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Messiah without Resentment,
Or What Remains of Messianism in Giorgio Agamben's
Remnants of Auschwitz

The aim of my essay is to extract the idea of messianism that emerges from the writings of Giorgio Agamben, particularly from the central text in the *Homo Sacer* trilogy – *Remnants of Auschwitz*. I will try to demonstrate how Agamben's attempt to overcome the traditional dualism and opposition of Athens and Jerusalem, executed with his favorite rhetorical tool of “the cut of Apelles,”¹ radically transforms the meaning of the two categories: the philosophical *amor fati* of Athens that privileges ultimate reconciliation with the world, and Jerusalem's messianic resentment towards being, which feeds on the restless spirit of negativity. The peculiarity of Agamben's Cut consists precisely in the fact that it produces no stark oppositions, instead offering a subtle difference that simultaneously separates and reconciles. Yet, there is a risk involved in such a deconstructive procedure. For it may well be that the transformation of the messianic Agamben has in mind is self-canceling, i.e. it not only deactivates ossified dualisms, but simultaneously deactivates the very idea of the messianic which Agamben claims to have rescued for contemporary thinking.

The No Non-Messianism

In Agamben's deconstruction of the apparent dualism of Athens and Jerusalem, which he dissects into a subtler spectrum of differences, the two positions – the conciliatory and the resentful – mingle and penetrate one another. There is thus more of a Jew in a Greek and more of a Greek in a Jew than it would seem from the traditional exposition of their mutual hostility. Yet, the real purpose in initiating this subtle interplay is to reveal the true meaning of the messianic. In *The Time that Remains* Agamben delivers his own interpretation of the famous Paulian “neither Jew, nor Greek” that constitutes the messianic remnant:

The remnant is an *exception taken to its extreme*, pushed to its paradoxical formulation. In his rendering of the messianic condition of the believer, Paul radicalizes the condition of the state of exception, whereby law is applied in disapplying itself, no longer having an inside or an outside (TTR, 106–7).

Il resto is a remnant of the operation that Agamben calls “messianic aphorism,” the act of separation that upholds the Jewish Law dividing people into Jews and non-Jews, which simultaneously cuts into this division and thus produces an effect of enduring “exceptionality”: “This means that messianic division introduces a remnant (*resto*) into the law’s overall division of the people, and Jews and non-Jews are constitutively ‘not-all’” (TTR, 50; emphasis mine). The “non-people” to whom Paul addresses himself are the “exceptional” of Israel, the truly “righteous remnant,” who are “circumcised by heart” and give a spiritual meaning to the foundation of the mundane law, the ordering of “circumcision by flesh.” Once the spiritual “exception” can be recovered and properly interpolated by the messianic address (which, as Paul believes, is offered by the teaching of Jesus), the law can be deactivated and thrown away, in a manner similar to the Wittgensteinian ladder that has lost its usefulness.

Just as the righteous “remnant of Israel,” which is the carrier of the messianic calling, cuts into the opposition of Greeks and Jews by attaching itself to what remains of this division: *the no non-Jews* – the true messianic is the outcome of an analogical operation, implemented on the discursive meta-level. It cuts into the opposition of the “Greek” tragico-philosophical idiom and the “Jewish” messianico-theological idiom, extracting the remnant of this division – *the no non-messianic*. This complex structure of double difference is necessary if the remnant is to remain a *remnant*; the two-subsequent negations cannot be summed up and reverted to a positive identity. The messianic, identified as a positive historical discourse (“circumcised by flesh”), and the *true* messianic, which can be extracted from it (“circumcised by heart”), do not coincide: the no non-messianic preserves a negativity of detachment that makes it truly universal, i.e. not part of any tradition or discursive order positioned within the world history of ideas. Therefore, the “true” messianic is *beyond any opposition*, just as it is beyond any *positioning* as such. To be truly messianic it must remain outside of any conceptual war waged within the historical immanence. It must be a categorical remnant untouched by the immanentist positioning, if it is to fulfill its role: to still the war of concepts and bring about “messianic peace.”

For Agamben, the messianic peace consists precisely in cutting into and deactivating the oppositions at the root of all wars and evil itself. In *The Coming Community* he defines evil as the outcome of a wrong reaction to the deficiency of being, a “fearful retreat” from “the demonic element” of existence issuing in a misconceived attempt to mend it:

Evil is only our inadequate reaction when faced with the demonic element, our fearful retreat from it in order to exercise – founding ourselves in this flight – some power of being. Creation – or existence – is *not* the victorious struggle of a power to be against a power to not-be. (CC, 29-30).

The fundamental opposition of being and non-being – translating into further derivative dualisms of good and evil, demonic and divine, human and non-human and so on – must be made inoperative for the sake of the true messianic peace which, as Stéphane Moses recently put it in Levinasian idiom, can only thrive *à-dela de la guerre*.² The deconstructive deactivation of warring oppositions can thus be regarded as Agamben’s answer to Derrida’s practice of deconstruction as an instrument of “messianic justice,” offering both a continuation and a polemic.

The main difference precisely concerns the idea of war. For Derrida, who also operated within the Alexandrian melange of a mixed “Jewgreek – Greekjew” idiom³, striving toward messianic justice does not mean *falling away* from the universe of war. Quite to the contrary, it rather indicates an intensification of struggle, carried out against all those thoughts and concepts that wish to end struggle once for all. Therefore, Derrida’s deconstruction takes on the notion of messianic peace *au dela de la guerre* in a dialectical way. True peace can be achieved only after a *true* struggle, i.e. after all false ideas of reconciliation have been brought down. And if he fights against dualistic oppositions, or, for that matter, against all definitive positioning of concepts - most of all of his own concept of deconstruction which for him acts as a necessarily unruly messianic agent – it is because they are too neat, static, and orderly. In the totem-like, ritualistic antagonism of ideas there is already an incipient closure, a balanced economy of war that constitutes its own type of order. Thus, in order to reach a messianic peace, the true war must first be unleashed against all inertia of reconciliation. The desired *Miteinander des Verschiedenen*⁴ can only be achieved through the complete emancipation of the latter, “the different”: the agile and ultimately negative spirit of *différance* that

spoils every conceptual arrangement, thereby letting a misfit singularity come to the fore.

For Derrida, to cut deconstructively into oppositions therefore means to intensify and liberate the war that the conceptual dualistic arrangement ritually domesticated.⁵ For Agamben, on the other hand, to cut into oppositions means to deactivate and arrest the war that arises only as a side effect of the positioning of concepts. Whereas for Derrida the “true” messianic is a fire of negativity thrown on the surface of the earth to consume its false images of peace, the “true” messianic of Agamben, the *no non-messianic*, is far more conciliatory, although in this case reconciliation does not mean an acceptance of any order of being as such. Derrida believes in the power of saying No, which becomes embodied by language opposing all conceptual structures by sheer force of *différance*. By contrast, Agamben follows the paradoxical line of the tragic philosophers who, like Nietzsche, decided to say No to saying No, and therefore he believes in the power of higher reconciliation which arrests the spirit of negativity, appeases revenge and resentment and, by dismantling warring oppositions, takes the subject into the *àu-dela de la guerre*.

For Agamben, the *Yeah-saying* attitude of the tragic philosophers, who learned the spirit of ontological rebellion but only to turn it against itself, is therefore not as anti-messianic as it would seem on the first glance. It is rather no non-messianic, where the “true” messianic can only be realized when it is not openly wanted or desired; where it happens beyond any hope or need, almost in a mode of an “unintended consequence”; no longer expected, precisely as in Kafka’s aphorism, often quoted by Agamben, about the Messiah who comes when no longer needed. Sticking to the messianic, pure and simple, with its discourse of hope and expectation, hinders the coming of the Messiah. It is only when the concept of the messianic is abandoned for the sake of the “no non-messianic” that messianic peace can begin to take shape. The overtly visible messianic “circumcision by flesh” must give way to the new, more secretive covenant of the no non-messianic “circumcision by heart.”

In taking this peculiar stance, Agamben may be seen as situating himself, somewhat revisionistically, within the line of thought that explicitly abandoned the concept of the messianic and advocated a return to the tragic, for i.e. the philosophy inaugurated by Nietzsche and continued later by Heidegger. Agamben’s revision consists in maintaining the “messianic remnant” of this operation: the seemingly positive gestures of Nietzsche’s

Ja-Sagen or Heidegger's *Gelassenheit* hide the dimension of a never completely sublated double negation in which the Nay-saying spirit of resentment, engendering the messianic expectation, finally becomes reflective and says No to itself. The no non-messianic is the product of this double negation that preserves the history of its self-canceling negativity: coming-to-reconciliation out of the depths of the night of denial. This hovering, secretive aura is best visible in Agamben's favorite figure, borrowed directly from Benjamin: the figure of *die gerettete Nacht*, a "saved night."⁶

The passage from the tragic to the no non-messianic, which occupies Agamben in his "messianizing" interpretation of Nietzsche and Heidegger, is a maneuver parallel – or, perhaps even identical – to the passage from bare life (*vita nuda*) to the remnant (*il resto*). This transformation, as Agamben himself admits, constitutes the very gist of the *Homo Sacer* project.⁷ Bare life and the remnant are functional equivalents in two different stories: the Greek tragico-philosophical narrative on the one hand, and the Jewish messianic counter-narrative on the other. They both refer to what has fallen out from the human symbolic order: the destitute subject, deprived by all the misfortunes that befell him of his social status, identity, and communal belonging, reduced to a state of "dust and nothingness." This subject is what remains after everything that made him human in the eyes of his fellow beings has been removed; it is the limit situation embodied, exposed to the most extreme suffering whose cause seems to lie not in some specific wrongdoing but in the most general order of things. Therefore, it is the potential subject of the most primary negotiation with the world as such, more fundamental than any cognitive attitude. This potential subject must decide whether to forgive the world its ontological arrangement and find a way to reconcile with being, despite all the suffering it has caused him – or to *not* to forgive the world and seek a non-ontological, transcendent alternative in which it can deposit its radical messianic hopes.

This fundamental decision is what *traditionally* divides the two heritages. The idiom of philosophy operates with the notion of bare life, bequeathed to it from the Greek tragedy: from Oedipus, the paradigmatic *homo sacer*, to Michel Foucault's subject as a passive victim of modern biopolitical power, constituting the starting point of Agamben's analysis. Whereas messianic discourse operates with the notion of the "righteous remnant": from Job and Isaiah, through Paul, to Benjamin and Rosenzweig. Both bare life and the remnant are subject to the creaturely condition of suffer-

ing that constitutes the human subject as such. But this subjection-subjection is played out differently in these two lines of thought. Within the Greek heritage, which contains both tragedy and philosophy, bare life emerges as an *error*, a tragic self-inflicted guilt (*hamartia*), which must be corrected by the powers of order: the individual, who fell out of the socio-metaphysical arrangements, must be punished for excessive *hubris* and brought back to the system where fate and the totality of beings live in reconciled harmony. The Greek process of dealing with the fall-out of bare life thus leads necessarily to an act of reconciliation with the finite condition of pain and death: the Stoic *amor fati*, the Hegelian *Versöhnung*, the Nietzschean *Ja-Sagen* and the Heideggerian *Gelassenheit*, are but only quasi-new historical avatars of the same recurring predicament. Whereas in the Jewish line of thought, the destitute subject is left with an alternative that is lacking in the Greek immanentist metaphysics or “natural theology”⁸: conceived as a subject-to-God, who is transcendent and thus separate from the order of the created world, he can hope for an exemption from the tough rules of the creaturely fate, i.e. for an *election*. Unlike Oedipus, who can only feel *negatively selected* as a sticking out exception-error, an apex for the wrath of gods doing away with his bare life, Job can feel *positively elected* and designated as a “righteous remnant”: error and scandal to the order of creatureliness, he can nonetheless be empowered by an alternative truth and become a carrier of the other, divine, justice and strive toward the messianic times, when “death and destruction,” this heavy seal of the creaturely condition, will no longer serve as keepers of law and order.

Agamben’s greatest ambition is to find a spot on the Möbius strip of these two parallel stories where Oedipus secretly meets Job, where bare life, the philosophical synonym of passive victimhood, passes into the remnant, the subject of messianic passion and practice. Yet, as we have already suggested, this transformation does not exhaust itself in a simple *turn* from the tragic to the messianic: Agamben certainly is not Rosenzweig, not even Benjamin, who both experimented with the idea of *Umkehr* that would turn the tragic hero to the threshold of revelation.⁹ Instead of a dynamic turn, which would provide a dialectical link to both stories, Agamben proposes a cut into the dualism of the tragic and the messianic, which deactivates their mutual opposition. Therefore, the mystery of the remnant is to reveal itself in this double act of abandoning the overtly messianic and the simultaneous “no non-messianic” recuperation of the tragic.

Nihilo-Messianism: The Praise of Meaninglessness

Before we get to the analysis of *Remnants of Auschwitz*, let me first examine the way in which Agamben defines his two crucial concepts; how he prepares the staging of an encounter between Oedipus and Job, the hopeless bare life and the hopeful remnant, which eventually will find its culmination in his work on the survivors of the Nazi concentration camps.

The notion of bare life, which Agamben borrows from Benjamin's essay "Critique of Violence," appears in the description of homo sacer as the liminal figure of extreme suffering who belongs to the human community precisely by being excluded from it as the one who is no longer "one of us": "We are confronted here with a residual and irreducible bare life, which must be excluded and *exposed to a death that no rite and no sacrifice can redeem*" (HS, 100; my emphasis).

Although Agamben focuses mostly on the definition of bare life in *Homo Sacer* and leaves somewhat understated the meaning of "bare death", which falls out of the human symbolic system of sacrificial rites, it is precisely this act of the *profanation of death* that truly interests him. For it is only thanks to this act that *homo sacer* can turn his exclusion into advantage, i.e. transform his victimhood into a victorious remnant. Contrary to the intuition that would see in the *meaninglessness* of *homo sacer's* death a truly painful sign of exclusion, Agamben wants to portray it as a chance – a chance of liberation from the "enigmatic signifiers"¹⁰ that sustain the power of symbolic systems, with all its seemingly redeeming and meaningful rituals. This "meaningfulness" appears as nothing but a sham, an illusion of legitimacy created by a power whose true essence is, in fact, "being in force without significance":

Being in force without significance (*Geltung ohne Bedeutung*): nothing better describes the ban that our age cannot master than Scholem's formula for the status of law in Kafka's novel. What, after all, is the structure of the sovereign ban if not that of a law that *is in force* but does not *signify*? Everywhere on earth men live today in the ban of a law and tradition that are maintained solely as the 'zero point' of their own content, and that include men within them in the form of a pure relation of abandonment. All societies and all cultures today (it does not matter whether they are democratic or totalitarian, conservative or progressive) have entered into a legitimation crisis in which law is in force as the pure "Nothing of Revelation" (HS, 51).

This description of Scholem from his letter to Benjamin from 1934 in the succinct formula of *Geltung ohne Bedeutung*, i.e. the validity of power so

absolute that it does not even bother to deliver a meaningful self-justification, perfectly fits the condition of power in the nominalist universe, this shaky cradle of the modern world. Due to what has become recognized as the *nominalist crisis* of the once ordered medieval universe, the system of meaningful hierarchical mediations, translating the flow of power from the highest to the lowest regions of existence, collapsed and gave way to a much bleaker vision of creaturely disarray. What *remained* of these ruins were just two extreme poles: on the one hand, God as a sheer voluntarist power, and, on the other, his creatures reduced to passive objects of his unintelligible verdicts. On this account, *homo sacer*, the survivor of the nominalist catastrophe, reveals the final crisis of legitimation: he disenchant power as such, by showing it in its final, unadorned, terrifying – perfectly *meaningless* – purity.

According to Agamben, this predicament can only be solved in one way: that night must be saved as, precisely, *the night, the unsavable*. In his early essay “The Messiah and the Sovereign: The Problem of Law in Walter Benjamin,”¹¹ he alludes to the passage from bare life to the remnant as the essential transformation within the *messianico-nihilistic* tradition, best exemplified by the work of Franz Kafka and Walter Benjamin. The “imperfect nihilism,” which is close to Scholem’s position, sticks to the “nothingness of revelation” and maintains it in an “indefinitely deferred state of validity” (P, 171); as such it belongs directly to the project of secularization that continues to draw on the authority of theological categories that it simultaneously transforms. While the second, more advanced “perfect nihilism,” characteristic of the gesture of profanation and closer to Agamben’s heart¹², removes the enigmatic Nothing, which mesmerizes believers with its empty validity, and seeks redemption in the final, fully horizontal coincidence of power and subject, or law and life, where the rule of the former over the latter ceases. “Law that becomes indistinguishable from life in a real state of exception is confronted by life that, *in a symmetrical but inverse gesture*, is entirely transformed into law,” says Agamben (HS, 55; my emphasis). The way out of the nominalist crisis, therefore, leads through the deepening of the “theological nihilism” that divests the “enigmatic signifier” of *deus absconditus* of its spellbinding power. Once this transcendent instance, signaled by the “Nothing of Revelation,” is annulled, bare life, reduced to the “zero point” of its content, can begin anew and resurrect as its own sovereign law-giver, thus entering the positive state of exception, where, in Benjamin’s words, “the rule of the law over the living ceases.”¹³

Yet, Agamben's interpretation of this famous sentence of Benjamin goes somewhat against the grain of the latter's overtly messianic intention: while Benjamin envisions a state of blessed life, free from the heavy burden of law and its punitive hand of death, Agamben proposes a different solution which seeks an *ultimate reconciliation with our deathly condition*. *Homo sacer* hovers in the ambivalence between life and death, being and non-being: he "enters into an intimate symbiosis with death without, nevertheless, belonging to the world of the deceased" (HS, 100). And, as Agamben clearly alludes, this "intimate symbiosis with death" appears as his only chance of liberation, his only escape from the powers that haunt and humiliate him; as long as he betrays a will-to-live, he is doomed to remain a helpless toy in hands of "the force without significance," which defines the essence of the sovereign power, manifesting itself in "the right to kill." As long as he wishes to lead a *meaningful* life, which in the end boils down to a *meaningful* death, sanctioned by redeeming rituals, he can never hope to get beyond the grip of power. The messianico-nihilistic tradition thus teaches the *lesson of meaninglessness* – meaningless life coupled symbiotically with meaningless death – as something not to be feared, but desirable: as a chance of liberation from the sway of "enigmatic signifiers."

Thus, in spite of the traditional association that binds messianic hopes with the "blessing of more life,"¹⁴ Agamben invokes a radical inversion that binds his messianic hopes with the *promise of death*. It is the realm of death – and not life – that opens to him so far unexplored messianic potentialities. What Agamben consequently offers is not just, as he himself declares in *Homo Sacer*, "thanatopolitics," but also – *thanatomessianism*.

Agamben's Meta-Antinomianism: Saving the Night

This radical reversal of the messianic idiom – or, as we have proposed here, the turn from the overtly messianic to the more secretive no non-messianic – constitutes the main theme of *Remnants of Auschwitz*. For Agamben, it often seems as if the only distinctive feature of the messianic idiom were *antinomianism*, i.e. the style of thinking that abounds with counter-intuitive paradoxes and reversals: "The idea that the Kingdom is present in profane time in sinister and distorted forms [. . .] is a profound messianic theme" (PR, 34). This antinomian logic perceives the world as immersed in a constant upheaval where all categories are always on the brink of radical

inversion: “the oppressed becomes oppressor and the executioner in turn appears as victim” (RA, 21).

According to Agamben, Auschwitz is the place in which these antinomial inversions come most distinctly to the fore; this is the site where “a gray, incessant alchemy in which good and evil and, along with them, all the metals of the traditional ethics reach their point of fusion” (ibid.). Auschwitz, this great alchemical furnace, is also the experimental ground on which Agamben tests his most ambitious hypothesis of the transfiguration of bare life into the remnant. Out of the lead of the most destitute victimhood rises the gold of ultimate liberation. The lesson of Auschwitz, which Agamben treats as “the paradigm of modernity,” is the secret of this transformation that constitutes the last post-historical task of modern men: once again, “saving the night.”

But who is to draw the lesson of Auschwitz; who is to mediate between the dead and the living? The figure of the mediator is offered by a “survivor,” and his mediating role consists in giving an impossible testimony: in bearing witness to the bare life of “the drowned,” *der Muselmann*, whom the survivor discovers as his own inner truth, his own “limit figure.” Agamben portrays *der Muselmann*, poised “exceptionally” on the verge between life and death, as the icon of ultimate suffering which becomes so extreme that it subverts our mundane systems of ethics and carries us beyond any law, norm, or even a possibility of witnessing: *beyond meaning*. “The *Muselmann* [. . .] is the site of an experiment in which morality and humanity themselves are called into question. The *Muselmann* is a limit figure of a special kind, in which not only categories such as dignity and respect but even the very idea of an ethical limit *lose their meaning*” (RA, 63; my emphasis). In reaction to this peculiar negative apotheosis of “the muslim,” Dominik Finkelde, Agamben’s recent German commentator, went even as far as to declare that:

[. . .] The *Muselmann* poses in front of us an obligation to rethink the concept of man in the light of Agamben’s idea of the remnant in a way which no longer will avail itself of traditional humanism. The *Muselmann* *hides in himself a prophetic dimension*. His impotence, apathy, utmost exposition incorporates a prophetic appeal.¹⁵

However, this hasty conclusion appears to be slightly far-fetched. For, although Agamben builds a suggestive and seductive tension of *structural analogy* between the “muslim” and the witness – they both hover in the ambivalence between life and death – it is only the latter who possesses a

messianic power. The relationship between “the drowned” and “the saved” (to use Primo Levi’s expressions) reflects the secret transformation between bare life and the remnant, where “drowning” and “saving,” damnation and salvation, enter into a sphere of aporetic indeterminacy:

In the concept of remnant the aporia of testimony coincides with the aporia of messianism. Just as the remnant of Israel signifies neither the whole nor a part of the people but, rather, the non-coincidence of the whole and the part, and just as messianic time is neither historical time nor eternity but, rather, the disjunction that divides them, so the remnants of Auschwitz – the witnesses – are neither the dead nor the survivors, neither the drowned nor the saved. They are what remains between them. (RA, 163-4)

We are dealing here with a long and complex chain of analogies. Just as in Agamben’s book on Saint Paul, *The Time that Remains*, here in *Remnants of Auschwitz* he also proposes a version of a “messianic aphorismos,” based on his favorite model of Apelles’ Cut. In the first approach, the aporia of messianism consists in locating the time of redemption in the temporal *neither/nor* that cuts through the opposition of historical time and eternity. In the next approach, however, the cut of Apelles is being applied to second order categories: the messianic and the non-messianic itself; redemption and non-redemption; the very dualism of “the drowned” and “the saved.” This maneuver chimes well with the method of meta-antinomianism chosen by Agamben throughout this text, which subverts the traditional division of messianic and non-messianic discourses in order to extract the “true” idiom of the non-messianic. We are now invited to rethink the very idea of the witness as the remnant operating from within the ambivalence between salvation and ruin, or even to experiment with the idea of redemption in the very midst of doom.

The essence of this lesson lies in the specific way in which Agamben interprets the crucial feature of the messianic thought: *the promise to conquer death*. Using once again the cut of Apelles, Agamben claims that this act of triumph over death must go beyond any simple dualism of mortality and immortality. The true meaning of the messianic promise is therefore not so much eternal life but rather a state of life in which *death no longer matters*. In other words, if the sign of the unsaved condition is living under the power of “death, the absolute lord and master”¹⁶ – the sign of the saved condition is living in the world where death holds no sway over life; where it is dethroned, no longer feared, and no longer serving as a canvass for the phantasmatic, spell-binding “nothingness of revelation.”

If, as Ernst Bloch very acutely observed, the essence of the tragic condition, which means precisely “the unsavable,” consists in the *overestimation of death*,¹⁷ the reverse should be true for the state of redemption. And not just true: for Agamben it is the only, as well as sufficient, indication of the fully actualized redemptive state. Therefore, perfect nihilism differs from its imperfect versions in the act of the radical *profanation of death*, where it can no longer produce enigmatic signifiers of religious validity; profane, simplified, ordinary, meaning nothing, death is liberated from its various sublime halos to be just what it is. This is precisely why in Agamben’s antinomian rhetoric the messianic promise to conquer death turns into a promise to liberate death. It is not death as such, as a bare fact, which needs to be overcome, but only a false aura of signification that has surrounded it since time immemorial when the “anthropological machine,” producing man as a sense-producing animal, began to operate. If modern men want to emancipate themselves from all auratic powers and laws, they must first of all disable the very source of this *Geltung ohne Bedeutung*, which lies in their wrong, symbolically overcharged attitude towards death. Instead of *overestimating* death, they have to learn how to die in a way that means nothing; that adds nothing extra, nothing sublime to the most ordinary, bare fact of dying.

According to Agamben, the moment when death loses all meaning – precisely the moment of Auschwitz where the “dignity of dying” became an empty phrase – signifies the Hölderlinian moment of both the greatest danger and the greatest hope. Auschwitz offers an unelaborated antinomian *datum*, where *das Gefährlichste* and *das Rettende* come into a confused mixture of a state of exception that can be interpreted simultaneously as – a terrifying regress and a promising progress. It is the role of the witness to act subsequently as a messianic agent of the progressive interpretation – to extract the right kind of lesson from the meaninglessness of death; the right kind of message, darkly emanating from the profanation of death that took place in Auschwitz.

Agamben makes it clear that this message should not be confused with totalitarian permission to inflict “cold-blooded and meaningless death, with no more significance than cleaving the head of cabbage or swallowing a draught of water,” as Hegel once remarked in reference to the terror of French Revolution.¹⁸ Yet, it shall nonetheless come from the same “alchemical furnace” of the state of exception, where all laws become suspended, and propagate a messianic *evangelia* of the right way

of dying seen equally easy, but this time from the point of view of the victim: *without fear and resentment*. The messianic state of exception has a chance to emerge from the “exceptionality” of Auschwitz, where for the first time in human history death absolutely lost its meaning and became a truly *bare death*, thereby cutting into the traditional dualism of mortality and eternity by offering a respite from the signifying projections of death, which produced the power structure of Western metaphysics. Hence, the ultimate messianic message, according to Agamben, aims at the reconciliation with death that resists any effort of sublimation. When bare life, so far spellbound by its anxious will-to-live, will be coupled by no longer “overestimated” bare death, it will finally transform itself into a remnant.

Therefore, what somewhat disturbingly fascinates Agamben in the figure of the *Muselmann* is the way in which he reconciles himself with dying, which loses all significance, all human face, all sublime quality. This fascination is only checked by the fact that the “muslim” is a passive victim who does not inflict this gesture, strongly reminiscent of Heideggerian *Gelassenheit*, on himself willingly but under the pressure of an unjust power. Willingly or not, the “muslim” reaches the other shore of the state of exception; by approaching and facing his bare death, *der Muselmann* falls out of the logic of power, whose only weapon over the mortals is, precisely, the “threat of death,” working through its various fear-inducing projections. The “muslim,” by entering into “symbiosis with his own death,” falls out of the evil logic of sovereignty, which always feeds on the sublimity of death, and achieves a state of *releasement*. In his passive abandonment and self-enclosure, he releases himself from the grips of power, which brought him to the brink of death – in fact, brought him *too close*. It thus over-killed the effect of lethal menace by pushing the “muslim” to the very limit of death’s literality, depriving it of its sublime halo. Turned profane, ordinary, everyday-like and mundane, death, experienced by every member of the concentration camp as a daily companion, could no longer serve as a template for threatening projections. By turning absolutely immanent, it could no longer offer a model for transcendence, which every sovereign power requires as its “auratic” spot of legitimacy. The world of the “muslim” thus became perfectly horizontal, where death, once an enigmatic other of life, walked next to the barely living; or, to use Agamben’s own formula, it became “perfectly nihilistic,” with no space left for otherworldly revelation and its contentless validity.

A good illustration of this effect of the literalization of death is offered by Imre Kertész's *Fatelessness*¹⁹, the style of which consequently and deliberately refuses any figuration. Kertész aims at the description of the concentration camp in words that meticulously avoid any metaphorical projection belonging to "the world of the living." When the young hero, having spent his formative adolescent years in various camps, finally returns to Budapest and meets a compassionate reporter who asks him how he had survived "this hell," he does not know how to answer because he no longer understands this most traditional figure of the kingdom of death; for him it was "just a camp." The loss of fate equals the loss of words, the loss of language, which, when used by humans, "the living," appears to Kertész to be too colorful, too exaggerated, too projective; young Imre soon discovers that most of what it says, simply "is not there." But unlike the unfortunate Churbinek, whose loss of language is deplored by Primo Levi as the sign of ultimate victimhood, Imre experiences the loss of words as strangely liberating and invigorating. The novel reaches its climax when he, rapidly sliding into "muslimhood," already living-with-death that has been eating into his gangrenous body, looks one day at the camp as if with fresh eyes and suddenly says: "It would be nice to live in this beautiful place a little longer." And it is precisely this phrase – "a little longer" – which, according to Agamben, makes all the difference. Imre is already reconciled with his death which has made itself fully present in his life; all he wishes – and this is a truly minimal wish – is to prolong his bare life, as bare as death that shall end it. Thus, from the perspective of the state of reduction he has achieved, even Buchenwald can emerge as a "beautiful place" in this most mundane, horizontal and literal revelation.

A wish without hope, a wish to survive so minimal and reduced that it cannot engender any desire, any fantasy of "what is not there," any figurative surplus over bare, naked being – is the only version of "will-to-life" that could pass Agamben's messianic test. It is well known that the bare life that harbors no hopes, bare death that brings no fear, and the loss of linguistic figuration that generates distaste for anything non-literal, together as one post-traumatic syndrome, have already been described by Adorno in his famous remarks on Beckett in *Negative Dialectics*. But Kertész and Agamben attempt something more: they want to pass beyond the discourse of traumatization to a new *form-of-life* which will no longer mourn the loss but see in it a liberating discharge, a redemptive *release*.

The shocking news that Agamben therefore wants to convey to us in *Remnants of Auschwitz* is that the “muslim” – unwillingly and by force – nonetheless *achieved* a state that had long been yearned for by the messianic tradition: this truly secret no non-messianic line, separate from overt messianism, circumcised merely by flesh. The experiment he wants us to join concerns the possibility of the *repetition* that would involve the activity of the witness. As if in psychoanalytic therapy, the witness should be able to repeat freely and without compulsion the trauma that resulted from sheer force and constraint. By taking away the element of *Zwang*, the compulsion, this *Wiederholung*, the repetition itself could emerge as a lesson more valuable than anything we so far have learned from history. Seen in this perspective, the elaboration of the Auschwitz trauma, envisaged by Agamben, challenges all the working-through projects proposed by the psychoanalytic studies on Holocaust. Yet, since Agamben insists on associating this healing “turn” with “the theologico-messianic concept of the remnant” (RA, 162), we must carefully pose a series of questions which will inquire into and eventually put in doubt his idiosyncratic rendering of the messianic tradition: Can indeed this *gelassen* release and reconciliation with one’s mortality be so blithely equated with redemption? Can redemption, within the Jewish messianic idiom tightly associated with “the blessing of more life,” be achieved through just one maneuver: the profanation of death? And finally, is this association with “more life” only a superficial, “overt” feature of the messianic tradition – or, quite to the contrary, something that cannot be done away with by any clever “cut” or *aphorismos*?

The Spirit as Resentment

The issue, which seems to be the true bone of contention here, is the status of the *spirit of resentment* – the right to protest against reconciliation with being – to which Agamben devotes crucial attention in his book. In preparation for this debate, he rallies his friends and foes: Primo Levi, the author of *The Drowned and The Saved*, is put on the side of potential allies – while Jean Amery, the author of *At The Mind’s Limits*, is cast off as the most embittered representative of the “party of resentment.”

Yet, pace Agamben’s interpretive (or rather, manipulative) efforts, Primo Levi, even when quoted in *Remnants of Auschwitz*, cannot help but stubbornly reemerge as a partisan of the “official” Jewish messianic line of

thought, which puts him much closer to Amery than Agamben would wish to have it. Both Levi and Amery seem to be binding their radical hopes to an *emphatic* notion of life which has its source in a dialectical attitude towards death – of which Agamben takes only one part. The rejoinder not to overestimate death, formulated by Ernst Bloch in his succinct précis of the messianic impulse, does not aim here at the reconciliation with death but, quite to the contrary, at staging a *proper agon with death*; proper, i.e. truly recognizing its enemy for what it really is without demonizing projections. It is true, therefore, that the messianic impulse refrains from surrounding death with a sublime halo – but only because it recognizes in such sublimation an element of submission and defeatism. To overestimate death, by turning it into a paradigm of sovereign power, “the absolute master,” means to paralyze the agon, still the rightful resentment, and replace it with an essentially tragic submissiveness. Hence, the messianic prohibition to sublimate death does not serve to reconcile us with the literality of “meaningless” dying, but to fight it all the better *as it is*: indeed meaningless, and *because of that* non-acceptable, scandalous, and truly offensive. Here, meaningless death, the “seal” of an equally senseless machinery of being, which turns in an eternal circle of *genesis kai phtora*, becoming and perishing, can never be “easily” accepted; it is precisely this heavy “sealing” meaningfulness of death that must be broken, so that the law of the eternal return of the irreparable, senseless and the same over the living could cease. Full of sublime meaning *or* meaningless, figuratively enchanted *or* literalistically disenchanting – it does not matter, as long as death still functions as “the absolute master” which rules the totality of being with the iron law of the eternal return of the same. Seen from this perspective, Agamben’s messianism is simply not radical enough, just a half-way measure: by stopping at the profanation of death, which, stripped of its phantasmatic qualities, becomes “acceptable” as a sheer, meaningless necessity with which we have no choice but to reconcile ourselves, he would lose the original agonistic motivation that wished to desacralize death only to better see its offensive tyranny. Within the Jewish messianic line of thought, the profanation of death is just a means to an end – and not, as in Agamben, a *means without end*.²⁰

Therefore, we can understand Primo Levi when he writes in a Levinasian vein about “the anguish inscribed in everyone of *tohu-bohu*, of a deserted and empty universe crushed under the spirit of God but from which the spirit of man is absent: not yet born or already extinguished”²¹ – but we

simply find it hard to believe that Agamben, despite his declarations in the opening pages of *Remnants of Auschwitz* (RA, 26), participates in this anxiety. If anything, he rather rejoices at the coming of *tohu va vohu*, for, when taken in isolation, i.e. unharassed by the resentful demands of “spirit,” it forms – next to “limbo” and “saved night” – yet another secret name of Agamben’s messianic state: precisely the state “from which the spirit of man is absent: not yet born or already extinguished.” His newly invented subjective structure of witnessing testifies to one thing only: “that humans bear within themselves the mark of the inhuman, that their spirit contains at its very center the wound of non-spirit, non-human chaos atrociously consigned to its own being capable of everything” (RA, 77). Yet unlike Primo Levi or Levinas, Agamben proposes a scheme of ultimate reconciliation that will quench the “spirit,” *as* “spirit of resentment,” issuing from “the will’s impossibility to accept that something happened” (RA, 71). Thus, what one party calls positively *the right to protest*, the right not to forgive and not to strive towards reconciliation – the other, formed by Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Agamben, calls derogatively “the spirit of resentment.”

The crucial discussion in *Remnants of Auschwitz* takes place precisely around this double nomenclature. Jean Amery’s sentence – “Man has the right and the privilege to declare himself in disagreement with every natural occurrence” (RA, 100) – serves Agamben as an instance of the “wrong” namely “resentful” reaction to Auschwitz; it only confirms the evils of old ethics and as such belongs to the same paradigm that created the death camps. Whereas the “new ethics,” free of the evil logic of sovereignty and all the illusions and phantasms on which it feeds, must adhere to the Nietzschean project of “overcoming resentment.” But why should we follow Agamben on this Nietzschean transvaluation of “privilege” into vice? Is the “right to disagree with every natural occurrence,” to contest the necessity of things that happened (“what happened, happened,” as Amery mocks this fatalistic wisdom), truly nothing more than just “resentment,” the sign of deplorable weakness in face of the real? Is this excess of negativity nothing more than a Nietzschean sickness of the human mind, unable to say Yea to bare living and dying?

In the focal point of his book, Agamben makes it far too easy for himself: he dismisses the arguments of the other party with the unreflected Nietzschean gesture, which stigmatizes the birth of negativity with the medical stamp of “sickness,” without even examining their alternative

logic.²² It is logic, and its crucial feature lies in the *dialectical relation between resentment and disenchantment*. The human subject is called to protest against the rules of the necessitarian universe, however, at the same time, he is forbidden to overestimate its enemy, death. Now, if we extrapolate this relation on the Levinasian analysis of shame, which constitutes the gist of Agamben's argument, we shall obtain a reading that is precisely reverse to that of Agamben.

Witnessing: Apotropaic vs. Asymptotic

In *Remnants of Auschwitz*, Agamben proposes that we begin to think about human subjectivity not in terms of the structure of desire, which invests too much in the welfare of the "human spirit" struggling with nature, but in terms of the structure of pure witnessing, which contrastingly dwells in proximity to "the inhuman" layers of bare life. This alteration suggests a radical change of vectors within the intra-subjective split: if subjectivity conceived in terms of desire was imagined as a move beyond and away from animal nature, the act of witnessing "chains" subjectivity to the moment of its own desubjectivation where "it is forever impossible to distinguish between man and non-man" (RA, 47). "The subject of testimony is the one who bears witness to a desubjectivation" (RA, 120-121).

This "shameful" witnessing of one's own helplessness in front of one's own bare life, where subjectivity simultaneously fixes and averts its eyes from the Gorgon-like center of its material being, finds its perfect illustration in the split between two types of the inhabitants of the death camp: the Muselmann, the true witness of the inhuman, who did not survive to tell the story – and the Survivor, the witness "by proxy," who lives to tell the story untold by the former. But it is "the Muselmann... – says Agamben – (who) bears the true likeness of man" (RA, 52); he is the real *ecce homo*. Whereas the surviving witness (soon Agamben will reveal that his true name is "the remnant") is the one who spreads the new evangelia (or, perhaps *kakangelia*): "the atrocious news that [. . .] it is possible to lose dignity and decency beyond imagination, that there is still life in the most extreme degradation," and prophesizes the coming of "a new ethics, an ethics of a form of life that begins where dignity ends" (RA, 69). Therefore, not only is it possible to live after the departure of desire-spirit, which wished to give meaning to everything and thus dignify it; it is also – paradoxically

– *desirable*. The absolutely literal baring of “life in the most extreme degradation” bears a lesson that indeed possesses a prophetic appeal.

Yet the whole context of these meditations on the new, post-spiritual, post-figurative subjectivity developed in the chapter “Shame, or on the Subject,” is deeply confusing, especially in its involvement of Levinas. “Shame” is the term Levinas uses to phenomenologically describe the state of being fixed to one’s own body as an unambiguously negative experience, giving rise to *l’évasion* – the impossible, yet also unavoidable “escape.” If anything, therefore, Levinasian “shame” only confirms the model of subjectivity based on desire, which tries to achieve its own private Exodus from the oppressive bondage of material – literal, meaningless – existence: by showing it as ontologically impossible, as interdicted by the forces of Being, Levinas merely stresses the *ethical* imperative of such “excedence,” in which the subject says No to its conditioning by the rules of *Sein*. In *De l’évasion*, the early essay which already anticipates Levinas’ falling away from Heidegger, shame eventually gives way to nausea as a physiological reaction to “this revolting presence of ourselves to ourselves.”²³ Although this situation of “being riveted” appears “insurmountable” (*ibid.*), the process does not end with this recognition. Instead of reconciling itself with the apparent necessities of Being, the subject expresses resentment, rebels and finally takes off:

In nausea – which amounts to an impossibility of being what one is – we are at the same time riveted to ourselves, enclosed in a tight circle that smothers. We are there, and there is nothing more to be done, or anything to add to this fact that we have been entirely delivered up, that everything is consumed: *this the very experience of pure being ...* (*ibid.*, 66-67).

This is the moment, in which Agamben would like to stop, precisely at the alpha and omega of “pure being”: the *vera icon*, the Real and the True. However, Levinas *continues*:

However, this ‘nothing-more-to-be-done’ is the mark of a limit situation in which the uselessness of any action is precisely *the sign of the supreme instant from which we can only depart*. The experience of pure being is at the same time the experience of its internal antagonism and of the escape that foists itself on us (*ibid.*; my emphasis).

This, writes Levinas, is how we begin our Exodus: in the supreme instant of recognizing both the ontological impossibility *and* ethical necessity to “get out,” marking the aporia within Being itself. The “evasion,” therefore, begins

with the experience of ultimate irreconcilability – when we cannot forgive ourselves for what we are, or even stronger, *that* we are – and then only grows and justifies itself in the system of commandments, equally “non-intuitive” as the first imperative “to escape”: the system Levinas calls ethics.

Therefore, the gist of the difference between Levinas and Agamben (reading Levinas) is their radically disparate attitudes towards the spirit of resentment, which is immediately reflected in two fundamentally different models of witnessing. The one, more characteristic of the “party of resentment,” we will call here *apotropaic* – the other, pertinent to the “party of reconciliation,” we will call *asymptotic*. Both these models involve an “aporia of testimony,” but they cope with it in two very different ways.

Emil Fackenheim’s *To Mend the World* offers the best illustration of the apotropaic model of witnessing: the strongest messianic response to Auschwitz, which Agamben, strangely enough, forgets to mention.²⁴ In Fackenheim’s analysis, the *Muselmann* also assumes a “revelatory potential” which is to be discovered by the witness – but only in the negative sense of an *anti-revelation*, where every action leading *away* from this black hole automatically acquires the status of a “holy work,” a *mitzva*. Any act of resistance against the all-powerful gravitation of the “black star” marks the trajectory of holiness, the messianic path of “mending the world.”

Thus, in the preface to the second edition of *To Mend the World*, Fackenheim contrasts two types of wonder: one wonder, characteristic of philosophy, becomes paralyzed by horror in front of the event of Auschwitz – while the second, messianic wonder, takes action in resistance to the “humanly impossible.”²⁵ Messianic wonder consists precisely in what we call here *the apotropaic aporia of witnessing*: the stronger the horror in front of the “humanly impossible,” the stronger the reaction of doing everything opposite – as opposite as possible. This *as opposite as possible*, symmetrical to the witnessed “impossible,” indirectly creates a sphere of positive revelation which, within the secular modernity, offers a chance to renew our weakening messianic powers. Therefore, when Fackenheim talks about “the astounding fact – for *To Mend the World* the crucial fact – that the very sphere of life that does the paralyzing also gives the basis for the mending” (ibid., xxiv-v), he implies a similar kind of *turn*, from the tragico-philosophical to the messianico-theological, which also appears in Agamben’s project, but he understands it in a radically different way. He is looking not so much for the sources of reconciliation, as, rather, for the renewed sources of an even stronger, organized rebellion.

Only in this midnight of dark despair does post-Holocaust thought come upon a shining light. The Nazi logic of destruction was irresistible: *it was, nevertheless, being resisted*. This logic is a *novum* in human history, the source of an unprecedented, abiding horror: but resistance to it on the part of the most radically exposed, too, is a *novum* in history, and it is a source of an unprecedented, abiding wonder (ibid., 25).

In Fackenheim's apotropaic model of witnessing, the witness-survivor, who faced the ultimate Gorgon of the *Muselmann*, does not turn into a paralyzed stone, but, as if in a renewed, reinvigorated Abrahamic gesture of "walking away," he uses his experience as a spring-board to leap beyond the closure of immanence – without the help of transcendent intervention, which, in the times of modern *Nacht der Erde*, cannot be expected to manifest itself directly.²⁶

Without mentioning Fackenheim, Agamben uses his astronomical metaphor, when he compares the *Muselmann* to "the darkness of the invisible, unknown star" (RA, 162), and plays with the messianic overtones of *To Mend the World*, but only to twist them into a Nietzschean-Heideggerian arrangement, where messianism no longer indicates an apotropaic will-to-mend but teaches a contrary lesson of reconciliation with "the unsavable." To this purpose Agamben redefines the notion of the messianic remnant, which in the Jewish tradition applies to "the band of survivors,"²⁷ as the witness, who hovers between the drowned and the saved and places himself at the threshold of indistinction between doom and redemption; he "saves the unsavable," precisely as "unsavable."

If the witness survives it is therefore not in order to resist or move away from the dark gravity of degraded bare life. If he survives, it is only in order to stay in proximity to the drowning bare life of extreme desubjectification and accompany this act of *untergehen* with accepting awareness and will that has left the victim herself; he is to be the eyes, ears, and senses of the "living dead," who herself turned numb and indifferent.²⁸ It is, therefore, not the Benjaminian struggle which the witness is taking up after "the drowning one" has abandoned it; it is the final act of *Gelassenheit*, the ultimate, paradoxical, self-winding gesture of the will that no longer wants any will and says the last No to the spirit of negativity that engendered it. The role of the witness is to repeat the "muslim" experience, without trauma and violence, in a spirit of conciliation with the "natural occurrence" of the *Muselmann's* meaningless death. His role is to make durable and accessible to everyone that fleeting moment of "strange sweetness" *der Muselmann*

felt while abandoning himself to the bare contingency of dying.²⁹ In Agamben's own words, his role is to testify to the truth that "the human being is the inhuman; the one whose humanity is completely destroyed is the one who is truly human" (RA, 133). The witness as the remnant is thus an aporetic figure whose task verges on the impossible, which is characteristic of asymptotic functions that can never reach their *limes*: he is to tell, in words that are always too contaminated by "humanity," that the true human reveals himself only when his "humanity" is completely destroyed. He is to try, despite the sense-giving inertia of language, *not to give meaning to the meaningless*.³⁰

In his critique of Jean Amery, Agamben would like to suggest that the main difference between the apotropaic and the asymptotic model of witnessing is while the former resentfully denies the real and takes flight into the realm of "spiritual" fantasies, the latter truly faces the Gorgon that "cannot *not* be seen" (RA, 53). In our reconstruction, however, this Nietzschean argument from "fear and illusion" does not work. The apotropaic testimony indeed moves away from the Gorgon, but *never denies its existence*; quite to the contrary, it takes all its antithetical force from "staring straight in the eye of negativity." Yet, by doing so, it is simultaneously faithful to the imperative of disenchantment which does not allow it to overestimate its enemy: it denies the Gorgon its ultimate authority as *vera icon*, the sublime and thus mind-stopping truth of the human-inhuman. Yes, that happened, it was perhaps even more real than anything possible – but it doesn't mean that it is *the Real*, imbued with the authority of "telling the truth" (RA, 52). This apotropaic form of witnessing does not pass a moral judgment on the *Muselmann*, as Agamben implies; it merely warns us, the late coming second-order witnesses of the original testimony, from surrounding the figure of the *Muselmann* with a sublime halo of secret knowledge. Whereas Agamben's attempt to come as near as possible to the ultimate layer of "bare life," which supposedly tells all the truth, runs into the paradox he himself claims to have avoided: it threatens to bestow an excess of meaning on the meaninglessness of the "muslim's" act of drowning, or add a halo of enigmatic pathos that would ruin its sobering, redemptive literality – even if Agamben, as if aware of this paradox, will decide to call it oxymoronically a "profane halo."³¹

The Profane Halo

On this reading, the aporia of witnessing that faces the irreparable ultimacy of the Real and the True (emphatic and sublime in their capital letters), not only would not coincide with the aporia of messianism but would constitute its very opposite. The difficulty of the life-affirming messianic can rather be called, by contrast, *the aporia of apotropaism*: the ability to face the Gorgon without giving in to its dark attraction, or, in other words, the ability to face all the atrocities of *tohu va vohu* without giving in to the “secret knowledge” of its seemingly irreparable nature.³² This apotropaic aporia appears first – and paradigmatically so – in the story of Job who refuses to be identified with his miserable and afflicted, death-driven bare life, and gathers all the impossible strength – remindful of the Levinasian impossible power of non-identification – to claim his righteousness and innocence, untouched by the process of his bodily degradation. On the other hand, the prototype of the asymptotic witnessing is offered by Greek tragedy, where the spectator follows the tragic hero, who has given up the fight, to the very gates of his death he himself freely chose and accepted.

And despite his claims that the tragic paradigm is no longer valid after Auschwitz³³, the lesson Agamben wishes to draw from the existence of the Muselmann finally boils down to the lesson of an *accomplished fatalism* which originated in the *tragische Weltanschauung*, and if it transcends it, then only by its truly consequent completion. Transcending the tragic does not indicate here a messianic turn towards radical hope, but only a further deepening of the resignatory *Gelassenheit* which acquires a no non-messianic “halo” of a long desired answer to the question of suffering and death.

Agamben claims that Auschwitz neutralizes both traditional responses – the tragic and the messianic – because they both contain the element of “spirit” or “desire,” and therefore “resentment” which, by having founded the “old ethics,” the ethics of war of good against evil, eventually resulted in the creation of death camps. Yet, his no non-messianic response is much closer to the tragic solution that he himself would like to admit, pretending to keep a symmetrical distance from both discourses. His deactivation of the tragic consists in depriving us “after Auschwitz” of the last possibility of heroic decision and action, these last remainders of “human dignity,” which are still operative in Nietzsche’s *Ja-Sagen* where the will can affirm itself as *will*, even if in perfect attunement with being (“thus I willed it”).

Yet, the change is not as decisive as Agamben would like to suggest with his (ab)use of the messianic idiom: all he can offer is yet another tragic, though post-heroic, world, in which we cannot even *choose* the state we are in, because, in this truly extreme form of “perfect nihilism,” all will and all spirit – even this tiny bit that is needed for the Nietzschean act of affirmation – are already extinguished.

What Agamben, therefore, proposes is a *non-spirited version of reconciliation*, which does not really demonstrate the heroic will to say Yes to the world and forgive its brutality with a magnanimous *so wollte ich*, but rather passively falls into the rhythm of bare contingency of living and dying, in the negative, non-heroic gesture of Bartleby’s *I’d prefer not to...* For, if Bartleby is a figure of a Messiah for Agamben, it is precisely because he abstains from anything that would not strictly be necessary: yet not “necessary” in terms of some purposeful imperative but “necessary” in terms of abandoning oneself to the flow of absolutely literal “natural transience” Agamben calls in *The Open* “the rhythm of beatitude” (O, 82). When Bartleby states his notorious *I’d prefer not to*, he in fact means that he would prefer not to prefer anything; that he simply would not trust in any other modality than the bare necessity of his contingency about which there is nothing to prefer. Which is why, in the end, he can only die, meeting his death in the form of a meaningless event in the city prison; he *can* only die because dying is the only thing he *must* do. If Bartleby is then a Messiah, it is because, by his paradoxical choice of non-choosing, he is a willing *Muselmann*.³⁴

Purposelessness and senselessness, however, are necessary: chaos is fate. In the conception of chaos as necessity and fate, nihilism reaches its extreme form, that in which it opens up to the idea of eternal recurrence. (MWC, 90; my emphasis)

One cannot wish Auschwitz to repeat itself, says Agamben, if only because it is already repeating itself³⁵: the condition, in which purposelessness and senselessness reveal themselves as ruling forces of fate, is destined to return eternally as the only “necessity” that truly constitutes our bare life. However, what can be changed is the nature of this repetition. Fate can either strike its unknowing victims time after time, or it can come willingly to those ready to be reconciled to its ultimate meaninglessness. After the evacuation of the spirit, marked by the coming of Bartleby-the Messiah, a willing *Muselmann*; after the evaporation of everything “non-necessary” – all arbitrary

“preference,” all resentment and desire to mend to the world – being, finally abandoned to itself, to the “natural rhythm of transience,” will also find itself on an expiration track. The eternal recurrence of the same, unlike in Nietzsche’s still too “powerful” vision, will not have strength to recur forever. Beings shall return every time weaker and weaker, increasingly paler and more powerless copies of themselves – until they finally find reconciliation with their incipient non-being and hopefully vanish: erase themselves once for all out of the misconceived Book of the Living.

This *no non-messianic reconciliation* is once again a perfect example of Agamben’s favorite maneuver, the Apelles’ master cut that this time slides into the dualism of tragico-philosophical “spirit of reconciliation” and messianico-theological “spirit of resentment.” The tragico-philosophical spirit of reconciliation remains sober and disenchanting towards life, but it compensates this honesty with its sublime investment in death; by contrast, the messianico-theological spirit dryly refrains from overestimating death, but only in order to create a powerful fantasy of “more life.” Both traditions contain a moment of profanation (desublimation and despiritualization), but only for the sake of the instrumental denigration of their “enemy.” A truly profane world, profane only for its own sake, is ready to embrace its own death as the absolutely non-heroic and non-grand finale of the irreparable error of creation. We must thus follow the way of the *Muselmann*-Bartleby, whose “strange sweetness” teaches us how to *deactivate* our spirit of resentment for this readiness to come to the fore. We must say *Yes* to the world, so it can finally say *No* to itself.

*

Can this humble finale of all beings pass for “messianic,” even in the most comprehensive sense of this term that could still be reconcilable with its original context – the Jewish tradition? The series of Apelles’ cuts that Agamben employs in order to disarm the opposition of Athens and Jerusalem, reconciliation and redemption, philosophical *amor fati* and messianic struggle against the ontological *status quo*, produces a truly strange and, indeed, original hybrid, in which the redemptive climax becomes curiously anti-climactic: the releasement from all negativity and struggle leads not to the heroic-affirmative “reconciliation with being” but to a qualitatively new *reconciliation with non-being*, where negativity and positivity come into a mutual dance. Agamben allows no traditionally messianic protest

against the world, no unforgiving attempts to mend the order of being, yet he is also equally far from the self-sacrificial pathos of the tragic hero, who freely accepts his death for the sake of the world to continue. Agamben says neither No nor Yes to being: for him, the “true” messianic – or no non-messianic – activity consists in subtly and silently tuning things to their “potentiality to not-be,” in ending the ontological injustice by showing creation the way of *der Muselmann*, who “goes down” impassively and indifferently, entering into a non-heroic symbiosis with his own death.

The idea that lies behind all these cuts of Apelles is the one of “profanation”; they all aim at the deactivation of all surplus spiritual investments which surround our bare life and death with an enigmatic halo: the Scholemian *Geltung ohne Bedeutung*, which Agamben perceives as the primary locus of all power and injustice. This maneuver of profanation-deactivation is Agamben’s own version of enlightenment which he understands as a process of *baring*, i.e. a gradual reduction of human existence to the layer of the absolutely literal, free of any figurative excess; a process of peeling the human onion that, in the end, reveals only – *the inhuman*, or, to be more precise, a pure potentiality to not-be, which, after centuries of “ontofilic,” spiritual repression, can finally be actualized as such. This version of enlightenment also brings knowledge, a kind of redemptive *gnosis*. Among all beings, which tend to acquire a solid positive essence, the so called “humans,” despite all the modern ideology of humanism, persevere in their very mode of being a remnant of this pure, indeterminate potentiality – *to not-be* – which, once disclosed and unleashed, can finally dissolve the ontological structure of being.

Yet, this process of enlightenment eventually encounters a serious obstacle which Agamben himself rightly calls the aporia of witnessing: the fact that profanation cannot profanate itself; that it is bound to produce a halo of unintended sublimity. Just as the witness, who cannot but use language, *must* fall away from the “strange sweetness” of *der Muselmann* (even Imre Kertesz, the closest to Agamben’s ideal, must fail in this respect), the profanation, which acts through language, *must* acquire a figurative aura; a nimbus of attraction, something desirable and meaningful, i.e. worthy of “spiritual investment.” The Agambenian image of “the profane halo” that would radiate from beings left to themselves after the departure of the spirit, remains the most worrying expression of this antinomy. The very project of profanation, as *project*, must necessarily involve resentful negativity of the spirit which it simultaneously wants to eradicate; this very negativity that

produces various “nothings of revelation” and their arbitrary surplus authority. Does not the “profane halo” possess the same kind of a spellbinding, enigmatic quality? And if does not, then – why not?

But, then – this critique is nothing new: we already know this paradox from the Heideggerian gesture of *Gelassenheit*, a will that wills itself no longer, or spirit of revenge that wants to take revenge on itself. By turning this gesture, which probably must have remained *only* a gesture, into a *project*, and then, on top of that, by calling it a “truly” *messianic* project, Agamben made this aporia permanent. Which only means that that he himself deconstructed his own enterprise by demonstrating its aporetic futility.

Works of Giorgio Agamben:

- CC: *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt, Minneapolis and London: Minnesota University Press 1993
- HS: *Homo sacer. Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen, Stanford: Stanford University Press 1998
- MWC: *The Man Without Content*, trans. Giorgia Albert, Stanford: Stanford University Press 1999
- MWE: *Means Without End. Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino, Minneapolis and London: Minnesota University Press 1993
- P: *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen, Stanford: Stanford University Press 2000
- PR: *Profanations*, trans. Jeff Fort, New York: Zone Books 2007
- RA: *Remnants of Auschwitz. The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen, New York: Zone Books 1999
- O: *The Open. Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell, Stanford: Stanford University Press 2004
- SE: *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 2005
- TTR: *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. Patricia Dailey, Stanford: Stanford University Press 2005

Notes

- 1 “The cut of Apelles” is a particularly subtle line that divides an already existing line of division. This figure of speech derives from the legendary story in which Apelles, a famous painter of Greek antiquity, won a competition with another celebrated master, by drawing a line so fine that it run inside the already very fine line which was drawn previously by the other.

- 2 See Stéphane MOSES: *Au-delà de la guerre. Trois études sur Levinas*, Paris - Tel Aviv: Éditions de l'éclat, 2004.
- 3 See Jacques DERRIDA: "Violence and Metaphysics" in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978, p. 153.
- 4 To use Adorno's beautiful expression from *Negative Dialectics*.
- 5 This is precisely the gist of Derrida's argument against Carl Schmitt, who cannot help but deconstruct his own position despite his explicit intention to maintain a clear-cut dualism of friends and foes as the very essence of the political. This, Derrida wants to say, is the very nature of language itself, which does not allow for fixed oppositions. See Jacques DERRIDA: *Politics of Friendship*, London: Verso 2006.
- 6 In *The Open. Man and Animal*, AGAMBEN takes on Benjamin's idea of *die gerettete Nacht*, articulated in his letter to Christian Rang, and combines it with the antinomian motifs from Benjamin's *Theologico-Political Fragment*, thereby turning it into his major messianic project of redemption. "Here nature, as the world of closedness (*Verschlossenheit*) and of the night, is opposed to history as the sphere of revelation (*Offenbarung*) ... The saved night is a relationship with something unsavable" (O,81-82). But it is very doubtful whether Benjamin, for whom the idea of *die gerettete Nacht* appeared as rather marginal, would agree with such a promotion of this concept. Benjamin uses the German word *Rettung* in a different sense than "redemption," for which he reserves another word, *die Erlösung*; for him *Rettung* means not so much a messianic salvation as merely a "rescue" in which nature is finally relieved from the revelatory "attacks" of the human spirit and left alone to its own course of "eternal transience". For Agamben, however, the Benjaminian idea of "saving the unsavable" constitutes the very essence of the messianic vocation; it is precisely the revocation of any active attitude that would want to disturb the irreparability of being: "The Irreparable is that things are just as they are, in this or that mode, con-signed without remedy to their way of being. States of things are irreparable, whatever they may be: sad or happy, atrocious or blessed. How you are, how the world is – this is the Irreparable" (CC, 89).
- 7 "The life of *homo sacer*, which was the correlate of sovereign power (that is, in Agamben's vocabulary the power as such, capricious and arbitrary, best represented by the tragic powers of fate), *turns* into an existence over which power no longer seems to have hold" (HS, 153; my emphasis).
- 8 To use the very apt term of Werner Jaeger who in his studies on pre-Socratic Greek thinking calls it just that: "natural theology," i.e. a strictly immanentist cosmic perspective which deifies *phusis*, with its alternate rhythm of becoming and perishing (*genesis kai phtora*), as the ever-recurring paradigm and the non-changeable container of all things. See Werner JAEGER: *The Theology of Early Greek Philosophers*, London: Clarendon Press, 1947.
- 9 See Franz ROSENZWEIG: *The Star of Redemption*, trans. William W. Hallo, Notre Dame & London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985, and Walter BENJAMIN: *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne, London: Verso, 1998. On the difference between Agamben's notion of the "turn" and Rosenzweig's *Umkehr* see also my article: "The Broken Constellation. Agamben's Theology between Tragedy and Messianism." in *Telos* nr 152, autumn 2010.

- 10 I take the concept of an “enigmatic signifier” from Eric SANTNER’s *On the Psycho-theology of Everyday Life. Reflections on Rosenzweig and Freud*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001.
- 11 Agamben repeats this argument with some abbreviations in *Homo Sacer*, pp. 51–57.
- 12 In “The Apology of Profanation” AGAMBEN states firmly: “One has to differentiate between profanation and secularization. Secularization is a form of repression, which does not transform any forces but merely leads to their relocation” (PR, 98).
- 13 See Walter BENJAMIN: *Reflections. Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, trans. E. Jephcott, New York: Schocken Books, 1978, p. 297.
- 14 As Harold BLOOM succinctly put it in his *The Book of J*, New York: Harper Publishers 1990.
- 15 See Dominik FINKELDE: *Politische Eschatologie nach Paulus. Badiou – Agamben – Žizek – Santner*, Wien: Verlag Turia + Kant, 2007, p. 62; my emphasis.
- 16 See G. W. F. HEGEL: *Phenomenology of Mind*, trans. J.B. Baillie, Blackmask Online, 2001, p. 217.
- 17 See Ernst BLOCH: *The Spirit of Utopia*, trans. Anthony Nassar, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000, p. 224.
- 18 See G. W. F. HEGEL: *Phenomenology of Mind*, p. 216.
- 19 Trans. Tim Wilkinson, New York: Vintage, 2004.
- 20 Thus even suicide – as in AMERY’s *Suicide. A Discourse on Voluntary Death*, trans. John D. Barlow, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999 – is not here a sign of giving in to the mastery of death, but, quite to the contrary, the last triumphant manifestation of life protesting against the “impossibility” of ontological arrangement. Which, in Agamben’s interpretation, would simply mean the most resentful act of all.
- 21 Primo LEVI (1989): *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal, New York: Random House, 1989, p. 85.
- 22 note, for instance, Agamben’s quick exclusion of Levi from the party of “resenters,” so he can pull him immediately on his side: RA, 101.
- 23 Emmanuel LÉVINAS: *On Escape (De l’évasion)*, trans. Bettina Bergo, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003, p. 66.
- 24 Please, note that we are using here Fackenheim’s model only as a structural illustration, without assuming all existential and political consequences of his messianic response.
- 25 Emil L. FACKENHEIM: *To Mend the World. Foundations of Post-Holocaust Thought*, New York: Schocken Books, 1982, p. xxv.
- 26 This figure of apotropaic witnessing, opening a counter-sphere of indirect revelation, links Fackenheim’s efforts to those of Walter Benjamin, who attempted to create an analogical “spring-board” in his studies on German *Trauerspiel* that would allow a leap from the experience of the deepest, most hopeless fall into the night of immanence to the radical hope for something completely other. Also Levinas’s project of *evasion* participates in this apotropaic mechanism that tries to antinomically use the act of “drowning” – or, to cite Benjamin’s formula describing the doom of the tragic hero – the act of *untergehen*. In all these variations, the messianic appears as an apotropaic reaction to the tragic, occurring in the witness who watches *der untergehende Schein*; as a radical turning away from his falling trajectory that creates,

- symmetrically, a “returning act of resurrection.” In his essay “On Goethe’s *Elective Affinities*,” Benjamin construes such a figure of an apotropaic witness who accompanies the falling-drowning tragic hero (in this case, Ottilie) to the moment when he/she stops fighting and gives up to *untergehen*; it is from this moment on that the witness “turns away” and resumes the struggle of the tragic victim who can fight no more. Benjamin sums up this idea of apotropaic witnessing by offering towards the end of the essay his famous definition of the messianic hope which is given to us only for the sake of those who had already lost it.
- 27 See ISAIAH 37:32; “From Jerusalem a remnant shall go out, from Mount Zion a band of survivors.”
- 28 This figure of witnessing explains a strange digression Agamben makes on the margin of Canguilhem’s reflections on life and death. He seems to be fascinated by the experimental reversal of the normal sequence of dying, where mind functions dwindle first before bodily ones; instead, Agamben envisages a still lively mind that testifies to the “drowning” of its body. This is precisely the relation between the witness and “the muslim.”
- 29 See the testimony of Włodzimierz BORKOWSKI in RA, 167.
- 30 In *Idea della prosa* AGAMBEN writes: “Only language is enigmatic in its own ambiguity, but never what is being said ... The fact that there is no enigma, even the enigma of being ... is the real enigma against which human mind stops petrified” (Milano: Feltrinelli 1985, p. 46, my translation). So, the question emerges: is there no enigma, or – just because we state that fact in language – is the enigma of the lack of enigma, “the profane halo” immediately bound to appear?
- 31 The notion of “profane halo” appears in *The Coming Community* where it applies to all things in nature “after the judgment,” i.e. after the ultimate departure of the spirit: “After the judgment, animals, plants, things, all the elements and creatures of the world, having completed their theological task, would then enjoy an incorruptible fallenness – above them floats something like a profane halo” (CC, 39).
- 32 This danger of the “unintended” sublimation of the *Muselmann* figure lies at the center of Dominick La Capra’s critique of Agamben, who reacts to it with a tangible unease. In “Approaching Limit Events. Citing Agamben” LA CAPRA writes: “In this intellectual context, the ultimate in traumatized abjection, the *Muselmann* becomes a figure of sublimity and Auschwitz emerges as a transhistorical *leçon de philosophie*. The formula here – whether paradox or one of the oldest of Christian *doxa* – seems to be that only by descending to the depths can one ascend to the paradisiacal heights of revelatory language” in: *Giorgio Agamben. Sovereignty & Life*, eds. Matthew Calarco and Steven DeCaroli, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007, p. 162. Robert BUCH goes even further in his critique of *Remnants of Auschwitz*, pointing to a contradiction between Agamben’s indictment against all sacralization of bare life, emphatically unfit for any sublimating maneuvers – and his sublime transformation of the *Muselmann* figure into a *vera icon* of suffering humanity: “Agamben’s ‘gorgonization’ of the *Muselmann* results in a paradox: standing in the twilight, ceaselessly alternating between visibility and invisibility, the spectral figure of the *Muselmann* seems to have undergone a true transformation. It is precisely in his non-humanity, unanimously agreed on by all witnesses, that the human appears; it is in the unimaginable state of

reduction, in the atrophied ‘ethical material,’ where we see him. *The sacral seems to return in the somatic*; the *Muselmann* appears surrounded by a sort of halo; ‘the true likeness of man’ conjures up the figure of redemption ... In this example of extreme suffering a *reversal* seems to be imminent; it seems to contain a special kind of knowledge, perhaps a revelation” (Robert BUCH: “Seeing the Impossibility of Seeing or the Visibility of the Undead: Giorgio Agamben’s Gorgon” in *The Germanic Review*, nr 3/2007, pp. 185-6; my emphasis). And further: “As evident as these connotations seem to be, they are in fact strangely at odds with Agamben’s *Homo Sacer* series, for he repeatedly insists that ‘bare life,’ which is nowhere as manifest as in the *Muselmann*, is never sacred life, at least not in the usual sense of the term sacred. ‘Bare life’ is not subject to any divine laws; killing the *homo sacer* is not an act of sacrifice. *His death does not entail any kind of symbolic transformation, and his killing is not the site of a transfiguration.* (These ideas also explain Agamben’s indignation over the use of the term holocaust in connection with the Nazi death camps)” (ibid., 186; my emphasis). This, indeed, is a paradox – a paradox that may well be inscribed into the very nature of witnessing to the meaningless, which nonetheless must deal with words, necessarily charged with phantasmatic meanings – but there is no hint how to work it out in Agamben’s writings. The oxymoronic idea of a “profane halo” does not solve the problem; if anything, it rather exacerbates it.

- 33 “The Greek hero has left us forever; he can no longer bear witness for us in any way. After Auschwitz, it is not possible to use a tragic paradigm in ethics” (RA, 99).
- 34 See Giorgio AGAMBEN: “Bartleby, or On Contingency” in: *Potentialities*.
- 35 “One cannot want Auschwitz to return for eternity,” but only because “it is always already repeating itself” (RA, 101).