

Birth, love, politics

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Properly speaking, the individual and the community should be considered as opposites. The first term refers to something *indivisible* that stands by itself, while the second term, as can be seen from its root (*cum*), expresses the very essence of relation. Corresponding to the concept of the individual there should be that of a collectivity in which individuals are together because they form an aggregate. But the *with* implicit in the community does not in fact stand for the simple fact of being together, one next to the other, as an aggregate; it refers rather to an internal or constitutive relation. In this relation the uniqueness of each individual constitutes *itself*. Each one is a unique existent for whom the other cannot be lacking. Each one, in so far as they exist, exists with the other and cannot exist without the other. Its uniqueness, and that of the other, appear [*compaiono*] in the relation that constitutes them. This explains why Hannah Arendt endows the uniqueness of each human being with the status of appearance, and why Jean-Luc Nancy refers to the community as an appearance [*comparizione*].¹

The first setting in which uniqueness and community meet each other is that of birth. Here the existent is found in its incarnated concreteness: this boy, this girl. The aspect of the community, on the other hand, is presupposed in the fact that this singular comes into the world, from the start, *from and with* another existent: the mother, this mother. We find here an originary appearance and a sexed [*sessuata*]² uniqueness. The term ‘originary’ – meaning in that beginning which is *its* beginning – qualifies the appearance of the existent in so far as it comes into the world in its irremediable finitude. The existent that appears here is gendered even before it receives the *proprium* of the name which belongs to its uniqueness and which, in fact, certifies its sex.

According to a well-known etymological derivation the community is born as the *nation*;³ the bond of blood and earth which draws the singular into its bloodstream and engulfs it in a collective identity as soon as, or even before, it is born. But the community of birth is exactly the opposite of the national com-

munity. It refers to the setting where the appearing-with proves to be necessary to the existent precisely in its uniqueness or in its distinction. The newborn, as Hannah Arendt would say, appears as singular and unrepeatable, different from all those who have lived before or will live after it. The *with*, which bars any fusional sense of community, has nonetheless a peculiar form in this setting. Here in fact the appearance is the inaugural act of an existent who appears *with* and *to* another existent *from* whom it came. For the existent this originary sense of community presages a relation of companionship which can, at the same time, exclude solitude and speak to the existent the language of the gift. In fact, this loving language has been employed for centuries to name orphans. Names like Donato and Benedetta suggestively disclose that whoever is born and abandoned by the mother is still an existent offered by her as a gift [*donata/dono*] to the world and blessed [*benedetta*] by it. The infant, although found in solitude, finds in this solitude only a disgraceful and *extraordinary* state of affairs. Indeed, the absence of the mother is immediately perceptible in the question which is inevitable but destined to remain unanswered: ‘who gave birth to this creature?’

With this question the language of the existent reveals its symptomatic opposition to the language of the philosophers. The latter, looking to the existent in general, asks ‘from *where*’ it came, and is therefore forced to confine its explanation to the alternative between being and nothingness. But the question that is addressed to the singular being is precisely that which asks ‘from *whom*’ it came. And common parlance answers ‘from God’: thereby bequeathing to the infant the surname Diodato [God given] or – with admirable foresight – Diotallevi [may God bring you up]. Yet God himself is here called upon, above all, to supplement the absence of a mother because every existent is, from birth, exposed; that is, brought into appearance as someone who is abandoned. This exposure in the case of the orphan is just more fragile. The mother, who incarnates the *ex-* of the existent, despite having been there at the beginning of its ex-istence, is

no longer there now. Existence as exposure becomes in this case the perceptible truth of each existence, made more acute by the immediate loss of one's proper origin. This existence becomes a *with* to which the 'from' is already missing.

Over centuries, good and bad literature has abundantly illustrated the risk of a swift slippage from the

ex-istence: expulsion, exhibition, exposure. The *ex-*, the bond with the *with*, makes of birth an unrepeatable community. This community, however, proffers to the sense of the existent a language which also makes it possible to interpret correctly the subsequent configurations of community, ensuring that they are not named according to the twin myths of mystical union and abstraction.

The community of love

The second setting in which the existent and the community intersect is the community of lovers. This setting comes second because it usually takes this place in biographical time, and because here again it is the community that brings the two together again. The achievement of the political configuration of the community will need more than this relation of two terms. In the community of love, however, the other [*l'altra/o*] to whom the existent reciprocally appears is simply the beloved [*l'amato/a*]. And these bars that gender language could go on for ever, because the singular, expressing the maximum concreteness of the existent, always has a face, a voice, a look, a body, and a sex; we could even say a soul, if we did not fear its traditional meaning of invisibility and substantiality. The singular is not a *person*, it is *you*. If we choose to exemplify the whole discourse through the grammar of heterosexual love, it is therefore to free the writing from the 'alienating' effect of this barred double-gendering of language which tried to alert us to its illegitimate oneness.

In this second setting of appearance, the lovers love one another, they love who they are. As Hannah Arendt would say, they love their '*who*'. One does not love the *what* of the beloved, one loves instead *who* he is. Moreover, one often loves him in spite of what he is. 'You are the only one' [*Sei unica*, '*sei unico*'] lovers tell each other. In this way they reiterate what is *obvious* about the existent, namely, that when it appears once again, as it had already appeared at birth, it is without quality. Qualities, which define *what* this woman or this man is, render them similar to many others, and thus co-opt them to the various communities of taste, inclination, ideology or passion: 'inauthentic' communities in which the *with* consists in sharing the *things* we love or the *ideas* we think. The community of lovers, instead, is a privileged relation where two singularities couple themselves together in spite of their qualities and thus in spite of their defects. To say, as one sometimes does, 'I love your defects' is part of the truth of the amorous game. What is taken for granted in this game is that 'I love you in spite of

Susan Turcotte, Inflate me I'm gone (Berlin, 1996)

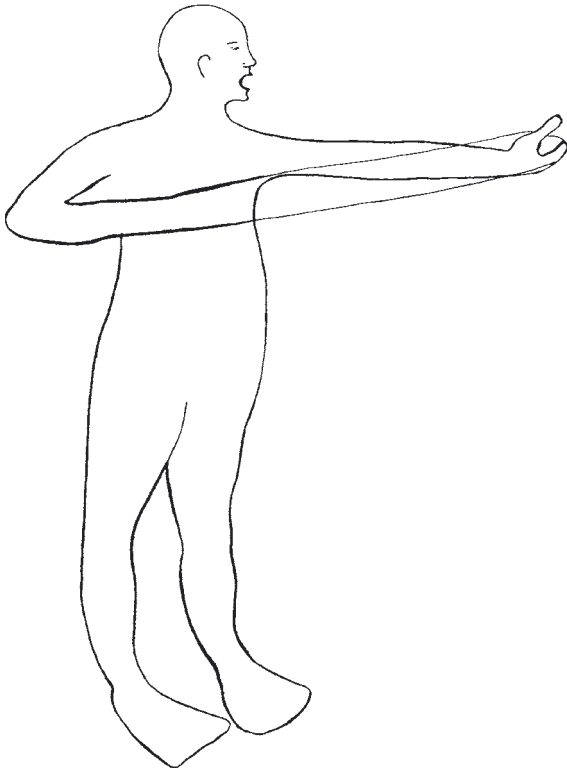


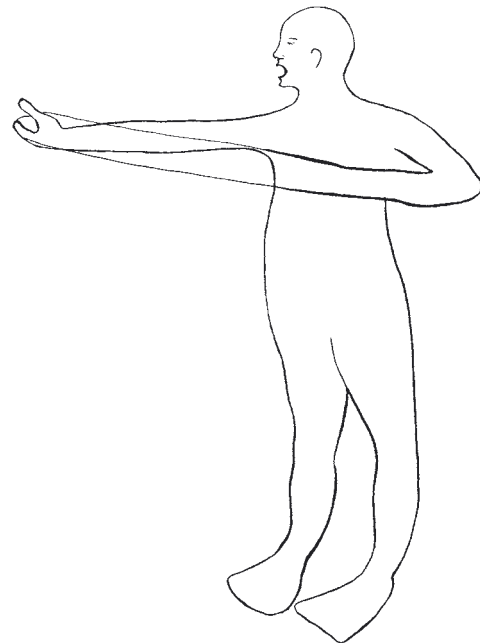
figure of the orphan to the mystique of motherhood. I will thus straightaway try to forestall this move. The question which addresses from *whom* the existent has come does not, in fact, sentimentalize this '*who*' but, on the contrary, eludes it. This does not mean that one should not love one's mother or that she should not love her offspring. Rather, it simply means that the existent is here searching for a language in which to speak the uniqueness and the community that constitutes it. The phenomenon of birth ensures to both mother and offspring an originary bond that connects two existents while maintaining their distinction. In the setting of childbirth, the inaugural exposition of existence coincides with the movement of the exposure, which is simultaneously expulsive and pulsional. The newborn emerges from a paired movement that exposes it while complying with its pulsion towards self-exposure; as Hannah Arendt would say, by showing itself it reacts to the crushing effect of being shown. The mother is the *threshold* of an exit and an entry, the human threshold of the world; she betokens the coincidence of this exposing expulsion. Not by chance, the vocabulary of appearance persists in reiterating that *ex-* which labels the newcomer as

your defects' or, better, 'I love your defects because they are yours' – that is, 'I love *who* you are, although I disapprove of *what* you are.' Maternal love speaks the same language of this 'in spite of', the language – which is, in a sense, immoral – of the 'beyond good and evil', where the judgement on *what* the beloved is becomes powerless before the appearance of *who* the beloved is.

As many have noted, the language of lovers is asocial. And it is obvious that this should be the case because *society* – all the more in the modern understanding of the term – is the competitive stage on which only *what* one is or has counts for anything, in accordance with the principles of iterability, exchange and substitution. Every beloved is unique for the lover, just as every child is unique for the mother, because the existent is constitutively unique. It is not difficult to understand why, for millennia, lovers have challenged social rules and conventions, transgressed caste distinctions and subverted hierarchies. The joy of love lies, in fact, in the nakedness of an appearing that cannot bear qualifications. Here the existent simply exists in the *with* of reciprocal exposure, which makes a perfect and exclusive community of lovers even though, contrary to birth, its occurrence is repeatable. It is then possible that the lovers will *remember* the twofold movement of the relation with the *mother*, at once passive and active; the originary pulsion towards self-exposure. All the fragility of the finite is found again here, in the wholeness of the existent who refuses, or even mocks, every internal distinction between its flesh and its spirit and *touches* an other existent. The only active distinction is now that of two unrepeatable singularities who distinguish themselves by appearing together. There is no fusion of lovers into unity despite the immemorial myth, false because it is false to celebrate existence in rites of dissolution, turning the pulsion of love into a death drive.

The myth tells us how love and death, *eros* and *thanatos*, willingly merge – despite some circumstantial shudders – in the seductive myth of dissolution. The mythical perfect community that devours the individual is again at work. The two existences, fusing into the one-all, disappear in the whirlpool of no-where: the very same place, according to a well-known variant of the myth, from which they emerged, namely the mother. Birth and death, the eternal seduction of the inorganic, would thus amount to the same: provided that the finite, if it is allowed some fleeting shimmer of glory, burns in the act of its annihilation; provided that the infinite preserves its primacy and death its voracity.

But, despite the ancient myth, lovers do not want to die, merging *one into the other*. Instead they want the full splendour of the finite according to the reciprocal uniqueness that exposes and distinguishes them in the *with*. Loving each other, they are simply reborn to the inaugural and relational fragility of their existence. Love, in fact, does not offer any protection against the fragility of the *who*. Its exposure is total and irremediable: it demands to be accepted, not to be annihilated. The sexual rite is thus not one of fusion, annihilating uniqueness, rendering the act vain. It is, if anything, the rite of repeating the beginning: exposing again the naked exposure, as yet covered by nothing, which inaugurates the appearing of the existent. Seen in this way, the newborn is the very prototype of the existent without qualities because its body, face and gender are not at all qualities of this existent but rather the spiritual matter of its uniqueness. Appearing in *indifference* towards their qualities – an indifference which is maximized in the orgasm – the lovers thus come to repeat the beginning of their existence. They do not return into the womb of the mother; on the contrary, they are ousted again into the inaugural nudity of appearance.



While not condoning its falsity, we can understand the blunder on which the credibility of the myth hinges. It is, in fact, the very experience of orgasm that is often identified with death as the perfect community, where pleasure would coincide with the annihilation of the individual in the autonomous and impersonal logic of the flesh. But what dies here – or better, what is already dead – is nothing but the subject adorned by its qualities. The loss of meaning of *what* one is and knows oneself to be, the complete oblivion of one's

own personal qualities and social markers, is mistaken for the death of the self. However, we are dealing with a repetition of birth, experienced by a self without qualities who, in virtue of this magnificent stripping, can suddenly *remember* the originary coincidence of life and existence. The prevalence of the body here only signifies the inherence of the existent to the body, the spirituality of the flesh and carnality of the spirit, which makes their indiscernibility the miracle of uniqueness. The lovers have undressed themselves in order to caress their naked bodies; it is, however, only in the orgasm that the nakedness of existence is really such in so far as it cannot be dressed up with any quality.

There is a great deal of sense in the proverbial expression ‘love at first sight’. At first sight one cannot see anything but the physical appearance and thus one can only fall in love with the beauty that it incarnates. But we know very well that it is not so. Instead we fall in love with *who* shines through that body and that face; these become beautiful because they are her/his body and her/his face. They are beautiful because they are unique and felt to be such with an intensity that is beyond argument because the criterion of this beauty no longer belongs to the sphere of judgement, perhaps not even to the sphere of taste. It belongs to the sphere, indifferent to qualities, of what is unjudgeable; to the sphere of the sudden manifestation of an existent. The equally proverbial brevity of love depends, in fact, on the supervenience of the qualities of the lover, beneath which *who* we used to love succumbs. And then we are surprised that we did not notice before *what* he was and is. In the luminous revelation of the existent that occupies the whole erotic stage, we could not see the quality which makes him similar to many others, qualities which are susceptible to judgement. Love is blind – that is, without judgement – precisely with respect to what all others see. It experiences another type of gaze: a gaze that comes from the crushing experience of the fragility of the finite. The finite is fragile not because it is exposed to solitude but precisely in so far as it appears.

Indeed lovers fully perceive the fragility of their appearing, and because in the fragile glory of the existent the *with* of their community is here also a reciprocal trust – trusting one in the *touch* of the other – they entrust themselves to the other. It is said, in this regard, that women know how to *touch* the beloved with gentleness because of their habit of ‘handling’ newborns. The truth is that the existent, when it exposes itself completely, is fragile, and all the more so in its adult flesh. The maps of the erogenous

zones are therefore ridiculous technical supports (a product of the scientific community of sex) for those who ignore that they are touching an existent in the wholeness of its exposure. This is precisely the community of lovers: a relation that constitutes the existent as intimate exteriority.

Appearance and politics

The third setting where the existent and the community meet is that of politics. Here ‘politics’ is not to be understood in any traditional sense that makes it coincide with the various forms of domination, in their historical and theoretical declensions. Politics is to be understood, instead, in the Arendtian sense of a *plural* space of reciprocal appearing. This is an interactive space where the exhibition of the existents is reciprocal, so that each one is, at the same time, an actor in and a spectator of the plural theatre of uniqueness. The political community therefore also pertains to the originary condition of the existent as a uniqueness that exhibits and relates to others. As in the case of love, the existent shows itself; but it shows itself to many, not just to one. Moreover, unlike the lovers, political actors expose themselves *actively*; that is, they do not simply happen to find themselves exposed one to the other. Love and politics thus belong, in two different modalities, to the same existential horizon of appearing. In fact, in both settings the relation to the other, to the others, is constitutive of the reality of the self. In both settings there is the communication and distinction of existence without qualities. In both settings the appearing is contextual, happening here and now, within the space of the actual relationship, without being able to be exploited or transferred. The *with* of community also therefore indicates the temporal and spatial context of the relation. The community adheres to the time and space of its happening and it cannot be represented, either in the sense in which representation is a product of discourse, or in the sense in which there is someone elected by the community who should represent it elsewhere.

All the reality of the community and of the existent in fact consists – just as it does in the beginning – in the phenomenon of appearing. The *inexposable is the inexistent*, to use Jean-Luc Nancy’s words. Indeed, the depoliticizing effect of domination achieves precisely the result that the life of individuals, in the impossibility of a plural appearance within the political community, corresponds to their inexistence. They can at best exist only in the couple, as lovers. It is not a coincidence that the *inexposable* par excellence, the existent of female gender, traditionally looks upon

love as the only authentic setting for her appearing. Due to their well-known patriarchal character, the forms of domination produce a prohibition of political appearance which applies above all to women. Stifled by socially defined qualities (like maternal caring or bodily seductiveness), a woman is thus by and large forced to exhibit *what she is*, while the drive towards the self-exhibition of *who she is* becomes perceptible to her as a sort of secret resistance to the prohibition against expression. It may then happen, precisely in the secret of the feminine self – in its intimacy, as one might say – that the paradox of this inexposable uniqueness, magnifying itself in its solipsistic game, makes up an unexposed greatness. Or it may happen that the experience of love as the only legitimate setting of appearance is exalted beyond measure.

But if the inexposable is the inexistent, the existent that is more than any other prohibited from appearing will be more capable than others of grasping the existential root of politics. Put briefly, it is precisely women – as we have seen recently – who affirm the relational and contextual character of the political community as the plural space of appearing. The feminist vocabulary of ‘self-reliance’ and of the ‘politics of relation’ (a vocabulary that obviously sounds somewhat bizarre to professional politicians) is nothing short of a correct linguistic rendering of the practice of appearing. In this practice the existent, in the act of exposing herself beyond her qualities in communicating with other women, immediately denounces the falsity of all the abstract and neutral names that the tradition has created: subject, person, individual, and so on. More than an individual, each woman of the community is now this concrete uniqueness, in flesh and spirit, constitutively incorporating a face, a body, and a sex which she exhibits in the relation of communication. She has verified, beyond love, that the existent is exposable only in the *with* of appearing.

The constitution of this appearance as the *political configuration* of the community depends on the fact that its setting is plural and active. It is in fact contextually opened by a drive towards self-exhibition that is measurable in the plurality of women that are present. In other words, the community has the form of the ‘group’, or, as Hannah Arendt would say, it has the numerical dimension that allows for an effective relation. (The imaginary dimension, on the other hand, can extend to the entire globe or to some of its parts, according to criteria of opportunity or of taste. In the imaginary dimension the existents do not *touch* each other and are thus reincorporated in the abstract concept that traditionally belongs to them.)

The group can obviously display a ‘cliquish’ tendency and is exposed to all of the mythical counterfeits of the community as the negation of the existent: collective identity, substantialization of belonging, fundamentalism, totalization, and so on. However, the group has its only reality in the *actual* and existential context of appearance, which can be renewed but not conserved. What appears, in any case, is the existent in its greatest concreteness, in the unrepeatable difference that pertains to the very concept of uniqueness. Thus in the setting of a women’s group sexual difference does not at all essentialize a sexed identity. Rather, this difference signals *simply* the fact that some women – unlike many men – have decided to appear in the irremediable finitude that every existent embodies, leaving to others the ecumenical fiction of the universal. The political community of the existent neither excludes nor includes; in any case the space where other plural stages of appearing can open themselves is infinite. Everything depends on the authentic desire to expose themselves on the part of those who materialize this space. As already happens in birth and then in love, the *with* of political community demands embodied existences, not universal subjects. It wants presence, not representation.

All of which neither dissolves nor resolves those problems of *cohabitation* that are generally referred to by the names of Public Policy, Justice, Market, and so on. However, these problems belong to a different order than that of uniqueness and community. They pertain, as is sometimes said, to the *quality* of life: referring to a broader sphere of natural and artificial things in which men and women, rather than coexisting, cohabit. The pre-judicial question consists, then, in deciding what the relationship is between the communitarian order of existence and the social order of cohabitation, thinking how the latter can respect the former rather than ignoring and offending it. It is a question of a radical perspectival shift, whose elemental dynamic has at least two fixed points: uniqueness versus individualism, concreteness versus abstraction, difference versus homologization.

**Translated by Isabella Bertolotti
and Miguel Vatter**

Notes

1. The author plays with the term *comparizione*, ‘to appear’, ‘to enter on the stage’, as if it were composed of two terms: *com-apparizione*, ‘to appear together’, ‘the togetherness of appearance’ [tr.].
2. The Italian *sessuato/sessuata* covers the conventional English meanings of both ‘sexed’ and ‘gendered’ [tr.].
3. *Nascere* – to be born; *nazione* – nation; both from the