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## The Sweet Allure of Theory

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*Profanations* by Giorgio Agamben, trans. Jeff Fort. New York: Zone Books, 2007. Pp. 100. \$25.95 cloth.

Giorgio Agamben's recent book, *Profanations*, unites seemingly disparate essays. However, even without being a student of his work, one may single out a certain key theme that runs across different disciplinary domains, including philosophy, literature (and literary criticism), and studies of the visual. I would define this theme as the *composition of the subject*. Indeed, the very first essay in Agamben's new book introduces readers to this problematic by describing the tense and even dramatic relationship between a person's Ego and his Genius, the symbolic bearer and representation of his fate. This is a field of forces shaping each and every individual when the personal is simultaneously maintained and challenged by the secret strength of the impersonal. Such is physiological life, which, despite its striking closeness, remains distant, nonconscious, and, for that reason, out of control. Such are the workings of emotion, which, according to the theorist Gilbert Simondon, is precisely a way of relating to what remains of the pre-individual within us. Agamben clearly formulates the paradox: "*Genius* is our life insofar as it does not belong to us" (13)—in other words, insofar as it does not come into our possession.

However, this other life is not a matter of the individual alone. In the essay titled "Special Being" the author seems to extend his own initial definition. "Special," a word

deriving from the Latin *species* (“appearance,” “aspect,” “vision”), stands for a quality being displayed; it is a mode of being that essentially calls for sharing (or, in Agamben’s terminology, offers itself “to common use” [59]). Since such being, also defined as “whatever being” (58), adheres to each of its qualities but is not identified by them, it remains insubstantial. That is, it is not a substance, but a desire for the *species* of another, for its “habits” or “ways” that reveal its perseverance in its being—such is the clue to the understanding of a being that, to recall Jean-Luc Nancy, is a priori “in common.” Although culture incessantly reduces the special to the personal and thus invests it with identity, special being cannot be an object of personal property. Identity is itself a powerful cultural apparatus. (Agamben here uses the Italian word *dispositivo*, which brings to mind Michel Foucault and his concept of biopower.)

Therefore, the subject as it is defined and formed by impersonal forces shares this composition with others. Although Agamben does not further dwell on his version of “being in common,” he goes on to elaborate the specific relationship between the personal and the impersonal by addressing the very nature of the boundary that separates the sacred from the profane. At this point the relationship in question, full of ambiguity, becomes truly dynamic. It is epitomized in the figure of

*homo sacer*, a “sacred man,” who has survived the very rite of separation: belonging to the gods, he continues to lead an obviously profane existence among his fellow men. However, his communication with other men is fatally damaged. His position is such that they may violently kill him (restoring him, thus, to the realm of the gods), and yet he cannot be sacrificed, because he is no longer part of the community. In sum, “in the machine of sacrifice, sacred and profane represent the two poles of a system in which a floating signifier travels from one domain to the other without ceasing to refer to the same object” (78). For Agamben, this is a question of use. Indeed, religion in general is about separating things, places, humans, or animals from their habitual functions and of putting them to a use that is consecrated and, as such, uncommon.

Let us linger here for a moment, especially since this thread of analysis results in Agamben’s formulating an open political task. In the essay “In Praise of Profanation,” which actually lends its name to the book, profanation is seen as a way of not only neutralizing the sacred (the best example is provided by play) but also of deactivating those apparatuses of power that, as I would put it, capitalize on the separation installed and maintained by religion. Again, and even more clearly, it is a question of use. Profanation seeks to reestablish a “common use” (77) of previously excluded spaces and

objects. Such use has nothing to do with consumption. On the contrary, it indicates a relationship with something one can never actually "have" or "possess": things freed from their very functionality. Concerning behavior, the new use would mean extracting it "from its genetic inscription within a given sphere" (85; the cat playing with a ball of yarn, for example); in other words, it would amount to transforming activity into "a pure means" (86). The old use, utilitarian and/or genetically preinscribed, therefore becomes "inoperative." Hence the political task of profaning the unprofanable, which is marked by its absolute separation in the form of consumption or "spectacular exhibition" (82), the twin aspects of the capitalist religion ubiquitously reigning in our time.

The concept developed in this essay is heavily influenced by Jean-Luc Nancy and his notion of "inoperative community." "Inoperative" is the English word for *désœuvré*, which literally means "out of work." Nancy adopts the term from Maurice Blanchot and highlights precisely the overtones of idleness that it carries; in his philosophical reflection, a "nonworking" community is that which has neither identity nor substance, and does not "betray" itself in institutional forms. The political stakes for addressing the issue are high. How is it still possible to speak (or think) of the revolution and communism at a moment when

both seem to have been completely discredited? Yet there is something about human existence that these phenomena tend to display: an initial connectedness, a being that is by definition shared with the others. Thus communism will always be a manifestation of some basic truth concerning ontological togetherness. The examples that Giorgio Agamben gives (more than twenty years after Nancy's initial publication of *La communauté désœuvrée*) within a slightly modified theoretical framework are somewhat disconcerting. They are the possibility of "profane defecation" and the brazen faces of porn stars regarded as the site for a "new form of erotic communication" (90). (One can hardly imagine the consequences of returning feces, even if only a symbol, to "common use" [87].) What accounts for this apparent lowering of political stakes? Is it simply due to a shift in the theme, or does it not show signs of dominant theory becoming more modest and docile, if not to say opportunistic, these days?

What has been alluded to as the impersonal in the composition of subjectivity is elsewhere rendered as life. This is made clear by Agamben's analysis of Foucault's study of the lives of infamous men. Although the passage is meant to elucidate another concept, that of the death of the author, it deserves independent attention. What is of special interest to Agamben is the point of intersection between actual lives and

the discourse of anonymous scribes whose task it was to register them. This relationship is not one of representation, to be sure. In Foucault's words, the real lives were "played out" (*jouées*) in the few sentences that gave them legal expression.<sup>1</sup> Taking on the ambiguous word "*jouer*," Agamben tries to work out the ways in which life reverberates in discourse. The infamous life that belongs neither to juridical identity nor to the functionaries of power "is never possessed, never represented, never said" (68). Instead, it is that "inexpressive outer edge" (70) that makes expression possible precisely by emptying the core of this expression. This holds true for the author as gesture. And this holds true for the poem insofar as the author and reader put themselves into play in the text and likewise are withdrawn from it. The recurrence to life allows Agamben to sketch out the beginnings of an ethics: the latter is tightly linked to a life form whose ethos coincides with perseverance in its being.

A life, any life, life in general played out—that is, lived at its utmost and for that reason remaining inexpressible—is what makes expression possible. The essay "Parody" can be read as complementary to "The Author as Gesture." Here Agamben explores the potential of parody both as literary genre and what is referred to in terms of a "duplication of being" (49). Parody, etymologically meaning a space

beside or next to the song (reserved for speech or, more broadly, for language), is the only way of approaching a mystery, while the latter is the only possible emblem of life. At least this is what is suggested by the prose of Elsa Morante. Parody is not only a means of reconstructing an unnarratable object such as the innocent life, but is also a form and practice that is essentially liminal: it sustains itself "on the threshold of literature" and is "stubbornly suspended between reality and fiction, between word and thing" (48). As such, it constitutes a split in language, something that points to its outer dimension. Modeled on the ancient definition of parody, this space is called "the being-beside-itself" (49) and has to do with every living being as well as every discourse. To put it differently, parody indicates the limits of language, its inability to reach the thing through the procedure of naming, and yet, one might conclude, there is nothing more real than the thing that calls for expression.

The two other themes that I would single out are *desire* and *messianic time*. Perhaps they end up being one and the same or at least combining into a fairly distinct problematic. This problematic is introduced by means of the figure of the helper, of which literature gives abundant examples. Franz Kafka's compelling "assistants," the famous puppet Pinocchio, helpers of the Messiah in the Arabic tradition, and

Walter Benjamin's hunchback are the favored few of these examples. What is it that unites all of these incongruous beings? First of all, it must be said that they belong to "a complementary world." Access to this world is more than problematic ("they cannot be helped" [30], but, most important, help is not their forte). Second, they perform a revelation. If in the case of *wuzara'* (the plural of *wasir*, the vizier) it is literally about translating the divine language into the language of men, the little hunchback in Benjamin appears as spokesman of the forgotten. What he represents is that "ontological waste" (35) that we carry in ourselves and that fails to surface in memory or consciousness. However, it is by remaining forgotten that the insignificant tissue of our lives may be redeemed. For Benjamin, the Kingdom is already present, albeit in despicable and distorted forms. The helpers, then, are nothing but "our unfulfilled desires" (34), which will shine back on us on Judgment Day.<sup>2</sup>

The other medium that Agamben chooses for his speculations on time is, quite predictably, photography. The essay that explores the theme is characteristically titled "Judgment Day." Although there is no explicit mention of the nature of the photograph, it turns out that it resides in the gesture. The gesture here may be interpreted as the "monogram" of a person, of his or her entire life.<sup>3</sup> A gesture reproduced

in the photo may be mundane and banal; however, because of the intervention of the camera, it assumes an eschatological meaning: what is captured in its historicity and singularity is displayed as if on Judgment Day itself. According to this reading, it would seem that "the angel of photography" (24) unites the two modes of time by way of a rupture. Indeed, the photograph is "the site of a gap . . . between the sensible and the intelligible, between copy and reality, between a memory and a hope" (26). Messianic time thus imprinted in the image corresponds to the exigency emitted by every photograph: it demands that all forgotten lives should be named and remembered.

This temporal sketch inspired by Walter Benjamin is essentially another take on the impersonal, this time from an ethical perspective. We are interpellated by that which we do not possess, which goes beyond the boundaries of time and lived experience. I would call this the exigency of life, and if I am right in my interpretation, I do share the overall message. In fact, one can hardly disagree with the various thoughts and insights collected in *Profanations*, the more so that they are rendered poetically, in a lyrical tone. But a strange shadow hovers over this intimacy. The reader is lulled into a sweet contemplation of varying cultural texts and phenomena. And it seems that theory itself quietly transforms into a bagatelle.

What are the risks involved in the present undertaking? What is the “outer edge” of the sophisticated form it adopts? Is the community whose echo it presumably articulates inclusive or exclusive? The book provides no answers to those questions, even if the problems that it touches on are clearly acute.

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## NOTES

1. See Michel Foucault, “Lives of Infamous Men,” in *Power*, ed. James D. Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: New Press, 2000), 160 (translation emended).
2. For a direct connection between desires and their fulfillment at the end of time, see the short essay “Desiring” in Agamben’s *Profanations*.
3. *Monogram* is a term that comes from Siegfried Kracauer. He juxtaposes the “last image” of a person’s life as memory retains it to the photograph, which represents only a set of scattered fragments related to that human being.