She indicates that it involves both corporeal attachment and one’s dependence on the necessary other to appear, and that the physical reaction to the loss of this attachment, at least, is temporary, see, ibid., 396, 370. Yet if one can recover physically, it seems implausible that one would not be able to recover existentially as well, by, e.g., entering into new relations in which who one is can be exposed anew.
45 Ibid., 367.
49 Stone, “Natality,” 366-7. It would otherwise be necessary to consider the self as dying partially each time one ended a relationship, through death or otherwise. Given that ending certain relationships, e.g., unhealthy ones, can be experienced as life-affirming rather than as a loss of self, it seems that this position must be nuanced, if not rejected.
50 Cavarero, Relating, 92.
51 Ibid., 366-7.
52 Cavarero, Relating, 87.
54 Cavarero, Relating, 86.
55 Admittedly, the relevant issue of the corporeality of the existent goes unaddressed here.
56 Cavarero, Relating, 3.
57 Ibid., 2.
58 Ibid., 3.
59 Ibid., 144.
60 Ibid., 136.