

Agamben,  
Or the Philosophy of Shipwrecking Waves  
Angela Arsenà

**Residual philosophy or what remains**

Agamben's method of philosophical inquiry is anti-Baconian in the extreme: *pars costruens* and *pars destruens* in fact neither divide nor articulate his research.

In *Homo Sacer* he refuses and denies their role as tools for subdividing the philosophical orchestration. They are irrelevant (if not clumsy) because in philosophical research, he says, '*pars destruens* coincides at every point with the residues of *pars costruens*'.<sup>1</sup> The residues, in Agamben's reflection, seem to be precisely that which can not be brought within the scope of dialectics and which, therefore, escapes actuality or what Hegel calls the totality of the real (*Wirklichkeit*).<sup>2</sup> The residue is precisely that remainder, or what remains, or what is left over: the singular, the fragment, the thread, the flotsam bobbing on the waves after a shipwreck, which may however, in its apparent insignificance, keep the Absolute in check.

We could define contemporary Italian philosophy as the outcome (partial and incomplete since man's theoretical work is never fully completed) of a long conceptual tension between Hegel's absolute plasticity of reality and the residue of the ontological difference that will become the philosophical signature of Heidegger or the *différance* of Derrida.

The philosophy of Agamben erupts within the wrestling between signifier and totality, with a dethroning power, and never lets itself be absorbed by orthodoxy or by any attempt at philosophical taxonomy.

It is no coincidence that Roberto Esposito, in his recent analysis of the profile and fate of Italian philosophy,<sup>3</sup> describes the latter as everted towards the outer edge, to the limit and the boundary of things, at the precise point at which there is a dense and opaque material, hardly reducible to a formal representation, which is also similar to that form of knowledge which, on encountering the limit, approaches it from both sides and thinks the unthinkable and unspeakable, 'thinks what one

---

<sup>1</sup> Agamben, Giorgio (2016 [2014]), *The Use of Bodies*. (Homo sacer, IV, 2). Trans. Adam Kotsko. Stanford: Stanford UP. *L'uso dei corpi*. Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 2014, p. 10. Here and in the following, the translations of Giorgio Agamben's works are mine.

<sup>2</sup> Longuenesse, Béatrice (2007), *Hegel's Critique of Metaphysics*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, pp. 110–114.

<sup>3</sup> Esposito, Roberto (2010), *Pensiero vivente. Origine e attualità della filosofia italiana*, Turin: Einaudi.

can not think of<sup>4</sup>: in fact, the limit in the Aristotelian sense, is the closest bound beyond which it is not possible to grasp anything that belongs to that thing and the closest bound within which lies all that belongs to the thing.<sup>5</sup>

Therefore, in order to know, one should straddle both sides of the limit, and the philosophy of Agamben is an encounter with the irremediable character of this condition,<sup>6</sup> with the awareness that, even when language says something as something and succeeds, what should have been appropriate to think might have been left unthinkable, or irremediably dual, dismembered, split.<sup>7</sup>

Faced with this condition, thought can either travel the path of the unsaid, of silence (as Wittgenstein wanted<sup>8</sup>) or it can renounce saying something qua something in order to bring to the speech the how: thought of thought is spirituality, or not-thingness, which paradoxically means getting lost in things until you conceive them as nothing but things.<sup>9</sup>

It would seem that the great stakes of the philosophical chessboard staged by Agamben with his reflection is the possibility, maybe the hope, of finding, with a hermeneutic and existential effort of excavation, the original structure of the λόγος, which constitutes in some way the foundation of the philosophical assertion, and which remains in some way fully hidden and obstinately exposed.<sup>10</sup> This archaeological dimension of philosophy triggers and roots the hodological dimension, namely the search for an ὁδός, another way.

Spirituality, for example, is an experience of the absolute co-belonging of being and thought, which allows us to conceive and bring out, or to re-emerge, the thing itself, along that treacherous limit which is language.<sup>11</sup>

But the thing of thought is not the identity of the being with itself, in the manner of Giovanni Gentile, which excluded from the being the possibility of reflecting on itself:<sup>12</sup> the thing of thought is the thing itself, which, in turn is neither something else by which the thing is transcended, nor even simply the same thing.

### The wrestling of two castaways

The thing itself transcends itself only in order to find itself, towards its being such as it is: in other words, the thing is the thing itself.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Wittgenstein, Ludwig (1922), *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, London: Kegan Paul, p. 26.

<sup>5</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, V, 17, 1022a.

<sup>6</sup> Agamben, Giorgio (1993 [1990]), *The Coming Community*. Trans. Michael Hardt. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. *La comunità che viene*. Turin: Einaudi, 1990, p. 68.

<sup>7</sup> Loc. cit., p. 65.

<sup>8</sup> Wittgenstein, Ludwig (1922), *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, loc., p. 151.

<sup>9</sup> Agamben, Giorgio (1993 [1990]), *The Coming Community*. loc., p. 65.

<sup>10</sup> Agamben, Giorgio (2016 [2014]), *The Use of Bodies*. (Homo sacer, IV, 2). loc. p. 333.

<sup>11</sup> Loc. cit, p. 334.

<sup>12</sup> Gentile, Giovanni (2006), *Il concetto della storia della filosofia*, Florence: Le Lettere, p. 184.

<sup>13</sup> Loc. cit., p. 68.

Here we see a force, a power, a theoretical triumph of the thing in itself that inevitably, irremediably, puts in the shade the language that signifies the thing and the subject that wants to know the thing; it demonstrates the finitude of the one and the other. Language, explains Agamben with the words of Scotus, is *ens debilissimum*, ontologically feeble because it should name the thing and instead has the urge to disappear in the thing which it denominates, ‘otherwise instead of designating and unveiling it, it would hinder its understanding’.<sup>14</sup>

And it is not only language that seems feeble; the subject too, which through language must unravel the world, reality: ‘man is the being who, by running into things and only in this encounter, opens himself to the non-thingness. And inversely: he who, being open to the non-thingness, is, for this reason alone, irreparably delivered over to the things’.<sup>15</sup>

The subject, moreover, must also unravel himself, explains Agamben with his work of deconstruction of all the boundary conditions erected as bastions around the western gnoseology. But a subjectivity, he continues, ‘is born whenever the subject encounters language, whenever he says “I”. But precisely because he is generated in it and through it, it is so difficult for the subject to grasp his place [...]. Western philosophy is born from the wrestling of these two very feeble beings that consist and take place in one other, as they incessantly founder, and because of this they try obstinately to grasp and to understand themselves’.<sup>16</sup>

A language that wants to fully understand both the thing and the subject, and that yearns for a perfect coincidence between signifier and meaning, is doomed to leave a gap, a margin of uncertainty, of emptiness, of unsaid, of an impossibility of saying, where what Agamben calls the ‘Indo-European scourge’<sup>17</sup> wedges itself in: namely, the possibility, intrinsic in every word, of being false, intentionally false, or the possibility of lying inherent in language.<sup>18</sup>

Within grammar we discover anthropology, namely, man’s manner of living in the world since his first appearance as *Homo Sapiens* (denial, contradiction and oxymoron are the harbingers of lying, which is peculiar to man<sup>19</sup>) but in grammar, and in its fallibility, we also find politics and its constant search for a unifying centre.

The endless attempt to find a nucleus, not just inceptive, but also static, steady and identical to itself, and able to produce the shift from language to politics,

---

<sup>14</sup> Agamben, Giorgio (2018 [2016]), *What is Philosophy?* Trans. Lorenzo Chiesa. Stanford: Stanford UP [Marked 2018 but actually published September 2017]. *Che cos’è la filosofia?* Macerata: Quodlibet, 2016, p. 23.

<sup>15</sup> Agamben, Giorgio (1993 [1990]), *The Coming Community*. loc., p. 75.

<sup>16</sup> Loc. cit., p. 24.

<sup>17</sup> Agamben, Giorgio (2011 [2008]), *The Sacrament of Language: An Archaeology of the Oath*. (Homo sacer II, 3). Trans. Adam Kotsko. Stanford UP. *Il sacramento del linguaggio. Archeologia del giuramento*. Rome: Laterza, 2008, p. 7.

<sup>18</sup> Loc. cit., p. 8.

<sup>19</sup> Virno, Paolo (2018 [2013]), *An Essay on Negation: For a Linguistic Anthropology*. Trans. Lorenzo Chiesa. London; Calcutta: Seagull. *Saggio sulla negazione: Per una antropologia linguistica*. Turin: Boringhieri.

has produced, for instance, the western liturgy of taking oaths, which are the scaffolds that supposedly sustain the language that must be telling the truth and distinguish it from the language that may be false.

Yet, even if authentic, the language remains clumsy, inadequate, unsuitable, lacking, missing.

And, therefore: dangerous (and it is no coincidence that from the oath gushes its opposite: the perjury, ἐπίορκος in Hesiod,<sup>20</sup> Thucydides<sup>21</sup> and also in the New Testament<sup>22</sup>).

In fact, although the speaking man immediately and inevitably becomes aware of his inadequacy, nevertheless he also becomes aware that his words, though not divine words (which are the ultimate engine of creation) are nevertheless able either to create appearance (not reality, therefore, but a fictitious and yet habitable condition), and therefore shape a lie, a *fictio*; or, on the other hand, they are able to evoke the reality created by the divine word, and therefore are engines of art and poetry (ποιέω understood as ‘doing’, as ‘to make’ in the highest sense).

Thus, lie or poetry seem to be the only possibilities given to human speech, or rather lie *and* poetry, at least according to Plato, who bound the one indissolubly to the other, condemning both.<sup>23</sup>

### The knot that tightens around philosophy and poetry

Here, in Agamben, there is the doubt that the question of Plato’s censorship of art and poetry is rooted in two fundamental theoretical questions, one of a psychic nature and the other of a practical nature.

On a practical, methodological ground, the Platonic condemnation focuses on the divine terror of art (an ancestral terror which, Agamben explains, contemporary man, moulded by the normalisation of Kantian aesthetics that invokes disinterest, no longer feels). This terror alone would have put at risk the foundations of the city, as if the artists were themselves capable of incendiary actions.

On a psychic ground, the Platonic condemnation concerns only imitative poetry (that which challenges the reader with the intent of dragging him into the same stormy sea of the author’s passions) and not merely narrative poetry. Here, according to Agamben, we find a fundamental instance of Platonic thought, that is, the relationship established between violence and language: ‘his premise is the

---

<sup>20</sup> Hesiod ([2006]), *Theogony*, Trans. Glenn Most, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press (Loeb Classical Library), v.231–232.

<sup>21</sup> Thucydides ([1910]), *The Peloponnesian War*, Trans. Richard Crawley, London :J.M. Dent, VII, 44, v. 1–7.

<sup>22</sup> Paul of Tharsus ([2010]), *First Epistle to Timothy*, 1.1–10. In Coogan, M. D., Brettler, M. Z., Newsom, C. A., & Perkins, P. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version, with the Apocrypha*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>23</sup> Gordon, Jill (1999), *Turning Toward Philosophy: Literary Device and Dramatic Structure in Plato’s Dialogues*, Pennsylvania: UP.

discovery that the principle, which in Greece had been tacitly held for true until the rise of the Sophists, according to which language ruled out of itself any possibility of violence, was no longer valid, and that the use of violence was an integral part of poetic language'.<sup>24</sup> If poetry is violence, then it must necessarily be relegated outside the city walls, banned, exiled, but with the aim of preserving it intact and to preserve intact its capacity to accumulate, distil and be wedged into the essence of violence for the purpose of holding it as if it were in Pandora's box, without allowing it to travel the world and degenerate into chatter, into empty, meaningless, superficial, and dangerous words. To banish poetry then becomes an ethical urgency in the name of a utopian design of a perfectly calm and balanced world.

Poetry, therefore, as a container of violence and an exorcism of violence: this is the distortion, the curvature of meanings we are attempting to bring to light in Agamben.

It might be a random coincidence (and yet here we would like to consider it just about intentional), but there appears to be a certain continuity between the Pasolinian experience of poetry, seen as a container of necessary violence and equally necessary sweetness, especially in the use of dialect, and the relationship established and tracked by Agamben, an associate of Pasolini's, appearing in his *Gospel According to St. Matthew*.

In this purely biographical detail (which we would like to consider, at least for a moment, as of theoretical relevance) violence and poetry intertwine not in a socio-political sense (as a petty revolutionary struggle) but in an eminently metaphysical or epic sense whose literary archetype is Homer's Ulysses who, in order not to fall victim to the song of the Sirens, asks his men to bind him with knots that can not be untied.

In order to hear what no mortal has heard without dying, the mixture of shrieks and music produced by the Sirens, perhaps a poetic song of pure, archaic, distilled, compressed violence, which attracts and entices those who listen, Ulysses needs to be bound hand and foot to the mast of the ship: 'you are to tie me up, tight as a splint, erect along the mast, lashed to the mast, and if I shout and beg to be untied, take more turns of rope to muffle me'.<sup>25</sup>

A node saves Ulysses who, without going mad and without being pierced and annihilated by violence, nevertheless manages to immerse himself in the song of the Sirens, or in a space that circumscribes the encounter between poetry and violence and that, however, like a rock upon which waves break, interrupts the linearity, the purity of navigation and upon which the ship of human life risks coming to ruin.

---

<sup>24</sup> Agamben, Giorgio (1999 [1970]), *The Man Without Content*. Trans. Georgia Albert. Stanford: Stanford UP. *L'uomo senza contenuto*. Macerata: Quodlibet, 1994. First edition, 1970, p. 18.

<sup>25</sup> Homer (1998), *The Odyssey*, Trans. Robert Fitzgerald, New York: Straus and Giroux, XII, vv. 195-198.

In the same way perhaps, Pasolini circumscribed the poetic world as a sort of sacred enclosure, where everything is possible, even the most bloody sacrifice, to distinguish this state in a figurative place, which is poetry, from what we might call the politically correct, full of words apparently fertile and innocuous, but really hard as stones and homicidal. He writes: ‘the word tolerance, for example, would be a contradiction in terms: the fact that you tolerate someone, is the same as to have condemned that someone’.<sup>26</sup>

The conviction that violence can be glimpsed in a speech that has the peaceful characteristics of coherence, rationality, and inclusiveness, highlights the connection, always disguised, removed or disavowed, between language and violence. Paradoxically, the λόγος is always violent precisely when it de-cides: the choice of a rational, reasonable attitude, or the very choice in favour of the λόγος, has its roots in violence in the primary sense of being constantly fuelled by violence. If man had been satisfied, satisfied by his world and in his world, he would never have posed the problem of the λόγος. In order to choose the λόγος, it is necessary that the world be suffered, experienced as no longer satisfactory. That is, one must feel the rip, the laceration, the severity, the violence: in order to have de-cision we need a re-scission.

Therefore, this gap, this painful distance, this chasm (a margin, according to Agamben, or a limit in the most geometric and mathematical sense of the term, as a place which cannot occupy less space than it does) is necessary for man to feel the need of the λόγος. In other words, as the philosopher Eric Weil writes explicitly, it is violence that produces philosophy, and it requires violence for philosophy to be: from dissatisfaction with the world comes the discourse (and therefore also the poetic discourse) which reveals the condition of absolute finitude, shortage, the deprivation on the part of the man who, as long as he were satiated, satisfied, full, spherical, could not perceive. But it is precisely the speech (in an attempt to fill the chasm) that turns into chains what, up to that moment, had not even been recorded, noticed, perceived.<sup>27</sup> When the discourse tends to make itself absolute and to claim that only one of its modalities engulfs the scope of all possible meanings, that is, when the discourse forgets the original, irreconcilable division and excision that nourishes it, and wants to become monolithic, then it produces violence: the inherent contradiction in the philosophical discourse, Vattimo writes, is incurable.<sup>28</sup>

In this seamless dynamics that links violence to language, and language to speech and poetic and philosophical discourse, we grasp both the Platonic reasons dictated by a sacred fear of the philosophical λόγος (once this discovery was made, writes Agamben, it was perfectly consequent for Plato to establish that the genres,

---

<sup>26</sup> Pasolini, Pier Paolo (1976), *Lettere luterane*, Milan: Garzanti, p. 23. Here and in the following the translations of Pasolini's works are mine.

<sup>27</sup> Weil, Éric (1950), *Logique de la philosophie*, Paris: Vrin, pp. 96-108.

<sup>28</sup> Vattimo, Gianni (2018), *Essere e dintorni*, Milan: La Nave di Teseo, pp. 25-29.

and even the rhythms and the meters of poetry, had to be watched over by the guardians of the State and therefore had to remain confined outside of human assemblies) but also the very close link between poetry and philosophy: the logic of philosophy is based on the awareness of violence as ἀρχή (which philosophy must both tell and uncover), and gazes towards the end of λόγος.

In other words, the purpose of philosophy is to dig for a recapitulative end, an end of ends.

As it encompasses everything, even the violence that constitutes it, the logic of philosophy inevitably arrives at the end of its possibilities, at the end of language.

The link between philosophy and poetry is traced on the edge, at the boundary of an exhausted language, or amidst shipwrecking waves: the relationship poetry-philosophy does not appear in Agamben as linear, hierarchical, pyramidal, Hegelian, that is, as a rational reflection of reality crystallised in thought, nor would poetry be the highest expression of the same rationality.

The philosophy-poetry relationship in Agamben does not concern the *esprit de géométrie* and does not use usual, used and sometimes abused categories: its reasons dwell in a drastic and dramatic dimension – tragic we would dare to say, because philosophical language is the language of contradiction, of permanent aporia, of theses and antitheses that remain distant and irreconcilable, separated, cut off, never a synthesis.

This relationship finds a reason (but this is just our hypothesis) in the metaphysical gaze of Pier Paolo Pasolini, when he explained that poetic language is the only language that allows for the co-presence and divergence of meanings, the coexistence of the identical and the opposite, metric caesura, a parting of significance and wrapping around, leaving an isolated verse, like a castaway, at the mercy of an unattainable reconciliation of meanings.<sup>29</sup>

The philosophy-poetry link is therefore characterised by a condition in which both share the fate which befell Tantalus, who could only for a fleeting moment delude himself into thinking that he had completed his task, only to realise immediately thereafter that the end was not met at all.

This state of affairs brings to awareness the irreducible plurality of meanings, and that conciliation and pacification of contradictions (in poetry and philosophy) is and will remain unworkable and unrealised because the bond that holds them together, which is wrapped around them, as the remnants of a shipwreck amidst the same waves, is exactly what it remains, the residue which is left over after

---

<sup>29</sup> On the poetic language of Pasolini, see: Zambon, Francesco, 'Introduzione' in Pasolini, Pier Paolo (2015), *Poesie Scelte*, Milan: Guanda, pp. 3-20. The prime examples of co-presence and divergence of meanings, and of the coexistence of the identical and the opposite are to be found in the collections, *Le Ceneri di Gramsci* and *La Religione del mio Tempo*, of which extensive portions are translated in Pasolini (2014), *The Selected Poetry of Pier Paolo Pasolini: A Bilingual Edition*. Ed. and trans. Stephen Sartarelli. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

somebody decided to take a risk and took it to its utmost limit, to the point beyond which one can no longer continue and no longer tell.