

PDF hosted at the Radboud Repository of the Radboud University Nijmegen

The following full text is a publisher's version.

For additional information about this publication click this link.

<http://hdl.handle.net/2066/119946>

Please be advised that this information was generated on 2017-12-05 and may be subject to change.

Reading Bartleby, Reading Ion

On a Difference between Agamben and Nancy

by

GERT-JAN VAN DER HEIDEN (Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen)

Without any doubt, the concept of the event plays a central role in contemporary thought. This concept obviously has a Heideggerian background, and it is introduced in order to describe the ontological realm opened up by the suspension of the principle of reason. In the work of Heidegger, this principle characterizes metaphysics as ontotheology and guides the metaphysical quest for a unifying ground. Although the concept of the event is defined in different ways, as the works of philosophers such as Badiou, Meillassoux, Marion, Romano and Agamben demonstrate, they are all variations of the same basic idea: the event is without reason and is withdrawn from the quest for a unifying ground. This implies that it is unforeseeable, unrepeatable or singular, contingent and unmasterable.¹ This specific Heideggerian orientation also gives shape to the basic questions that present-day ontologies aim to address: how to think being when the idea of a unifying ground is suspended? How to think it in terms of (plural) singularity, unmasterability and contingency?

To understand how philosophers approach such questions, one may consider the stories they read and the characters to which they are drawn. When philosophers read literary characters, as Deleuze rightly saw, these characters become "*personnages conceptuels*."² They become conceptual characters that the philosophers use to develop a conceptual field. Different characters will thus inspire various trajectories in the field of the philosophical problems that are under discussion.

¹ See, e.g., JEAN-LUC MARION, *De surcroît. Études sur les phénomènes saturés*, Paris 2001, p. 37.

² GILLES DELEUZE/FÉLIX GUATTARI, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie?*, Paris 2005, p. 29.

In this paper, I will proceed in this way to interrogate how Jean-Luc Nancy and Giorgio Agamben address the aforementioned philosophical questions.

It is not difficult to identify the concepts they are interested in. Nancy is known as a philosopher of *plurality*, and he always approaches this notion in light of his key concept of *partage* or sharing, and its taking place. Agamben, on the other hand, can be understood as a philosopher of *potentiality*, and he explores this concept to understand how one can think the *contingency* of being. Yet, when looking more closely at how they actually develop these concepts, we see that both Nancy and Agamben do so in a reading of two similar, but nevertheless different literary characters. For Nancy, the concept of *partage* forms the heart of his understanding of the rhapsode Ion in Plato's eponymous dialogue, whereas Agamben develops his account of potentiality in a reading of Herman Melville's character Bartleby, who is a scrivener by profession, a copyist of laws.

These two characters, Ion and Bartleby, are similar because they might both be considered to be sons of Hermes. Where it is the task of the rhapsode to recite the words the poet sang before him, it is the task of the scrivener to copy the text of the law already written. Hence, both are engaged with the activity of repeating and handing down the words once spoken or once written. Of course, it is quite remarkable that Nancy and Agamben choose these figures, whose main enterprise is found in repetition, to think the singular and the unrepeatable.

Despite their similarity, Ion and Bartleby are also different in important respects. The rhapsode belongs to the realm of the voice and song. The scrivener belongs to the realm of writing and copying. The rhapsode is an enthusiast in the literal sense: his voice communicates a divine potentiality or power (*θεία δύναμις*), as Socrates explains in the *Ion*.³ This power affects the rhapsode and his audience with strong emotions. As Ion says: "When I tell a sad story, my eyes are full of tears; and when I tell a story that's frightening or awful, my hair stands on end with fear and my heart jumps."⁴ On the other hand, the activity of the scrivener, as the narrator of *Bartleby, the Scrivener* informs us, "is a very dull, wearisome, and lethargic affair."⁵ When repeating his singular words "I would prefer not to", the scrivener does not seem to be affected by anything. "Not a wrinkle of agitation rippled him",

³ PLATO, *Ion* 533d; quotations from Plato's dialogues are based on: *Platonis Opera*, edited by John Burnet, Oxford 1900–1907. Translations are taken from PLATO, *Complete Works*, edited by John M. Cooper, Indianapolis 1997.

⁴ PLATO, *Ion* 535c; PLATO, *Works*, p. 943.

⁵ Dan McCall (ed.), *Melville's Short Novels*, New York 2002, p. 10.

the narrator tells us.⁶ Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Melville's story confronts us with the strange circumstance of a scrivener who interrupts his work and gives up copying the law.

In what follows, I will show that Agamben and Nancy read these characters to examine the unexplored domain that Heidegger opened up by his interrogation of the principle of reason. The following questions will therefore guide me in the rest of this essay: to which ontological trajectories do these characters invite us? How do they conceive the ideas of the unmasterable, the singular and the contingent?

1. Sharing the Divine Power

Let us first consider the case of Nancy and start with the somewhat odd question of why he does not read *Bartleby, the Scrivener*. I borrow this question from *L'Effet Bartleby*, a study that appeared a year ago and that discusses the impact of *Bartleby, the Scrivener* on contemporary French thought.⁷ The author, Gisèle Berkman, wonders why Nancy never wrote on *Bartleby* despite the fact that philosophers who are very close to him, such as Blanchot, Derrida and Agamben, all offer a reading of this character in their work. Nancy writes a brief answer, which is added to the book as an appendix.⁸ He notes that the story presents itself as an allegory demanding interpretation and, thus, does not present itself as a genuine story that one may enter; nor does it present us with characters we can encounter. He adds that *Bartleby's* famous formula "I would prefer not to" is too calculated for his taste and that the work of the copyist does not communicate with any kind of social life.⁹

Although one need not agree with this account of *Bartleby*, it is perhaps not very surprising that Nancy finds it difficult to relate to *Bartleby*. The social dimension, understood as being-with, forms the core of many of Nancy's reflections, and it is exactly from these forms of sociability that *Bartleby* radically withdraws himself. The formula "I would prefer not to", as many have noted, communicates nothing. In this sense, *Bartleby* presents an interruption or a limit case of the social dimension of being-with or being-in-common with which Nancy's work is so often concerned. How

⁶ McCall, *Melville's Short Novels*, p. 11.

⁷ GISELE BERKMAN, *L'Effet Bartleby*. Philosophes Lecteurs, Paris 2011.

⁸ See BERKMAN, *L'Effet Bartleby*, pp. 179–181.

⁹ Nancy even writes that the story is in a certain sense withdrawn from literature: "Elle me donne l'impression d'être écrite pour être commentée et interprétée, ce qui pour moi la retire de la littérature en quelque sorte." (BERKMAN, *L'Effet Bartleby*, p. 180).

to communicate with this strange, solitary Bartleby that presents us with an utter lack of communication of messages, emotions and will? One might say that in opposition to the basic *partage*, the sharing and dividing that prefigures Nancy's interpretation of being as being-with and as being singular plural, the character of Bartleby rather invites us to think a *non-partage*.

This latter term is borrowed from Derrida who uses it in the immediate context of his reference to Bartleby in *Donner la mort*.¹⁰ Commenting on Kierkegaard's reading of the story of the sacrifice of Isaac by his father Abraham in *Fear and Trembling*, Derrida notes that Kierkegaard characterizes Abraham's words as a form of glossolalia: Abraham speaks in a strange tongue. This is a language, as Derrida explains, in which nobody can share. He compares this way of speaking with Bartleby's "I would prefer not to". This phrase, as he writes, "n'énonce rien qui soit arête, déterminable, positif ou négative."¹¹ According to Derrida, Abraham's as well as Bartleby's voice expresses a language in which others do not and cannot share.

While this clearly indicates why Nancy may feel foreign to *Bartleby, the Scrivener*, he does not feel foreign to one of his literary family members, namely the rhapsode Ion. Nancy engages with this rhapsode in his early text *Le partage des voix*.¹² In this text, he criticizes especially Ricœur's and to a lesser degree also Gadamer's conception of hermeneutics in light of Heidegger's brief comments on hermeneutics in his dialogue *Aus einem Gespräch von der Sprache*. In this dialogue, Heidegger famously distinguishes between the meaning of hermeneutics as *Auslegung* or explication and the more original meaning of the Greek verb ἐρμηνεύειν as the bringing of a message that conditions every explication, and which Heidegger traces in Plato's dialogue *Ion*.¹³ Nancy elaborates this suggestion in an extensive reading of the *Ion* in which he aims to trace this double meaning of ἐρμηνεύειν in the form of a hierarchy between announcement and explication. This hierarchy corresponds to the distinction between signification and significance (*signifiance*), which he introduces in *L'Oubli de la philosophie*.¹⁴ While interpretation in a Ricœurian sense would adhere to a signification

¹⁰ JACQUES DERRIDA, *Donner la mort*, Paris 1999, pp. 104–106.

¹¹ DERRIDA, *Donner la mort*, p. 106.

¹² JEAN-LUC NANCY, *Le Partage des voix*, Paris 1982, pp. 51–90. Many other questions and points of critique may be raised in relation to Nancy's reading of the *Ion* than the one I present here. For a critique of Nancy's understanding of ἐρμηνεύειν, cf. MICHAEL NAAS, *Urania – The Only Real Muse? Conversation with Jean-Luc Nancy on the Plurality of Genres*, in: *Internationales Jahrbuch für Hermeneutik* 3 (2004), pp. 1–22.

¹³ See MARTIN HEIDEGGER, *Aus einem Gespräch von der Sprache*, in: *Unterwegs zur Sprache*, Gesamtausgabe volume 12, edited by Friedrich-Wilhelm von Hermann, Frankfurt am Main 1985, pp. 79–146, here p. 115.

¹⁴ JEAN-LUC NANCY, *L'Oubli de la philosophie*, Paris 1986, pp. 32–33.

that is *presupposed*, interpretation in the sense of a primary ἐρμηνεύειν as announcement is the very *disclosure* of the realm of significance in which people share and which is the presupposition of every explication of a particular signification. In *Le partage des voix*, Nancy aims to make this realm of significance manifest by means of a reading of the *Ion*. Let me discuss this in three steps.

First, in the *Ion*, Socrates uses the famous figure of the iron rings that transmit a magnetic force to understand the activity of poets and rhapsodes.¹⁵ The poet does not transmit something he understands; rather he transmits a divine power – θεῖα δύναμις.¹⁶ The poet and the rhapsode do not first and foremost communicate a particular signification, but they rather bring their audience under the spell of the same enthusiasm that lets them speak and makes them speak. Thus, the poet is the voice of the gods. This constitutes the difference and hierarchy between announcement and explication: the latter presupposes the former and the former occurs in the form of the poet's speaking for the gods in the *Ion*. This forms the background of Nancy's understanding of ἐρμηνεύειν as a form of communication and transmission. In my third comment, I will discuss how this leads to another conception of the philosophical dialogue as well, since Nancy reinterprets the communality of the dialogue in terms of the (poetic) sharing of voices. That is, for him, it is not the subject matter that is being discussed that founds the communality of the speakers in a dialogue; rather, it is a *working* and *active* magnetic force that constitutes the communality or sharing of poets, rhapsodes and listeners.

The context in which the notion of *partage* arises here, also brings into play another concept, namely of ban and abandonment, that is used in *Le partage des voix*, and that is here of special interest since it is not only immediately related to the question of ontology, but is also a point of dispute between Nancy and Agamben, as we shall see. Ban and abandonment are of central importance in *L'Être abandonné*, which is a difficult and dense text from the same period as *Le partage des voix*.¹⁷ In this text, Nancy offers

¹⁵ See NANCY, *Le Partage des voix*, pp. 61–62.

¹⁶ See NANCY, *Le Partage des voix*, p. 69; PLATO, *Ion* 533d.

¹⁷ JEAN-LUC NANCY, *L'Être abandonné*, in: *L'Impératif catégorique*, Paris 1983, pp. 139–153. The notion of abandonment occurs a number of times in *Le partage des voix*. Mostly, it occurs in relation to Heidegger's abandonment of the term "hermeneutics" (cf. NANCY, *Le partage des voix*, pp. 23, 40–41, 44), but also and more importantly, three times in relation to the notion of *partage* (cf. NANCY, *Le partage des voix*, p. 83). In the last occurrence, it becomes clear how close the notions of *être abandonné* and *partage* are connected for Nancy: being is being abandoned, and being abandoned is "être abandonné à ce partage", that is, being is at the mercy of this sharing (NANCY, *Le partage des voix*, p. 83).

an ontological program in which being is no longer “confié à une cause, à un moteur, à un principe.”¹⁸ That is, according to him, contemporary ontology requires the suspension of the principle of reason since being can no longer be thought as belonging to the realm reigned by this principle. Instead, as Nancy suggests, being is now entrusted to abandonment, which Nancy introduces as a translation of Heidegger’s *Verlassenheit*. Hence, the concepts of sharing and abandonment together form the heart of Nancy’s understanding of ontology in which the principle of reason is suspended.

The notion of abandonment combines two elements, which we can easily discern in the poetic activity described in the *Ion*. While the poet is under the spell of a divine power and is always exposed to it, he can never grasp or master it; that is, he is abandoned or entrusted to it. Nancy’s account of the ban always brings these two meanings into play: to be under the spell of and to be excluded from.¹⁹ In *Le partage des voix*, the poet is excluded from the divine force in a double sense: he does not master it – to poeticize is not a form of artisanship (τέχνη), as Socrates claims – and he does not have knowledge (ἐπιστήμη) of it. The latter does not only mean that poets and rhapsodes do not know the topics they address in their song, but they also do not know *that it is a divine force that acts in them*. Only the dialogical inquiry of Socrates makes this clear. This is an issue Nancy only marginally touches upon, but which I consider to be quite important for the Heideggerian tone in which Nancy reads the rhapsodic and poetic activity as the *announcement* of a divine power: what does it mean that the divine force is *transmitted* like a magnetic force by poets and rhapsodes, but is only truly *made known* as divine force in and through Socrates’ inquiry?²⁰ Can we truly say that the mere transmission of this divine power is already the announcement of this power in its full sense? Should we not rather say that this divine power works in the poetic activity *without being noticed*? Therefore, does the announcement of this force not always require an interruption of this normal working of this force in which it goes unnoticed? I will come back to these questions in my third comment.

¹⁸ NANCY, L’Impératif catégorique, p. 150.

¹⁹ This is also claimed by WERNER HAMACHER, *Ou, séance, touche de Nancy, ici*, in: *On Jean-Luc Nancy. The Sense of Philosophy*, ed. by Darren Sheppard, Simon Sparks and Colin Thomas, London 1997, pp. 40–63; here p. 41.

²⁰ In a certain sense, these questions and concerns are close to the ones Naas explored in *NAAS, Urania – The Only Real Muse? Conversation with Jean-Luc Nancy on the Plurality of Genres*, pp. 1–22. For Naas, Socrates is the true interpreter because he understands. In a more Heideggerian tone of voice, one might also say, as I aim to do here, that Socrates is the true interpreter because he and he alone makes the divine power as such known, rather than merely exposing the others to it as the poet and the rhapsode do according to the logic of the *Ion*.

Secondly, Nancy notes that only with the rhapsode is the framework of transmission fully disclosed. Whereas one might think that the rhapsode, as the interpreter of the poet, is further removed from the original divine source, Nancy notes that the dialogue never states that the divine force decreases when transmitted.²¹

At this point, Nancy can fully develop the concept of *partage*. He translates the expression $\theta\epsilon\iota\alpha \mu\omicron\iota\rho\alpha$, divine dispensation, as "*partage divin*", that is, the divine sharing out in parts.²² The poet's voice is not the expression of a "*vouloir-dire*", and not even of a presupposed divine "*vouloir-dire*", but it is a *partage des voix*; it is a voice that communicates and multiplies a divine force in a sharing of voices. In this sense, the rhapsode is not a derivative. Rather, by supplementing the poetic voice, the rhapsodic voice shows the true nature of the poetic voice: it is a singular voice that should be understood within a plurality of voices. The divine voice is nothing but this plurality of voices.

Of course, one might wonder why Nancy pursues an account of poetry in which the poet is denied all forms of artisanship and knowledge. Can one truly say that the poet is without artisanship and can one truly agree with Socrates who ironically refers to Tynnichus from Chalcis, who apparently wrote only one poem worth remembering, as the exemplary poet to understand what it means to poeticize?²³ When the divine force indeed plays such a huge role and when the poet is indeed such a voice of the gods, does this not mean that the poetic song should be understood as a form of glossolalia, a speaking in strange tongues? Nancy implicitly uses exactly this characterization of poetry to show that poetry opens up a realm of both the unmasterable and the singular: there is no poetry in general, and poetry exists only in the plurality of singular styles.²⁴ Moreover, as I mentioned before, Derrida characterizes the "strange tongue" in which Bartleby and Abraham speak as *non-partage*. The unique contribution of Nancy's reading of the *Ion* may consist exactly in this. Although the poet does not simply speak in his own tongue, since he speaks for the gods, this "strange tongue" does not lead to *non-partage*. Rather, it constitutes forms of sharing and communication. All are under the spell of the same force, and all are entrusted to or "abandoned to this sharing of voices", as Nancy writes.

²¹ See NANCY, *Le Partage des voix*, p. 69.

²² NANCY, *Le Partage des voix*, p. 66; PLATO, *Ion* 534c; Cooper translates this as "divine gift" (PLATO, *Works*, p. 942). Clearly, to get a full overview of the notion of $\theta\epsilon\iota\alpha \mu\omicron\iota\rho\alpha$ in Plato's work, one should add an analysis of the other occurrences in PLATO, *Republic* 492a, 493a; *Phaedrus* 58e; *Phaedrus* 244c, and others.

²³ See PLATO, *Ion* 534d.

²⁴ See NANCY, *Le Partage des voix*, p. 66.

Hence, the event of the poetic song itself constitutes what we might call the being-in-common or the being singular plural of the sharing of voices. Thus, Nancy connects speaking in a strange tongue to *partage* rather than to *non-partage*; and, in this sense, he prefers *Ion* to *Bartleby*.

Thirdly, Nancy uses the poet's sharing of voices to characterize what a dialogue is. Clearly, the dialogue offers us a model of *logos* that is marked by a multiplicity of voices and of speakers. Yet, to think this model, he transfers the poetic sharing in the divine force to the sharing of voices in the dialogue. The plurality of voices in a dialogue thus mirrors the plurality of poetic genres. One might say that the subject matter discussed in a dialogue is abandoned to or at the mercy of the plurality of voices that constitutes the dialogue and that, being in the dialogue together, disclose the force field of significance in which a subject matter may be explicated.

This suggestion is both interesting and problematic. It is interesting because we see here most clearly in what sense the event of the poet's or the rhapsode's song promises to offer an alternative model for thought than the one based on a quest for unity and ground. The transference of the poetic model to dialogue also shows how the latter depends on a primordial sharing of singular voices. In exactly this sense, the application of the notion of *partage* to the dialogue is itself the most basic prefiguration of Nancy's conception of being-with and being singular plural.

Yet, it remains to be seen how easily one can transfer the strange tongue of the poets and rhapsodes to the dialogue. Nancy notes that, in the *Ion*, the sharing of voices occurs mainly as speaking for someone or something else. The poet is the voice of the god and the rhapsode is the voice of the poet. Also, as Nancy notes, Socrates speaks on behalf of others in the *Ion*. In particular, he becomes a rhapsode reciting Homer and interpreting his poetry. For Nancy, this shows most clearly how the discourse of philosophy shares in poetry. Yet is this true? Are there not important differences between philosopher and rhapsode?

As Nancy also notes, the philosopher is the one who excels in knowing the truth of the discourse of the other, which in this case is the poetic discourse.²⁵ But this particular enterprise and quality of the philosopher also has implications for Socrates' recitation. When he recites, he does something *different* than the rhapsode. When Socrates recites, his audience is not placed under the spell of Homer's poetry and is not at the mercy of the divine power that inspires this poetry. Rather, the philosopher aims to break the spell – and to “put” *his arguments* “forward like an incantation”, as

²⁵ NANCY, *Le Partage des voix*, pp. 59–60.

Socrates puts it in the *Republic*.²⁶ In this sense, the philosopher offers *another* song. Or, to put it differently, when Socrates recites, his song is not a “normal” poetic song in the sense given in the *Ion*. Both his recitation and the dialogue as a whole *interrupt* the normal transmission of the “divine power”. Thanks to this interruption Socrates *shows* what poets and rhapsodes *do* and what they *cannot do*.

In this latter sense, using Agamben’s logic of the example, we might call Socrates’ recitations *exemplary*.²⁷ Socrates’ recitation is a recitation – one among others – but as every example, it is set apart from the others *in order to show* what recitations are and how they “function”. This is exactly what *Ion* never does: while he transmits a divine force, only Socrates makes it known as a divine force. Socrates’ rhapsodic activity does not enthrall or enchant *in the same way* since it makes *the rule of this enchantment* manifest, thus interrupting the *ban* of the divine force – even if it is, as the quote from the *Republic* suggests, by bringing into play *another* incantation. In this sense, it might perhaps be better to say that when Socrates recites, he parodies rhapsody, and opens up a sphere of language beside the Homeric song, interrupting its specific ban and enthrallment.²⁸

To summarize, the concept of *partage* allows Nancy to think the repetitiveness of the rhapsodic activity in terms of a plurality of singularities. This is what the sharing of voices means. Each performance of the song is a singular performance. Hence, the rhapsode’s “repetition” does not repeat an origin since the divine power is only at work *in* these performances. Each time, the song evokes the divine power and entrusts poets, rhapsodes and listeners to it – addressing them all, without either of them being its final destination. Yet, by his focus on the rhapsode in his explication of *partage*, Nancy does not address the characteristic way in which Socrates questions and interrupts the way in which the rhapsode entrusts himself to this *θεῖα δύναμις*.

²⁶ PLATO, *The Republic* 608a; PLATO, *Works*, p. 1212.

²⁷ See GIORGIO AGAMBEN, *The Coming Community*, Minneapolis 1993, pp. 9–11; GIORGIO AGAMBEN, *The Signature of All Things. On Method*, New York 2009, pp. 18, 23–24.

²⁸ One might call Socrates’ recitation a parody, in the following sense of the word: “In the case of the recitation of the Homeric poems, when this traditional link is broken and the rhapsodes begin to introduce discordant melodies, it is said that they are singing *para tēn oīdēn*, against (or beside) the song. [...] According to this more ancient meaning of the term, then, parody designates the rupture of the ‘natural’ bond between music and language, the separation of song from speech. [...] Breaking this link liberates a *para*, a space beside, in which prose takes its place.” (GIORGIO AGAMBEN, *Profanations*, New York 2007, pp. 39–40).

2. The Angel of Contingency

In a completely different setting, far away from enthusiasts and divine powers, we find *Bartleby*, the scrivener who at a certain moment decides "upon doing no more writing".²⁹ Although the scenery is completely different, the copyist who gives up copying is, in Agamben's reading of *Bartleby, the Scrivener*, engaged with similar philosophical problems as the one that we came across in Nancy's reading of the *Ion*: How to deactivate the strange relation of δύναμις to the activity of reciting and, in *Bartleby*'s case, to the activity of copying? How to break the ban that also characterizes the work of the copyist? While the rhapsode addresses everyone equally, without addressing anyone in particular, the copyist, as we shall see, is concerned with the fact that letters address but in their address *fail* to reach their addressees.³⁰ These questions and themes motivate Agamben's reading of *Bartleby, the Scrivener*, as we can see in *Homo Sacer*. In this text, he notes that, although Nancy is the thinker par excellence of the "ontological structure" of the ban and the abandonment, Nancy's work limits itself to analyzing this structure; it does not provide "any way out of the ban".³¹ In the context of these questions, it is Melville's creation *Bartleby* who, more than others, is concerned with the "dissolution of the ban" and who promises another account of potentiality.³² So how does Agamben read *Bartleby, the Scrivener*?

In the first part of his essay *Bartleby, or On Contingency*, which is entitled "The Scribe, or On Creation", Agamben surveys and describes the philosophical context onto which he will graft the figure of writing in general and of the odd scrivener *Bartleby* in particular.³³ Summarizing his dense argumentation, we find that this philosophical context is marked by two important themes.

First, Agamben argues that the scrivener should be understood in relation to the important philosophical tradition originating in Aristotle's *De Anima* that describes the intellect (νοῦς) as a "writing tablet" (γραμματεῖον), a

²⁹ McCall, *Melville's Short Novels*, p. 21. The title of this section is a variation on Berkman who calls Agamben's *Bartleby* the angel of the possible, cf. BERKMAN, *L'Effet Bartleby*, p. 162.

³⁰ This is also mentioned in Nancy's characterization of the transmission of rhapsode and the endlessness of rings that address but without having a final addressee in mind, cf. NANCY, *Le partage des voix*, p. 70.

³¹ GIORGIO AGAMBEN, *Homo Sacer*, translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen, Stanford 1998, p. 58.

³² AGAMBEN, *Homo Sacer*, p. 48.

³³ GIORGIO AGAMBEN, *Bartleby, or On Contingency*, in: *Potentialities*, translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen, New York 1999, pp. 243–271.

tabula rasa.³⁴ It is well known which problem Aristotle aims to solve with this figure. If thought would have a form of its own, it would impose this form on every being it aims to think, thus distorting the form of this being. Therefore, thought should have no form of its own. It is, as Agamben writes, "not a thing but a being of pure potentiality".³⁵ The writing tablet is the figure of this particular potentiality. Hence, also for Agamben, it is the concept of *δύναμις* that is immediately brought into play, even before he starts reading *Bartleby, the Scrivener*, but this potentiality is of course different from the one Nancy invokes: not a divine power, but a writing tablet.

In relation to other Aristotelian accounts of *δύναμις*, as the potentiality that finds its fulfillment in its actualization, the potentiality of the intellect is of a different sort for Agamben. Since every thought thinks a *particular* form, no thought exhausts this potentiality. In this sense, every actual thought refers back to the potentiality of thinking that is always *richer* than the actual thoughts it gives rise to. For Aristotle, therefore, the divine culmination point of thought is neither thought that thinks something nor thought that thinks nothing, but thought that thinks itself. Yet, as Agamben asks: "How can a writing tablet [...] turn back upon itself, *impress itself*?"³⁶

Secondly, amidst many other comments, Agamben notes that in the course of history, the figure of writing is dominated more and more by the notion of the demiurge-God, the creator. Since the divine act of creation is an act of the divine intellect, divine creation can be understood "as an act of writing" in the medieval period.³⁷ For the medieval theologians, God is a scribe. In a variation of Heidegger's reading of metaphysics as ontotheology, Agamben argues that this reinterpretation of the figure of writing in terms of the scribe-creator, that is, in terms of the unifying ground of all beings, subsumes all forms of potentiality in the world under the notion of a God who is "absolutely without potentiality".

³⁴ ARISTOTLE, *De Anima* 430a1. AGAMBEN, *Potentialities*, p. 244. See also AGAMBEN, *The Coming Community*, p. 37.

³⁵ AGAMBEN, *Potentialities*, p. 245.

³⁶ AGAMBEN, *Potentialities*, p. 251.

³⁷ AGAMBEN, *Potentialities*, p. 246. Elsewhere, Agamben hints at a conception of creation (which coincides with his conception of existence), in which creation is not understood in an ontotheological framework, but rather in the following terms: "Creation – or existence – [...] is rather the impotence of God with respect to his own impotence, his allowing – being able to *not not-be* – a contingency to be." (AGAMBEN, *The Coming Community*, p. 32). This, then, implies that God himself is absolute contingency since the expression "being able to *not not-be*" describes exactly the excluded third – "*not not-be*" is not "to be," but rather "neither to be nor not to be" – that is potentiality and which he describes as the potential to be and not to be in his essay on *Bartleby*.

When comparing these two themes – the writing tablet and the creator as a scribe – one may of course wonder why Agamben does not pursue the motive of the writing tablet or *tabula rasa* throughout its entire history, why he does not discuss the primacy of actuality in Aristotle's account of the divine intellect, and why he privileges the figure of the scribe to account for the motive of the demiurge in the history of philosophy. However, let us limit ourselves to the question of how these two themes situate his reading of *Bartleby*. Clearly, the motive of the scribe is immediately related to *Bartleby*, who is the scribe that gives up writing. As Agamben suggests, *Bartleby* is a counter-figure to creation, namely a figure concerned with "decreation". Melville's story conducts an experiment that examines being by placing it in light of decreation rather than creation, thus aiming to render inoperative the motive of creation in ontology. It is this ontological commitment of the story that guides Agamben:

Not only science but also poetry and thinking conduct experiments. These experiments do not simply concern the truth or falsity of hypotheses, the occurrence or nonoccurrence of something, as in scientific experiments; rather, they call into question Being itself.³⁸

Agamben uses the second theme – the writing tablet – to identify *Bartleby*. Anticipating his conclusions, he argues already in the first part of his essay that when *Bartleby* stops writing, "the scrivener has become the writing tablet; he is now nothing other than his white sheet."³⁹ Hence, the difficult notion of decreation is interpreted in terms of the relation between potentiality and actuality: it concerns taking back what is actualized – the letters that are written, the beings that are created – and return potentiality both to what is and to what is not.

Although the story does not offer us any conclusive evidence of why *Bartleby* gives up writing, the narrator gives us a clear hint in the epilogue. He informs us about the rumor that *Bartleby* used to work at the Dead Letter Office, which is an office where the letters that could not be delivered to their intended addressees are collected and burned. The famous and beautiful description of the experience to which such a place leads concludes the story:

Dead letter! does it not sound like dead men? Conceive a man by nature and misfortune prone to a pallid hopelessness, can any business seem more fitted to heighten it than that of continually handling these dead letters and assorting them for the flames? For by the cartload they are annually burned. Sometimes from out of the folded paper the pale clerk takes a ring: – the finger it was meant for, perhaps, moulders in the grave; a bank-note sent in swiftest charity: – he whom it would relieve, nor eats nor hungers any more; pardon

³⁸ AGAMBEN, *Potentialities*, p. 260.

³⁹ AGAMBEN, *Potentialities*, p. 254.

for those who died despairing; hope for those who died unhoping; good tidings for those who died stifled by unrelieved calamities.⁴⁰

Agamben reads this passage in terms of the philosophical context he discussed in the first part of his essay. When writing is the model for creation, letters represent what is and what took place. *Bartleby*, however, experienced to what extent letters are not only the ciphers of what is and of what took place, but also of what is *not* and what did *not* take place. The banknote did not relieve from hunger and the pardon never arrived at those whom it could relieve from despair. It is in this sense that actuality does not only refer back to its own potentiality to be, but also to its potentiality to not be and to what could have been, but was not. Hence, in these philosophical terms, *Bartleby* redirects our attention from *what is* to *what is not*.

To elaborate this point in ontological terms, Agamben argues that the story of *Bartleby* is engaged with an experiment that requires the suspension of the principle of reason and interprets being in light of this suspension – the same motive that we found at the heart of Nancy's notion of abandonment. Agamben elaborates this idea in reference to Leibniz as well as to Nietzsche. Let me explain this in some detail.

Leibniz's principle of reason, as Agamben writes, "has the following form: [...] 'there is a reason for which something does rather than does not exist.'"⁴¹ Hence, this principle expresses how only reason provides a ground for the "preference" – a "rather than" or a being "more powerful" – of being over non-being. In Leibniz's thought this is also what ultimately justifies creation, as we can see in his theodicy. The creator only wills the best of all possible worlds. If we read the narrator's comments on the Dead Letter Office as the motivation of the scrivener to stop writing, it becomes clear to what extent this experiment on potentiality and decreation aims to provide an alternative to the framework of Leibniz's thought on the principle of reason and its application to the creator God in the theodicy. Rethinking Leibniz's description of the creator who now and again revisits the immense mausoleum of possible worlds, once more enjoying his own choice, Agamben writes:

It is difficult to imagine something more pharisaic than this demiurge, who contemplates all uncreated worlds to take delight in his own single choice. For to do so, he must close his own ears to the incessant lamentations that, throughout the infinite chambers of this Baroque inferno of potentiality, arises from everything that could have been but was not, from everything that could have been otherwise but had to be sacrificed for the present world to be as it is.⁴²

⁴⁰ McCANN, *Melville's Short Novels*, p. 34.

⁴¹ AGAMBEN, *Potentialities*, p. 258.

⁴² AGAMBEN, *Potentialities*, p. 266.

The experience to which *Bartleby* invites us is opposite to this one: he draws our attention to what is not. Thus, the story experiments with the suspension of the principle of reason, since only this suspension takes away the ground for the choice of the creator. The “rather than” loses its ground and transforms into a “no more than”. In this way, this suspension inaugurates “a preference and a potentiality that [...] exist, without reason, in the indifference between Being and Nothing. [...] it is the mode of Being of potentiality that is purified of all reason.”⁴³ *Bartleby*’s “formula” – “I would prefer not to” –, which affirms no more than rejects, makes this “no more than” known. More precisely, it announces and “opens a zone of indistinction [...] between the potential to be [...] and the potential not to be [...].”⁴⁴ Hence, *Bartleby* is for Agamben a true son of Hermes, namely the messenger and angel of this potentiality.

Whatever this potentiality exactly means, it is clear that we usually call something that preserves its potential not to be, *contingent*. The suspension of the principle of reason invites us to think being such that it “preserves its potential not to be”. To think being as contingent is therefore the ontological background of the literary experiment Melville conducts. This has remarkable consequences, as Agamben informs us: “If Being at all times and places preserved its potential not to be, the past itself could in some sense be called into question.”⁴⁵ To understand what it means to give potentiality back to the past and to what is actualized Agamben interprets the most basic aspect of *Bartleby*, namely that he *gives up* copying and stops repeating what is written.

To explain why it is necessary for the copyist to stop writing, Agamben refers to what he interprets as the “atheistic version” of Leibniz’s theodicy, namely Nietzsche’s notion of the eternal return of the same. Of course, one can read this notion in different ways, but Agamben interprets the eternal return here as a variation of Leibniz’s theodicy in which the difference between the possible world and the actual world is effaced: where the creator wills, among the possible worlds, the world that is good, the eternal return invites the will to will what was. Agamben comments:

⁴³ AGAMBEN, *Potentialities*, p. 259. This is reminiscent of Deleuze’s reading of *Bartleby* who refers implicitly to the same formulation of Leibniz’s principle and indicates that *Bartleby* reverses it as follows: “Je préférerais rien plutôt que quelque chose.” (GILLES DELEUZE, *Critique et clinique*, Paris 1993, p. 92).

⁴⁴ AGAMBEN, *Potentialities*, p. 255.

⁴⁵ AGAMBEN, *Potentialities*, p. 261.

The infinite repetition of what was abandons all its potential not to be. In its obstinate copying, as in Aristotle's contingency, there is no potential not to be. The will to power is, in truth, the will to will, an eternally repeated action; only as such is it potentialized.⁴⁶

Although repetition gives potentiality back to the past, since everything that once was (actual) will be (or is willed to be) again, the possible is nothing but what once was actual. Quoting Benjamin, Agamben comments: "The eternal return is copying projected onto the cosmos".⁴⁷ In this context, to save the potential not to be, the scrivener must stop copying. Here we see, as in other texts, the specific messianic motive in Agamben's work: "if Bartleby is a new Messiah, he comes [...] to save what was not."⁴⁸

Although Agamben's essay brings into play many different authors and themes, which makes his text extremely dense and in many respects open-ended, it is clear that he aims to think the importance of Bartleby's "interruption of writing" in the context of the role that the figure of writing has for philosophy and how it may orient a present-day ontological inquiries. The course from the writing tablet to the scribe, which philosophically finds its culmination in the principle of reason, is put upside down in the story of the scribe who stops writing and thus poses the question of what it means that being is contingent.

3. From Ion to Bartleby

Our analysis of Nancy's interpretation of Ion and Agamben's account of Bartleby both indicate that these authors are engaged with these literary characters in light of an overarching question: what can an ontology be that is no longer dominated by a quest for a unifying ground? Yet, their explorations of these characters give shape to different trajectories and to different concepts.

For Nancy, the notions that are central to an ontology that take the Heideggerian inquiry into metaphysics and the abandonment of being (*Seinsverlassenheit*) seriously are the notions of *partage* and abandonment. It is the *Ion* and its account of the poetic and rhapsodic activity that gives rise to these notions in Nancy's work. Clearly, these two concepts allow him to think a κοινός, an in-common, that is no longer subsumed under a εἶν, a one(ness). Beings "are in common" in the way the poets, rhapsodes and listeners share a divine voice and δύναμις. This power *occurs* only in and as

⁴⁶ AGAMBEN, *Potentialities*, p. 268. Agamben refers here also to a remark of Leibniz that indeed prefigures the idea of the eternal return of the same.

⁴⁷ AGAMBEN, *Potentialities*, p. 268.

⁴⁸ AGAMBEN, *Potentialities*, p. 270.

a sharing of different voices, but this also means that every singular voice is always at the mercy of this sharing: the poet and the rhapsode are under the spell of this sharing and cannot master it. They cannot even think it as a divine power. Only Socrates is capable of doing this in his dialogical inquiry that interrupts the working of this power.

While agreeing with Nancy that the structure of abandonment is indeed the basic characteristic of our time to think being, Agamben objects that Nancy does not offer a way out of this ban – as Socrates does. As he puts it in *Homo Sacer*, the notion of the ban puts us in a relation of “force without significance”.⁴⁹ Applied to Nancy’s reading of the *Ion*, one immediately sees how striking this latter formulation is: the divine power itself is without meaning. Since the poet and the rhapsode are banned from it, it is an arbitrary force to them and can make them say whatever it wants. This is why Socrates’ odd example of the poet Tynnichus from Chalcis, who only wrote one poem worth mentioning, is so well chosen. The poet is banned from the power that makes him speak; what he says is fully at the mercy of the divine power.

Against the background of these questions, Agamben turns to *Bartleby* in which the question of δύναμις returns in a completely different form: not in the form of a power that is at work, but in the form of the potentiality to write and not to write. Within the philosophical framework Agamben chooses, it becomes clear that the lack of reason does not necessarily entrust us to a divine power or other forms of sovereignty, but rather indicates that there is no reason why something should happen rather than not happen – why one letter should be written rather than another. It is the task of thinking to understand being in relation to this primordial potentiality to be and not to be.

As I noted in the first part of this essay, Nancy’s interpretation of the poetic and rhapsodic ἐρμηνεύειν as the announcement of the divine power is problematic: even though poets and rhapsodes transmit this power, they are also at its mercy and thus do not simply make it known as such; they only expose others to it. As I also noted, it is only Socrates who, by interrupting this transmission, truly *makes* the divine power *known* as divine power. In this constellation we understand in another way why Agamben’s *Bartleby* has to give up writing: only by interrupting his basic activity of handing down and by showing that the potential to write is also the potential not to write, *Bartleby* becomes an angel of δύναμις. He does not simply transmit this potentiality as power to which the others are subsequently entrusted and exposed, but he interrupts its transmission in order to announce δύναμις

⁴⁹ AGAMBEN, *Homo Sacer*, p. 58.

and contingency itself. Thus, Agamben pushes us to consider another possibility, beyond the abandonment of being as Nancy conceives it, namely the experimental and speculative possibility of a decreation that does not abandon the potential not to be.

Summary

Nancy's reading of Plato's dialogue the *Ion* and Agamben's reading of Melville's story *Bartleby, the Scrivener* both explore the possibility of a present-day ontology starting from the suspension of the principle of reason. We have seen that Nancy reads the *Ion* in order to develop the notions of sharing and abandonment, which form the central concepts in his early understanding of ontology. In addition, I have argued that Agamben's reading of *Bartleby, the Scrivener* responds to Nancy and develops an account of potentiality and of contingency that overcome some of the problems attached to Nancy's account of abandonment.

Zusammenfassung

Jean-Luc Nancys Lektüre des platonischen Dialogs *Ion* und Giorgio Agambens Lektüre der Geschichte Melvilles *Bartleby, the Scrivener* loten beide gleichermaßen die Spielräume einer heute noch möglichen Ontologie aus, die mit der Aufhebung des Satzes vom Grund beginnt. In vorliegendem Aufsatz wird gezeigt, dass Nancy *Ion* mit dem Ziel interpretiert, die Begriffe der Teilhabe und der Verlassenheit zu entfalten, welche die zentralen Begriffe seiner frühen Ontologie darstellen. Außerdem wird aufgewiesen, dass Agambens Lektüre von *Bartleby, the Scrivener* auf Nancy antwortet und dass Ersterer einen Begriff von Potenzialität und Kontingenz entwickelt, der die Schwierigkeiten, welche mit Nancys Begriff der Verlassenheit verknüpft sind, aufzulösen vermag.

Critical Excess and the Reasonableness of Interpretation¹

by

NICHOLAS DAVEY (University of Dundee)

1. Introduction

In *Real Presences*, George Steiner notes the commonplace “anything can be said and, in consequence, written about anything” but then qualifies it with the remark, “we scarcely pause to observe [...] (the) [...] enigmatic enormity that inhabits it.”² “Language,” he argues, “knows no conceptual, no projective finality [...] need halt at no frontier [...] in respect of conceptual and narrative constructs”.³ This, Steiner remarks, is “the open secret which hermeneutics and aesthetics [...] have laboured to exorcise or to conceal from themselves and their clients”.⁴ On the other hand, it is precisely “this commonplace” which provides such advocates of critical excess and overreading as Slavoj Žižek with a logical warrant to challenge the assumptions of philosophical hermeneutics. The purpose of this essay is to take pause and consider the enigmatic enormity posed by advocates of overreading and critical excess. However, we should in the first instance avoid an obvious trap. Titles such as *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*⁵ encourage the misleading impression that there is clear antinomy between the classical hermeneutic tradition and its deconstructive and post-modern critics: the former yearns for closure of interpretation in order to discipline the anarchic play of surplus meaning whilst the latter endeavours to prolong, if not accelerate, the pace of that play to the end of questioning any hint of canonized meaning. Such polarisation blurs all too simply and too conveniently both

¹ The first version of this paper was presented at the International Hermeneutics Seminar, Albert-Ludwigs-University of Freiburg, 29th June-1st July, 2012.

² GEORGE STEINER, *Real Presences*, London 1990, p. 53.

³ STEINER, *Real Presences*, p. 53.

⁴ STEINER, *Real Presences*, p. 61.

⁵ UMBERTO ECO/RICHARD RORTY/JONATHAN CULLER et al., *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, edited by Stefan Collini, Cambridge 2002.