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Review of William Watkin, The Literary Agamben: Adventures in Logopoiesis.

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William Watkin, *The Literary Agamben: Adventures in Logopoiesis*. London and New York: Continuum, 2010. 236 pp. ISBN 9780826443249 (paper).

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In the final chapter of his book *The Literary Agamben*, William Watkin—Professor of Contemporary Literature and Philosophy at Brunel University, London, and a specialist in modern poetry—turns to Giorgio Agamben's discussion of a classic story: the encounter of Oedipus and the Sphinx. As Watkin observes, Agamben discusses this story in the context of a reflection on the theory of signification. If signification, or the operation of making meaning, involves the leap across an abyss separating a word from its meaning or a signifier from a signified, this leap tends to forget about the abyss that it crosses: about the bar (/) that, in semiotic theory, separates the signifier from the signified—Sa/Sé, to use structuralist shorthand—from the French "*signifiant*" and "*signifié*." As Agamben sees it, both Oedipus and the Sphinx are contributors to this situation: Oedipus, because he reveals meaning; the Sphinx, because she hides it. And so we are stuck on either side of the bar. This amounts to what Agamben calls, in no weak terms, a "sin" (Agamben 1993b, 138): Oedipus is in fact mistaken when he reads the Sphinx's riddle as a signifier that demands signification. What appears to be the story of a victory—a story that is foundational for Western civilization—turns out to be the story of a fall (the echoes from theology continue).

What if, Agamben asks, we restore the enigma of this story and experience the riddle of the Sphinx as another kind of speaking: one that would, instead of hiding or revealing, throw us back onto the bar separating signifier from signified—into the abyss that our treatment of language as signification risks obscuring? The point of such a project would not be to stop speaking, even though the flirtation with silence is evident (more on this later). It would be to start speaking differently, paying careful attention to a fracture that haunts the way we are in the world. It would mean to start speaking from a different experience of language.

I like rereading this chapter from *Stanzas* whenever I start a book by Agamben, or one of the several excellent books that have been published about his work in recent years. (The best one is still Leland de la Durantaye's *Giorgio Agamben: A Critical Introduction*.) It places a demand not just on the reading but also on the writing experience, warning me about an Oedipus complex that differs from the traditional psychoanalytic one. The sin of Agamben's Oedipus is not so much incest, as the chapter from *Stanzas* points out, but "hubris toward the power of the symbolic in general" (Agamben 1993b, 138)—a power that Oedipus, in Agamben's reading, slights by decoding the riddle. What would it mean to read, and to write, from the place of the critique of this hubris? Watkin invites this question when he asks if Agamben's prose is close to "the idea of prose" that he theorizes in his book of the same title. What would it mean to write from the time *after* this Oedipus complex? What kind of pedagogy would remain once decoding is off the table? What kind of theology, when the Sphinx is no longer hiding? What kind of thought—what kind of poetic thinking—might the experience of the enigma of language provoke? What *logopoièsis*?

Agamben writes in the chapter from *Stanzas* of a mode of speaking that is able to "[repel] the uncanny by attracting it and assuming it within itself" (Agamben 1993b, 138). This enigmatic

description resonates with the theory of art presented in the opening chapter of Agamben's first book, *The Man Without Content*, which Watkin discusses in detail in the first part of his book, "On the Way to Logopoiesis." *Man Without Content* opens with a long quotation from Friedrich Nietzsche's critique in *The Genealogy of Morals* of Immanuel Kant's "definition of the beautiful as disinterested pleasure" (Agamben 1999a, 1). Such an aesthetic provokes Nietzsche's anger: "the point is precisely to purify the concept of beauty . . . by filtering out the sensory involvement of the spectator and thus to consider art from the point of view of its creator" (Agamben 1999a, 2). It is via this critique of Kantian aesthetics that Agamben arrives at a definition of the human-being-as-the-creator, of the human-being-as-the-being-that-has-*technè* (or the ability to produce), as "the most uncanny thing" (Agamben 1999a, 4)—a characterization that is taken from Sophocles' *Antigone*. *Technè*, art or craft, is thus the most uncanny thing: the spectator can welcome art as "interesting," an adjective that *really* names "disinterested pleasure" and reveals an art that has *left* the sphere of interest. On the side of the creator, on the other hand, we find extreme risk, an art that is fundamentally dangerous and terrorizing, leading Plato to ban it from his ideal city. Aesthetics has led art away from this link to terror, its uncanny subversion. Agamben's call for a "*destruction* of aesthetics" (Agamben 1999a, 6), then, arguably runs parallel to his call for another mode of speaking, one that would be able to assume the uncanny within itself—as enigma.

Indeed, it is difficult not to see this critique of aesthetics in relation to what Watkin argues is a central notion in Agamben's work, poièsis. With the notion of poièsis, we are much closer to the potential captured by the verb "can" that Agamben in an essay titled "On Potentiality" has said to be the subject of all of his work: not the actualization of signification, but the abyss or bar separating signifier from signified. (That might be where the truly political potential of language lies—from this perspective, there hasn't been a more philosophical electoral campaign slogan than "Yes, we can!" But Watkin, as I will elaborate below, is not interested in politics.) This is the post-Oedipal potential that is the time/place of the many "thresholds" punctuating Agamben's work, the time/place of the "Preface" to his 1978 book *Infancy and History*, which Watkin analyses in detail, in which Agamben theorizes the experience of language as the potentiality not-to speak—as infancy, from the Latin "in-fans," "not being able to speak (yet)." It's important to note that the "childlike" state evoked here is not part of some linear history that must inevitably lead from not-speaking to speaking. Rather, infancy is a capacity that unworks our speech, makes us speak in a different way. Here again, the flirtation with silence is evident. Indeed, given all of this—Oedipus, Antigone, infancy—how is one to start reading Agamben? To start writing about Agamben? And how did Agamben start writing? Wouldn't the more sensible option have been the Bartleby-option: to reply to the demand of reading and writing using the formula of Herman Melville's enigmatic scrivener—a figure that haunts Agamben's oeuvre—"I prefer not to"? Perhaps.

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Some of the particular difficulty of Agamben's writing—it cuts across multiple disciplines, languages, time periods, more often than not drastically changing topics from one book to the next—no doubt goes back to his analysis of the Oedipus complex of signification and, more generally, to his investigation of language. One might even suggest that the radical project of the work on language was such that critics simply did not know what to do with it. As Watkin points

out in the opening pages of his book, it was not so much Agamben's work on language that made his name but what tends to be referred to as his "political" writings, and specifically his book *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. With a title like that, the book appears to belong squarely in the field of political theory, and indeed, the first English-language book devoted to Agamben's writings—*Politics, Metaphysics, and Death*, edited by political theorist Andrew Norris—was a collection of essays on *Homo Sacer* that focused on politics. With its other emphasis on metaphysics, the book already appeared to bring together two Agambens, as Toni Negri was quick to observe: a metaphysical one, "perpetually forced into a confrontation with the idea of death"; and a political one "who, through immersion in the work of philology and linguistic analysis, attains the power of being (that is, he rediscovers pieces or elements of being, by manipulating and constructing them)" (Negri qtd. 2).

Over the years, however, the critical approach has become more nuanced, with several collections—most programmatically, *The Work of Giorgio Agamben*, edited by Justin Clemens, Nick Heron, and Alex Murray; I contributed a chapter to this book (to avoid confusion, I *am* the "Anne" De Boever referenced in Watkin's footnotes!)—insisting on the importance of the work on language for both camps, and uncovering the close connections between language and politics throughout Agamben's oeuvre.

Watkin's book appears to complete the swing of the pendulum, first summarizing *Homo Sacer* in a page and a half in order to focus, with the joy of the creative writer and thinker, on Agamben's literary side: "Attend, if you will, beyond the learned and almost overwhelming conversation between the two Agambens and his many critics, to the tones of the term, the literary Agamben, adventurer in *poiesis*" (3), as the book's epic *incipit* goes. The political Agamben is "the one about whom I will have the least to say in the chapters that follow" (2), Watkin states. He is laboring hard in the book's opening pages and at other transitional moments in the writing—and consciously so, as the humor in his writing reveals: "And so I present for general perusal and perhaps initial skepticism or even weary derision my theory of logo-poiesis" (117-8)—to separate out a third Agamben, a literary one, from the metaphysical and the political Agambens. Well aware that there is only one Agamben, Watkin's project is nevertheless to introduce the reader to what he perceives to be a third and crucial component in Agamben's thought, without much consideration for anything else. The word "politics" does not even have an entry in his book's index ("biopolitical" does, but it occurs only two times). When, after his close reading of the "Oedipus and the Sphinx" chapter, he moves into a brief discussion of Agamben's book, *The Coming Community*, that promising view onto something non-literary ends rather abruptly, with Watkin asking the reader to please "[f]orgive this digression into the biopolitical realm of the ethics of alterity" (181). It's as if ethics and politics—two key components of Agamben's thought—have been banned into what some may want to call, using the notion loosely, a *state of exception*.

The thought to which this relentless focus on the literary introduces us is *logopoièsis*, defined in the book as "a procedure of thinking through making" (77). (The definition goes against Plato's age-old separation of poetry from philosophy.) Although Agamben (as the text of a postcard that is included in the book reveals) was initially unconvinced by this term, he in fact came to appreciate the ways in which it captures a model in which "the poem-thought commences due to the presence of semiotic conventional rule-based constraint" while at the same time it "already

prefigures its development and cessation": "As it progresses it does so by always simultaneously going on and looking back, by flowing and interrupting said flow, by submitting thought to a constraining linearity and exploding linearity through a translinear planar rhythmic structure" (200-1). There is a "work" that takes place here, a "making" or poièsis, as Watkin's concept suggests. But it is a peculiar kind of work: it leads to cessation, an interruption and explosion. In fact, it might be closer to a kind of un-work that circulates in Agamben's work under different names: G.W.F. Hegel's term *Aufhebung* is certainly one of them, and next to "unwork" the English translations also sometimes use the phrase "render inoperative," which reveals Agamben's proximity to Georges Bataille, Maurice Blanchot, and Jean-Luc Nancy. Again, one can see the flirtation with silence in the description above (Watkin spends a good amount of time discussing silence throughout his book)—but that is not exactly what is going on here. Infancy is not silence, and it's not speech either. It's the potentiality not-to-speak which, as I have argued elsewhere [1], is in fact much closer to a certain strand of Enlightenment thought that insists on "separat[ing] out, from the contingency that has made us what we are, the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do, or think" (Foucault 114). Agamben, for his part, follows Duns Scotus' definition of contingency, as "not something that is not necessary or eternal, but something whose opposite could have happened in the very moment in which it happened" (Scotus qtd. Agamben 1999b, 262). "At the same instant," he explains, "I can thus act in one way and be able to act otherwise (or not to act at all)." One understands that his notion of contingency is in fact very close to the "possibility" that Michel Foucault in his text on the Enlightenment is theorizing (Agamben 1999b, 262). To unwork language so that it would assume within it the potentiality not-to-speak—to assume within the home of language the unhomely terror of infancy: it's in this partly frightening, properly adventurous experience (to recall Watkin's title) that Agamben's thought takes place.

Watkin's book starts out with a section titled "Projection: There is Language" in which he moves through *Infancy and History*, *Stanzas*, *Language and Death*, *Remnants of Auschwitz* and *The Idea of Prose* to lay out Agamben's theory of language, or rather its first and foremost experience: that *there is language*. The rest of the book is divided into two "episodes": one, "On the Way to Logopoiesis," which revolves largely (after an opening section on logopoièsis) around Agamben's book on aesthetics, *The Man Without Content*; and two, "Adventures in Logopoiesis," which focuses more specifically on tautology, enjambment, and caesura as three key figures of Agamben's poetic thought. Nearly everything of literary significance in Agamben's work is covered, and in detail: the readings are meticulous, often going through particularly dense passages line by line in order to explain them. (On his blog, http://williamwatkin.blogspot.com/, Watkin showcases his talent for unpacking particularly gnarly concepts or problems in Agamben's thought in, say, one thousand words or less.) There are moments of genuine insight, as for example when, in the discussion of Alexander Garcia Düttmann's analysis of Agamben's use of the Italian term "medio" in *The Idea of Prose*—Düttmann challenges the English translation of "medio" as "middle term" and argues instead that it ought to be translated as "midst" or "milieu"—Watkin quite simply suggests that "mean" is the appropriate translation (62-3). When it comes to thinking language, Agamben is certainly a thinker of language as a pure medium, a mean without end—"balance, stillness, tension, suspension: 'dialectic at a standstill'" (63). The image for this in Agamben's work is, as Watkin discusses, "the perfectly bare writing tablet on which nothing had yet been written" (Agamben qtd. 61).

The discussion of Agamben that is presented in the book is most definitely valuable for specialists of Agamben's work, and scholars of language and literature in general. But I will confess that I had some difficulty remaining invested in Watkin's discussion of the literary Agamben due to the lack of any discussion of that other Agamben, the political one. Reading Watkin's book, I was reminded of Agamben's essay about the eccentric art historian Aby Warburg, which opens with a peculiar sentence: "This essay seeks to situate a discipline that, in contrast to many others, exists but has no name" (Agamben 1999b, 89). Warburg's unorthodox way of doing art history was such a "discipline": the panels of Warburg's unfinished atlas project *Mnemosyne* combine in constellations heterogeneous but connected images as part of an "art history without a text." I fear that the discipline of studying the literary Agamben may be one of those many others that are mentioned here, namely a discipline that has a name—"the literary Agamben"—but doesn't really exist. For I think we must remember that at the end of the day, *there is no literary Agamben*, in the same way that there is no political Agamben. Each of these are analytical straw-men through which critics have tried to approach a vast body of work that risks to intimidate even the most experienced comparatist.

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Let me elaborate on this point by making a brief detour through a short text Agamben wrote in January 2004 for the French newspaper *Le Monde*. [2] It's a political text, so Watkin does not refer to it in his book. Titled "No to Bio-Political Tattooing," the text explains why Agamben had cancelled a course he was supposed to teach at New York University in March of that same year. The reason was a new regulation that required "whoever wants to go to the United States with a visa" to be "put on file" and "leave their fingerprints when they enter the country." The problem Agamben has with this regulation "concerns the juridical-political status . . . of citizens of the so-called democratic states where we live": we are being convinced "to accept as the humane and normal dimensions of our existence, practices of control that had always been properly considered inhumane and exceptional." Agamben characterizes this development as a "progressive animalization of man," stating that in modern democratic states, "the most private and incommunicable aspect of subjectivity: I mean the body's biological life" is "filed away" as if it were dangerous, suspect, and even criminal. The model for modern politics, he concludes, is no longer the Greek city-state or polis but the camp. "From Athens to Auschwitz": that is how Agamben characterizes the trajectory of Western democracy.

This text is problematic for a number of reasons, and not just because of its comparison of a new visa regulation to Auschwitz. (While Agamben explains that the comparison is a philosophical thesis and not a historical one, one cannot help but wonder whether such a comparison is not simply giving philosophy—and the practice of comparison—a bad reputation. That's certainly one of the other reasons why Agamben's writing risks driving even the most experienced comparatist up the wall.) One could also question Agamben's use of the word "animalization" (supposedly lifted from the work of Foucault, but no reference is given) to describe the effects of biopolitics on human life: does biopolitics really reduce human life to animal life? Or does it reduce human life to a life that is different from *both* human and animal life? Finally, is withdrawing from the US really an effective response to the problems that Agamben is highlighting? And what privilege does his call for action—he hopes that "other European

intellectuals and teachers" will follow his example—presume? Not everyone has the luxury of being able to cancel a course in the US while another teaching position awaits one back home.

However, "No to Bio-Political Tattooing" is also a helpful text because it reveals, in a highly condensed form, the three most important components of Agamben's thought: *politics—human life—language*. Indeed, the text expresses Agamben's resistance to the political attempt to render human life communicable. Instead, the philosopher insists on its privacy and incommunicability. What we are invited to think here is, precisely, the relation between politics, life, and language rather than any of these components alone.

Now, what Watkin does with this constellation is: he focuses entirely on the "literary" Agamben—on the Agamben who is interested in language, linguistics, the theory of signification, semiotics and semantics, poetry, art, and so on. His aim is to foreground this Agamben and to theorize him as an "adventurer in logopoiesis": as a philosopher who has seriously considered poetry, has ventured in "poetic thinking" (or logopoièsis), and come away from it with some major insights. So major, in fact—so "complex and subtle," as Watkin puts it in one case—that he does not hesitate to describe them, in one particular instance, as "counting as one of the most profound reflections on the literary ever penned in any language at any time." I am a literary critic, but I know this is not why I became interested in Agamben's work. It wasn't because of Agamben's reflections on the literary, even though that was a crucial part of it. I got hooked because of Agamben's treatment of political problems like the ones addressed in the *Le Monde* text. And the literary Agamben only makes sense to me in this political light—in the same way that the political one needs the literary dimension if it wants to be fully appreciated. Separating out the politics from the literature makes no sense in the same way that separating out the literature from the politics doesn't.

The issue is, in essence, one of comparison. Of course, one can find comparison at work in Agamben's writings at many different levels, and Watkin's book certainly reflects some of this when it brings literature and philosophy—logos and poièsis—together. But the surgical removal of ethics and politics—to the point of Watkin asking the reader for forgiveness for including a paragraph on both—comes at a high cost.

One could populate a pretty exciting comparative literature department with specialists of Agamben's work. Such a department would include, of course, someone like Watkin—someone who specializes in linguistics, literature, the theory of signification, et cetera. It would also have to include, just for starters, a philosopher, a political theorist, a legal scholar, an art historian, a theologian. All of these specialists would need to be familiar with the entire history of their field, going at least from Antiquity until the present. They would need to have a working knowledge of multiple languages, and have to be willing to venture (as most comparatists are) across the various disciplines represented in their department. Finally, they would also have to have read extensively outside of what tends to qualify as falling under the purview of traditional disciplines—they would also have to have an interest in, say, nylon stockings or the art porn of Chloë des Lysses, since both are discussed in Agamben's writings.

One of Agamben's early translators, Princeton Professor of Comparative Literature Daniel Heller-Roazen, offers this kind of perspective in his own work, ranging from his study of "the

poetics of contingency," *Fortune's Faces*, to *The Fifth Hammer: Pythagoras and the Disharmony of the World*. As I suggested earlier on, Agamben himself has arguably shaped his method after Warburg. Warburg is presented in Agamben's essay on his work as the inventor of a discipline that exists, but has no name. "Comparative Literature" would not be a bad name for it. Describing Warburg's method, Agamben suggests that "[w]hat is unique and significant about Warburg's method as a scholar is . . . that he always directs his research toward the overcoming of the borders of art history. It is as if Warburg were interested in this discipline solely to place within it the seed that would cause it to explode" (Agamben 1999b, 90). This quote takes us back to the postcard Agamben sent to Watkin, where the word "explode" is used as well. (In addition, Watkin describes Agamben's *Homo Sacer* as an "explosive" book [1].) In the footnotes to the Warburg essay, Agamben describes how the books in Warburg's library were ordered, deriving from it a principle for good research:

Warburg ordered his books not by the alphabetical or arithmetical criteria used in large libraries, but rather according to his interests and his system of thought, to the point of rearranging the order of his books whenever his methods of research changed. The law guiding the library was that of the "good neighbor," which states that the solution of one's problem is contained not in the book one is looking for but in the one beside it. (Agamben 1999b, 284 n9)

This "law" also guides Agamben's project—de la Durantaye places it at the beginning of his own book on Agamben, evoking it as the principle that will guide his investigations.

When, years later, Agamben comes to describe his own method as trying "to identify in the texts and contexts on which I work what Feuerbach used to call the philosophical element, that is to say, the point of their *Entwicklungsfähigkeit* (literally, capacity to be developed)" (Agamben 2009, 12-3), this language takes us straight back to Warburg. All of this to say that Agamben is at heart a comparatist, and it is worth asking what happens to this core aspect of his work when it is bound in a book like *The Literary Agamben*—no matter how valuable the readings presented in it might be.

After finishing *The Literary Agamben*, I was left wondering whether Agamben's work can be fully appreciated from that literary side. If "living thought" is what characterizes the Italian philosophical tradition, as Roberto Esposito has argued, i.e., if thinking is really about opening oneself up to the chaotic, messy world—then a book such as *The Literary Agamben* risks leading us away from there into a thought that is rich but ultimately quite tautological (like Agamben's thinking on language itself), limited to its own ways of reasoning. To include a reference to another thinker who appears a number of times in Watkin's book: imagine a book that focuses only, without any consideration of the other aspects of his thought, on set theory in the philosophy of Alain Badiou. What would be the effect of this kind of book on the project of Badiou's philosophy?

It may be that Watkin himself has already realized that this one book on Agamben cannot be enough. He has reportedly finished a second monograph on Agamben, this time on Agamben as a philosopher of indifference. Together, the two books may offer a more complete picture of Agamben as a philosopher who starts from an *indifferent* theory of language ("there is

language") but was able to make that *matter*—ethically, politically—in ways that are still waiting to be assessed.

Notes

[1] Arne De Boever, "The Allegory of the Cage: Foucault, Agamben, and the Enlightenment," *Foucault Studies* 10 (2010): 7-22.
http://www.google.com/search?client=safari&rls=en&q=de+boever+foucault+studies&ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8

[2] Giorgio Agamben, "No to Bio-Political Tatooing," *Le Monde* (January 10 2004).
http://www.ratical.org/ratville/CAH/totalControl.html

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