

Review Essay

Agamben's Comic Messianism

Giorgio Agamben: Beyond the Threshold of Deconstruction

Kevin Attell. New York: Fordham University Press, 2014. 328pp.

Agamben and Politics: A Critical Introduction

Sergei Prozorov. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014. 208pp.

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The publication of Giorgio Agamben's *The Use of Bodies* in 2014, followed the next year by Adam Kotsko's English translation, marked a momentous event in the history of more recent continental thought, bringing to a close one of the most far reaching and ambitious scholarly and philosophical labors of the twentieth century. Initiated in 1995 with *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Agamben's project, named after the first volume,

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would come to comprise nine separate books, published at fairly regular intervals over the course of twenty years. While neither Kevin Attell's *Giorgio Agamben: Beyond the Threshold of Deconstruction (BTD)* nor Sergei Prozorov's *Agamben and Politics: A Critical Introduction (AP)* were able to take advantage of the appearance of the last volume of *Homo Sacer*, they both benefit from an understanding of the scope of Agamben's work and thought that has only recently become possible. Indeed, these books represent two of the most compelling attempts to offer a comprehensive account of Agamben's work that is sensitive to its range and subtlety, recognizing the complex interactions between political, philosophical, theological, linguistic and poetological lines of inquiry.

Kevin Attell's *Giorgio Agamben: Beyond the Threshold of Deconstruction* aims to trace out the "philosophical gigantomachy" between Agamben and Derrida. Seeking to show "the extent and the significance of Agamben's debate with deconstruction," *BTD* is written from the conviction that "Agamben views deconstruction as perhaps the most significant body of philosophical thought in the postwar period, the work against which he must continually measure his own" (Attell 2015: 3). This is, indeed, a task of great significance for understanding Agamben's own project, which, as Attell convincingly argues, involves an engagement with Derrida's thought that, first formulated in 1966 and 1968 (just around the time of Derrida's own *annus mirabilis*), will "continue to develop and deepen over the course of the following decades, sometimes overtly and pointedly, sometimes much more obliquely and, as it were, esoterically" (Attell 2015: 1–2). *Beyond the Threshold of Deconstruction* indeed provides a helpful remedy for the tendency among many of Agamben's readers, led astray by the manifestly political character of *Homo Sacer*, to neglect the philosophical (as well as theological and linguistic) horizon within which its political questions become legible. Attell is hardly alone in insisting that Agamben's work must be understood in the context of twentieth-century French philosophy, yet he goes further in presenting the gigantomachia between Derrida and Agamben, both of whom undertake a radical critique of metaphysics, as a powerful frame for understanding post-war continental thought.

Beyond merely considering Agamben's explicit engagements with Derrida, Attell also juxtaposes and contrasts their readings of key texts by Saussure, Benveniste, Heidegger, Husserl, Plato, Aristotle, Benjamin, and Schmitt (Attell 2015: 4). This second methodological strategy forms the substance of Attell's book, making possible a much more richly nuanced account of the gigantomachia. Were Attell to restrict himself to the

first strategy, it might seem as if, with his death, Derrida become less and less significant for Agamben, despite the fact that, in the seminars from 2001–2002 published as *The Beast and the Sovereign*, Derrida would offer an explicit critique of Agamben's project. Derrida is entirely absent from *The Kingdom and the Glory*, *The Sacrament of Language*, *Opus Dei*, *The Highest Poverty*, and *The Use of Bodies*. Agamben's turn to Foucault and his explicit incorporation into *Homo Sacer* of an archeological and genealogical method, together with his move away from the more playful and experimental approach of earlier works, such as the *Idea of Prose*, itself suggests a repudiation of the deconstructive current in post-war French thought. Moreover, Agamben's explicit engagements with Derrida seems, from the beginning, to involve oversimplifying the thought of his opponent to the point of caricature. Having soon realized that a Derridean battle against Derrida can't be won, Agamben seeks from the outset to set the rules of the game. Often taking the form of an unabashedly distant reading, his critique of Derrida depends, with a kind of tautological necessity, on the refusal to enter into the endless process of signification.

Each of *BTD*'s six chapters investigates a different textual constellation. The first chapter argues that Saussure plays a no less fundamental role for Agamben than for Derrida, while also offering a nuanced account of the very different approaches that they both take to him. This culminates in a wonderfully insightful reading of Agamben's attempt, in *Stanzas*, to approach the "enigma of language" from the viewpoint of the Sphinx rather than Oedipus (Attell 2015: 35). For Agamben, Attell shows, Derrida remains "confined to the Oedipal understanding of the enigma, an understanding of language fundamentally as code," against which Agamben will seek to restore the metaphysical dimension of semiotics by conceiving of the sign not fundamentally as a "plexus" of difference but as a positive unity of signifier and signified (Attell 2015: 37).

Reading Agamben's *Infancy and History* in conjunction with Derrida's early writings on Husserl, the second chapter turns to the "voice," offering an insightful account of the opposition between Derrida and Agamben's critiques of "phonocentrism." Whereas Derrida regards the *phonē* as a means by which metaphysics, in a gesture repeated from Plato to Rousseau, Saussure, Levi-Strauss and even Husserl and Heidegger, tries to secure presence, Agamben identifies the "Voice as the site of a metaphysical negativity rather than a presence" (Attell 2015: 81). This chapter also includes an excursus on Émile Benveniste, and his theory of the "shifter." This sheds much light on the French linguist's significance Agamben, whose most fundamental onto-logical thesis depends on

Benveniste's account of the linguistics of the utterance, and also deepens the account of Agamben and Derrida's very different reception of structuralism (Attell 2015: 67).

The third chapter addresses *potenza* and *différance*—keywords, respectively, of Agamben and Derrida's thought. The concept of *potentiality* (*Potenza*), Attell argues, emerges from Agamben's own attempt, in texts written from the early-80s up to 1990 to come to terms with his relation to Derridean deconstruction. This account of *potentiality*, and the complex interplay of *dunamis* and *energeia*—concepts at the very core of Aristotle's thought—underwrites the critique of sovereignty developed in *Homo Sacer*. For indeed there can be no critique of the Western politics without rethinking the most basic concepts in terms of which relations of power are articulated. In the following passage, Attell offers an incisive account of Agamben's "first-philosophical project":

In *Homo Sacer*, Agamben says of the "constitutive ambiguity of the Aristotelian theory of *dunamis/energeia*" that "it is not [the result] of a certain indecisiveness or, worse, contradiction in the philosopher's thought but [arises] because potentiality and actuality are simply the two faces of the sovereign self-grounding of Being." This sovereign self-grounding is the "24 centuries"-long impasse that Agamben's thought seeks to break, for rather than thinking the meaning of being or even the passage from potentiality to actuality, the ultimate task at hand is to break the sovereign structure that holds us in ban of being, to "think the existence of potentiality without any relation to Being in the form of actuality." (Attell 2015: 99–100)

Far from engaging in an endless critique of traditional ontology by fixing its attention on the marginal moments of metaphysical texts in which the attempted closure of meaning betrays itself, Agamben proposes to achieve, by way of passing through the closure of Aristotelian ontology, a new ontology, and hence also a new politics. Yet this new ontology and politics—an ontology and politics of potentiality—is in truth an anti-ontology and an anti-politics; a "dunamology" or "potentiology" (Attell 2015: 100).

Yet one might suspect that, in just this way, Agamben's project remains terminologically identical, and in a certain respect dependent, on the tradition that it sets out to overcome. It is not so much a new world, as the old world with a twist; but a twist by which everything becomes new. For if *différance* and *potenza* are the respective keywords of Agamben and Derrida, there is nevertheless a decided lack of symmetry:

whereas *différance* is a neologism, involving a clever typographic innovation to call attention to a graphic dimension of signification irreducible to the phonetic, *potenza* is a simple Italian word, derived from the problematic Latin translation of the Greek *dunamis*. Thus we find, hidden behind Derrida and Agamben's gigantomachia, the unrealized contest between Heidegger, who would never cease inventing new terminology to avoid the traps of metaphysics, and Benjamin, whose stylistic powers had nothing to do with pure terminological invention.

In the second part of the third chapter, Attell turns to Agamben's subtle and complex critique of Derrida's terminological innovations, including, in the first instance, *différance*. Derrida will, as it were, shirk back from an experience of potential that appears in his grammatological discourse; rather than succeeding in thinking this "potentiological repressed," and indeed thinking it *through*, he will instead decide to "dwell at" the "crossroads" of the aporia of self-reference that *différance* makes manifest. It is in this way that the "early grammatological inquiry" leads to deconstruction. Yet this step forward, into the terrain of an endless inquiry, is in fact a step backwards (Attell 2015: 105). As Agamben writes in a passage that Attell cites:

Grammatology was forced to become deconstruction in order to avoid this paradox (or, more precisely, to seek to dwell in it correctly); this is why it renounced any attempt to proceed by decisions about meaning. But in its original intention, grammatology is not a theory of polysemy or a doctrine of the transcendence of meaning; it has as its object...a radicalization of the problem of self-reference that calls into question and transforms the very concept of meaning grounding Western logic. (Agamben 1999b: 213; Attell 2015: 105)

The gist of Agamben's critique of deconstruction, the "nucleus of a critique that Agamben will never fundamentally retract," is that Derrida thinks his way to the outer limit of Saussurian semiology, but remains enclosed within a semiological understanding of language" (Attell 2015: 2).

The third chapter brings to a close the first part of *BTD*, which, dedicated to the "pre-history" of *Homo Sacer*, focuses on those key concepts that, developed in Agamben's writings from the 70s and the 80s, are at the foundation of his later, more explicitly political work. The second part, titled "Strategy without Finality or Means without End," explores the political turn in both thinkers, contrasting their approaches to a range of more explicitly

political concepts. These include, in chapter four, sovereignty, law, and violence; in chapter five, the problem of the relation of the animal and the human; and finally, in chapter six, the nature of messianic time. The ingenuous organization of the book into these two parts, allowing for an account of Agamben's thought that is at once systematically and chronologically coherent, is one of the great virtues of Attell's book: it offers a compellingly synoptic and coherent interpretation of Agamben, whose work is all too often regarded as eclectic and disjoint, as well as of Derrida. Against the suggestion that both are unsystematic and tactical thinkers, Attell maintains that they "propose and consistently maintain certain central theoretical positions" (Attell 2015: 4).

This systematic intention is refreshing. Yet I question the impression of parity to which it leads. Far from being a neutral term, indicating a strategy of interpretation that can be applied to their works as if from a certain position of objectivity, concepts like systematicity and structural coherence call attention to precisely what is at stake between them. This is because every disagreement between them can be seen to derive from a difference in strategies of reading: whereas Agamben's readings almost always aim toward a systematic closure that, in its self-exhaustion, points beyond itself, Derrida seeks to affirm a radical openness to which metaphysics, with its desire for presence and closure, has closed itself off. It is for precisely this reason that Agamben needs Derrida: deconstruction comes to serve as a master signifier that refers to, and indeed refers to as a totality, the entire set of possible non-totalizing readings of the metaphysical corpus. Somewhat analogous to the set of all sets, it sums up all the ways in which metaphysics can stave off the exhaustion of its concepts, continuing to tarry at the threshold: the totality of series of readings generated by a non-systematic principal. Yet the set of all sets is, of course, self-contradictory; it can only be encountered by a thinking that is able to live with contradiction.

Agamben's entire project thus depends on what we might call a paradoxical structuralism, or, better, a structuralism of paradox: it demands an ultimately referential (and hence quasi-systematic) account of the paradox of self-reference. This could not be more different than deconstruction, which, far from contenting itself with a description of paradoxical structures, seeks to *experience* paradox as the very play of signification through the labor of reading. Yet in this way there is a certain sleight of hand involved in using the word 'deconstruction' to bring Agamben and Derrida into a polemical dialogue. Whereas Derrida regards deconstruction as a term that must be written under erasure, for

Agamben deconstruction serves as the master signifier for a paradoxical thought, that, unable to give a systematic account of its structure, is forced into a never-ending task of thinking *about* that which it can never think *through*. At the point where they seem to meet—when Agamben speaks of “deconstruction”—the distance between them is, in fact, most extreme.

Along these same lines, one might wonder whether the notion of a gigantomachia does justice to the debate between Derrida and Agamben—or whether this is even a debate, and not, rather, a collision between thoughts that, while certain standing in an intimate proximity, remain fundamentally opaque to each other. Neither Derrida nor Agamben are, in any simple sense, polemical thinkers, and perhaps the latter even less than the former. Nevertheless, Agamben needed to approach Derrida polemically: he could not digest and assimilate Derrida, taking him up into his own thought, in the manner that he does with Foucault and even Deleuze. He could only deal with deconstruction by regarding it as the counterpart, or even the antithesis, of his own thought. Taking Agamben's polemical impulse at face value, Attell does not always seem to fully appreciate either the strangeness of this gesture, and of the need that underlies it, or the deeper dissonance between Derrida and Agamben's thought. This dissonance appears with particular clarity in the coda, when Attell discusses the concept of play.

For Derrida, Attell explains, the play of differences, “the play that worries the hairline fractures and fissures of every structure, the unstoppable play that fatally undermines any appeal to a solid, pure presence,” is the “key gesture in undermining any and all appeals to—and ultimately all desires for—an origin or originary state or being” (Attell 2015: 258). It is, in other words, the radical disruption of presence; the play of the signifier is what always scuttles the closure of the system. For Agamben, by contrast, play is the “messianic operator” that brings the “time of the now,” and hence the time of inoperativity, of use without ownership, to fruition, by deactivating the law and opening “human action to a truly postjuridical condition animated by a pure *Gewalt*, a *Gewalt purified* of the law” (Attell 2015: 262). For as Agamben writes in a passage from *State of Exception* cited at length by Attell in the last page of *Beyond the Threshold of Deconstruction*:

Humanity will play with law just as children play with disused objects, not in order to restore them to their canonical use but to free them from it for good. What is found after the law is not a more proper and original

use value that precedes the law, but a new use that is born only after it.... This liberation is the task of study, or of play. And this studious play is the passage that allows us to arrive at that justice that one of Benjamin's posthumous fragments defines as a state of the world in which the world appears as a good that absolutely cannot be appropriated or made juridical. (Agamben 2005: 64; Attell 2015: 262)

With these different senses of play played against each other, and with the stakes so high, I cannot help but feel disquieted by Attell's reluctance to subject Agamben's formulations, and his own reformulations of these, to a greater critical scrutiny. There seems to be something remarkably unplayful, if not joyless, about Agamben's play, which has indeed been tasked with a paradoxical operation of disoperativity; the work of unworking every work, and liberating man to his essential freedom from every proper task. This unplayful play has a very concrete correlate: Agamben's own magnum opus, the nine volumes of *Homo Sacer*—assuming, at least, that we are able to take these as in some sense already performing the operation of disoperativity. This unplayful play is a play that never ceases to point beyond itself to a time in which its true and essential playfulness would be fulfilled.

Derrida's play, by contrast, is a play that is itself somehow experienced, that plays itself out, in the very act of deconstructive reading. It is a play that is happening in the irreparably fractured now in all its playfulness, and not a mere prelude. For what else is deconstruction doing than putting the text to a use for which it was not intended; turning it, through a kind of catachresis, into an object of play? But if this is so, it suggests that Agamben's critique of Derrida must be the opposite of what it seems: it is not just that Derrida's play fails to lead "beyond an affirmation (whether resigned or joyous) of the impossibility of an original purity and presence," and thus remains no more than one half of the messianic project (Attell 2015: 258–60). The deeper problem is that the interminable labor of deconstruction, unfolding as a manner of reading that enters into the play of signification, presents itself already as genuinely playful, and even, in this sense, satisfying. Against this "false messianism," which can only end up playing out the structure of oppression within which it remains trapped, Agamben will insist, in a manner that recalls Plato's *Laws*, on a serious play; a play that is a prelude, a foreplay, a preparation. This should not surprise us: the play that unworks work, that puts work out of work, could not

be anything else than a play that unplays play—or indeed, play and work must themselves collapse into a threshold of indistinction.

Sergei Prozorov's *Agamben and Politics: A Critical Introduction* covers much the same ground as *BTD*. Demonstrating a deep knowledge of the range of Agamben's writings, Prozorov also strives to give a coherent and largely unifying account of his thought. *Agamben and Politics* is, moreover, similarly organized around a chronological arrangement of thematic clusters, with chapters devoted to animality, language and the voice, law and sovereignty, and history. Nevertheless, *AP* is aimed at a very different audience than *BTD*: whereas Attell, an associate professor of English at Cornell University, targets his book principally at those for whom Derrida is familiar enough to serve as a point of reference, Prozorov, who teaches in the Department of Political and Economic Studies at the University of Helsinki, writes with a very different audience in mind. He seeks to make Agamben comprehensible as a political thinker to those who are inclined to doubt that Agamben's "erudite, elliptical and admittedly arcane writings" could be relevant for the politics of the present. His book, he explains, is "an invitation to read Agamben that ventures to demonstrate the originality of his political thought in the contemporary theoretical and sociopolitical context, its capacity to disturb out familiar assumptions about politics, provoke unease about the political positions we uphold and offer new perspectives on the key political issues of our times" (Prozorov 2014: 1). To this end it seeks to show that while politics is of central significance for Agamben's philosophy, it is "a *different kind* of politics"—and one which, by reinterpreting seemingly non-political phenomena, is "able both to problematize the entire political tradition which we continue to inhabit and advance a thoroughgoing alternative that seeks to deactivate this tradition... render it inoperative" (Prozorov 2014: 2). In precisely this way, *AP* and *BTD* complement each other, together offering a fuller picture of Agamben's thought.

The guiding claim of *AP* is that Agamben's philosophy has an essentially *comic* character. The first chapter, titled "All's Well That Ends Well: Agamben's Comic Politics," is devoted to this provocative claim. Starting out from Heidegger's analysis of *mood* (*Stimmung*), Prozorov goes on to argue that Agamben's thought depends on a comic mood. This might seem like a bizarre claim; as Prozorov himself notes, there certainly doesn't seem to be anything comic about concentration camps, the state of exception, *homo sacer* and the *Muselman* (Prozorov 2014: 12). Yet precisely by insisting on the comic mood, Prozorov seeks to resist the dominant tragic and pessimistic interpretation of Agamben's

work. This interpretation, he notes, has led commentators such as Ernesto Laclau, William Connolly, and Andreas Kalyvas to regard Agamben as a purely negative thinker who paints a bleak picture of Western political history as an unremitting march toward the catastrophe prefigured in its origins while refusing to grant that any form of voluntarist political activism possible in the present could offer meaningful resistance (Prozorov 2014: 13). Against this, Prozorov writes:

In contrast to this tragic pathos...Agamben's politics may be understood as comic, evidently not in the sense of being funny or humorous, but rather in the sense espoused by classical aesthetics. Whereas tragedy is marked by a pacific beginning after which things go wrong and end badly, comedy begins with various misfortunes only to lead at the end to what Agamben refers to as "happy life"...It is specifically the movement *from* the misfortunes or mishaps at the beginning *to* happiness at the end that defines comedy. (Prozorov 2014: 14)

Prozorov goes on to provide a close reading of the argument of *End of the Poem*, showing how Agamben conceives of the comic character of Dante's *Divine Comedy* in terms of the categories of guilt and innocence. The fundamental difference between the tragic worldview of Ancient Greece and the "comic logic made possible by the historical event of Christianity" is that whereas tragedy involves a "conflict between the subjective innocence of the hero and his objectively attributed guilt, whereby the just end up guilty despite themselves" the logic of comedy "consists in the overcoming of the subjectivity guilt that ensures a 'prosperous and pleasant ending'" (Prozorov 2014: 15). Yet things get somewhat more complicated. Through the doctrine of original sin, Christianity ends up taking over the tragic view, regarding postlapsarian nature as itself inherently guilty. Nevertheless, Christ's passion itself profoundly changes this situation by "transforming natural guilty into personal expiation and an irreconcilable objective conflict into a personal matter." Indeed: "Transforming the conflict between natural guilt and personal innocence into the division between natural innocence and personal guilt, Christ's death thus liberates man from tragedy and makes comedy possible" (Agamben 1999a: 12–13; Prozorov 2014: 15). Dante carries through this comic reversal by extending it even to erotic experience, which remains the last reserve of tragedy. This reversal takes the form of a displacement of a logic of guilt by a logic of shame; whereas tragic heroes such as Oedipus are kept from "assuming their shame" due to their sense of subjective innocence, the comic

character, renouncing “every claim to personal innocence as well as every attempt to return to the Edenic state” is able in turn to fully take on the “fracture between the natural and the personal” within their own existence. Comedy thus achieves a redemption that is fundamentally different than tragic redemption: redeemed is not the individual person or subject, who remains a mere mask, but the “‘creature’ in its natural innocence.” Resisting identification with this mask, a “foreign person” that is the product of external forces—an irreparable alienation, as it were—, the comic character reclaims “its natural innocence while leaving its guilty person to the external forces of the law” (Prozorov 2014: 16).

Prozorov deserves great credit not only for calling attention to the “comic” dimension of Agamben, but indeed stressing its absolute centrality for understanding his thought as a whole, including, not least of all, the works written after his so-called political turn. My own reading of Agamben, indeed, advances through a very different path, and yet ends up reaching a similar destination. In the conclusion of “Deconfabulation: Agamben’s Italian Categories and the Impossibility of Experience,” I write:

The comic, which is always at risk of being intoned tragicomically, is the shibboleth at the threshold of Agamben’s fabulous undertaking....Of Dante, Agamben writes: “The fierce mask left by a superficial hagiography to a tradition that almost immediately forgot the reason for the Comedy’s title is, in this sense, a comic mask.” The same might well be said of Agamben himself: here he tells us, as directly as he can, how he must be read. The very stiffness of Agamben’s Heidegger, his Schmitt, his Aristotle, his *homo sacer*, his sovereign, his Arendt and Foucault, and even his Benjamin and Dante and his Paul, the rigor mortis that Agamben will never seek to cover over by reviving a living dialectic, is not the stiffness of a death mask, the last trace and testament of a departed life. Rather, it is the stiffness of comic personas, comic masks, faithful to creaturely innocence in their very injustice and untruth. (Adler 2015: 89)

There is nevertheless a subtle yet significant difference in our approaches: whereas Prozorov makes use of the comic as a kind of paradigm for understanding the overarching logic of Agamben’s political thought, I draw attention to the comic as a horizon from which to understand Agamben’s *method*, his literary and philosophical practice.

Prozorov's approach has the virtue of offering an explicitly unifying and systematic account of Agamben's thought, the kernel of which is presented in the penultimate chapter ("Outside of Being: Inoperative Humanity"). While Agamben's comic politics does depend on a concept of salvation, this salvation "introduces no new positive content, nor does it restore positivity to the tradition that nihilism has already rendered vacuous." It is neither a Marxist political revolution leading to a new social order, nor a Nietzschean overcoming of nihilism. Neither the reparation of what has been lost, nor the resacralization of what has been profaned, it is the "irreparable loss of the lost, the definite profanity of the profane" (Agamben 1993: 102; Prozorov 2014: 167). Hence, as Prozorov explains: "To be saved as unsavable or irreparable is to be saved *from* the salvation promised by the myriad of historical apparatuses that capture and dominate one's animality in order to perfect one's humanity, to be let be in one's being-thus, in the night of one's originary inoperativity" (Prozorov 2014: 167). This comic salvation ultimately involves nothing less than an erasure of all the "signatures" that, according to Paracelsus, exist throughout nature as "markers of original sin," such that "*phone* and *logos*, *zoe* and *bios*, Master and Slave, man and animal become indistinct" (Prozorov 2014: 174). This notion of an "unmarked life" is "the culmination of the many strands of Agamben's thought": inoperativity itself can be understood as the "deactivation of all signatures that assign a being to this or that identity of function in various apparatuses of government" (Prozorov 2014: 174).

The main problem I have with Prozorov's notion of "comic salvation" is that the notion of the comic itself, regarded as an aesthetic and ultimately theological paradigm, does not seem sufficient to conceive of an overcoming of the tragic. The comic involves an inversion of the logic of tragedy, yet this inversion does not amount to an overcoming of the teleology inherent to tragedy itself but simply involves switching from the negative teleology of fate to the positive teleology of providence. Clearly, the notion of a "happy ending" remains thoroughly teleological. The more radical dimension of comedy, then, is not the "happy ending" as such, but the *mood* that permeates comedy. This mood is the very opposite of Heideggerian anxiety: the fundamental mood in which being-toward-death, being-toward-the-end, reveals itself. What characterizes the comic mood, above all, is that nothing matters too much. Comedy involves a suspension of care—precisely that which, for Heidegger, is of the very essence of *being-in-the-world*, and hence the horizon through which the question of the meaning of being can be raised. The "happy ending," by

contrast, keeps the tragic logic in play, since it holds out the promise of happiness against which alone tragic disappointment and despair is possible. What is more properly comic about the comedy, however, is not the end, but the mood that permeates the whole: a sense of levity and good humor; a feeling that everyone and everything is ridiculous, that the very individuality of the individual is somehow itself fundamentally risible, yet that nevertheless none of this really matters.

Prozorov is acutely aware of the complexity of the concept of comic, stressing throughout that the comic is to be understood in the first instance as mood. Yet I would argue that it is only by slipping between different senses of the comic that Prozorov can provide a coherent account of Agamben's soteriology. If comedy were simply a mood, it would not seem to carry the historico-philosophical weight that Prozorov assigns to it. But if it were a historico-theological paradigm—a way of understanding the “shape” of history—then it seems like it would remain caught up in the teleological gesture of tragedy, merely inverting it to transform pessimism into optimism. However, by conceiving of comedy as at once both mood and paradigm, Prozorov can regard it as simultaneously the end of the end, the end of every possible ending, and a “reversal of fortune” that consists in nothing else than the opening up of history to fortune itself; a radical contingency that falls completely outside the given order, and yet whose significance consists not in changing anything at all, but only in the “slight displacement” that initiates the messianic age, rendering inoperative even the machine of history itself.

If the comic offers the key to Agamben's project, it is not as a “logically” or even “paradoxologically” coherent capstone, but as a “master signifier” that conflates two different senses that can never be brought together into a coherent picture. It is for this reason, I would moreover argue, that Agamben does not do more with the comic; he sees that it would involve a kind of trick. And there is good reason to suspect that Agamben could not permit the comic *qua* mood to provide a guiding philosophical orientation. Prozorov, in motivating his use of the Heideggerian notion of mood, invokes a telling passage from the *Idea of Prose*:

[C]ourage, before which the imperfect nihilism of our times is in constant retreat, would indeed consist in recognizing that we no longer have moods, that we are the first men not to be in tune with a *Stimmung*. [And] if moods are the same thing in the history of the individual as are epochs in the history of humanity, then what presents itself in the leaden

light of our apathy is the never yet seen sky of the absolute non-epochal situation in human history. The unveiling of being and language, which remains unsaid in each historical epoch and in each destiny, perhaps is truly coming to an end. Deprived of an epoch, worn out and without destiny, we reach the blissful threshold of our unmusical dwelling in time. Our word has truly reached the beginning. (Agamben 1995: 91)

While noting that this passage speaks to “a radical discontinuity in our contemporary condition,” Prozorov goes on to remark that this “actually provides us with a glimpse into the fundamental mood of his philosophy” (Prozorov 2014: 12). I believe, however, that Agamben’s claim that “we no longer have moods” needs to be taken more seriously. We should hesitate to construe the absence of moods as a new kind of mood. That the contemporary condition is characterized by a lack of mood is of such significance for Agamben, I would argue, because it signals a discontinuity in the history of philosophy demanding a radically new kind of method. The givenness of mood (together with experience and gesture, which Agamben speaks of elsewhere in an analogous manner), and with the epochal nature of history and thought, provides the basis for a phenomenological method: the form of philosophical inquiry that remains possible when the critical project, having run its course, has destroyed every other possible basis, including subjectivity, reason, and absolute spirit. Nihilism remains imperfect if it holds on to the possibility of a mood of nihilism, an experience of nihilism—or even a “gesture” of nihilism, a mode of corporeal being proper to our nihilistic age. True philosophical courage demands that we abandon even these last residues of stability.

Yet what kind of philosophy is possible when phenomenology is no longer possible? Agamben’s answers to this question seems, in the first instance, to involve rethinking mood (and experience) in a manner that deprives it of its metaphysical residue; the residue of “propriety,” of an attachment to an ontology of *ousia*, that allows them to remain thought of as moods and experiences proper to us. This strategy appears most clearly in “Experimentum Linguae,” where Agamben cites Wittgenstein’s remark (made during the only public lecture he would ever hold) that the “correct expression in language for the miracle of the existence of the world, albeit as expressing nothing *within* language, is the existence of language itself” (Agamben 2007: 10). Yet this approach, itself of a piece with his account of potentiality and inoperativity and of the relation of being and language, only makes the question of the contemporary possibility of philosophy even more critical.

For it becomes clear that philosophy, if it is possible, can no longer be the proper work of any one thinker; can no longer be authorized through a proper name. The individual philosopher, the individual philosophy is always risible; if the philosophical tradition itself is to be redeemed of its guilt, individual philosophers must assume the full measure of their shame, coming to terms with the preposterousness of the move by which, trying to salvage their truth from a general untruth, they have ended up merely repeating the fatal closure of thought. This points us toward Agamben's implicit method: a comic method that has little to do either with a comic mood or with the comic paradigm of a "happy ending." This method consists in a complete and rigorous abandonment of the pretense of philosophical originality and authorship. There is, in the strictest sense—a sense that the very institutional structure of academic discourse must efface—no such thing as Agamben's philosophy, Agamben's political thought: there are *only* other thinkers, who are so many comic masks, reduced to an alienated exteriority—a mere pretension to an originality and singularity that is always absent, yet a pretension that, given over to its shame, allows the tradition itself to appear redeemed, transformed into the material of pure play, of a use without ownership. Agamben is perhaps the first thinker, at least since the pre-Socratics, to have abandoned the call to know oneself and think *for* oneself.

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46 *Anthony Curtis Adler*

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