



# AGAMBEN'S POTENTIAL

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**Giorgio Agamben.** POTENTIALITIES: COLLECTED ESSAYS IN PHILOSOPHY.  
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*It is only after a long and arduous frequenting of names, definitions, and facts that the spark is lit in the soul which, in enflaming it, marks the passage from passion to accomplishment.*

—Giorgio Agamben, *The Idea of Prose*

In a preface written for the French translation of his *Infancy and History: The Destruction of Experience*, Giorgio Agamben states that “every written work can be regarded as the prologue (or rather, the broken cast) of a work never penned, and destined to remain so, because later works, which in turn will be the prologues or the moulds for other absent works, represent only sketches or death masks.”<sup>1</sup> This remark, which describes every work of art as a *preface*, does not simply refer to the impossibility of translating the *all* of life into a single work. Nor does it simply refer to those purely empirical obstacles which stand in the way of creation, preventing the work of art from attaining the plenitude it might have hoped for had not greedy wine-merchants, harrying tailors, and eloquent panderers distracted the Great Minds from their tasks. Instead, in returning every work of art to its originary hesitation, in evoking the oscillation between work and draft, effort and accomplishment, Agamben invokes a much richer and darker *potentiality* lying at the heart of the work. It is this richer and darker potentiality that constitutes the central concern of Agamben’s thought and that gives its name to this collection. Yet what is named in this potentiality? What is the nature of the potentiality of which Agamben speaks? What is this potentiality the potential *for*?

Before advancing in the investigation of this question, let us look briefly at what is gathered together under its name. In this collection of essays by a thinker of unquestionable brilliance one finds a number of axes. The first of these is that of chronology: the essays presented in this volume stretch from 1975 to 1996 and thus cover the period during which works such as *Stanzas*, *Infancy and History*, *The Idea of Prose*, and *The Coming Community* were prepared and published. The second axis—the one that dictates the ordering of the texts found in this volume and which is the choice of the editor and not the author—is a thematic one: the book is divided into four sections entitled respectively, “Language,” “History,” “Potentiality,” and “Contingency.”<sup>2</sup> One notes the presence of other, more fugitive axes such as those which can be found in connections between different essays in the collection (as in the case of the remark from a late Byzantine lexicon cited in the closing paragraphs of the first essay, which receives a magisterial, thirty-page gloss in the last, richest essay in the collection) and between the essays gathered together in this volume and Agamben’s other written works (the question

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1. This preface is translated in *Infancy and History: The Destruction of Experience* [3].

2. On this choice, see Daniel Heller-Roazen’s introduction to this volume.

of the genealogy of the *sacred*, which lies at the heart of Agamben's most recent works, is evoked here in the closing lines of the eighth essay in this collection; the question of a philosophy of *life* as the coming philosophy in the chronologically final essay in this volume [chapter 14] thus announces Agamben's more recent studies on the politico-philosophical concept of *life*). These last two axes confront the reader with all the more urgency, as no major thinker since Walter Benjamin has occupied himself with such a tensely, densely interconnected constellation of concerns at the heart of such seeming diversity of subject. At the hub of these axes, which accelerate and blur in the reading of the work, lies the animating, abiding concern of Agamben's thought: *potentiality*.

### *The Potentiality of Language, or Matter*

#### 1.1

This preface with which we began, and which finds itself near the chronological midpoint of the essays gathered together in this volume, contains a singular *profession de foi*. After suggesting that, "if for every author there exists a question which defines the *motivum* of his thought," Agamben indicates his own: "In both my written and unwritten books, I have stubbornly pursued only one train of thought: what is the meaning of 'there is language'; what is the meaning of 'I speak'?" [IH 5]. This stubbornly pursued train of thought, which rumbles through the rich and varied territories of Agamben's writing, is then given a name—a name that lends the preface its title: "*experimentum linguae*."

What is the experiment, the experience of language evoked in this phrase? What is learned through such an *experiment*, or gained through such an *experience*, of language? Agamben defines this *experimentum linguae* as an experience "in which what is experienced is language itself . . . without language experienced as this or that signifying proposition, but as the pure fact that one speaks, that language exists" [IH 4–5]. As is the question with Walter Benjamin's *reine Sprache*<sup>3</sup>—from which Agamben's reflection, in part, develops—one must ask how one might understand—and "*pursue*"—a thought that seeks not to inquire into the meaning of specific propositions in language but instead into the darker and simpler fact that "*there is language*." What indeed is the nature of an experience "in which what is experienced is language itself"? What are the coordinates of a realm where, as Agamben remarks, "one can only encounter the pure exteriority of language" [IH 6]? How can an experience of such a "pure exteriority of language" lie at the outset of an inquiry? How can it be its guiding force rather than its confounded endpoint? In short, how can such an experience constitute a *vocation*?

At first glance, one finds everything but a satisfying response to this question in this volume. In an essay that appears here for the first time (in any language) and was first given as a lecture in Lisbon in 1986, Agamben offers another *profession de foi*: "I could state the subject of my work as an attempt to understand the meaning of the verb 'can' [*potere*]. What do I mean when I say: 'I can, I cannot'?" [P 177]. This remark, which is seconded by a decisive remark from another essay (which dates from 1993) found in this collection ("in its deepest intuition, philosophy is a firm assertion of potentiality, the construction of an experience of the possible as such" [P 249]), might at first

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3. Whose privileged realm, as the essay "On Language as Such and the Language of Man" [GS 2.1.140–57] indicates, is that of the name. In this connection one does well to note Gershom Scholem's reference in *Von der mystischen Gestalt der Gottheit: Studien zu Grundbegriffen der Kabbala* to "der 'Sprache der Reinheit' [Scholem takes the term from the Merkaba schelema] das heißt einer esoterischen Sprache des reinen Namens" [17].

leave the reader of Agamben's French preface somewhat perplexed. Do these two *professions* contradict one another? Whereas in the French preface, from 1989, Agamben declares that the question that has guided his work has been "what is the meaning of 'there is language'; what is the meaning of 'I speak'?", we find in this talk in Lisbon, from 1986, that "the subject of my work" is "an attempt to understand the verb 'can' [*potere*]." What is more, an essay, that dates from after the French preface (it dates from 1993) defines philosophy, "in its deepest intuition," as "a construction of an experience of the possible as such" (Agamben being a philosopher, such a definition of philosophy's "deepest intuition" amounts to a self-descriptive remark). Are we confronted here, then, with a particularly mobile center of study? A contradiction born of a series of occasional essays?

Or might we not instead understand the two *professions de foi* as entirely, even necessarily, compatible? Might we not consider the two declared motors of Agamben's work, "what is the meaning of 'I speak'?" and "what do I mean when I say: 'I can, I cannot?'" as being, in *their deepest intuition*, the same, as being different facets of a single question? More precisely, is it not possible to understand the question "what is the meaning of 'I speak'?" as a question about potentiality, as "an attempt to understand the verb 'can' [*potere*]"? In short, is it possible to understand Agamben's *experimentum linguae* as an experience of *pure potentiality*?

## 1.2

*Like dolphins, for a mere instant human language lifts its head from the semiotic sea of nature.*

—Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History*

So as to attempt to answer this question, let us try to attain some precision as to the nature and limits of this experience of what Agamben calls "the pure exteriority of language." English-language readers of this journal may be most familiar with such an *experimentum linguae* from the work of an author the history of whose production and reception is closely linked with it—Paul de Man.

In a talk given at Cornell University in 1983 on Walter Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator," one finds de Man's at once most famous and most notorious attempt at effecting an experience of the sort Agamben describes. In this late period of de Man's work, where he abandons the phenomenological dialectic of his earlier writing, we find an experience of language reduced to its grammatical rudiments. What is, in the experience of a language seen not as this or that signifying proposition but as, to borrow Agamben's phrase, "the pure fact that one speaks, that language exists," a messianic experience for Benjamin, the sign, the messianic vector of human redemption, is for de Man a radical experience of the privative and what he names in this talk the "*inhuman*." De Man states here that

*Benjamin's language of pathos, language of historical pathos, language of the messianic, the pathos of exile and so on and so forth, really describes linguistic events which are by no means human. So that what he calls the pains of the original become structural deficiencies which are best analyzed in terms of the inhuman, dehumanized language of linguistics. . . . [O]ne is impelled to read reine Sprache as that which is the most sacred, which is the most divine, when in fact in Benjamin it means a language completely devoid of any kind of meaning function, language which would be pure signifier, which would be*

completely devoid of any semantic function whatsoever. . . . [RT 96–97; my emphasis]<sup>4</sup>

Wishing to forestall misunderstanding, de Man states of this surprising figure: “the ‘inhuman,’ is not some kind of mystery, or secret—it is linguistic structures, the play of linguistic tensions, linguistic events that occur, possibilities which are inherent in language—independently of any intent or any drive or any wish or any desire we might have” [RT 96]. It is clear from these passages that de Man would have found a more felicitous formula in a different, less-connotated privative construction such as *a-human* or *non-human* (as the *inhuman* has become reserved for those things which are, in truth, *all-too-human*); this is the issue motivating the exchange between de Man and M. H. Abrams that followed the lecture (and is reproduced in *The Resistance to Theory*). But this should not prevent us from trying to understand what was aimed for in the expression. What de Man is endeavoring to state here is the tremendous *expropriative* force potential in language, the structural disclosing of which was the fruit and motor of the work of those thinkers on language who were most decisive for de Man (and indeed, de Man’s *inhuman* closely resembles Benveniste’s description of language’s *impersonality*). In *Allegories of Reading*, de Man writes that “we do not ‘possess’ language in the same way that we can be said to possess natural properties. It would be just as proper or improper to say that ‘we’ are a property of language as the reverse” [AR 160]. In the general sense which concerns us here, what this remark indicates is the common point that unites thinkers as diverse as de Man, Blanchot, Nancy, Derrida, Foucault, and Agamben: the inheritance of the Heideggerian dialectic of the proper as a philosophical problem *concerning, above all, language*. It is then in this light that one can see that one would do better to understand the experience invoked by de Man under the sign of the *inhuman* as akin to what Paul Celan once referred to as “going beyond what is human, stepping to a real which is turned towards the human, but uncanny” (“ein Hinastreten aus dem Menschlichen, ein Sichhinausbegeben in einen dem Menschlichen zegewandten und unheimlichen Bereich”) [Celan 42–43; *GW* 3.192]. Language is undoubtedly “turned towards the human,” and this turning distinguishes man. In this sense, language is far from inhuman. But this does not for as much remove that in language which is, while a “stepping to a real,” “uncanny.”

Despite the radical expropriative force conveyed by de Man’s figure of the “inhuman,” one finds a figure that expresses de Man’s most personal *aporia* perhaps even more fully. In another of those late essays often marked by a vertiginous concision, de Man states that, “the bottom line, in Kant as well as Hegel, is the prosaic materiality of the letter and no degree of obfuscation or ideology can transform this materiality into the phenomenal cognition of aesthetic judgment” [AI 90]. We are here confronted with an experience of “the pure exteriority of language” in the form of an experience of language’s *materiality*. This materiality, which de Man elsewhere calls “*inscription*,” is language reduced to its graphic rudiments, materiality conceived as the materiality of an inscription itself. In short, it is an experience of language, to employ Agamben’s description with which we began, “not as this or that signifying proposition, but as the pure fact that one speaks, that language exists.” While de Man demonstrates, in another essay from this period, a professional desire for a wider cognizance or recognition of this experience amongst scholars, describing his “return to philology” as an “examination of the structures of language prior to the meaning it produces” [RT 24] (thus con-

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4. Speaking in “*Reading and History*” (an essay contemporaneous with this talk) of this same essay of Benjamin’s, de Man goes on to state that “the existential pathos [of Benjamin’s text] is counterbalanced by the fact that these ‘bottomless depths’ of language are also its most manifest and ordinary grammatical dimensions . . .” [RT 62].

forming precisely to the experience described above—an experience of language “not as this or that signifying proposition”), this experience of the materiality of language is what blocks access to *judgments* of all sorts and prevents the stable enunciation of presuppositions, propositions, and postulates which would aspire to ground aesthetic or ethical precepts. And this experience of the materiality of language, of language unveiled in its impersonality, thus devastates, in de Man’s late work, the ground of presupposition—and aesthetics and ethics with it.

In one of the most important sections of Agamben’s *The Idea of Prose*, entitled “The Idea of Matter,” one finds a passage that mirrors the experience we found in de Man. Agamben writes: “There where language ends, it is not the unsayable which begins, but rather the matter of language. He who has never attained, as in a dream, that wood-like [*lignea*] substance of language that the ancients called ‘*silva*,’ remains, even when he is silent, a prisoner to representations” [*IP* 37; trans. modified; *Idea della prosa* 19]. Here we are confronted with precisely the same experience of the materiality of language that we found in de Man—and yet with a slight, but decisive, displacement. For de Man, as here with Agamben, there where language “ends,” it is indeed not the “unsayable” which begins, but instead “the matter of language.” What is more, for both thinkers, he who fails to conduct this radical *experimentum linguae* of “the matter of language” is destined to remain a “prisoner to representations.” The two interpretations are identical in their essential coordinates (their similarity is less surprising in light of the fact that both writers seem to have received a part of their impulsion to investigate this “matter of language” by an encounter with the linguistic theory of Walter Benjamin, and both evidence an approach to Benjamin’s writing inflected by a decisive encounter with Heidegger’s thought). Agamben’s interpretations of Benjamin in “Language and History: Linguistic and Historical Categories in Benjamin’s Thought” [chap. 3 of this volume] and “The Messiah and the Sovereign: The Problem of Law in Walter Benjamin” [chap. 10], match de Man’s in the lucid acceptance that Benjamin’s concept of *reine Sprache* sacrifices communication for communicativity—that the *reine Sprache* is a language possessing no meaning function whatsoever and is in a sense simply *the matter of language*. Thus, both de Man’s and Agamben’s critiques of language, informed by an experience of the materiality of language akin to that of Benjamin—which is to say, informed by an experience of “the pure exteriority of language”—result in a recognition of the *expropriative* force of language. It is only at this point that the two critiques diverge.

In de Man’s vision of language, it is impossible to avoid becoming a “prisoner to representations” for any longer than the blink of an eye, and this experience of “the matter of language” marks, as we saw above, the irrevocable endpoint or endgame of a thought which must renounce any hope of founding an ethics or an aesthetics. What lies beyond is only an endless cycle of forgetting and remembrance which offers no issue and no hope, and it is for this reason that this experience of the materiality of language is associated in de Man’s late work with stuttering, loss, falling, automatism, the “inhuman,” and death. Agamben’s thinking of the *matter*—and the *potentiality*—of language proceeds differently. For Agamben, this experience of language, the experience of what he calls elsewhere “the pure mediality of human communication” [*MSF* 93] (and which, as such, is intimately linked to the question of *gesture* in his work),<sup>5</sup> instead of engendering the disappearance of the human and the ethical in the mechanico-grammatical

5. “. . . *gesture* is not an absolutely nonlinguistic element but, rather, something closely tied to language. It is first of all a forceful presence in language itself, one that is older and more originary than conceptual expression” [*P* 77]. Gesture could almost be said to be a technical term in Agamben’s writing. The genealogy of this term in Agamben’s thought remains to be done, but we might note here a few of the central lines. As the essay from this volume “Kommerell, or On Gesture” makes clear, Kommerell himself contributed largely to Agamben’s conception of

machinations of language, opens up thought to a thinking of ethics, transforms the *aporia* which “the matter of language” created for de Man into a *euporia*.

Before going further, let us linger for a moment upon this movement from *aporia* to *euporia*. These terms of transition can themselves be found in an essay from this volume where Agamben, discussing the role of terminology in the work of Derrida, writes that “the aporias of self-reference . . . do not find their solution here; rather, they are dislocated and . . . transformed into *euporias*” [P 217].<sup>6</sup> To what does the “here” of this citation refer? Precisely to that which we have been considering—the “*event of matter*” [P 217, my emphasis] experienced in language. Two things must then be distinguished. First, the idea of dynamic reversibility upon which such an idea rests. Agamben’s thought integrally depends upon an idea of just such a transition from *aporia* to *euporia* and its particular dialectic—above all as a *political* thought—is shaped by this movement. “The closer we come to the danger,” writes Heidegger in a famous essay, “the more brightly do the ways into the saving power begin to shine” [*Basic Writings* 341]. This idea of the proximity of the cure to the poison (which can be traced in Heidegger’s work back to Hölderlin), of the critical reversibility contained in every moment is an idea we find in numerous places and guises in Agamben’s work (as in the closing lines of Agamben’s first book, *The Man without Content*).<sup>7</sup> We could as well employ this idea to explain Agamben’s special affection (evidenced in several interviews) for Marx’s remark that “the absolutely desperate current state of affairs fills me with hope.” This is an idea that could truly claim a double genealogy in Agamben’s work as it is present, in different forms, in those two thinkers who most strongly marked Agamben’s thought: in both Heidegger and Benjamin,<sup>8</sup> where it takes the form of a memory that surges forth at

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*gesture (something clearly evidenced by Agamben’s “Notes on Gesture,” found in the English edition of Infancy and History). Another of these lines is certainly Benjamin (whose theory of gesture is indeed similar in many respects to that of Kommerell). Lastly, one should note the sense and importance Heidegger ascribes to the term. In Heidegger’s talk with Professor Tezuka of the Imperial University of Tokyo in On the Way to Language, in the latter’s discussion of Japanese No theater, the question of gesture (die Gebärde) is raised. After Professor Tezuka observes that “Das Eigentliche dessen, was in Ihrer Sprache Gebärde heisst, lässt sich schwer sagen [That which is truly meant by the German Gebärde [gesture] does not allow itself to be easily said],” Heidegger replies, “Und doch ist dieses Wort vielleicht eine Hilfe, das zu-Sagende wahrhaft zu erfahren [And thus this word is perhaps of some help in truly experiencing what there is to say]” [Unterwegs Zur Sprache 107]. Although Agamben does not explicitly focus upon this in his treatment of gesture, it should not be forgotten that the term is a technical one in the oratorical arts.*

6. Daniel Heller-Roazen’s introduction to this volume also cites this remark [P 5].

7. “According to the principle by which it is only in the burning house that the fundamental architectural problem becomes visible for the first time, art, at the furthest point of its destiny, makes visible its original project” [*Man without Content* 115].

8. In an interview which is not a joke despite its date of publication (April 1, 1999) for the French daily newspaper *Libération*, Giorgio Agamben, asked about his participation in the Thor seminars with Heidegger, states that it was at that time that, for the young man he was, “la philosophie est devenue possible [philosophy became possible].” He continues, “c’est bien cela l’intérêt des rencontres, dans la vie comme dans la pensée: ils servent à nous rendre la vie possible (ou impossible, parfois). En tout cas, c’est ce que m’est arrivé avec Heidegger et, presque dans les mêmes années, avec la pensée de Benjamin. Toute grande œuvre contient une part d’ombre et de poison, contre laquelle elle ne nous fournit pas toujours l’antidote. Benjamin a été pour moi cet antidote, qui m’a aidé à survivre à Heidegger [This is precisely the interest of encounters—both in life and in thinking. They render life, for us, possible (or, sometimes, impossible). In any event, this is what happened to me with Heidegger, and, during these same years, with Benjamin’s thought. Every great oeuvre contains a degree of shadow and poison for which it does not always furnish the antidote. For me, Benjamin was that antidote which helped me survive Heidegger]” [*“Agamben, le chercheur d’homme”* 2–3]. The importance of this final remark for an understanding of the development of Agamben’s thought is capital.

the critical instant, and which Benjamin compares at one point to the vision of a drowning man.<sup>9</sup> The second thing we must note in the above citation is that this power of critical reversibility, of *radical potentiality* contained in every tick of humanity's (revolutionary) clock, is intimately related to what Agamben calls in that passage "*the event of matter*"—the matter of language. It is for this reason that Agamben will state that "the *experimentum linguae* . . . does not (as a common misunderstanding insists) authorize an interpretative practice directed toward the infinite deconstruction of a text, nor does it inaugurate a new formalism. Rather, *it marks the decisive event of matter, and in doing so opens onto an ethics*" [P 219, my emphasis]. And yet, here, a new problem opens before us. It is clearly not enough to simply note the presence of such a dynamic reversibility, such a transition from *aporia* to *euporia*. We must endeavor to understand how Agamben justifies the *possibility* of, the *potentiality* for, such a critical reversal, how such an experience of language in its "*pure exteriority*" can lead to a reversal, and an *ethics*.

How is it possible for an experience of language, an experience of the "*matter of language*," to "*open onto an ethics*"? In what way does such a *potentiality* lie within language? How can the opacity of such a *matter* cause the saving power to shine? As we saw above, Agamben fully recognizes the expropriative force of language—that which strips presupposition of its ground, evacuates attribution, steals possession. It is here, however, that Agamben effects the slight displacement that demonstrates the profound originality of his theory of language.

### 1.3

In a talk from 1929 entitled "Lecture on Ethics" given at the instance of The Heretics Society in Cambridge and whose importance for Agamben is capital, Wittgenstein says, "I am tempted to say that the right expression in language for the miracle of the existence of the world, though it is not any proposition *in* language, is the existence of language itself" [PO 43–44].<sup>10</sup> This experience of "the miracle of the existence of the world," like those effected by Agamben and de Man, is based on an experience of language—the fact that we speak rather than anything that might be contained as a proposition within language. In the closing words of this talk Wittgenstein remarks: "My whole tendency and I believe the tendency of all men who ever tried to write or talk [sic] Ethics or Religion was to run against the boundaries of language. *This running against the walls of our cage is perfectly, absolutely hopeless*" [44, my emphasis]. The displacement that Agamben effects in his theory of language, in his experiment on, and experience of, language allows itself to be seen with particular clarity in relation to this remark. De Man's late work demonstrates a vehement agreement with Wittgenstein's assessment as to the hopelessness of the running against the boundaries of language. And Agamben, in a certain sense, agrees as well. Running up against the boundaries of language for Agamben, as for de Man and Wittgenstein, is indeed hopeless—and yet not without hope.<sup>11</sup> For Agamben, it is a matter of transforming hope, of seizing upon

9. One might note the presence of this idea, as well, in the thinker of modern politics who is perhaps most important for Agamben, Guy Debord.

10. Agamben cites this passage in *Infancy and History* [15] and refers to it without citing it in numerous other places in his work.

11. One might connect this view to Heidegger's remark at the end of "Die Sprache" (from *Unterwegs zur Sprache*): "Nichts liegt darin, eine neue Ansicht über die Sprache vorzutragen. Aller beruht darin, das Wohnen im Sprechen der Sprache zu lernen [Nothing lies in exposing a new view of language. Everything lies in learning to dwell in the speaking of language]" [Gesamtausgabe 30].



the *perfection* and *absolution* of such *hopelessness*. A way of escaping the aporias of presupposition (or self-reference) is *not* hoped for. Instead, a new, transformed hope is envisioned in light of this perfect, absolute hopelessness where humanity is *absolved* from the task of dissolving the aporetic bars of such a cage. The very renunciation of the task of resolving these aporias, which consigns man, in Agamben's view, to the living of their perpetual deferral as exile and loss, is what is hoped for, a hope Agamben refers to in *The Coming Community* as "post-messianic" and "irreparably profane." In Agamben's own dialectic of *Eigentlichkeit*, of the proper, it is hopelessness which is appropriated and which engenders a transformed hope. But is this hope not senseless? What is the ground for such hope?

#### 1.4

To understand the nature and importance of this displacement effected in Agamben's theory of language, we need to note a term that plays a crucial role therein: *community*. An ethics, a doctrine aiming at the realization of *the happy life*, must of necessity consider how people might live together, how they might live in a *community*. To this end it must consider what it is that might form or found a group, a community, what these men and women might have *in common*. For Agamben, modern politics has done nothing so much as tirelessly demonstrate that no true community can be founded on a presupposition or condition of belonging *of any kind* (be it in the form of nation, race, class, or gender); such a *true commonality* can in no way be understood after the manner of an attribute or a substance, can in no way be founded on the structure of presupposition.<sup>12</sup> This is an *aporia* that Agamben is far from the only one facing today (the dialogue between Maurice Blanchot and Jean-Luc Nancy to which Agamben's *The Coming Community* is to a certain degree a response is perhaps the most salient one in this instance); it is his *euphoria* which is unique. One must confront then the fact that the only means by which an authentic human community could be constituted would be on the basis of what Agamben refers to in an essay from this volume as "the unpresupposable and unpresupposed principle . . . that, as such, constitutes authentic human community and communication" [P 35]. And, as this same essay notes, it is, for Agamben, finally an experience of "a pure event of language before or beyond all possible meaning" which provides the means for encountering this "unpresupposable and unpresupposed principle"—that is to say, just this force of expropriation we encountered earlier [P 42]. Agamben's analysis (in this sense, identical to de Man's) *devastates the ground of presupposition*. What one is left with after such an experience or experiment is a vision of language no longer grounded upon a constantly displaced presupposition (the violence of which is the violence of language). The *matter of language*, exposing the groundless presupposition of language, offers an experience of, an experiment in, a belonging that is without presupposition—"the unpresupposable and unpresupposed principle" of which Agamben speaks, and which he calls in one of the essays from this volume "pure destination" [P 113]. It is for this reason that Agamben states that

*only because man finds himself cast into language without the vehicle of a voice, and only because the experimentum linguae lures him, grammarless, into that void and that aponia, do an ethos and a community of any kind become possible.*

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12. "There can be no true human community on the basis of a presupposition—be it a nation, a language, or even the a priori of communication of which hermeneutics speaks" [P 47].

*So the community that is born of the experimentum linguae cannot take the form of a presupposition, not even in the purely “grammatical” form of a self-presupposition. . . . The first outcome of the experimentum linguae, therefore, is a radical revision of the very idea of Community. [IH 9]*<sup>13</sup>

There remains, however, in this vision an element of this dynamic reversibility of which Agamben speaks that we have not yet taken into account: *history*. In an essay entitled “The Idea of Language,” Agamben remarks, “we are the first human beings who have become completely conscious of language” [P 45]. This is echoed by Agamben in a number of other places—as in *The Coming Community*, where he states that “the era in which we live is also that in which for the first time it is possible for humans to experience their own linguistic being—not this or that content of language, but language *itself*” [CC 83, my emphasis], or in a remark from another work: “thought finds itself for the first time, today, confronted by its task without any illusion and without any possible alibi” [MSF 87]. To what do these remarks refer? What does it mean to become “completely conscious of language”? How is it possible for an entire age to become capable of experiencing “language *itself*”? What is this “task” which can no longer be avoided?

Advancing certain insights of Guy Debord concerning modern mediatized society, Agamben signals the chance offered contemporary society by the expropriation of language effected in the modern society of the spectacle. This devastation of presupposition, which has always existed as language’s potentiality and ground, becomes, in Agamben’s analysis, fantastically aggravated in modern society. In Agamben’s analysis (most emphatically in *The Coming Community* and *Means without End*—but the idea is present in a number of essays from *Potentialities*), the society of the spectacle reflects humanity’s expropriated linguistic nature in inverted form. However, this potentially devastating experience carries with it a potential for a radical reversal, “a positive possibility” which could be used against that same society of the spectacle, and could then break its enchanting hold [MSF 92]. It is thus for this reason that Agamben remarks in this volume that “we are the first human beings who have become completely conscious of language.” For him, we have been offered no choice. In Agamben’s view, for the first time in history it has become possible for humankind to live the experience of its own *expropriated* linguistic essence—“not the experience of a certain content of language, of a certain true proposition, but the mere fact that we speak” [MSF 92].

Let us now return to ethics, and community. This inherent possibility or *potentiality* in language for the disclosure of language’s impersonality (language’s violence), its capacity for expropriation, is exacerbated in the modern society of the spectacle to the point that, in reaching its limit, it offers the possibility for a dynamic reversal. The

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13. Even more than economic necessity and technological development, what drives the nations of the earth toward a single common destiny is the alienation from linguistic being, the uprooting of all peoples from their vital dwelling in language.

For this very reason, however, the era in which we live is also that in which for the first time it is possible for humans to experience their own linguistic being—not this or that content of language, but language *itself*. Contemporary politics is this devastating *experimentum linguae* that all over the planet unhinges and empties traditions and beliefs, ideologies and religions, identities and communities.

Only those who succeed in carrying it to completion—without allowing what reveals to remain veiled in the nothingness that reveals, but bringing language itself to language—will be the first citizens of a community with neither presuppositions nor a State, where the nullifying and determining power of what is common will be pacified. . . . [CC 83]

community that would come in such a reversal would be one that no longer thought belonging on the model of presupposition, on a predicative model, but would instead think *the common* as this truly universal expropriated state *in language*. Thus, the displacement of belonging as predicative or presuppositional effects a reevaluation of the ontological categories. In *The Coming Community*, in the section on the “Irreparable,” Agamben talks of just such a community no longer founded on such a belonging, which he calls the “post-messianic world,” and imagines that from it, “both necessity and contingency, those two crosses of Western thought, have disappeared,” with the result that “the world is now and forever necessarily contingent or contingently necessary” [CC 40]. It is in just such a post-messianic light that Agamben’s “pure destination” is illuminated, and the form of such a community can be glimpsed.

We read in this same work that “the fact that must constitute the point of departure for any discourse on ethics is that there is no essence, no historical or spiritual vocation, no biological destiny that humans must enact or realize” [CC 43]. What then lies before humankind as a task is the thinking of a “free use” in accordance with this “unpresupposable” belonging—a “free use of the proper,” which Agamben evokes, citing Hölderlin in the last lines of an essay from this volume, as “the most difficult task” [P 204]. And as the *experimentum linguae* as Agamben describes and effects it is the “unique material experience possible of our generic essence,” then the *experimentum linguae* is a lesson in the *potentiality* of the coming community [MSF 92]. It is thus in this *experimentum linguae* that one can hear the call for a thought which could live “its proper im-potentiality” and open itself to a truly “free usage” [MSF 90, 92].<sup>14</sup> “There is in effect,” says Agamben in *The Coming Community*, “something that humans are and have to be, but this something is not an essence nor properly a thing: *it is the simple fact of one’s own existence as possibility or potentiality*” [CC 43]. This then is the only prerequisite for the coming community and the free use of the proper which is to guide it. (This vision of radical change is not for as much “passive”—though it does necessarily imply the “passion” of “potentiality.” The dynamic force possible in the radically inert is an idea explored in a number of places in Agamben’s work, most centrally through the conceptions of *infancy* and the *potentiality* represented by figures such as Bartleby.)

Let us at last return to the question that was our starting point. In a passage from *The Idea of Prose* that recounts the story of Damascus, the last Master of Philosophy before the closing of the Athenian schools in 529 AD, Agamben speaks of the latter’s search for a first principle, which ends in his realization that such a first principle could in a certain sense be found in the very wax tablet on which he was engraving his thoughts. Agamben relates that “what he [Damascus] had until then believed that he thought as the One, as the absolute Other of thought, was nothing other than the matter, the poten-

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14. In a recent interview with the French review *Vacarme*, Agamben offers a historical instance of such a truly “free usage of the proper” in a conflict in the Franciscan order as to right of usage. Not only did the Franciscan order refuse personal property, but it refused communal property (in the name of the order) as well. The Church asked then that they classify their manner of living as “droit d’usage” (the “usufructus,” as distinguished from the right of ownership). Agamben relates that they retorted (in his own paraphrase), “Non, ce n’est pas un droit d’usage, c’est de l’usage sans droit” (“No, this is not a lawful usage, it is lawless usage”) [“Une biopolitique mineure” 7].

It is as a continuation of the thinking of the Heideggerian dialectic of *Eigentlichkeit*, in this thinking of the “proper” or “authentic,” that the two authoritative lines of contemporary French thought, that of Deleuze and Foucault and that of Derrida, Levinas, and Nancy, unite in the effort to think a form of belonging that would evade identitarian, prescriptive, propositional belonging so as to truly think “a free usage of the proper.”

tiality of thought” [IP 34, trans. modified; *Idea della prosa* 15]. And this “potentiality of thought” is nothing other than the matter of inscription, the wax tablet, which Aristotle elsewhere figures, in a passage to which Agamben returns so often, as the potentiality of thought itself. Here we at last find “*the matter of thought*” (expressed through the figure of the writing tablet) as “*the potentiality of thought*.”<sup>15</sup> It is then here, where “the matter of language” and “the potentiality of thought” converge, that we can at last answer the question posed at the outset as to whether these two questions, these two motors—the matter of language and the potentiality of thought—could be seen as the same. And the answer is yes.<sup>16</sup>

### *The Potentiality of History, or The Return of the Same and the Return of the New*

Though, as we have shown, understanding *potentiality* as Agamben thinks it is the understanding of the experience of the *matter of language*, such an understanding does not exhaust the concept of *potentiality* as we find it in his work. For, as we know, *potentiality* is a *temporal* concept, is the concept of time’s darkness, the hushed shadows massing about the stage of what happens. As this is the case, we must then ask how we can understand potentiality in its relation to time and to history.

## 2.1

*For history is not, as the dominant ideology would have it, humans’ servitude to continuous linear time, but their liberation from it: the time of history and the kairos in which humans, by this initiative, grasp favorable opportunity and choose their own freedom in the moment. Just as the full, discontinuous, finite and complete time of pleasure must be set against the empty, continuous and infinite time of vulgar historicism, so the chronological time of pseudo-history must be opposed by the kairological time of authentic history. . . . But a revolution from which there springs not a new chronology, but a qualitative alteration of time (a kairology), would have the weightiest consequences and would alone be immune to absorption into the reflux of restoration. [IH 105]*

This passage is the most succinct and the fullest statement of purpose in Agamben’s thinking of time. One recognizes in it the Benjaminian project of conceiving a revolutionary model of time adequate to Marx’s revolutionary model of history—the combating of an idea of “empty, homogenous time,” as Benjamin calls it, in the name of

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15. And in doing so we can understand the dual aptness of Daniel Heller-Roazen’s remark near the outset of his introduction to this volume that “a single matter . . . animates the works gathered together here” [P 1]. It also demonstrates the intelligence of Daniel Heller-Roazen’s reference therein to Agamben’s “most original philosophical project: to conceive of the existence of language as the existence of potentiality” [P 13, Heller-Roazen’s emphasis].

16. It is in light of the above that we can also more fully understand the role Agamben ascribes to philology in his “Project for a Review” from *Infancy and History*. (On this projected review, see also the preface to *The End of the Poem* xi–xiii.) The intelligence and the vigilance of this philological attention is proven in every essay in this collection, and extends into the minutiae of the matter of language. In an essay on terminology and Derrida, Agamben remarks that “even a simple punctuation mark can acquire a terminological character” and proves it in his essay on Deleuze, where the colon and the ellipses are submitted to a brilliant and original examination that discloses Deleuze’s deepest intuition of immanence [P 208].

a “messianic” time that Benjamin felt Marx had “secularized” in his idea of a classless society and which Benjamin calls *Jetzt-Zeit*, Now-Time.<sup>17</sup> Agamben’s continuation of this project, involving the discovery of the seeds of this conception in the works of the Gnostics, in the Paulinian “time of the now,” in the Stoics, and in the experience of pleasure, is the most important and penetrating continuation of this effort to conceive such a model. In examining the meaning of Agamben’s *potentiality* as it pertains to temporality, the first potentiality we must note, then, is that which is contained in every instant of human time, the radical potentiality inscribed in every instant, in a present which always harbors the possibility of being the “straight gate” through which the radically new comes.

And yet, in Benjamin’s work, this experience of Now-Time implies another moment—that of the “tiger-leap into the past [*Tigersprung in Vergangene*]” [GS 1.701]. Which is to say that this unleashing of the hidden explosiveness of the human instant requires a new understanding of the potential of the past. What is the nature of this ferocious seizing of the energies of the past to which Agamben seems to apply the description “the return of the new”? But first, as a means toward understanding the paradoxical formula “the return of the new,” let us look at its formulaic cousin, “the return of the same.”

## 2.2

Just as Spinoza’s idea of a circle is not round, Nietzsche’s idea of the *eternal recurrence of the same* is neither eternal nor identical. Though it is indeed recurrent, not only in the variety of forms it appears in within Nietzsche’s books and notebooks but also in the equally diverse forms it takes on in Nietzsche’s interpreters, it is something less than a unified doctrine. But let us cite a single, relatively definitive version. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, the animals saying the latter’s doctrine (but saying it right—unlike the dwarf one encounters elsewhere in that work) say, “I come again, with this sun, with this earth, with this eagle, with this serpent—not to a new life or a better life or a similar life: I come back eternally to this same, selfsame life, in what is greatest as in what is smallest, to teach again the eternal recurrence of the same” [221]. The principle, like that of the Benjaminian order of the profane (which, as Jacob Taubes has noted, is a transformation of Nietzsche’s idea), is one of *absolute transience*. And yet at the same time it is transience retained, frozen, given eternal durability in the form of a circle. What has come and what is will not come again as anything other than what it was and is—which is *nearly* tantamount to saying that it will *not* come again (the operative vision in Benjamin’s *order of the profane*). It will come again not transcended, purified, or spiritualized; no sea-changes, nothing rich or strange will it suffer. It will come back again as it was and is: inflexible, and perfectly nondynamic.

It is for this reason that commentators with as diverse interpretations of the doctrine as Benjamin and Heidegger have seen or sensed something *mechanical* behind Nietzsche’s idea of eternal recurrence. It is this lack of dynamism, or this dynamism

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17. “Empty, homogenous time” is a formula that Benjamin employs in a number of places in his “Theses on the Philosophy of History” and the notes leading up to them—as at GS 1.702. In a draft for these same theses, Benjamin writes: “Marx hat in der Vorstellung der klassenlosen Gesellschaft die Vorstellung der messianischen Zeit säkularisiert [In his representation of the classless society, Marx secularized the representation of messianic time]” [GS 1.1231]. In the chapter entitled “Klēsis and Class” of Agamben’s *Il tempo che resta: Un commento alla Lettera ai Romani*, Agamben notes the pertinence of this last remark in relation to the Paulinian heritage expressed through the term klēsis.

present only in the form of creativity-evacuated mechanical repetition, which leads Benjamin to oppose his thought to it. Benjamin's interpretation is fragmentary and comes down to us in the form of aphoristic remarks in "Zentralpark" and in the *Konvolut* of the *Passagen-Werk* dedicated to "boredom" and "eternal recurrence" (*Konvolut D*, "Die Langeweile, Ewige Wiederkehr"). Most famously, Benjamin raises a question here of precedence, noting, as will Agamben after him, that Louis-Auguste Blanqui, the nineteenth-century French revolutionary and autodidact, formulates a thought which in its essential outline anticipates Nietzsche's doctrine by ten years. After noting this, Benjamin also notes his finding that "the belief in progress, in an endless perfectibility—an endless moral task—and the representation [*Vorstellung*] of eternal recurrence are complementary" [GS 5.178; Fragment D 10a 5]. More broadly, Benjamin finds that Nietzsche's teaching is complicit with imperialism [GS 5.175; Fragment D 9, 5] and that, consequently, eternal recurrence opposes the concept of messianic time, of *Jetzt-Zeit* or Now-Time, as explosive, nonhomogenous, ripe, full, bursting time, with a time of evacuated "progress."<sup>18</sup>

Perhaps even more so than Benjamin, Agamben is sensitive to the multivalence of Nietzsche's doctrine, as his varying interpretations of it reflect. In a first treatment of the idea, in the essay "The Eternal Return and the Paradox of Passion," we read that "the idea of eternal return, is primarily an idea of the like [Agamben had been exploring and explicating the etymology of *Gleich* in Nietzsche's phrase "ewige Wiederkehr des Gleichen"], something in the order of a total image, or to use Benjamin's words, a dialectical image" ["ER" 10]. Eternal recurrence is thus liberated here (as in Deleuze's interpretation of eternal recurrence) from its very sameness (in favor of a "likeness") and, what is more, is likened, in something of a conceptual encomium, to Benjamin's dialectical image. Elsewhere in Agamben's work, however, one finds both silent and vocal departures from this view of Nietzsche's "heaviest" doctrine. Such a silent departure is found in *Infancy and History*, where one finds Nietzsche's eternal recurrence absent from the list of thoughts exploring radically now-centered, "*cairotic*" conceptions of temporality which might constitute a "critique of the instant and the continuum." And such a vocal departure is found in an essay from this volume entitled "Bartleby, or On Contingency," where eternal recurrence plays a crucial, if negative, role in Agamben's discussion of potentiality, contingency, and what he calls "decreation."

While in "The Eternal Return and the Paradox of Passion," Agamben will refer to Nietzsche's doctrine as "this paradox of passion, this giving of self to self . . . which marks the dawning of all consciousness and all subjectivity" ["ER" 16], such a view is replaced in the later essay by a devastating aridity. In this later version, Agamben distinguishes two ways of turning potentiality toward the past: "Potentiality can be turned back toward the past in two ways. The first one Nietzsche assigns to the eternal return" [P 267]. Referring himself to Nietzsche's own description of the genesis of the doctrine of eternal recurrence through the painful experience of the individual confronted with the fact that "the will cannot will backward" (which Nietzsche calls "the will's loneliest melancholy"), Agamben focuses upon the violence done to the *possible* in that doctrine. Summing up the doctrine and offering his diagnosis of it, Agamben states that, "solely

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18. One should note, as well, the ambiguity contained herein as Benjamin is also sensitive to that in Nietzsche's eternal recurrence which constitutes a critique of progress (that is, of the idea of an essential goal in history)—cf. fragments D 8, 1 and D 8, 5 [GS 5.173]. One might note that Heidegger's interpretation of eternal recurrence is quite close to Benjamin's own conception of Now-Time. In *Nietzsche*, Heidegger states that what is thought in Nietzsche's concept of eternal recurrence is "Ewigkeit nicht als ein stehengebleibendes Jetzt, sondern als das in sich selbst zurückschlagende Jetzt [eternity not as an unmoving 'now,' but as a 'now' thrown back upon itself]" [Gesamtausgabe 6.1.17].

concerned with repressing the spirit of revenge, Nietzsche completely forgets the laments of what was not or could have been otherwise” [P 267]. Whereas in the earlier essay Agamben states that “what Nietzsche tried to do in the concept of eternal return is precisely to conceive the final identity of the two *potentiae* [*potentia activa* and *potentia passiva*], the will to power as a pure passion affecting itself” [“ER” 17], in the later essay Nietzsche’s eternal recurrence is branded as having taken, in the interest of suppressing “the spirit of revenge,” the extreme measure of evacuating the past of its potentiality to have been otherwise—and thus of having been deaf to the “laments” of those possibles.<sup>19</sup> Rather than the point at which two potentialities come together, the shimmering point of identity between two forms of potentiality, eternal recurrence is here, in Agamben’s revised view, that which evacuates the past of its potential.<sup>20</sup>

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19. Agamben’s essay “Kommerell, or On Gesture” [P, chap. 5] from 1991, retains this earlier view of eternal recurrence as representing the point of indistinction between potentiality and actuality. Here we read that “the eternal return is intelligible only as a gesture . . . in which potentiality and actuality, authenticity and mannerism, contingency and necessity have become indistinguishable” [P 83]. Agamben’s *Homo Sacer*, from 1995 and thus dating from after “Bartleby, or on Contingency,” from which the above remarks as to forgetting the laments of the possible come and which dates from 1993, returns to this earlier view, or at least offers a more multivalent view of the doctrine than the *Bartleby* essay. Here one reads, “in the late Nietzsche, the eternal return of the same gives form to the impossibility of distinguishing between potentiality and actuality, even as the *Amor fati* gives shape to the impossibility of distinguishing between contingency and necessity” [HS 48]. In the continuation of this work, *Quel che resta di Auschwitz*. L’archivio e il testimone (*Homo Sacer* III), Agamben opposes himself to Nietzsche’s idea of eternal recurrence on other grounds—and somewhat less stable ones. In this work he employs Auschwitz to refute and reject Nietzsche’s thought-experiment as it is expressed in the form of the speech of a tempter in *The Gay Science* visiting one in one’s “loneliest loneliness” and asking whether one is able to endure the idea that things will recur infinitely. “It suffices to reformulate the experiment [eternal recurrence as it is first expressed in *The Gay Science*] to categorically refute it, to forever render it impracticable” [92]. This “reformulation” is the integration of Auschwitz into the series of things (history) to be willed an infinity of times. Agamben states that no one who had lived through something as horrible as Auschwitz could possibly will its return and claims thus to categorically refute the validity of Nietzsche’s thought-experiment. This, however, is perhaps to banalize the experience Nietzsche formulates, as it implies that either eternal recurrence, as a challenge, as a correlate of an effort to overcome nihilism, was something essentially to be accepted only in light of the acceptable, rather than an effort to assume an integrally profane world without succumbing to resentment, or, alternately, that Nietzsche’s thought-experiment is secretly based on a sort of *felix culpa* logic such that one could will the eternal recurrence of even the most horrible things if such horrible things served a higher purpose—and that the pure horror of Auschwitz invalidates any end employing such means. The doctrine is also treated in the short essay dedicated to Italo Calvino, “On Heaviness,” in terms of the effort to convert the heaviest of things, eternal recurrence, into the lightest, eternal transience. In the chapter entitled “Recapitulation,” of Agamben’s *Il tempo che resta*, Agamben connects Nietzsche’s doctrine to the Paulinian heritage contained in *Ephesians* 1.10.

20. While Agamben’s reading of eternal recurrence is in every sense a pertinent one, one should note that among the great exegetes of the doctrine, one finds a diametrically opposed interpretation of the role of the possible. In *Nietzsche et le cercle vicieux*, Pierre Klossowski notes: “Le remède de Zarathoustra: re-vouloir le non-voulu en tant qu’il desire assumer le fait accompli—donc le rendre inaccompli, en le revoulant d’innombrables fois. Ruse qui soustrait à l’événement son caractère ‘une fois pour toutes’: telle est l’échappatoire que l’expérience (inintelligible en soi) de Sils-Maria offre d’abord à la réflexion [Zarathoustra’s remedy: to will again the un-willed so as to give the un-willed the form of a fait accompli—and in so doing, in willing again innumerable times the fait accompli, render the accompli inaccompli. This ruse divests the event of its immutable character. This is the escape route that the (in itself, unintelligible) experience of Sils-Maria first offers to reflection]” [105]. Such a thinking stretches the will along a line which in becoming a circle voids its volitional content and in some sense then opens

It is clear, then, that awakening the potentiality of the past involves not simply an act of will which consolidates and appropriates the past's contingency as the will's ordaining: it is clear that Nietzsche's eternal recurrence can correspond in no simple way to such a returning of potentiality to the past. Now that we have investigated "*the return of the same*," let us turn to the "second way," according to Agamben, that potentiality can be turned back toward the past, to "*the return of the new*."

### 2.3

*Anyone can create the future, but only a wise man can create the past.*  
—Vladimir Nabokov, Bend Sinister

Agamben's change of position as to the status of what he calls *potentiality* in Nietzsche's idea of eternal recurrence of the same stems from the extreme difficulty of what is at issue there—conceiving potentiality turned back toward the past, toward history. The bottom line in Nietzsche's doctrine of eternal recurrence, as we saw above, is that this teeth-gnashing will cannot change the past and must learn to "will backwards" within the limits of the etched and immovable past (independently of how the concepts of will and potentiality might be altered as a result of the experience). If "the return of the same" does not correspond to the experience which is at issue in Agamben's potentiality, if it is not simply a confrontation with, and appropriation of, contingency, what is it? How might we describe it?

In "The Messiah and the Sovereign: The Problem of Law in Walter Benjamin," Agamben refers to the phrase "the Law will return to its new form," from the talmudic treatise *Pesiqta Rabbati*, as a "return of the new," an "experience . . . perfectly familiar to adepts of Benjaminian gnosis" [P 167]. What is this "return of the new" which is familiar to such adepts and how might we relate this form of "Benjaminian gnosis" to what is at issue in Agamben's doctrine of potentiality?

In "Bartleby, or On Contingency," Agamben cites Benjamin's remark that "remembrance can make the incomplete (happiness) complete, and the complete (pain) incomplete" [P 267]. Agamben does not indicate the origin of the remark, but it is from fragment N 8, 1 of the *Passagen-Werk* [GS 5.589], the section of Benjamin's final, unfinished work that endeavors to evolve a theory of knowledge, and thus lies at the heart of "Benjaminian gnosis." It is in the light of this enigmatic axiom of potentiality that one can begin to understand what is truly at issue not only in Benjamin's "experiment in the technique of awakening," which is "an attempt to become aware of the dialectical, the Copernican revolution of remembrance" [GS 5.490], and his idea that "history is not

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*itself up for the kind of potentiality that Agamben is interested in pursuing. It voids, in the viciousness of its circularity, any room for a willing at all. Klossowski will go even further and note that "la pensée de l'Eternel Retour dans ses prolongements abolit avec l'identité du moi le concept traditionnel du vouloir. . . . De la sorte, la fatalité se fondrait avec la force impulsionnelle qui, précisément, excède le 'vouloir' du suppôt et déjà le modifie, donc menace son identité stable [in its prolongations, the thought of eternal recurrence abolishes the principle of stable identity along with the traditional conception of willing. . . . For this reason, fate is rendered indistinguishable from the impulsive force that itself goes beyond the basis of the will, modifies it, and thus threatens its stable self-identity]" [112]. Klossowski also notes, "si toutes choses reviennent selon la loi du Cercle vicieux, tout agir volontaire équivaut à un non-agir réel, ou tout non-agir conscient à un agir illusoire [if all things return following the law of the vicious circle, every willed act corresponds to a real non-act, or every conscious non-act to an illusory act]" [105]. In this, eternal recurrence would be returning every act, every gesture, to its potentiality, accompanying each gesture by the shadow of a gesture of another sort.*



only a science, it is no less a form of remembrance. Remembrance can modify what science has ‘established’” [GS 5.589], but also in Agamben’s doctrine of potentiality. We must first ask, however, what would a change in the concept of remembrance be which one might call “Copernican” and which could “modify” what the scientific study of the past has “established”? More succinctly, how might remembrance modify the past? By falsifying it? Surely not. By willing the contingency of the past as the heroic necessity of the will, as in Nietzsche’s eternal recurrence? Again, surely not. Is what is at issue, then, the creation of past events, the somehow *adding* of events to the past? Once again, surely not. What, then, is being envisioned in such a thought? What possibilities remain? Are we confronted here with a “return of the new” incomprehensible within any of the traditional frameworks through which history has become accustomed to view the past?

Let us return to this essay, in which Agamben describes the experience in which the incomplete is made complete, and the complete incomplete. Here we find ourselves confronted with an experience we might call *remembering that which never happened*. Therein Agamben examines those philosophical arguments which have been used to neutralize the power of the possible, one of the most powerful and effective of which he cites as “the retroactive unrealizability of potentiality,” and which he describes Melville’s *Bartleby* as so radically contesting [P 266]. We can see there that “the return of the new,” like Benjamin’s remembering that which has never happened (as it happened), are formulae conceived to contest such a principle of “the retroactive unrealizability of potentiality.” Glossing this passage from N 8, 1 of the *Passagen-Werk* which we quoted above, Agamben states that, “remembrance restores possibility to the past, making what happened incomplete and completing what never was. Remembrance is neither what happened nor what did not happen but, rather, their potentialization, their becoming possible once again. It is in this sense that *Bartleby* calls the past into question . . .” [P 267]. It is clear, then, that the element of “Benjaminian gnosis” embodied in the formula “the return of the new” and lying at the heart of Benjamin’s doctrine of remembrance concerns just such a calling into question of the past. But might we not achieve some greater precision as to the nature of this questioning of the past, as to the modalities of *remembering that which never happened*?

Daniel Heller-Roazen’s excellent introduction to this volume, “To Read What Was Never Written,” refers itself to a formula (which Benjamin borrowed from Hofmannsthal) that at once represents a “return of the new” familiar to adepts of Benjaminian gnosis, and mirrors such an experience of remembering that which never happened reflected in the remark from N 8, 1. The “true historian,” in Benjamin’s note from which Heller-Roazen takes his title, is he who reads “what has never been written” in “the book of life” [GS 1.1238; cited by Heller-Roazen at P 1]. We are here confronted with a formula that Heller-Roazen associates with Agamben’s innermost intention in these essays and that, like “the return of the new” and “remembering that which never happened,” begins to suggest the nature of the experience at issue in Agamben’s doctrine of potentiality. Yet how might we understand it?

If Benjamin’s theory of *remembrance* is intimately tied to his conception of *redemption*, might we not understand the formulae “the return of the new,” “to remember what has never happened,” and “to read what was never written” after the fashion of the “citation” that Benjamin claims a redeemed humanity would be capable of in the third of his “Theses on the Philosophy of History”? Benjamin states there that “only for a redeemed mankind has its past become citable in all its moments. Each moment it has lived becomes a *citation à l’ordre du jour*—and that day is Judgment Day” (“erst der erlösten Menschheit ist ihre Vergangenheit in jedem ihrer Momente zitierbar geworden. Jeder ihrer gelebten Augenblicke wird zu einer citation à l’ordre du jour—welcher Tag

eben der jüngste ist”) [*Illuminations* 254; *GS* 1.695]. Is this generalized citability the return of the new, the citing of that which never happened? It seems not. Like eternal recurrence, such a redeemed citability seems to concern the status of past events, but not their *actuality*. Indeed, the citation of the past of a redeemed humanity for whom history and tradition would no longer be a burden which it was obliged to carry forward into its future without ever being able to lay hands upon and use, would be a freedom to cite any moment, even the cruelest and quietest, and in some sense thus redeem the history of the oppressed. But it seems that what Agamben sees in Benjamin’s formulae is a different history—one that seeks to reach back not only to that which *occurred* in human history, but also to that which might have, *and did not*.

It is here that we might turn back to the first part of this review and recall the degree to which, for Agamben, the question of potentiality is related to the question of language, the degree to which potentiality can only be conceived in all its potential to not be through language. With this in mind, let us return to the Benjaminian gnosis of which we have been speaking and look at another place in Benjamin’s work where he cites this same phrase from Hofmannsthal’s 1893 play *Der Tor un der Tod*.<sup>21</sup> In “On the Mimetic Capacity,” Benjamin speaks of the translation of the mimetic capacity from the sensible realm of dance, astrology, and the examination of the entrails of sacrificial animals to the *insensible* realm of writing—which then comes to constitute “the fullest archive of non-sensuous resemblance [*das vollkommenste Archiv der unsinnlichen Ähnlichkeit*]” [*GS* 2.213]. Benjamin then says of this “reading of what was never written” that “this reading is the oldest: the reading before all languages [*dies Lesen ist das älteste: das Lesen vor aller Sprache*]” [*GS* 2.213]. This oldest reading is, then, not a reading of a content communicated in language, but the communicativity of language itself, that matter of language which we looked at in the first part of this review. The “reading before all language” is, then, “the reading of that which was never written” in that that which has never been written and which is read is precisely that which cannot be said in language—language’s true mode of being as potentiality. We therefore can only truly understand this potentiality as of the order of the potentiality lodged deep within human language. And yet this only returns us to where we were before and leaves in all its difficulty the question as to how we are to conceive *the potentiality of the past*. Might there not be some means of more closely approaching what is thought in Benjamin’s formulae and Agamben’s related concept of potentiality?

In these preceding attempts at glossing what is at issue in such a thinking, we have focused on the first half of Benjamin’s remark (“remembrance can make the incomplete (happiness) complete”): how *creation* might be conceived within the past. It is, however, the second half of the statement (“... and the complete (pain) incomplete”), whose concern is truly “*decreation*” and whose project is *redemption*, that can lead us closest to what Agamben is invoking in his doctrine of *potentiality*.

## 2.4

In his lecture course on Nietzsche, Heidegger states that

*to think through a possibility truly—that is to say, with all its consequences—means to decide something for ourselves, even if the decision calls for nothing more than a retreat from and exclusion of the possibility.*

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21. Heller-Roazen notes this recurrence at P 275n1. There is in fact one other occurrence of this phrase in Benjamin’s work: an epigraph to Konvolut M [*Der Flaneur of the Passagen-Werk*, *GS* 5.524].

*In accord with the entire history of Western humanity hitherto, and in accord with the interpretation of beings that sustains that history, we are all too accustomed to thinking purely and simply in terms of actualities, to interpreting in terms of the actual (as presence, ousia). For this reason we are still unprepared, we feel awkward and inadequate, when it comes to thinking possibility, a kind of thinking that is always creative. [Nietzsche 2.130]<sup>22</sup>*

As Heidegger says here, “thinking possibility” is indeed “a kind of thinking that is always creative”—and Agamben’s thinking of possibility, or potentiality, is a proof of this. But, on a more original level, “thinking possibility” for Agamben is more concerned with what Agamben calls, in his essay on Bartleby, “decreation”—with rendering, to return to Benjamin’s formula, “the complete (pain) incomplete.”

In a chapter entitled “The Idea of Infancy” from *The Idea of Prose*, Agamben discusses the relation of the genetic code to human law and tradition. There he enjoins his reader:

*Let us try to imagine an infant that . . . does not merely keep to its larval environment and retain its immature form [like the axototl Agamben had been speaking of in the first part of that chapter], but is, as it were, so completely abandoned to its own state of infancy, and so little specialized and totipotent that it rejects any specific destiny and any determined environment in order to hold onto its immaturity and helplessness. . . . The neotenic infant [the imagined infant referred to here] . . . would find himself in the condition of being able to pay attention precisely to what has not been written, to somatic possibilities that are arbitrary and uncodified; in his infantile totipotency, he would be ecstatically overwhelmed, cast out of himself, not like other living beings into a specific adventure or environment, but for the first time into a world. He would truly be listening to being. His voice still free from any genetic prescription, and having absolutely nothing to say or express, sole animal of his kind, he could, like Adam, name things in his language. In naming, man is tied to infancy, he is forever linked to an openness that transcends every specific destiny and every genetic calling. [IP 96–97; first emphasis mine, the others Agamben’s].<sup>23</sup>*

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22. See also, in the epilogue to Heidegger’s essay “The Thing” entitled “A Letter to a Young Student,” Heidegger’s stressing of the need for the thinking of such a mode of being (potentiality):

Thinking, such as lies at the basis of the lecture (“The Thing”), is no mere representing of some existent. “Being” is in no way identical with reality or with precisely determined actuality. Nor is Being in any way opposed to being-no-longer and being-not-yet; these two belong themselves to the essential nature of Being. Even metaphysics already had, to a certain extent, an intimation of this fact in its doctrine of the modalities—which, to be sure, has hardly been understood—according to which possibility belongs to Being just as much as do actuality and necessity. [183]

One should also keep in mind Heidegger’s formula found throughout *Being and Time* (and which Agamben cites in P 193): “Dasein is each time its own possibility.”

23. In Agamben’s remark here that the neotenic infant, in retaining its potentiality to be and do otherwise than the suddenly outdated law of its genetic code dictates—and thus effecting, on the genetic level, the refusal of vocation (like Agamben’s Bartleby) as the only true vocation (and which Agamben describes in the interview cited below as the vocation of philosophy)—allows us to begin to understand the extent to which vocation, in Agamben’s philosophy, functions as a

In this curious and brilliant passage we find ourselves confronted, in a fantastical abbreviation, with the heart of Agamben's thought.<sup>24</sup> Continuing this line of thought in *Potentialities*, Agamben says of those "experiments without truth" of which Bartleby's is one that "whoever submits himself to these experiments jeopardizes not so much the truth of his own statements as the very mode of his existence; he undergoes an anthropological change that is just as decisive in the context of the individual's natural history as the liberation of the hand by the erect position was for the primate or as was, for the reptile, the transformation of limbs that changed it into a bird" [P 260]. We will have recognized the formula that Agamben ascribes to the neotenic infant's potential for experience granted by its radical *infancy* (*to be in the condition of being able to pay attention precisely to what has not been written*) as that which Benjamin uses to describe the activity of the "true historian" in the fragment we looked at earlier. But how precisely might we understand this curious paying attention to the genetically unwritten? Let us begin with what is written: the genetic code, the genetic tradition which is law. Paying attention to what has not been written (in one's genetic code) would be then the listening to that which is not already inscribed in what Benjamin called "the book of life" (which is also what we might call the genetic code), paying attention to a potentiality not always already seen under the sign of actuality, *but in its own right*. It is here that we approach the heart of Agamben's theory of potentiality as a true doctrine of creation, one that does not simply view Being under one of its signs (in *Homo Sacer* Agamben states that "if it is never clear, to a reader freed from the prejudices of tradition, whether Book Theta of the *Metaphysics* [of Aristotle] in fact gives primacy to actuality or potentiality, this is not because of a certain indecisiveness or, worse, contradiction in the philosopher's thought but because potentiality and actuality are simply the two faces of the sovereign self-grounding of Being" [HS 47]), but integrally as the unity of possibility and actuality, and that thus holds that every creation involves *decreation*, the renouncing of pure potentialities. The final and fullest gloss that Agamben gives of what is meant by remembering that which never happened is his reference, in this same essay we've been looking at, to a "second creation" which he calls "*decreation*." Of the philosophical constellation in which Bartleby's experiment in preferring not to lies, he says,

*the interruption of writing marks the passage to the second creation, in which God summons all his potential not to be, creating on the basis of a point of*

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*technical term. One need only think of the fragment from The Idea of Prose entitled "The Idea of Vocation," or of Agamben's more recent analyses of the idea of vocation in Saint Paul. As to the idea of the vocation of philosophy being constituted as a revocation of an earlier vocation, and a giving way to "an urgency which works from within every vocation," see also Agamben's remarks in the Libération interview cited earlier: "c'est que la vocation philosophique n'est que la révocation d'une vocation précédente. Mais, par cela même elle nous donne la paradigme de toute vocation véritable. Car il ne s'agit pas de substituer une vocation, censée être plus vraie, à une autre moins authentique, il s'agit plutôt d'une urgence qui travaille de l'intérieur toute vocation, qui adhère à elle et, au même moment, la creuse et l'ouvre. Cette urgence, cette ligne de fuite intime à toute vocation, c'est cela la philosophie [the philosophical vocation is nothing other than the revocation of an earlier vocation. As such, it is the paradigm of all true vocations. What is at issue is not the replacement of a truer or more authentic vocation for one that is less so, but rather an urgency at work within every vocation that adheres to it and at the same time explores and opens it. This urgency, this line of flight within every vocation, is, itself, philosophy]" [2].*

24. In *The Coming Community*, Agamben notes that "authentic" experience is constituted as that which can and does appropriate its inauthenticity, experience that endeavors to expose "in every form one's own amorphousness and in every act one's own inactuality" [CC 44]. Agamben explores this idea in the work of Heidegger in "The Passion of Facticity," found in the volume reviewed here.

*indifference between potentiality and impotentiality. The creation that is now fulfilled is neither a re-creation nor an eternal repetition; it is, rather, a decreation in which what happened and what did not happen are returned to their originary unity in the mind of God, while what could have not been but was becomes indistinguishable from what could have been but was not. [P 270]*

It is here, then, that “eternal repetition” (as in Nietzsche) and “re-creation” (simple evocation or reproduction of the past) are pushed to the side, and we have at last reached “*the return of the new*” familiar to adepts of Benjaminian gnosis as what is returned to is truly the *new-as-such*, the production, the creation, of the *new itself*, the creation of creation from the indistinction of actuality and possibility. It is here, then, in light of Agamben’s *axototl* and the neotenic infant in “The Idea of Infancy,” and his reference to the mutation of the primate into the human and the reptile into the bird in this volume, that we can at last see the degree to which what is at issue in Agamben’s thinking of potentiality is, simply and intensely, creation—creation in its most radical form, a form that, to truly create, must make the complete of the dictated incomplete, must grasp *decreation*. It is in this light that we can begin to understand Agamben’s reference, in the last lines of the last essay in this collection, that what is being thought in potentiality is truly “the new creature” [P 271].<sup>25</sup>

#### *Postscript: A Note on the Prehistory of Potentiality*

In his *Language and Death*, Agamben speaks of an idea of what he calls the “*never-having-been*.” In the final section of that work (whose links to the essay “\*Se: Hegel’s Absolute and Heidegger’s *Ereignis*” [chap. 8 in *Potentialities*] are important), Agamben says: “So if we wished to characterize the perspective of the seminar with respect to the having-been in Hegel and in Heidegger, we could say that thought is oriented here [in the thought Agamben announces and which the seminar explored] in the direction of a *never-having-been*” [LD 104]. The seminar’s innermost trajectory is thus singled out as being oriented toward *the memory of that which never was*—whose name, we’ve learned in the preceding pages, is *potentiality*.

But there is another conception in Agamben’s work which is even more closely related to *potentiality* than this *never-having-been*.

The most significant mutation or evolution in Agamben’s terminology over the twenty years covered by this volume is that which takes place around the term *infancy*. This term and central concept, which lends itself to the title of one of Agamben’s most important books, *Infancy and History*, and to which a chapter is dedicated in *The Idea of Prose* (as well as numerous references in other essays contemporaneous with those works), disappears from the pages of this volume, and from Agamben’s later work generally, where it is replaced by the titular term of this collection: *potentiality*. The genealogy of this transformation (a genealogy not without parallels to that which Agamben traces in the evolution of Heidegger’s terminology in “The Passion of Facticity”) cannot be undertaken here. But we might note that *infancy* as Agamben conceives it in his earlier work (where it is considered in relation to, as the title of one of Agamben’s works indicates, the leap into history) corresponds to a type of potentiality that Agamben evokes in a number of places and that he distinguishes sharply from the

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25. This formulation, “the new creature,” might also be seen, as the chapter entitled “*Chrēsis*” of Agamben’s *Il tempo che resta* indicates, as a reference to 2 Corinthians 5.17.

type of potentiality that most interests him in the essays gathered together here. In “Bartleby, or On Contingency” (as well as elsewhere in his writings, for example, in the chapter “Potentiality and Law” from *Homo Sacer*, and in *The Coming Community*), wherein one finds “material” potential intellect—“that resembles the condition of a child who may certainly one day learn to write but does not yet know anything about writing” (which corresponds in at least one essential respect to Agamben’s *infancy*)—distinguished from “possible” potential intellect wherein the child has begun to write but has not yet mastered writing, as well as, “a complete or perfect potentiality that belongs to the scribe who is in full possession of the art of writing in the moment in which he does not write,” which, the case of Bartleby, is above all explored in the essays in this volume [P 246–47].

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