

DECONFABULATION

AGAMBEN'S ITALIAN CATEGORIES AND THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF EXPERIENCE

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Dazzled by Giorgio Agamben's famed erudition, one could almost fail to notice the change to philosophy that has taken place: erudition has set up shop at the very center of philosophical discourse, finding its way into the essence of its method, even offering itself as the essence of method. It is not merely that, as already with Martin Heidegger or Jacques Derrida, the systematic philosophical treatise gives way to commentary. For Heidegger and even for Derrida, the turn to language, commentary, and textuality is not so much the rejection as the radicalization of Edmund Husserl's call to renew philosophy by bracketing the "natural attitude," thus gaining access to a strata of experience that, providing immediate evidence for a priori and essential structures, is originary and constitutive and hence transcendental in the Kantian sense. Neither Heidegger nor Derrida will cease to orient his thought toward some manner of radical and constitutive experience, however transformed: of being in its difference from beings, of truth as unconcealment, of trace and *différance*, or of the impossible as such. For Agamben, by contrast, erudition comes close to becoming mere erudition. This is not meant pejoratively: Agamben's synthetic powers, tying a bewildering array of texts together into a coherent narrative, dazzle no less than his erudition. Yet this synthesis is achieved through the fabric of these texts and the structures of thought that they put into play: the very means through which elements of the tradition will be brought together into a semblance of unity, including the concepts of philosophical method, are borrowed more or less explicitly from the

tradition. Thus an erudite knowledge of philosophy takes the place of philosophy itself: philosophy becomes erudition without ceasing to be philosophy; neither abandoning the most radical intention of philosophical discourse, nor grounding this intention in or sustaining it by means of any manner of philosophical (not merely empirical) experience. One could even speak of an *epigonal* dimension to Agamben's work. In an interview with Jean-Baptiste Marongiu, Agamben admits precisely this, having his very epigonism follow in the steps of one who came before: "Fundamentally, I am nothing but an epigone, as Karl Kraus said of himself, 'one of the last epigones, who inhabits the antique house of language.'" Perhaps Agamben stands closest to Walter Benjamin in this regard, but only so far as Benjamin already stands outside of, or rather to the side of, philosophy in a space that is yet far from understood.

It would be easy, as many do, to simply ignore this aspect of Agamben's thought, excavating from his writings a set of claims, rooted in an ontology of potentiality and a logic of the paradigm and the signature, about the nature of sovereignty, the political history of the West, the critical condition of the present, Messianic time, and the coming community. In what follows I argue that Agamben's epigonism, far from merely abandoning the critical tendencies that animated phenomenology and deconstruction, in fact involves a complex, subtle, and largely hidden strategy that comes into view only if we turn away from the *Homo Sacer* series and focus on his earlier writings—including precisely those early texts that Antonio Negri relegates to the "literary apprenticeship" preceding Agamben's first "fully metaphysical and substantially philosophical" work, his 1982 *Language and Death*. The crux of this strategy is, moreover, the aspect of Agamben's thought that will most alienate the global readership to which he owes much of his fame: a peculiar and seemingly essentialist account of the "physiognomy" of Italian culture and language. This term, which he will appropriate from Benjamin, and possibly also Friedrich Schlegel, who himself draws on a long tradition revived in the German enlightenment by Johann Kaspar Lavater, refers to the manifestation of inner character through outer appearance. The literary in Agamben—this "uncanny unwelcome guest at the intimate if troubled feast that rages still *tête-à-tête* between metaphysics

and politics”—is precisely what forces us to confront an irreducible, if not exactly untranslatable, Italianness, and indeed a certain “nationalistic” residue, that inhabits his project from beginning to end.

The first of the three sections of this essay (“Experience”) argues that Agamben’s *Infancy and History* engages in a subtle polemic with Heidegger’s famous account of being-toward-death. The experience of a relation to our own death, rather than opening the way toward authenticity, will be understood by Agamben as a repetition of the original esotericism of the Greek mysteries, which, by seeking to fuse divine knowledge and human experience, prepared the way for the destruction of experience that takes place with the scientific revolution. Yet rather than rejecting the concept of experience altogether, Agamben, as the second section (“Fabulous Deconstruction”) will show, seeks to base thinking in a non-esoteric, essentially “inauthentic” experience and at the same time conceives of the fable, in opposition to mystery, as the discursive register appropriate to this “infantile” experience. Whereas the enrapturing mystery leaves us caught up in the ineffable, the fable, presenting silence as the result of enchantment, allows for its spell to be broken. Accomplishing the double movement of deconstructive critique while overcoming the negativity that Derridean deconstruction preserves, deconfabulation, which deploys the fable’s babble against the mysterious silence that continues to captivate philosophy, is at once the very experience of language as infancy and the deconstitution of metaphysics. The final section (“Italian Categories”) will show that Agamben bases his method of a fabulous, deconfabulating, deconstruction in an account of the Italian physiognomy: an Italian experience of language—and specifically of the relation of the vernacular to Latin—that, originating with Dante, stands in striking contrast to the German physiognomy that, enshrined in romanticism, is still at work in Heidegger’s Greco-German bilingualism.

It might seem strange to discover a method in Agamben that has little or nothing to do with the principles that he himself identifies in his own treatise on method. However, the preface to *The Signature of All Things* suggests that other methods stand behind the three principles (signature, paradigm, archeology) whose operations he will seek to explain. “If these observations appear to be investigations on the method of Michel Foucault,” he notes, “this is because one of the methodological principles not

discussed in the book—and which I owe to Walter Benjamin—is that doctrine may legitimately be exposed only in the form of interpretation.” This other method already brings us closer to the stakes of what follows. We need only ask: what method allows even the Benjaminian method of exposing doctrine through interpretation to justify its legitimacy by recourse to the interpretation of Benjamin? The wager of this essay is to discover a moment in Agamben’s discourse, far from the well-trodden path of *Homo Sacer*, that could cast light on the necessity of this seemingly vicious circularity.

EXPERIENCE

If Agamben’s thinking begins with an experience, it is not first of all a certain experience—of being, of political community, of language, or even of the impossible as such—but rather the experience of the impossibility of experience. For as he explains in the opening words of the title essay of his 1978 *Infancy and History*, “the question of experience can be approached nowadays only with an acknowledgment that it is no longer accessible to us.” Deprived of his biography and with his experience expropriated, modern man’s “incapacity to have and communicate experiences is perhaps one of the few self-certainties to which he can lay claim” (*IH*, 13). And even this experience of the present impossibility of experience cannot be communicated as his own experience, but only as the experience of the other, conveyed only through others. Thus Agamben draws on Benjamin’s study of Nikolai Leskov and its striking description of the men returned from the First World War “grown silent—not richer, but poorer in communicable experience (*Erfahrung*)” (*IH*, 13). While the Italy of the sixties and seventies, with the “sweet life” of its economic miracle, would seem to have left the traumas of the First and Second World Wars far behind, for Agamben experience has only become more difficult to have and to communicate than when Benjamin wrote “The Storyteller.” The destruction of experience now no longer even needs catastrophe: the everyday life of modern man in the city “contains virtually nothing that can still be translated into experience” (*IH*, 13).

Following Benjamin, Agamben understands experience (*Erfahrung* rather than *Erlebnis*) not simply as a subjective epistemological or psychological event: it is not a matter of having encountered

something firsthand, having lived through it or gained knowledge of it through a direct encounter. Rather, traditional experience involves authority, since, being rooted in the irreducible plurality of our political existence—our existence not as partakers of a single divine intellect but as “separate, individuated, impassive” souls, living together in a political community that enables the actualization of human nature—experience involves those claims that, rooted in our own individual encounters with the world, have a binding force for others in their own individuated existence. Traditional experience is thus incompatible with certainty, since indeed the very notion of certainty, as it functions in philosophical discourse, seeks to elevate the claims of experience beyond authority.

The expropriation of experience, while realizing itself most fully in the twentieth century, is already implied in modern science’s quixotic quest for absolute certainty. Uniting knowledge and experience in a single subject, such that experience itself becomes the path to knowledge, the scientific revolution brings together what had previously been kept apart (*IH*, 18–19). This explains why, starting with René Descartes, the experimental method will be joined to a mathematical conception of nature. Whereas for classical Greek philosophy the *psychē*’s sensate experience and *nous*’s pure intuition belong to separate realms, just as the cosmos is itself divided into terrestrial and celestial spheres, modern science, collapsing the divided cosmos into a single continuous nature, will come to understand sensate experience as the means toward mathematically precise, certain knowledge about the natural world. The modern scientific worldview is in its essence Neoplatonic mysticism and astrology: if science finally comes to abandon astrology, it is only because, having assimilated its fundamental principle—the union of experience and knowledge—“the mythic-divine apparatus became superfluous” (*IH*, 21). Yet while the scientific method thus revives ancient mystery religions, a crucial change has taken place. Whereas in the mysteries, “the conjunction of experience and knowledge,” reserved for the few, involved the esoteric experience par excellence—the “event without speech” in which the soul ascends to the divine *nous* and the isolated individual, having died and been reborn, merges with the absolute—modern science will transform this conjunction into something that, far from being unutterable, is always already expressed in every thought and utterance, constituting the foundation that must be known in advance for the very act of

knowledge to take place (*IH*, 21–22). The conjunction of experience and knowledge thus becomes what is most absolutely exoteric: that which, implicit and prescient in all knowledge, must be, if only implicitly and inchoately, common knowledge for everyone. The Cartesian subject, the radical ground of absolute certainty, is what remains of the individual in his individuation following the elimination of everything that isn't common to everyone: “nothing more than the subject of the verb, a purely linguistic-functional entity” (*IH*, 22).

Heidegger seems to play only a small role in “Infancy and History”: he is in fact mentioned only a few times, and always in a way that seems a bit peripheral to the argument. Yet an attentive reading suggests that by invoking Benjamin’s concept of *Erfahrung*, Agamben develops a comprehensive and penetrating critique of Heidegger. The most obvious target of this critique is Heidegger’s “deconstruction” (*Destruktion*) of the mathematical natural sciences: a theme expounded in *Being and Time* that culminates in the account of the *Ge-stell* (“enframing”) in *The Question Concerning Technology*. Agamben not only reasserts the importance of experiment and experience, but, drawing on the richer sense of cultural history exemplified in the mission of the Warburg Institute, challenges Heidegger’s tendency to reduce the enterprise of modern science to a certain interpretation of being, while largely ignoring the broader religious, cultural, even political context. As if he were deploying Frances Yates as a counterweight to Heidegger, Agamben argues that the modern scientific worldview does not arise merely from a new way of conceiving the natural world, and ultimately a new interpretation of the Being of beings, but involves the reception and transformation of an esoteric kernel that consequently comes to be hidden from view. Yet there is also a deeper level of critique. Indeed, Agamben takes aim at the very navel of *Being and Time*: its account of the difference between everydayness and authenticity, and the analysis of being-toward-death. By reorienting philosophy around the *Stimmung* (mood) of anxiety, which first opens inauthentic existence to authentic being-toward-death, Heidegger seeks to recover the original form of ancient mysticism in light of the modern expropriation of experience initiated by the scientific revolution. The entire project of fundamental ontology, and even the later thinking of the *Ereignis* (event), would not only be reactionary in its tendencies, but, far from overcoming the destruction of experience, can only

serve to preserve it ad infinitum, since, polemicizing against the impoverishment of scientific reasoning, it merely insists even more vehemently on the explicit repetition of the very mystery that scientific rationality itself secularizes. Esotericism and exotericism, “irrationality” (a label that Heidegger rejects) and “rationality,” are two sides of the same coin.

This suggests the implications of Agamben’s claim that the scientific revolution secularizes the mystical experience of death. The essence of mystical experience is, we recall, the inutterable experience of *pathoi*. Not merely without speech, this experience involves precisely what Heidegger understands as *schweigen* (keeping silent), an active rather than merely passive silence, in relation to being-toward-death. It is, to use the neologism formed from the Greek *sigān* (to hold silent, keep secret), sigetic. *Schweigen*, which is introduced thematically in the thirty-fourth section of *Being and Time* as an “essential possibility of discourse (*Rede*),” is not just a matter of being dumb, or having nothing to say. Rather, “to be able to keep silent, Dasein must have something to say—that is, it must have at its disposal an authentic and rich disclosedness of itself.” Here we already find the first lineaments of a thought that will guide the second division of *Being and Time*, marking the fault line that decisively separates Heidegger’s fundamental ontology from the metaphysical tradition. Staying silent, far from indicating an incapacity for speech, reveals the very greatest potential. On the basis of this analysis, Heidegger shows that the existential structure of the “anticipation of death” (*Vorlaufen zum Tode*), having already been disclosed as an “ontological possibility,” is itself attested to (*bezeugt*) by Dasein itself. There is, in other words, a certain phenomenal manifestation—indeed an experience—of the totality of Dasein in being-toward-death that points toward the more original phenomenon without exhaustively presenting it. This attesting (*Bezeugung*) is discovered in the sigetic call of consciousness (*Ruf des Gewissens*). Dispensing with every manner of vocalized utterance, not putting itself into words, conscience “discourses” only by keeping silent, and, by its silence, calls Dasein, the recipient of its silent call, away from the “public idle talk of the ‘they’” and back into “*the reticence of his existent potentiality-for-Being*.” The call of consciousness thus calls out of inauthenticity into authenticity; it calls Dasein to recall itself, to gather itself back together, from out of its lostness in the indefiniteness of *das Man*—the “they” or “one.” Dasein is given to

understand its uncanny, even monstrous possibility. Rather than being defined by a certain determinate purpose, such as rationality, politics, or contemplation, it is nothing else than a kind of void, a nugatory, null ground that realizes itself, and must realize itself, through projections into the future possibilities that, lacking a sufficient positive ground, are themselves as nugatory as the ground from which they originate.

It could hardly have escaped Agamben that the esoteric rituals of the ancient mystery religions attempt to experience the call of conscience that, announcing itself through silence and in a state of anxiety, summons us to recall ourselves from an individuated, plural, political existence. Yet if the scientific revolution—and hence also the absolute expropriation of experience that, as Agamben claims in his first explicit reference to Heidegger, is registered in Heidegger’s account of everydayness—is itself nothing but the secularization of the mysteries, this would mean that the inauthenticity of everydayness is grounded in, and perhaps even follows from, the sigetic experience of the conscious that calls us to cross the divide that separates the “two spheres” (*IH*, 19). This holds even if we grant that the mysteries involve merely an “inauthentic” institution of the more original, and more properly sigetic, experience, since the history of being, as Heidegger clearly saw, has to do not simply with pure experiences, but with their being instituted as foundation (*Stiftung*). Whereas for Heidegger the metaphysical oppositions would originate from the fact that, failing to adequately grasp Dasein as existence, *one* takes recourse to the categorial determinations applicable to beings that are not like Dasein, Agamben suggests that the metaphysical opposition between *nous* and *psychē* records, though perhaps still in a conceptually inadequate register, a primordial difference—an originary fracture in life like that between *zoē* and *bios*—whose effacement, itself achieved by way of a logic of silence and secrets and negativity, initiates the expropriation of experience. It is as if the very clumsiness and awkwardness of metaphysical distinctions—a certain resistance to free play—is precisely what allows them to signal the tectonic fractures inhabiting the seemingly continuous surface of thought. To deconstruct metaphysics, to return its dichotomies to a more original free play, is not so much to resist the hegemony of the transcendental signified as to destroy the very possibility of experience that metaphysics holds open. Heidegger’s

Destruktion, and perhaps even Derridean deconstruction, is nothing but the radical realization of the destruction of experience—the fulfillment of the secularized mysticism of the scientific revolution.

This reading of Heidegger, so subtly folded into the argument of Agamben’s essay, is presented more explicitly, if with less consequence, in later works such as *Language and Death*, where Agamben also develops the confrontation with Derridean deconstruction that is already expressed in *Stanzas*, and indeed dates back to the year following the publication of Derrida’s *Speech and Phenomena*, *Of Grammatology*, and *Writing and Difference*. The excursus following the eighth and final day (as if publishing the proceedings of an academic seminar, *Language and Death* is organized into days rather than chapters) offers the clearest account of a critique that will claim to extend to both Hegel’s absolute and Heidegger’s thinking of the event. Metaphysics, as Agamben had explained earlier, seeks to grasp the taking place of language—not the structure but the very event of language, the act of speech—by signifying this with an indexical, a “shifter” that refers generically to the “this-ness” and “there-ness” of what takes place. Thus the Voice (nothing else than the *grammē*) substitutes for the voice: the irreducible singularity of the event is indicated by the radically negative articulation of the shifter, which thus emerges as the negative foundation. Through the “mythogeme of the Voice” philosophy thus thinks the “ungroundedness of man.” Yet it thinks this ungroundedness by *founding* the existence of man in language, conceiving of him as the “living being that has logos” and thus “absolv[ing] man of his ungroundedness and of the unspeakableness of the sacrificial mystery.” This absolution, moreover, is itself incomplete, and philosophy must continually justify the violence of the founding gesture by which man is defined in opposition to the alogical, irrational, groundless, ineffable, merely animal, or even inanimate. And thus it remains haunted by what it had sought to exclude: the “arretion, the unspeakable tradition” still holds sway over the tradition of philosophy, not only in Hegel but even, indeed especially, in Heidegger, where it assumes the form of the “unnamed” that, remaining “unsaid in all speech and in all tradition,” “destines man to tradition and language.” Philosophy has not yet achieved its true aim of absolving man from the violence of its own foundation, and hence the “foundation of humanity” remains

incomplete. This would demand eliminating the “sacrificial mythogeme” as well as the various oppositions (nature/culture, unspeakable/speakable) that it founds. For indeed:

even the sacralization of life derives from sacrifice: from this point of view it simply abandons the naked natural life to its own violence and its own unspeakableness, in order to ground in them every cultural rule and all language. The *ethos*, humanity’s own, is not something unspeakable or *sacer* that must remain unsaid in all praxis and human speech. Neither is it nothingness, whose nullity serves as the basis for the arbitrariness and violence of social action. Rather, it is social praxis itself, human speech itself, which have become transparent to themselves.

Here we already find in germ the central problematic of *Homo Sacer*: the sigetic mystery that reunites soul (*psychē*) and mind (*nous*) becomes the sacrificial mystery and mythogeme through which the ineffable (*arreton*), secret, negative continue to hold sway over thinking by turning the lack of foundation into the foundation in lack; foundation in a negative ground, negativity as foundation. Not even Derrida, for Agamben, can escape the thrust of this critique. For as an earlier passage explains, the negativity in the form of *grammē*, trace, *différance* that Derrida seeks to deploy against metaphysics is neither outside (as Derrida would never claim) nor at the margins of metaphysics, but in fact occupies its very center as its negative, sigetic foundation.

Even though Agamben’s critique of deconstruction, as Kevin Attell demonstrates, assumes many forms in the course of his career, its gist remains remarkably constant: while deconstruction pushes up against the limit of metaphysics, it remains caught at this limit, failing to move decisively beyond its horizon. Thus Agamben will speak of deconstruction as a “thwarted messianism, a suspension of the messianic.” This certainly fails to do justice to the complexity of Derrida’s thought. Indeed, if deconstructive criticism develops out of a practice of close and intense reading, deploying its own vocabulary at the margins of philosophy, Agamben rarely engages deeply and intimately with Derrida’s texts, but rather conceives of deconstruction from a certain captivating distance, if not indeed *sub specie aeternitatis*. It is as if for Agamben deconstructive practices of reading were themselves not merely symptomatic of the failure to overcome metaphysics, but the very means by which metaphysics remains caught up in itself by dwelling on its failures—and hence a seduction that the thinker must avoid at all cost, and even at the cost of losing the semblance of philosophical rigor. Resisting this temptation, it will

be necessary not to let oneself all the way into the complexity of the philosophical text, not to carefully untie and retie its twists, snags, and entanglements, but to cut through it once and for all. As Agamben writes in *Homo Sacer*: “the dissolution of the ban, like the cutting of the Gordian knot, resembles less the solution of a logical or mathematical problem than the solution of an enigma. Here the metaphysical aporia shows its political nature.” This reference to the enigma recalls a passage from the last section of *Stanzas*, where Agamben argues that Western thought has always sought to understand the sign from the perspective of Oedipus, the one who solves the riddle, rather than from the perspective of the Sphinx:

What the Sphinx proposed was not simply something whose signified is hidden and veiled under an “enigmatic” signifier, but a mode of speech in which the original fracture of presence was alluded to in the paradox of a word that approaches its object while keeping it indefinitely at a distance. The *ainos* (story, fable) of the *ainigma* is not only obscurity, but a more original mode of speaking.

The fable, as it were, is what keeps the fracture of presence—an anticipation of Agamben’s famous account of the fracture of life into *zoē* and *bios*—in the open and in play, rather than veiled in mystery. As we now turn to consider the contrast Agamben will draw between the fable and the ineffable, the striking implications of this passage will become more clear.

FABULOUS DECONSTRUCTION

Returning to Agamben’s “Infancy and History” from the perspective that has now emerged, it becomes clear that the destruction of experience is nothing but the original tendency of metaphysics, which, in its very attempt to capture experience (the event of language, the voice), ends up replacing experience, as that which is necessarily dispersed among a plurality of speakers, with Experience: the sigetic, mysterious encounter with the negative ground that unites and unifies these beings in their plurality. Yet the theme of the destruction of experience also suggests a rhetoric of nostalgia and loss: precisely what Derrida will challenge in his brilliant early readings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Claude Lévi-Strauss. This is perhaps why, returning in deconstruction’s wake to the question of experience in the short essay “Experimentum Linguae”—written a decade after the first edition of *Infanzia e storia* and affixed to the 1993 English translation as a preface—Agamben, seeking to explain the relation of the earlier work to

Language and Death and hence to the incipient project of *Homo Sacer*, turns away from the theme of the destruction of experience. Yet this only makes more explicit what is already clear in “Infancy and History”: if there is hope of being able to experience in the full sense, it cannot be a question of returning to what is past and restoring what has been lost, but of coming to terms fully with the loss of experience so as to discover in this very loss the possibility of another kind of experience, apart from the horizon of metaphysics—an experience that is not so much new, not beyond the history of metaphysics, as it is what has always already been going on, though without exactly being experienced as experience. Precisely this is what Agamben will mean by infancy. As he explains in the preface, the transcendental experience of infancy involves the difference between language and speech—*langue* and *parole*, in Ferdinand de Saussure’s terminology, or semiotic and semantic in that of Émile Benveniste. Benveniste in particular, by showing that no conceptual mediation is possible between these two dimensions, forces linguistics, and indeed all the human sciences, to confront a “supreme aporia” that defines their disciplinary limit, beyond which they must transform into philosophy (*IH*, 6). For, as Agamben notes, the very condition of the possibility of knowledge, infancy, and history is that the experience of language be split into language and speech. A “primordially speaking being,” existing “primordially within an undivided language,” would already be fully united with its linguistic nature, and thus would not contain the discontinuity and difference that is the basis of history or knowledge (*IH*, 6–7). It is this original, unbridgeable difference between structure and event that constitutes the essence of the human, and the essential experience of human being as a *zōon echōn logon*. It is from this, moreover, that we can begin to understand the “true meaning” of the Aristotelian opposition between *dynamis* and *energeia*, potency and act (*IH*, 7). It is only in the conclusion of the preface that Agamben, anticipating the *Coming Community*, suggests the political dimension of this concept of transcendental experience. After dismissing the possibility that the community born of the *experimentum linguae* could assume the form of any sort of presupposition (if only a purely grammatical self-presupposition) or the given content of a quiddity, he explains that the *experimentum linguae* leads to “a radical revision of the very idea of Community” (*IH*, 9). Because the content of this *experimentum* is nothing else than the mere fact that there is language, it cannot be

represented by the “patrimony” of names and rules handed down from generation to generation. It is not the hidden and special possession of this or that historical people, and certainly not an original and constitutive experience, but rather the “unpresupposable non-latency” in which men have always dwelt, and in which, for all the forty millennia of *Homo sapiens*, man has not yet ventured to assume this non-latency, to have the experience of his speaking being (*IH*, 9).

The guiding question of this essay, which I have been approaching through various detours, now comes into clearer focus: what is the relation of Agamben’s philosophical style to experience? How does his own mode of discourse register, put in play, and play into the experience that philosophy will involve? If this question becomes so pressing, it is on the one hand because it is absolutely clear that for Agamben a certain transcendental experience does pose itself, if not exactly as the ground or the condition, nevertheless as the *sine qua non* of philosophy. As he puts it in the preface to *Infancy and History*, invoking Foucault’s “La pensée du dehors”:

To carry out the *experimentum linguae*, however, is to venture into a perfectly empty dimension . . . in which one can encounter only the pure exteriority of language, that “étalement du langage dans son être brut” of which Foucault speaks in one of his most philosophically dense writings. Every thinker has probably had to undertake this experience at least once; it is even possible that what we call thought is purely and simply this *experimentum*. (*IH*, 6)

Yet despite recalling philosophy to the problem of experience, Agamben’s discourse, far from betraying the wounds of the struggle to articulate experience, seems to move in the direction of clarity. Not only does Agamben avoid needless obscurity, but he seems to have no need for the terminological and conceptual innovations that compel philosophical discourse to abandon the seeming clarity of everyday language. Far from resisting the sedimentation of “original” thinking into mere “doctrine,” Agamben burrows into the tradition in all its dogmatic glory; recapitulating, synthesizing, narrating, drawing out analogies and resonances across the tradition. Rejecting the Cartesian tendency that finds its most radical expression in phenomenology, he performs a reduction away from the originality of transcendental experience and toward the tradition, allowing the tradition itself, as at once a succession and constellation of singular doctrines, to present itself as such. This is perhaps clearest in his most recent writings, such as the latest installments of *Homo Sacer*, which can appear almost pedantic and somewhat

artless, and above all in *The Kingdom and the Glory* with its doxographic treatment of doxology. But in a more subtle sense it is also true of those works that reject conventions of academic writing, such as *The Coming Community* or the *Idea of Prose*. No reading of Agamben, if it is either to give credence to or to dispute his work's claim to constitute an event in the history of philosophy, can avoid confronting the tension between the force of his insistence (following Benjamin's "Program of the Coming Philosophy") on transcendental experience as the sine qua non of philosophy, and his reduction of philosophy to doxographic erudition.

The contradiction between these tendencies, however, is only apparent. Agamben's "doxographic reduction" is not an evasion of, but a response to the challenge of entering into a relation to transcendental experience. While Agamben seems to follow Heidegger by referring philosophical thinking to an experience that must always take place for there to be philosophy at all (yet which has always previously been evaded by conceiving of it as otherwise than the experience that it is), he turns from Heidegger's path in one decisive way: this experience does not involve mystery, negativity, silence, death, or interiority—it is not the experience of the secret, but of the pure exteriority of language. This in turn suggests that past philosophers have evaded this experience by conceiving of it in terms of interiority, mystery, negativity, and death: they have supposed that the experience that the philosopher must have is one that, in a certain sense, only the philosopher could have. Against this, Agamben will suggest in effect that the experience the philosopher must have had is nothing else than the very experience that everyone already has. If everydayness involves the impossibility of experience, this very impossibility, as the product of the scientific secularization of the "sacrificial mysteries," would also involve the impossibility of the mysterious Experience, which—from the beginning, by holding out the prospect of the overcoming of the plural condition of humanity—had taken the place of experience, rendering it impossible. The destruction of experience is thus also the destruction of the Experience that has taken its place, opening the way for the experience of language as pure exteriority, without mystery, negativity, or death.

It is not yet clear how this experience of language as pure exteriority could be brought into play through philosophical discourse, nor how Agamben's writings will endeavor to achieve this. In the conclusion of "Experimentum linguae," Agamben quotes the "only public lecture" Wittgenstein ever gave:

And now I shall describe the experience of wonderment before the existence of the world, with these words: the world thus is experienced as a miracle. I am now tempted to say that the correct expression in language for the miracle of the existence of the world, albeit as expressing nothing *within* language, is the existence of language itself. (*IH*, 9)

Wittgenstein would seem to mark out one path, and perhaps the most rigorous, showing how language could be brought to speak for itself in its exteriority, to show itself in an exteriority without secrets—what else is the "language game" than this showing? To demonstrate that the meaning of a term is equivalent to its use is to divest language of its secrets, to bring it fully and absolutely into the *agora*, into the public openness of political life. Hence Agamben, in a characteristic gesture, moves immediately from Wittgenstein to the question of politics. If we try to follow through with Wittgenstein's experiment, asking "what then is the correct expression for the existence of language?" we must recognize, as the only possible answer: "human life, as *ethos*, as ethical way" (*IH*, 9–10). "The search for a *polis* and an *oikia* befitting this void and un presupposable community," Agamben adds, "is the *infantile* task of future generations" (*IH*, 10).

Yet while Agamben affirms the value of Wittgenstein's thought, he also hints at its limits. Wittgenstein, it would seem, is not able to think the horizon in which his own most radical thought, the thought of the simple existence of language, can itself be pursued. It is not only that Wittgenstein does not explicitly theorize "community" in the manner of Heidegger, Maurice Blanchot, Derrida, Emmanuel Levinas, and Jean-Luc Nancy, but that he lacks what is needed most: the specifically erudite, even pedantic knowledge of the tradition. This is because the problem of politics is ultimately nothing else than the problem of the tradition of thinking: to belong to a community is not only to participate in language games that present themselves in a certain immediacy—as what we might call the simple "use" of language—but to remain beholden to an inheritance that commands us even when we are ignorant of it, and perhaps above all (as Derrida had already shown in "Structure, Sign, and Play") when we naively

suppose that we are free of it and can already regard it from the outside. Wittgenstein demystifies and profanes language, returning it to the everydayness of use, but he does not demystify the tradition, community, or history. This other profanation demands recourse not to the language game, but to something completely different: the fable. As Agamben explains in the penultimate paragraph of the title essay of *Infancy and History*, it is the fable, that which must be narrated, rather than the *ineffable* mystery, that contains “the truth of infancy” as man’s origin. If the fable can free man from the obligation of silence that the mystery, with its rapturous participation in the cult of knowledge, imposes, it is because the silence of the fable, as spell and bewitchment, “must eventually be shattered and conquered.” Hence in the fairy tale:

Man is struck dumb, and animals emerge from the pure language of nature in order to speak. Through the temporary confusion of the two spheres, it is the world of the *open mouth*, of the Indo-European root **bha* (from which the word fable is derived), which the fairy tale validates, against the world of the *closed mouth*, of the root **mu*. . . .

Indeed, it can be said that the fairy tale is the place where, through the inversion of the categories: closed mouth/open mouth, pure language/infancy, man and nature exchange roles before each finds their own place in history. (*IH*, 61).

In this extraordinary passage, Agamben seems to have in mind not only more standard children’s fairy tales, but also the *Golden Ass* of Apuleius, which famously ends with a bizarre parody of Greek mystery religions. The intention of the novel in the Western tradition—a form of prose that from the beginning was both literature and philosophy—is to undo the enchantment of metaphysics itself; to profane the mystery at its core. Agamben’s writings seek in this way to *fabulize* the history of metaphysics—to present this history as a series of fables. Rather than orienting the history of philosophy around the encounter with being, and rather than turning the act of reading itself into a game and play of signification contesting the totalizing claims of metaphysics, Agamben instead transforms the history of philosophy into erudite gossip, chatter that, often deliberately concealing its sources, presents itself as a kind of hearsay. This is not despite, but because of its philological rigor: for the rigor of philology is fundamentally the rigor of hearsay; the insistence on the text beyond every extratextual source of evidence and experience. It is as if Agamben drew out the consequences of the one moment in *Being and*

Time where Heidegger, with the aim of confirming the existential interpretation of Dasein as care by way of a “pre-ontological self-interpretation,” would draw not only on a *fabula*, rather than a *mythos*, but indeed on a Latin fable, recounted by Gaius Julius Hyginus, that tells of how care (*cura*), having shaped the first human being from clay and induced Jupiter to animate it with spirit, was granted dominion over man for the course of his natural life. The thought of care (*cura*), this suggests—and here again we might think of the *Golden Ass*—cannot be separated from curiosity (*curiositas* is itself etymologically related to *care*) and chatter. If care is of the very essence of being-in-the-world—if the being of being-in-the-world is care—then it can perhaps only be accessed by way of the radical exteriority of language in its everydayness. There can be no passage from curiosity and chatter to the authentic experience of existence, and indeed the very opposition between the categorial and the existential must give way.

This strategy of profanation appears with the greatest clarity in Agamben’s most stylistically sophisticated and beautiful work, *Idea of Prose*. The introduction, styled a “threshold,” suggests the immense stakes of the transformation in philosophical discourse that, in an almost inconspicuous fashion, is taking place. As if telling an anecdote and with no attempt to reveal his sources, Agamben recounts the story of Damascius, who became the “last diadoch of pagan philosophy” when the School of Athens closed in the sixth century.³¹ He was ultimately forced into exile in Persia where at the court of the barbarian king he set to writing a work that was to be the capstone of Greek metaphysics.³² As if the project of perfect contemplation had become impossible the very moment it was freed from the political, administrative, and pedagogical distractions that once stood in its way, he struggles to make progress with his task, putting it down for days and weeks on end. He finally has an epiphany that, rather than enabling him to bring his work to completion, allows him to break it off: the entire volume he had crammed with letters “was nothing other than the attempt to represent the perfectly bare writing tablet on which nothing had yet been written.”

At stake in this anecdote is the very viability of the philosophical legacy of Plato once it has been forced into exile among the barbarians—literally the babblers. And indeed this fable, told with virtuosity about the end of philosophy and its new beginning, concerns fable itself as the means by which

philosophy, consigned to a babbling barbarian exile, could break the spell of its mysterious enchantment, not by refusing to write or even to philosophize but by unwriting itself: not in order to leave behind nothing, and certainly not to reinforce its mystery, but to leave behind the writing tablet itself, the pure potentiality of writing and language. We might speak of a deconstruction—the image of the writing tablet is important for Derrida—but a deconstruction that is fabulous and synthetic rather than analytic and rigorous; a deconstruction that will seek to tell a narrative about philosophy, to turn philosophy into a fable, rather than exhibiting in an extreme fashion the tension and contradictions at play in the concept.

Agamben conceives of this fabulous deconstruction as a response to both the original spell of metaphysics and the impasse of Derridean deconstruction. As I now hope to show, he also understands it as the realization of a potentiality (and impotentiality) that is characteristically Italian. Yet while this account of the Italian language and an Italian “physiognomy” must seem highly speculative and problematic, if not altogether fantastic, it also could be said to offer, precisely in its fabulousness, the most radical basis for understanding Agamben’s deconfabulatory method.

ITALIAN CATEGORIES

In a recent editorial in *La repubblica* “Se un impero latino prendesse forma nel cuore d’Europa” (If a Latin empire were formed in the heart of Europe), Agamben, drawing closely on Alexandre Kojève, advocated the formation of a political alliance of countries such as Spain, Italy, and France against German hegemony, suggesting that the impending disintegration of the European union was the almost inevitable result of attempting to establish political unity on the basis of purely economic relations rather than the “genuine affinities” (*parentela reale*) of culture, language, forms of life, and religion. If Agamben’s argument seems so perplexing, it is partly because one tends to overlook precisely that aspect of his thinking that, while least palatable to the cosmopolitan sensibilities of the present, is decisive for understanding his project. Given Agamben’s global intellectual celebrity, and because he draws on such a wide range of philosophical and literary traditions, it is easy to forget that he remains an Italian thinker, writing in Italian and engaging in ongoing intellectual and political debates that remain deeply rooted in

the specific situation of postwar Italy. Nor does it help that Agamben's global readership has tended to treat the English translations as if they were the original text. Yet for Agamben, no less than for Heidegger, the possibility of philosophical discourse must be understood in terms of the language in which it is written. Language is not the neutral medium of thought. And, like Heidegger, Agamben will orient his own project around a "dialogue" between *Dichten* and *Denken*, poetry and thought. Because Agamben sees the Italian language as essentially different than German—different in a sense that cannot be grasped in terms of linguistic positivism—this dialogue, and the very nature of Italian thinking, will also have to be different, and indeed essentially so. Not only will it proceed differently, and avail itself of different resources, but it will be capable of different things. It will have a different potential, a different *dynamis*, and perhaps indeed the potentiality of potentiality as such. One could even say that his entire project is underwritten by the unstated conviction that the most radical tendencies of prewar twentieth-century German philosophy (Heidegger, Benjamin, but also Ludwig Wittgenstein, Carl Schmitt) achieve a kind of legibility (a Benjaminian *Lesbarkeit*) and will indeed become capable of being brought to a certain fulfillment, in his own, specifically Italian, philosophical idiom. Just as Benjamin becomes the antidote to Heidegger, Italian will emerge as an antidote to German—and indeed will derive from the same source as the venom that it resists. This source is the bilingualism of the Western tradition, in all the manifold forms that it will assume: the disjunction between the Classical and modern languages, dead and living, Latin and vernacular, *phonē* and *grammē*, voice and Voice.

Agamben develops this dimension of his thought in the 1996 essay collection *Categorie italiane: Studi di poetica e di letteratura*, published in English as *The End of the Poem: Studies in Poetics*. By shifting the focus to the complex interplay of poetics and eschatology, the English title obscures the extent to which Agamben's poetic reflections remain concerned with the nature of poetry in his mother tongue and cognate Romance vernaculars. Dante takes the place of Friedrich Hölderlin, who nevertheless remains important for Agamben, as the principal point of departure for thinking the end of the poem. It is as if Scardanelli, Hölderlin's pseudonymous signature in the days of his madness, offers a hint that Heidegger himself, bound to a certain German linguistic chauvinism, could not follow.

Agamben's preface justifies the original title by referring to an unrealized project conceived in Paris in conversations with Italo Calvino and Claudio Rugafiori. They each agreed to devote one section to defining "Italian categories," identifying "the categorial structures of Italian culture through a series of conjoined polar concepts." Agamben himself would put forward several oppositions to explore: *tragedy/comedy, law/creature, biography/fable* (EP, xi). At stake in thinking the Italian categories, this suggests, is nothing less than the way in which the one who speaks and thinks in Italian exists in the openness of a "public" truth—the way in which, through the Italian language, human being has been brought into the *agora* of a certain kind of public gathering and conventionality. The following paragraph from the 1982 essay "Pascoli and the Thought of the Voice" suggests how far Agamben will go in affirming a cultural essentialism. The trait that "most deeply marks the physiognomy of Italian culture," he explains, is "the will and the consciousness of operating in a dead language, in an individual and artificially constructed language, which is 'glossolalic' in the sense considered, with or without a 'prayer of interpretation'" (EP, 73). If the very concept of physiognomy, which silently invokes Benjamin's "Fate and Character," suggests the possibility of judging the nature of a thing from its surface appearance, thus grasping the inner essence of a culture from its artifacts and moving from the frozen, deathly exteriority (precisely that which might be preserved by a death mask) to the interior animating principle, Agamben's physiognomy of Italian culture leads to an almost perverse conclusion that seems to call physiognomy itself into question. Whereas physiognomic criticism seems romantic in spirit, endeavoring to discover the living language that reveals itself through the dead letter of literature, the Italian physiognomy exposes, behind the surface of a poetic tradition whose very vitality inspired the dreams of the romantics, a language that is dead, artificial, invented by the individual rather than giving voice to the collective life of the people. This is to say that Italian (and also the language of the troubadours: Old Occitan, or Old Provençal as it is also known) is the very opposite of the romantic dream that would be dreamed around it, and by the Germans above all. Yet in some sense this romantic dream still remains the dream *of* Italian, in both an objective and a subjective sense.

This point is expressed with perfect clarity in a masterful interpretation of the “anonymous incunabulum printed in Venice in 1499” titled *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*. At the heart of Agamben’s reading of this singular text, which, “closed in its perfect Aldine jacket, seems to be composed of elements so divergent as to make it appear from the beginning a dead specimen without precedent or descendants,” is the complex interplay of living and dead languages, and of Latin (and Greek) and the vernacular, in a work whose own language itself defies classification (*EP*, 43). In particular, Agamben seeks to show that the *Hypnerotomachia* stands at the threshold of a transformation in the understanding of the relation of the living and the dead. At the opposite sides of this transformation are Dante and the humanists of the fifteenth and sixteenth century. For the Dante of the *Convivio* and *De vulgari eloquentia*, the vernacular is perishable and dead because it follows “use” rather than “art.” Indeed, “to speak in the vernacular is precisely to experience this incessant death and rebirth of words, which no grammar can fully treat” (*EP*, 53–54). By contrast, Latin, the *lingua grammatica*, is not only “perpetual and incorruptible,” but is “what puts an end to the mortality of languages” (*EP*, 53). Yet while the vernacular is mortal, touched through and through by death, it can still claim a certain privilege:

The vernacular is an absolutely primordial and immediate experience of speech. . . . It is an experience prior not only to all other languages but also to all science and all knowledge, of which it constitutes the necessary condition. . . . This primordiality of the vernacular . . . is, Dante says, “a cause that engenders love,” . . . that is, the ground of the most “perfect love of one’s own language.” (*EP*, 53)

Dante’s project is “to give stability to the vernacular, which is constituted as the language of poetry, without transforming it into a grammatical language” (*EP*, 54). Whereas Dante’s bilingualism respects the essential difference between Latin and the vernacular and thus maintains the possibility of experience, the bilingualism of the fifteenth and sixteenth century conceives of the struggle between Latin and the vernacular as “a struggle between two grammatical languages,” neither of which allows for an original experience of the event of language as such (*EP*, 54–55). The humanism of the fifteenth and sixteenth century thus “marks the definitive decline of the experience from which Romance lyric poetry emerged, as well as a radical change in the nature of bilingualism” (*EP*, 55). The oppositions defining Dante’s work, such as that between the original and derivate experience of the event of language or

“between *love* of language and *knowledge* of language,” are “replaced by the antithesis between living language and dead language” (*EP*, 55). The implications of this shift are extraordinary. Latin not only becomes reconceived as dead, but as a dead mother tongue, and indeed “a mother tongue of a new kind”—the mother of mothers; the “*lingua matrix* of seventeenth-century philology—the original language from which other languages derive and whose death renders possible [their] intelligibility and grammaticality” (*EP*, 55). Whereas for Dante Latin and the vernacular coexisted in fundamental synchrony, now languages, in their birth and death, origination and decline, are situated within a historical continuity. This lays the foundation for “Romantic linguistics,” and in turn the modern science of language: “For what is Indo-European—whose reconstruction marked the culmination of modern comparative grammar—if not the idea of a dead language that is always necessarily presupposed for every language and that, present precisely in being dead, sustains the systematic kinship and intelligibility of languages?” (*EP*, 56).

Heidegger is not named even once in this essay. However, just as in *Infancy and History*, he is the principal target of Agamben’s critique of the poetic and epistemological foundations of European modernity. Bilingualism is indeed decisive for Heidegger’s thought. Insisting on the unique privilege of Greek and German and their mutual affinity, Heidegger will never cease to conceive of thinking itself as a dialogue between different discourses; between the first beginning of thought and the other beginning; between poetry and thinking. Yet if Heidegger remains under the sway of romanticism, his privileging of Greek over Latin and German over the Romance languages suggests at the same time that dead and living language have entered into an even more disingenuous, indeed disastrous constellation. The privilege he grants to German over French or Italian or English depends on the dubious claim that it is somehow equiprimordial, co-originary, and not a degenerate scion. German becomes the medium in which the language of ancient Greek philosophy can be reborn. Ironically, precisely this strategy is the essence of the Latin humanism that Heidegger holds in such contempt. For as Agamben explains, it was the humanists who, passionately defending Latin, “first formulated the idea of a life, senescence, and rebirth—but, by that very token, also of a *death*—of language” and thus “first conceived of the object of

their living love as a dead and reborn language” (*EP*, 50). The *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, this esoteric incunabulum, anticipates the basic gesture of a body of writings written more than four centuries later that may someday also ask its commentators to wonder in what language it was written. Agamben argues that the poliphilia of the *Hypnerotomachia*, that is, Polifilo’s love for the ancient woman Polia, is an allegory for the Latin that will be erotically reborn through its strange semi-vernacular. This allegory will find an echo, perhaps more than an echo, in Heidegger’s own striving to return to the origin by inventing an origin, beyond every invention, to which to return.

Agamben’s Italian physiognomy, this suggests, implies a contrast with a German physiognomy that his 2013 *La Repubblica* editorial will merely make explicit. German culture will almost always deny the death that is the very origin of its life, and will seek again and again, if only in the name of the Southern, Italian other, to return to a pure life, a pure self-presence, even if this demands taking a detour through death and finitude. By contrast, Italian culture will involve nothing less than willfully and consciously embracing the deadness of its language. It is not a matter of being-toward-death as an event to come, but of facing, as David Kishik puts it, “the fact that *I am already dead*.” This “deadness” is, of course, intimately related to the negativity that Agamben regards as the very essence of metaphysics, and indeed one should not suppose that the Italian physiognomy does not itself remain within the horizon of metaphysics. Indeed Dante’s *Commedia* will establish the deathly, negative logic of metaphysics as the essence of Italian vernacular literature. If his earlier works had sought to render the vernacular enduring and stable through poetic practice, he now wholly accepts “the irreparable loss of every mother tongue . . . stating, through Adam, that even before the construction of the tower of Babel Edenic language was already ‘all extinct’” (*EP*, 58). The conclusion of Agamben’s essay, moreover, leaves little doubt of the need to overcome a poetic (and metaphysical) horizon established by Dante that still remains in effect. Referring to the dream of the *Hypnerotomachia*, whose “perfect self-referentiality” and unique bilingualism realizes “the absolute dwelling of language in the beginning” striven for by Dante and the other poets of the Dolce Stil Novo, Agamben adds that this dream, which is “fully contemporary today,” continues to be dreamt again and again:

How we might wake from it in the end, how we, the speaking beings, might awaken from the dream of language and once and for all leave behind us the illusion of bilingualism—whether, in other words, there can be human speech that is univocal and withdrawn from all bilingualism—these questions lie beyond the scope of this essay. (*EP*, 60–61)

Neither the anonymous author of the incunabulum nor Dante will offer a way out from metaphysics. Nor will Giovanni Pascoli, who, as the “poet of metaphysics in the age of its decline” experiences most radically the original mythologeme of metaphysics (*EP*, 74). And yet the readings of these and other Italian poets undertaken in *The End of the Poem* will hint at the sense in which Italian rather than German provides the resources for a body of writing opening up a path toward a way out. The key rests with the fabulousness of Italian, a quality that, as Agamben’s prefatory remark suggests, must be strictly opposed to biography and autobiography. This fabulousness is explained by Agamben as follows:

For the Provençals as for the Dolce Stil Novo poets, the experience of love was the experience of the absolute primacy of the event of words over life and of *what is poeticized* over *what is lived* . . . Now this experience is overturned in the idea that every poeticization is, instead, always a poeticization of life, a putting into words—narration—of a biographical event. (*EP*, 57)

Yet within the Italian and Romance traditions, even this reversal is more apparent than real. One never escapes from the primacy of the word. “Boccaccio and the anonymous authors of the troubadour *vidas* do nothing other than follow the love poets’ intention through to its most extreme consequence” (*EP*, 57). By constructing (or we might say: confabulating) “a biographical anecdote to explain a poem, they invent *what is lived* on the basis of *what is poeticized*, and not vice versa” (*EP*, 57). This nevertheless suggests that, especially when we look outside the Italian and Romance traditions, we might discover a more radical form of biography—one that will seek to hold back the fabulous, dreamlike inventiveness of language by referring it to some kind of real kernel, a real experience capable of giving birth to knowledge. This project of modern biography and autobiography, obsessed as it is with reaching the authentic, true self, finds its most radical expression in Heidegger’s *Being and Time*. German existentialia, rooted in the living rather than lethal experience of death, are perhaps the true opposite of Italian categories. Opposed to this project would be a fabulous poetic language that does not seek to follow or imitate life, but becomes instead the invention of life. Whereas in solving the sphinx’s riddle Oedipus forces biographical unity onto fractured life—his answer (“man”) literally transforms the enigma

into a biography—such language allows the enigma to stand by inventing the new enigma of new life. Fabulous language is not already outside of metaphysics, and yet, unlike the biographical (or could we say: biopolitical) language to which it is opposed, it is an enchantment that, precisely as enchantment, is able to dispel its spell. Dreaming only its own dream, and even when completely lost in its dream, it is always on the verge of breaking free.

This suggests the significance of the other two pairs of categories that Agamben mentions in the preface to *The End of the Poem*: tragedy/comedy and law/creature. The Italian physiognomy is characterized not only by its fabulous rather than biographical traits, but by the fact that the tragic tendencies that will come to prevail in modern culture—and certainly nowhere more so than in German-speaking lands (in Schiller, Hölderlin, Schelling, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Wagner, Nietzsche, Spengler, Heidegger, Freud)—will never take hold. Whereas the tragic worldview will involve natural (systematic, structural) guilt and personal innocence—just as Oedipus followed an inevitable destiny, Adolf Eichmann was merely following orders—in comedy there is only personal guilt. Nature remains innocent. A sense for the innocence of nature, combined with the hopelessly fallen, lethal being of language, is the legacy of Dante's *Divine Comedy*:

If Italian culture remained more faithful than any other to the antitragic inheritance of the late-ancient world, this is because, at the beginning of the fourteenth century, a Florentine poet decided to abandon the tragic claim to personal innocence in the name of the creature's natural innocence, leaving behind perfect Edenic love for the sake of comically divided human love, morality's inalienable person for law's "foreign person," and the kite's "lofty soaring" "over things that are totally base" for the sparrow's "low flight." (*EP*, 21–22)

It is this antitragic faith that will at least continue to hold open the door through which, with a gesture that is at once imperceptible and monstrous, it would be possible to pass back out through the door of the law and think creaturely life as it is before it has submitted to the law's violence. For indeed: "in comedy, law becomes the instrument of personal salvation. The person is the 'mask' that the creature assumes and then, in order to purify itself, abandons to the hands of the law" (*EP*, 21). Agamben's account of the comic is itself not as original as it might seem: it draws silently but extensively on Benjamin's "Fate and Character," the very text that first introduces the concept of *bloßes Leben* (mere life,

la nuda vita). While for both Agamben and Benjamin comedy stands opposed to the fateful order of tragic guilt, Agamben transforms Benjamin's complex argument in decisive respects. He places the comic within a specifically Italian context, giving it an Italian pedigree, and he also insists, far more explicitly, that the comic remain in a relation to the law, even if this relation is the mirror image of the tragic relation. And perhaps most strikingly, Agamben completely dissociates the comic from the concept of genius. In this Agamben differs from Benjamin, who conceives of the comic in terms of the still tragic and eminently German figure of the *genius*—the creator who sacrifices and redeems himself through his creation—and also in terms of an answer and hence dialogue (which for Benjamin is itself inherently tragic). This leaves Benjamin not quite able to recognize either the potential or the limitation of the comic.

The comic, which is always at risk of being intoned tragicomically, is the shibboleth at the threshold of Agamben's fabulous undertaking: if we read Agamben from within a tradition that, all its deconstructive vigilance notwithstanding, remains tragic in its sensibility, not only do we fail to understand his intentions, but we render his entire project incomprehensible and incoherent. This very vigilance, obsessively defending itself against the possibility that it could have missed something and not given everything its due as it tries to find its way out of the labyrinthine entanglements of the metaphysical tradition, is a tragic vigilance, registering the wish to exculpate the individual thinker even as the world (the system) falls to pieces. Of Dante, Agamben writes: "The fierce mask left by a superficial hagiography to a tradition that almost immediately forgot the reasons for the Comedy's title is, in this sense, a comic mask" (*EP*, 22). The same might well be said of Agamben himself: here he tells us, as directly as he can, how he must be read. The very stiffness of Agamben's Heidegger, his Schmitt, his Aristotle, his *homo sacer*, his sovereign, his Arendt and Foucault, and even his Benjamin and his Dante and his Paul, the rigor mortis that Agamben will never seek to cover over by reviving a living dialectic, is not the stiffness of a death mask, the last trace and testament of a departed life. Rather, it is the stiffness of comic personas, comic masks, faithful to creaturely innocence in their very injustice and untruth.

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¹ This transcendental experience is what Husserl understands as a “pure intuiting”, “a kind of givenness in which essences are given originarily as objects entirely in the same way that individual realities are given in experiential intuition (*in der erfahrenden Anschauung*)” (Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Philosophy*, 39). While in this passage Husserl avoids speaking of a transcendental experience, the parallel between the two kinds of intuition suggests that, if the conflation of experience with mere empiricism could be avoided, such a term would be quite apt. And Husserl, as Dermot Moran argues, does indeed develop a richer, no longer empirical concept of experience (*Edmund Husserl*, 44).

² Heidegger, much like Benjamin and also Husserl, distinguishes between *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis*, both of which may be rendered in English as “experience.” *Erlebnis*, Heidegger’s translation of the Greek *pathēma* (*Sein und Zeit*, 214), tends, in *Being and Time*, as in Husserl, to refer to mere interior psychological events, whereas *Erfahrung* has a richer and more positive range of meanings, encompassing the ontic, ontological, phenomenological, and pre-phenomenological. While the notion of experience in Derrida has received relatively little scholarly attention, it plays, as Zeynep Direk has noted, a crucial and complex role in his thought, and especially in his later writings. Indeed, a “double logic of experience can be shown to determine his deconstruction of the phenomenological concept of experience.” For while he deconstructs the metaphysical determination of experience as an experience of presence that underwrites Husserl’s phenomenology, he also seeks to develop, by way of his reading of Husserl, an account of “the experience of the trace—a condition of the possibility and of the impossibility of experience understood in terms of presence,” and ultimately of a radically aporetic experience (Direk, “The Renovation of the Notion of Experience in Derrida’s Philosophy,” iv). Direk published her thesis in 1998, and yet fourteen years later Steven Gormley would again call attention to the neglect of the role of experience in Derrida’s thought, arguing, in rather similar terms to Direk’s, that, far from abandoning the concept of experience as hopelessly metaphysical, Derrida is “engaged in a project of rearticulating the concept of experience” throughout his career (Gormley, “Rearticulating the Concept of Experience, Rethinking the Demands of Deconstruction,” 374–75).

³ Jean-Baptiste Marongiu, “Agamben, le chercheur d’homme” (interview with Giorgio Agamben), *Le Monde*, April 1, 1999, http://next.liberation.fr/livres/1999/04/01/agamben-le-chercheur-d-homme_270036; my translation, cited in Thüring, “Die Sprache, das Leben,” 101n1.

⁴ Negri, “Giorgio Agamben: The Discreet Taste of the Dialectic,” 111, 117–18.

⁵ Friedrich Schlegel refers to the “physiognomy” of a thought, which can be characterized “with a few strokes of the pen” (Athenaeum Fragments 302, in *Philosophical Fragments*, 60).

⁶ Watkin, *The Literary Agamben*, 2–3. Notable confrontations with the “literary” dimension of Agamben’s thought include those of Watkin, and also Attell, “The Muse of Translation.”

⁷ Agamben, *The Signature of All Things*, 7.

⁸ Agamben, *Infancy and History*, 13; hereafter cited parenthetically as *IH*.

⁹ The passage from “The Storyteller” appears in Benjamin, *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, 3:143–44.

¹⁰ This is understood by Benjamin specifically in terms of the relations between experience, authority, and death. By stressing the political over the natural, Agamben also tacitly invokes Hannah Arendt’s *The Human Condition*, a decisive influence on his thought from his first encounter with her writings in 1970. For Arendt, human mortality is precisely not a merely natural condition, but involves human plurality and individuality.

¹¹ It is a mistake, Agamben argues, to think that in classical Greek thought the mind is a faculty of the soul.

¹² This opposition between the esoteric and the exoteric certainly recalls Leo Strauss’s *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, and yet Agamben’s focus is rather different. He is not concerned principally with esoteric doctrine and writing, but esoteric experience.

¹³ For a study of the concept of experience in Benjamin, see Caygill, *Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience*.

¹⁴ Frances Yates, to whom Agamben was introduced through Italo Calvino, invited Agamben to work at the Warburg Institute during the year 1974–75. See Leland de la Durantaye, *Giorgio Agamben: A Critical Introduction*, 66.

¹⁵ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 208.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 311.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 322.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 333.

¹⁹ Agamben’s critique of Heideggerian being-toward-death also resonates with Blanchot’s *neutre* (neuter, neutral).

²⁰ See Attell, *Giorgio Agamben: Beyond the Threshold of Deconstruction*, 20.

²¹ Agamben, *Language and Death*, 106.

²² *Ibid.* Regarding the significance of the shifter in Agamben, see Justin Clemens, “The Role of the Shifter and the Problem of Reference in Giorgio Agamben.”

²³ Agamben, *Language and Death*, 106.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 39.

²⁶ Attell, *Giorgio Agamben*, 22.

²⁷ Agamben, *The Time That Remains*, 103.

²⁸ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 48. See also Attell, *Giorgio Agamben*, 18–19.

²⁹ Agamben, *Stanzas*, 138. Attell stresses that this passage should not be read as a “statement of affinity with the deconstructive notion of *différance* but rather something like an effort to step backward beyond it” (*Giorgio Agamben*, 36).

³⁰ Benjamin, drawing on Kierkegaard, invokes *Geschwätz* (prattle, chatter) in “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man,” 71. The final words of Peter Fenves’s study of “chatter” in Kierkegaard suggest that Agamben’s epigonic erudition differs from chatter by continuing to insist on the coherence of the tradition: “‘Chatter’ in the Kierkegaardian sense does not found or promote a tradition; it is closer to a swamp than a source. Its ‘origin’ is an enigma whose solution—for Wittgenstein, Benjamin, and Heidegger—would be the very dissolution of philosophy as it has hitherto been thought and practiced. Kierkegaard insisted that even Scripture,

which still had the glow of revelation to protect it, gave him no help in this one regard” (“*Chatter*,” 248–49).

³¹ Agamben, *Idea of Prose*, 31.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*, 34.

³⁴ Agamben, “Se un impero latino prendesse forma nel cuore d’Europa,” *La Repubblica*, March 13, 2013. Soon thereafter *Libération* published a French translation: “Que l’Empire latin contre-attaque!” (March 24, 2013): http://www.liberation.fr/planete/2013/03/24/que-l-empire-latin-contre-attaque_890916. It is available in English translation at

<http://www.voxeurop.eu/en/content/article/3593961-latin-empire-should-strike-back>.

³⁵ As Lorenzo Chiesa and Alberto Toscano claim in their introduction to *The Italian Difference: Between Nihilism and Biopolitics*, Italy’s exceptional status among Western European countries remains an abiding preoccupation in post-war leftist philosophy, and has tended to lead to a “peculiar admixture of the extremely parochial . . . and the intensely universal” (3). And as Roberto Esposito, invoking Chiesa and Toscano’s volume, claims, “the peculiarity of contemporary Italian thought resides precisely in this unprecedented double vision: a split gaze focused on the most pressing current events and at the same time on the dispositifs that come with a long or even ancient history” (*Living Thought: The Origins and Actuality of Italian Philosophy*, 4).

³⁶ It is hard to think of a single major theoretical concept in Agamben’s oeuvre whose translation is considered problematic enough to justify continuing reference to the original. One possible exception is *la nuda vita*, where it is necessary to call attention to the systematic relation both with *nudità* and with Benjamin’s “bare life,” and where the differences in nuance between *nuda*, *bloss*, and *bare* are too striking to ignore. Even so, little attention is given to the fact that Agamben’s term inverts *La vita nuda*, the title of a novella by Luigi Pirandello.

³⁷ Alessia Ricciardi describes this collaboration as “a strategic crossroads” that is decisive for the subsequent cultural and intellectual history of Italy, arguing that Agamben’s political turn contrasts sharply with the “aestheticized belle-lettrism” of Calvino (*After “La Dolce Vita,”* 12).

³⁸ Agamben, *The End of the Poem*, xi; hereafter cited parenthetically as *EP*.

³⁹ The notion that there is a certain characteristic (if not necessarily essential and unchanging) nature of the Italians, which determines their national destiny, is, as Ricciardi suggests, a central preoccupation of Italy’s intellectual history, from Giacomo Leopardi in the early nineteenth century to Calvino’s *Six Memos for the New Millennium* and Gianni Vattimo’s “weak thought” (*After “La Dolce Vita,”* 7–11).

⁴⁰ See Benjamin, “Fate and Character,” 206. I am grateful to Peter Fenves for calling my attention to this connection.

⁴¹ William D. Paden stresses that Old Occitan, like the Italian that Dante sought after in *De vulgari eloquentia*, does not represent a specific regional dialect, but, like Homeric Greek, is a “koine, or common language, incorporating features of various regional dialects yet identifiable with none” (*An Introduction to Old Occitan*, 4).

⁴² Kishik, *The Power of Life*, 14.

⁴³ Thus Benjamin writes that “while fate brings to light the immense complexity of the guilty person, the complications and bonds of his guilt, character gives this mystical enslavement of the person to the guilt complex the answer of genius” (“Fate and Character,” 205).