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Paolo Bartoloni

The Threshold and the Topos of the Remnant: Giorgio Agamben

Introduction

Towards the end of *The Coming Community* (1993) [*La comunità che viene*, 1990], Giorgio Agamben writes something that may be interpreted as a paraphrase of Franz Kafka's famous statement that while there is endless hope, this is not for us ["unendlich viel Hoffnung -, nur nicht für uns"]. He writes that "we can have hope only in what is without remedy." (1993: 101)ⁱ

A rather puzzling remark, without doubt. It starts to make sense, however, when it is placed within the context of not only the last section of *The Coming Community*, but also of the books preceding and following it, especially *The Time That Remains* (2005) [*Il tempo che resta*, 2000], and *The Open* (2004) [*L'aperto*, 2002]. More specifically, the meanings and the philosophical project that originate from an apparently paradoxical formula can be understood better if and when Agamben's discussion of hope is reconnected with the messianism of not only Kafka but also, and perhaps more importantly, of Paul.

It is in Paul that one of the most powerful discussions of hope at the end of hope is found. This is triggered by Paul's revolutionary

conceptualisation of Jesus' death and resurrection. If on the one hand Jesus' death meant the annihilation of hope, on the other his resurrection reconstituted the possibility of hope. But, and this is where Paul's innovation rests, the hope that emerges after the resurrection is not the same as the one that preceded it. The former is an invisible hope, which simultaneously makes old hope inoperative and present hope meaningless. The gap that the resurrection opens between the old and the new generates a time in-between – which is also “our” time – a threshold that Agamben describes as the “time that remains”.

Most of Agamben's work may be read as the attempt to interrogate the philosophical and ethical significance of “the remnant”, its meanings and its potentially empowering ontology. Agamben's investigation is not only conducted from a temporal perspective, but also from a political and ethical angle, detailing the complexity of the threshold, but also the novelty that might be discovered through a new analysis of the threshold.

In this article I will follow Agamben as he conceptualises the space of the threshold. The first section will be devoted to investigating Agamben's reading of Paul, with particular attention to hope and love. I will show how Paul's novel understanding of hope leads Agamben to propose an experience of life the productivity of which is not based on the possession and conceptualisation of work as norm. In the second section I will develop my study by relating Agamben's discussion of the threshold and

the remnant with broader Western philosophical and literary concerns, including those marking the work of Bataille, Blanchot, Heidegger and Kojève. Particular attention will be devoted to distinguishing between Bataille's "unemployed negativity" and Blanchot's "neuter", and the possible influence they might have had on Agamben's interrogation of the threshold.

1

The end of hope

The aphoristic sentence "we can have hope only in what is without remedy" ["possiamo avere speranza solo in ciò che è senza rimedio"] is found in the last chapter of *The Coming Community* titled ("The Irreparable" [*L'irreparabile*]). It sounds as an obvious paradox in that, conventionally speaking, hope is predicated on the possibility of changes, adjustments and rectifications, which will bring about a new state, or at least a different state of being and life. It is this very possibility that, in Agamben's statement, appears to be denied. Hope, he claims, can only be possible in the face of the irreparable and, therefore, in the absence of possibility. How can it be?

The similarity between Agamben's remark and Kafka's famous aphorism that while there is endless hope, this hope is not for us is at once direct, especially in consideration of Agamben's own admission in *The*

Time That Remains (56-57), and perplexing. On the face of it, they do not seem to say the same thing at all. If on the one hand Agamben emphasises that “we can have hope” Kafka, on the other, affirms the opposite. While the proximity is determined by the presence of the same grammatical person, “we”/”us”, the difference is characterised by the agency, or lack thereof, of this very person. In other words, for Kafka hope appears to be available, a kind of floating entity waiting to be possessed; hope for Agamben needs to be negotiated. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, while for Agamben hope and life (“our” life) are still connected, this connection is severed in Kafka.

However, this discussion has so far underestimated the centrality and the significance that the “irreparable” plays in Agamben’s thought and philosophical project, and not only in determining Agamben’s unique take on hope, but also in his relation to Kafka’s cosmogony.

The chapter “The Irreparable” in *The Coming Community* carves a space of its own within the context of the book (in the English translation this uniqueness is emphasised by qualifying this section as an “appendix”). The specificity of “The Irreparable”, as Agamben himself explains in a note, is both thematic and stylistic: it deals with discreet sections of Heidegger’s *Being and Time* (section 9) and Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* (proposition 6.44); and it employs a fragmentary discourse. There is no conventional investigation or close reading of Heidegger’s and

Wittgenstein's texts, which are instead deployed by Agamben to embark on an aphoristic reflection on the relation between essence and existence. It is beside the point to discuss here whether Agamben's treatment of *Being and Time* and *Tractatus* is of conceptual value, it is rather more pertinent to tease out the philosophical significance that Agamben appears to attach to the notion of the irreparable. He defines it thus: "The irreparable is that things are just as they are, in this or that mode, consigned without remedy to their way of being." (1993: 89) It is, though, of extreme interest that in order to offer clarifications to his statement, Agamben refers to the experience of revelation: "Revelation does not mean revelation of the sacredness of the world, but only revelation of its irreparably profane character." (Ibid.) With revelation, Agamben explains further, the world has been "consigned to the profane sphere." (Ibid.) It is the irreparable awareness of this condition of profanity that bestows it a purity that differentiates this world from an "impure and provisional" (90) one. The latter, in the words of Agamben, is marked by indeterminacy and transition, in which things might be not what they seem to be. In the irreparable "every legitimate cause of *doubt and hope* has been removed..." (Ibid. My emphasis) Revelation, Agamben argues, has introduced an element of closure dividing two existential spheres, which are, though, two temporalities as well; the world before and after

revelation, the first marked by uncertainty and the second by the purity of the irreparable.

In order to proceed further into Agamben's conceptualisation of the irreparable, and to bring it into fruition with other figures central to the argument of this article, we have to turn now to Agamben's reading of Paul and his investigation of the threshold in *The Time That Remains*.

The remnant

Several references to hope are found in the letters of St Paul. Three in particular, though, seem to catch the interest of Agamben. The first two are from the letter to the Romans. In Chapter 4 verse 18 we read: "Who against hope [*elpis*] believed in hope, that he might become the father of many nations, according to that which was spoken, So shall thy seed be." (1997, *New Testament*: 193) The reference, as we know, is to Abraham as the embodiment of a faith that transcends and subsumes the Law. In Chapter 8, verses 24-25: "For we are saved by hope: but hope that is seen is not hope: for what a man seeth, why doth he yet hope for? But if we hope for that we see not, *then* do we with patience wait for *it*." (1997: 197). The third one is from the first letter to the Corinthians, Chapter 13, verse 13: "And now abideth [*ménei*] faith [*pistís*], hope [*elpís*], love [*agape*], these three; but the greatest of these *is* love." (1997: 218)

Let us start from the last quotation. Agamben translates the verb *ménei* as “remain”, instead of the more declamatory and rhetorical “abideth” of the King James’ version. This lexical choice is significant because it determines the overall organisation and argument of Agamben’s philosophical project. Let us just remember, for instance, the centrality of the verb “remain” in the title of Agamben’s book, *The Time That Remains*. The verb indicates a threshold, an interim between the time prior to Jesus’ resurrection and the time of his final return. Two temporalities are, therefore, defined in relation to a third one that lies in-between the first two. And yet, it is not simply a case of temporality; it is rather more importantly a case of life. In philosophical terms, one might call it “ontology”. It is in this sense that “time” must be understood here as “period”, encompassing ethics, knowledge, justice, truth. Paul uses the concepts of faith, hope and love.

The first time, the one before the death of Jesus, is rendered unemployable by the arrival of the Messiah and his subsequent resurrection; the third time, the *éschaton*, is ahead, invisible. What is left is the visible present in which salvation is denied, in which nothing can be saved except for an ethical and political practice that prepares the advent of the final time. The remnant is, according to Agamben, an indefinite and indeterminate portion of life in which what is at stake is nothing other, and nothing less than the reconstitution of a life which can only be fully

experienced in another time. It will not be “this” time; it will not be “our” time. Not only this, but, and perhaps more importantly, the reconstitution of a life that is “not for our present us” must be accomplished and achieved by making our previous existence (the first temporality) inoperative.

There is no doubt that Agamben’s investigation of Paul focuses on the analysis of the remnant, and its philosophical and ontological implications. This project is concisely stated at the beginning of *The Time That Remains*. On page 18 we read: “What does it mean to live in the Messiah, and what is the messianic life? What is the structure of Messianic time? These questions, meaning Paul’s questions, must also be ours.”ⁱⁱ

Paul states that three things are left: faith, hope and love, and that love is the greatest of all. But what is it that he means by “faith”, “hope” and “love”? And more pertinently, given the context of this discussion, what is it that Agamben understands by “faith”, “hope” and “love”? Finally, why is it that law is excluded?

The answer to the last question is not only the more simple; it also provides a concrete example of the significant ethical and political praxis invested in the remnant. As Agamben sees it, law, be it the Roman or Jewish law, is not abolished or abdicated; it is simply suspended in and by faith. Suspension must be understood here not as erasure but as

reconstitution. Law is reconstituted through a process of renovation. In other words, faith is put in use to review the law, whose continuation depends, as it now transpires, on faith. It is not possible here to enter an elaborate reflection on Agamben's, and other contemporary philosophers' readings of law and justice in Paul. My reference to law must remain an aside, but it is an important one because it clarifies the crucial agency marking life in the remnant and, by doing so, re-establishes the links with the "irreparable", with which I opened my article.

The beginning of love

Agamben's statement in *The Coming Community* that "we can have hope only in what is without remedy", is echoed in *The Time That Remains* when Agamben claims that: "The messianic remnant exceeds the eschatological all, and irremediably so; it is the unredeemable that makes salvation possible." (2005: 57)ⁱⁱⁱ In the same paragraph, Agamben connects this conceptualisation with Kafka's aphorism on hope, saying that "The only possible meaning of Kafka's aphorism, in which there is salvation, but 'not for us,' is found here." (Ibid.)^{iv}

Both Agamben and Kafka allude to a time and a space – a life – that appear to be irreparably beyond or outside us. This is clearly evident in Kafka where "we" is outside hope. But in Agamben too, hope belongs to that which is without remedy, to that event which takes place, in a sense,

as the essential preparation for the time to come. Or, to be more precise, hope can only be possible once “we” renounce it for our individual worldly benefit; once we admit, in other words, that hope can be for “us” only when we prepare it for an indeterminate and undefined place and time beyond “us”. Again, this proposition opposes the assumed knowledge of hope which relates it unequivocally to life – *this* life, my life – in which hope, thanks to a stream of related and unrelated possibilities, dies, as we say in Italian, last (“la speranza è l’ultima a morire”).

Let us just reflect for a moment on the postulation that achievable hope (the hope that we can affect the world according to our desires, benefiting from these changes) will ultimately die, while a hope located within the irreparable will go on as hope. Is it the case that both Kafka and Agamben bypass the conventional understanding of hope predicated on a biological link between humans and hope by proposing a hope beyond human life (Kafka) or a hope that survives its biological death (Agamben)?

Two elements must be kept in mind: the first refers to Agamben’s conflation of hope and salvation [*salvezza*], the second to an ontological paradox according to which there can only be salvation (hope) as a result of its disappearance. And yet, this paradox is only apparent, and can be unravelled by shifting the philosophical perspective. Hope, salvation, is prepared, produced in the time that remains; a time which is face to face

with the irreparable and devoid of hope. Agamben concurs with Kafka that hope is not for us, but he substantially differs from Kafka by claiming that we make hope.

This incessant making that will not turn into possession abounds with political and ethical suggestions that appear to be directly connected to our time of globalised economies, racial and religious struggle and economic disparities. It certainly connects with other readings of Paul, namely Badiou's (2003), where Paul is interpreted as the "apostle", and antiphilosopher, who subverted the master discourses of his time, namely Jewish discourse, predicated on the possession and following of the Law, and Greek discourse, characterised by an indefatigable knowledge and possession of the cosmos. Paul's letters and actions are read instead as the attempt to produce a counterdiscourse whose main tenet is the production of life devoid of individual as well as collective individualised and constituting possessions, be they race, religion, gender, language, knowledge.

We can now understand how Paul's statement about hope in Romans ("For we are saved by hope: but hope that is seen is not hope: for what a man seeth, why doth he yet hope for? But if we hope for that we see not, *then* do we with patience wait for *it*.") is elaborated by Agamben as an example in support of his investigation of Paul. We cannot rely on what is here, visible, namely the law, knowledge. They cannot give us hope

because they are not made of hope. Hope is found in what is not seen or possessed, and as such, hope is beyond us, irreparably unpossessable.

What is left for us to do, is to patiently make hope, toil towards it, actively and incessantly. According to Agamben's reading of Paul, humans in Messianic time cannot live in hope; they can only be "towards" it.

In turn, these philosophical conceptualisation and perspective enable Agamben to emphasise and detail the stress that Paul places on love [*agape*] over faith and hope in the letter to the Corinthians. If it is correct, as Agamben appears to assume, that hope is not for us and that faith provides the necessary and indisputable orientation, love is that which in the end makes life possible. Orientation without motivation would be useless, which equates with saying that faith devoid of love would be unemployable. But here a clarification becomes imperative.

As Jacob Taubes had already noted (2004: 52-53), love in Paul is not to be understood as love for Jesus but for the neighbour. While faith is in God, Jesus and his resurrection as Christ, love is the quintessential element that will make faith thrive within the community. Love is the only possible possession and the one, which, once acquired, will determine the subjugation of subjectivity and the celebration of the community without sacrificing freedom. The result is that in Messianic time hope is over and love triumphs, to the extent that one might be tempted to assert that the end of hope is also the inevitable beginning of love. It is in this sense that

one might start to interpret, as Agamben does, the otherwise enigmatic reference to hope in Romans 4-18.

As we remember Paul claimed there that Abraham believed in hope by going against hope. In the context of the readings of Paul in contemporary thought, certainly in Agamben's work, this can be understood as constructing the future and invisible hope on the refutation of the old and visible hope. Believing in hope for Paul seems to mean, therefore, to abandon it, to renounce it, by choosing instead faith nourished and propelled by love.

The old is what has been made unemployable by the new, and yet the new is still to arrive. What is left, what *remains*, is this at once strange and fascinating time, a threshold, in which "renunciation" becomes the indispensable tool, ontology and philosophical project for an incessant production the results of which are not measured through possession but through love. Is this the idea that Paul worked on and that has been passed on to us? And if so, as Agamben believes, what is it that we can learn from it?

My hypothesis is that a possible answer to this question can be found by interrogating further the meanings and the philosophical relevance laying behind the idea of "incessant production"; in other words, of that state of anxious making, to say it in Heideggerian terms, that opposes conventional habits, and unconceals beings to their singularities. This path

leads inevitably to equate the notion of life as such with life in the threshold; or rather, it leads to understand the ontological *habitus* of being as singularity through the experience of the threshold. What needs to be brought into focus now are the reasons that induce Agamben to interpret the threshold as the locus of incessant production. Some might have already become apparent through my analysis of Agamben's reading of Paul. Others, though, remain unaccounted for. I contend here that they can be found by looking at a discussion that took place about seventy years ago and that culminated with Blanchot's remarkable proposition of an "existence without being".

In the following pages I trace Blanchot's concept of "existence without being", and relate it to Kojève's thesis of the end of history and Bataille's idea of "unemployed negativity". I will discuss the similarities and the differences marking these concepts, and show how Blanchot's "existence without being" is to my mind central to Agamben's exploration of the threshold as the locus of indeterminacy and production.

2

Existence without being

In a well known and often quoted passage of *The Work of Fire* (1995) [*La part du feu*, 1949], Maurice Blanchot introduces a notion that continues to

perplex and challenge us; he speaks of an “existence without being.”

(1995: 334)^v

The coupling of “existence” and “being” through the preposition “without” is simultaneously puzzling and seductive. The puzzlement derives from finding a separation where a conjunction is expected. It is not only Bishop Berkeley who would object to this idea, stressing that there simply cannot be existence without being. Even Christian cosmology, as well as idealism and metaphysics would have trouble in accepting, let alone coming to terms, with such a notion. In fact, the very foundations of Western thought rest on the belief that “existence” is “being” and that “being” is “existence”. How is it possible to contemplate an existence in the absence of being? Of course, it all depends on what one means by “being” and “existence”.

The context of Blanchot’s ““existence without being” is the essay “Literature and the Right to Death” [“La Littérature et le droit à la mort”]. Towards the end of the essay, Blanchot argues that, while literature (the example he offers is Gustave Flaubert) strives to be transparent, expressing “the reality of the human world” (334), it ends up by presenting the very opposite, that is, the “horror of existence deprived of the world.” (334)^{vi} One might surmise, quite legitimately, that Blanchot is here simply reiterating the view that language effaces the world, and that words plunge things into negativity as soon as they speak these very

things. Comforted by the universally accepted influence that Hegel's thought on language has had on Blanchot, one could simply leave it at that and move on. Moreover, is it not Blanchot himself who, a little later in the same essay, reminds us that "speech is the murder of existence"? (335)^{vii}

True, Blanchot refers here, however, to the *parole* (speech), which operates in the world of appearances, which is also the world of a conventionally understood literature, and a conventionally understood negativity. With subtle rhetorical ability, in the space of about two pages Blanchot provides a condensed critique of the negativity of language, opening at the same time the path for a conceptualisation of the potentiality of language. If, on the one hand, the negativity of language is predicated on a conventional understanding of language as that which represents and speaks the non-linguistic, the potentiality of language is predicated on the hypothesis of a world in which the difference between language and the non-linguistic becomes indeterminate. The latter, according to Blanchot, is a world "without existence."

The concept and the idea of "world" occupy a central position in Blanchot's discussion. Blanchot's "world" might be instructively compared with the meaning and conceptualisation of "world" found in Heidegger. This comparison will, in turn, enable us to draw a possible link between Agamben and Blanchot, especially in connection to Agamben's discussion of boredom in *The Open*.

It is widely accepted that in Heidegger's writing "world" does not refer to the planet earth but more likely, following biblical texts and especially Paul's letters, to a particular way of existing (on this point see also Crowe's book *Heidegger's Religious Origins*, 2006: 101-102).

Heidegger ultimately divides existence into "authentic" and "inauthentic" existence; a separation that is at the centre of *Being and Time*. In brief, while inauthentic existence is interpreted as the pull that induce the individual to live a life of security and comfort by conforming to the status quo at the expenses of the singularities and suchness of the individual, authentic life is that which resists the false tranquillity of existence in order to unconceal the individual's singular uniqueness. Heidegger's entire philosophical project might be understood as the articulation of processes that would lead towards authenticity. These include Heidegger's hermeneutics of facticity, the main argument of which is to experience the world as such and not as a transcendental concept or merely as a tool to be used to obtain emotional, political or economic gratifications; and his discussion of language. What I wish to stress now is the similarity between Heidegger's philosophical position and Blanchot's discussion of a world without existence or the horror of existence without the world. Blanchot might be rehearsing here nothing less than the attempt to think the beneficial shock that might be brought to bear on humans as they are

invited to dismiss their distract and confuse attraction to the path of least resistance; in a word, to superficiality.

Agamben's project in *The Open* is to question what he calls the anthropological machine, a way of existence, that is, based on the distinction between humans and animals from which the very determination and definition of humanity stem. Such proposition is, according to Agamben, not only aporetic but also disabling because, as he claims in a manner of analysis not too dissimilar from that of Blanchot and Heidegger, it reinforces old oppositions the danger of which rests in precisely accepting them superficially, uncritically.

As a counter discourse to this opposition, Agamben proposes a philosophical topos where the dichotomy human/animal is suspended. The philosophical indetermination we are referring to is brought about by a redefinition of the open (the world) as the locus of a "blissful ignorance" [*la grande ignoranza*], resulting from a process that disables the historical and cultural determinants of being. Hence the gradual indistinguishableness of humans and animals that takes place in the space of the open.

An entry point into Agamben's thought might be gained by contrasting the concept of the open as elaborated in Heidegger's original interpretation of the pre-Socratic notion of *aletheia* with the poetic narration of the open in Rilke's famous eighth *Duino Elegy*. This is not to

say that Heidegger and Rilke are Agamben's only references, far from it. As a matter of fact in *The Open* Rilke is mentioned only briefly to clarify Heidegger's thinking. And yet this comparison – and clarification – takes place in one of the most significant chapters of *The Open* titled, emblematically, “The Open” [“L’aperto”]. At the beginning of the chapter we read:

More than ten years later [more than ten years after Heidegger's *Die Grundbegriffe der Metaphysik*], in full world war, Heidegger returns to this concept [the open. The series of seminars Agamben refers to were later collected in the volume *Parmenides*] and traces a summary genealogy of it. That it arose out of the eighth *Duino Elegy* was, in a certain sense, obvious; but in being adopted as the name of being (“the open, in which every being is freed...is being itself”), Rilke's term undergoes an essential reversal, which Heidegger seeks to emphasize in every way. For in the eighth *Elegy* it is the animal [*die Kreatur*] that sees the open “with all its eyes,” in distinct contrast to man, whose eyes have instead been “turned backward” and placed “like traps” around him. While man always has the world before him – always only stands “facing opposite” [*gegenüber*] and never enters the “pure space” of the outside – the animal instead moves in the open, in a “nowhere without the no.” (2004: 57)

The stark differences between Rilke's poetisation of the open on the one hand, and Heidegger's conceptualisation of it on the other, are not only

useful to make sense of Heidegger's philosophy but also, and more pointedly, to dig deeper into Agamben's own refinement of Heidegger's thought. Agamben states clearly that Heidegger found and took the notion of the open in and from Rilke's eighth *Elegy* ("That it arose out of the eighth *Duino Elegy* was, in a certain sense, obvious"). And yet this seems to be the only communality since Rilke's and Heidegger's reading are diametrically opposed (Heidegger calls this opposition "a gaping abyss" ["eine Kluft"], 1992: 159). Whereas in Rilke the animal sees the open ["Mit allen Augen sieht die Kreature/ das Offene." 1942: 76] – is in the open – in Heidegger the animal is unaware of it, and therefore shut out from the open. Both Rilke and Heidegger preserve the paradigmatic distinction opposing humans and animals, but while Rilke does it through romantically anthropomorphizing the animal (Heidegger calls it the "hominization of the animal" ["Vermenschung des Tieres"], 1992: 161), Heidegger does it by further emphasizing and insisting on the differences. Heidegger's conceptualisation of the open is arrived at through an original rendition of the pre-Socratic notion of *aletheia* (which might be translated as "truth", "uncovering" but also, although more metaphorically, as the "fight against oblivion"). Heidegger thinks of *aletheia* as unconcealment, as the freedom "to-be-there". Human's freedom, their breaking from the concealed closure in which all creatures are housed is, according to Heidegger, achieved through language. Following in the footsteps of Plato

and Aristotle Heidegger traces the gap separating humans from animals back to language. It is the human's ability to speak, and therefore to enter a dialogue with tradition, that enables beings to come face-to-face with the open and, ultimately with Being.

The systematic critique that Heidegger mounts against metaphysics, and that Agamben inherits in *The Open*, is that of having mistaken being for Being and, as a result of this, of treating the subject (being) as always already confronting a separate and distinct object (the open). This, according to Heidegger, is the great shortcoming of Western metaphysics the final results of which are Nietzsche's philosophy and Rilke's poetry (Heidegger also refers to modern metaphysics as "popular biological metaphysics" ["biologischen Populärmetaphysik"] 1992: 158). And yet this is precisely the moment at which Heidegger's philosophical project comes to an end. In fact, while it is clear that for Heidegger Western metaphysics has exhausted its purpose, the reasons for metaphysics' decline are not totally clear. More importantly, while Heidegger's theorization of *aletheia* as unconcealment, as that which exposes the open ("aletheia is the looking of Being into the open that is lighted by it itself as it itself, the open for the unconcealedness of all appearance." ["offen für das Unverborgene alles Erscheinens"] 1992: 162) finds fruitful outcome in Heidegger's analysis of art and poetry (especially in *Off the Beaten Track*

[*Holzwege*] and *On the Way to Language* [*Unterwegs zur Sprache*]), its ethical and moral significance remain unthought.

In a book that precedes *The Open* by about twenty-five years, *Infancy and History: The Destruction of Experience* (1993) [*Infanzia e storia* 1978; reprinted 2001], Agamben developed a theory which might help to place the belief in the erosion of metaphysics, shared by many modern and contemporary philosophers and thinkers, into context. Agamben spoke of the typically modern phenomenon of the destruction of experience which is also to be ascribed, as he argued in that book, to the modern inability to tell, hand down, stories. Modernity is the age when experience and tradition, in their conventional understanding, collapsed for a lack of narrative. Now, if language is that which places being opposite the open, metaphysically turning being into the subject of inquiry, the lack of language is also the moment when this confrontation terminates. With the collapse of language as the instrument of communication and the vehicle through which knowledge, and therefore experience and tradition are transferred, the very basis of Western metaphysics, that is the presence of the subject, is under threat. Clearly, Agamben did not state that modern humans had lost the ability to speak, write, and tell stories. On the contrary, they went on to write and tell, and yet this writing and telling were now predicated not so much on a construction of experience as on the destruction of experience. This paradigmatic shift from construction to

destruction announces the end of metaphysics and the beginning of a historical and cultural period that is still in the making.

Discussing the work of Charles Baudelaire, in *Infancy and History* Agamben claimed that:

In Baudelaire, a man expropriated from experience [*espropriato dell'esperienza*] exposes himself to the force of shock. Poetry responds to the expropriation of experience by converting this expropriation into a reason for surviving and making the inexperience its normal condition [*facendo dell'inesperibile la sua condizione normale*]. In this perspective, the search for the 'new' [*nuovo*] does not appear as the search for a new object of experience; instead, it implies an eclipse and a suspension of experience. [*implica al contrario, un'eclisse e una sospensione dell'esperienza*] (1993: 41).

It is worth reflecting further on Agamben's emphasis on the suspension of experience. In chapter three of *Infancy and History*, under the sub-heading "Modern Poetry and Experience" ["La poesia moderna e l'esperienza"], we read:

... modern poetry from Baudelaire onwards is seen to be founded not on new experience, but on an unprecedented lack of experience [*una mancanza di esperienza senza precedenti*]. Hence the boldness

[*disinvoltura*] with which Baudelaire can place shock at the centre of his artistic work. It is experience that best affords us protection from surprises [*protezione dalle sorprese*], and the production of shock always implies a gap [*falla*] in experience. To experience something means divesting it of novelty [*novità*], neutralizing its shock potential. [*neutralizzare il suo potenziale di choc*] (1993: 41)

The word “shock” occupies a central and commanding position in this important passage. It appears to be in close relation to “surprise”, and opposed to experience. “Shock” is the “surprise” that upsets experience and relegates experience to the background, puts it out of sight, renders it useless and impracticable.

It is in this sense that Agamben can interpret the language of modernity not as a lesser language. Conversely, he sees the suspension and destruction of experience carried out in modernity as the necessary and indispensable shift which decrees at once the end of metaphysics and the beginning of a new ontology and a new philosophy: the coming philosophy.

Recapitulating: suspension and destruction do not mean unlearning, forgetting how to speak, and unlearning and forgetting how to be human in order to start from scratch (as in more nihilistic modern experimentations, including Nietzsche’s philosophy, Futurism and Dadaism). It means, rather, to learn how to be *really* human, and to

remember better, more profoundly. And yet this *remembering better* must perforce pass from a form of oblivion, which is, ultimately, the questioning of what Agamben in *The Open* calls the anthropological machine constructed by Western metaphysics.

Agamben conceptualises “l’aperto” by following closely Heidegger’s definition of the open as the name of Being and of the world (57). From Heidegger, he also takes the main distinction between animals (those which are unaware of the open) and humans (those who face the open), as well as the theory of a possible proximity and similarity between humans and animals (57-62). It is the latter theory that enables Agamben to carry Heidegger’s thought further. In *Parmenides* Heidegger compares human’s boredom with the stupefied being of the animal in the open. But whereas stupefaction conceals the world to the animal, boredom, especially if and when understood in the meaning of suspension, has the potential to bring humans into the presence of the world and of Being. Through suspending all the actual possibilities open to being by life, the original potentiality of simply Being might emerge. It is at moments of utter boredom and suspension, when ordinary life, and all its countless activities, is emptied and void that being might find itself available to the possibility of Being; in other words, to that possibility before and beyond metaphysics, and before and beyond the politics and ethics of metaphysics. The significant difference between Heidegger and Agamben is that for the latter these

moments of suspension are precisely the moments when humans and animals become suspended in indistinction, and when animality and humanity are momentarily reconciled (71-92). It is at these moments on the threshold that the anthropological machine [“la macchina antropologica”] comes to a halt.

We may propose at this stage the hypothesis that Agamben’s, Blanchot’s and Heidegger’s work on a similar proposition, that is, the attempt to think an existence without habitual, everyday being.

Before we go any further, it is essential to emphasise that for Blanchot the notion of “existence without being” is heralded by the completion of history [“l’histoire achevée”] and the coming to presence of a time and a space in which, “nature almost made human”, “...speech advances to meet the thing and the thing learns to speak.” (335)^{viii}

The life Blanchot intimates seems to be located at the end of history, not at history’s beginning. It is a matter of going ahead to meet our destiny of being in the world rather than of being before the world. What I wish to stress now is Blanchot’s articulation of a return achieved by going forward. In other words, Blanchot proposes to return where we have never been, to a place, that is, that is familiar in its utter strangeness.

Is this *topos* similar to the one that Agamben refers to in *The Open* when, discussing the life of “man” at the end of history via Paul and

Bataille, he talks of the grand ignorance [“grande ignoranza”] and of a zone of not-knowing? [“una zona di non-conoscenza”] (2004: 89-92)

In order to attempt an answer to this question we need to go back to the original debate between Kojève, Bataille, and indirectly Blanchot, on the end of history. On December 4, 1937, in a famous lecture he delivered at the College of Sociology in Paris, Alexandre Kojève announced the end of history.^{ix} He arrived at this philosophical conclusion through a close reading of Hegel’s *Phenomenology* in which he found clear and obvious indications pointing to a state in which the distinction between subject and object, human and nature would come to an end. This moment, he said, will mark the apotheosis of universalising principles and thinking, and the final celebration of human history and culture the result of which, ironically, will determine the end of culture, history and humanity as we know it. It is to be assumed that this re-appropriation of being in the world, rather than before the world, is the cause of a deliberate separation and estrangement, and that its achievement will lead humans to move forward to where they had already-been. And yet, this already-been is the unknown that lies behind history or, to be more precise, at the end of history.

Georges Bataille responded immediately to Kojève’s hypothesis with a letter later published in *Le coupable* (English translation in Hollier,

1988). He embraced most of what Kojève had proposed, but with a strong reservation.

Kojève had stated that “Man properly so-called” will disappear and with it history and philosophy. What will remain indefinitely, he added, will be what “makes Man happy”, that is, “art, love, play.” Bataille could not reconcile the disappearance of “Man” with the extant remnant of what “Man” had produced. What will be the form and use through which the “rest” will continue to exist? Bataille’s question goes to the very heart of humanity’s action and production, teasing out the mysterious, and perhaps even sacred elements connoting art.

In opposition to what Kojève produced in the form of an answer to Bataille’s letter nearly thirty years after the original debate, that is, that art, love, play will become natural again with the disappearance of “Man so-called”, Bataille proposed that the remnant of humanity after the end of history would be nothing other than an “unemployed negativity” (Hollier, 1988: 90); a testimony without a story to testify to, a non-language, or rather, a language which only speaks to itself, and for nobody else, the story of a return to the never-been.

What kind of place a life at the end of history might be was already, as we see, at the centre of the dialogue between Bataille and Kojève. Blanchot, although not directly involved in this dialogue, partakes of it, and responds to similar concerns throughout his work, providing his own

answers to the question of what might remain after the disappearance of “Man so-called”.

Among the similarities marking Blanchot’s perspectives and those produced by Kojève and Bataille – the most important of which is the consensus on the beginning of the new world from the self-annihilating fulfillment of history – there are some obvious differences. While for Kojève and Bataille the end of history determines the movement of humans toward nature, the opposite direction appears to be the one entertained by Blanchot. We remember that Blanchot writes of a “nature almost made human”, and of a speech that “advances to meet the thing and the thing learns to speak”. If this is correct, the historical *éschaton* produced by humans brings about a reunion, which is also the stage on which the differences between “Man” and nature are levelled and made indeterminate, but also on which what remains of this separation speaks a language that can potentially still be acted upon, that can still find *uses*.

In other words, Blanchot distances himself at once from Kojève’s naïve and elemental approach and from Bataille’s “unemployed negativity”. The ontological state that Blanchot announces is neither aesthetically savage (Kojève) nor aesthetically suspended in negativity (Bataille). What is it then?

The neuter has been often cited as the symbol of Blanchot's "existence without being", and with good reason (Bartoloni, 2005; Bident, 2005; Bruns, 1997: 52). Blanchot himself writes of the neuter – *The Space of Literature* (1982) [*L'espace littéraire*, 1955], is almost entirely devoted to map the neuter – in ways that leave little doubt regarding the significance of this indeterminate zone in which space, time and language appear to have been snatched away from history and negativity, from *chronos* and *kairós*, and from a determination that is entirely human. And yet, they are not entirely other. It is only that the differences between negativity and instrumentality, *chronos* and *kairós*, are no longer evident. What is important about this language, this time and this space – which are not totally foreign and unknown, and which, therefore, are not another language, and not another space and another time – is the ways in which what remains might speak and act, and ultimately the ways in which it might be used.

Agamben understands clearly that the mystery of the rise of humanity must be unravelled through a rigorous investigation of the separation of the human from the animal (2004: 92). He is also convinced, though, that this analysis will lead inevitably to the moment where both the human and the animal will find themselves "out of being" ["fuori dall'essere"], that is,

in the zone of indistinction and indeterminacy (Ibid.). This is the space of the threshold or, in temporal terminology, the time that remains.

That which *remains* must be understood here not as what is left of history or negativity, but precisely as what *remains* after the moment at which humans and nature have come together, making differences and distinctions, even in relation to what is left of history and negativity, inapplicable and inoperative.

Giorgio Agamben's exploration of zones of indistinction and suspension – the interstitial topos of the threshold - depends on the philosophical use of inoperativeness. These zones take different shapes and focus on disparate philosophical preoccupations, including potentiality, as the space of indistinction between *dynamis* and *energeia*, and authenticity and inauthenticity; and biopolitics, as the juxtaposition of *zoe* and *bios*. Agamben's very take on language and literature, and his discussion of Benjaminian categories such as "citation" and "death mask", is informed by the urge to think alternative ontological and aesthetic spaces, whose emblematic characteristics are indeterminacy and, in a word, thresholds (on this see also Bartoloni, 2004, 2003). It does not come as a surprise, then, when in *The Open* Agamben makes a direct reference to the Blanchotian notion of *desœuvrement*. And he does so at the crucial juncture of bringing his investigation of the open to a closure, albeit partial. Agamben translates *desœuvrement* as *inoperosità* (inoperativeness)

and grants it a philosophical significance that at once reconnects him and his project to Heidegger and Blanchot. It is through *desœuvrement* (Blanchot) and boredom (Heidegger) that according to Agamben the factual-political separation of humans from animals can simultaneously be understood and renegotiated. As in Heidegger, the factual experience of boredom, and *desœuvrement*, brings about the realignment of individual and things according to their respective singularity, no longer, that is, as objects. They face each other instead as things as such. But it is precisely this facing of each other as things as such that generates an availability that, ultimately, transcends the objectification of the other and introduces the possibility of mutual appropriation. This would result in a life experience in which the essence of the thing, be it human, animal or inorganic, is retained as such and not as a “death mask”, which is nothing else than a language that speaks about the thing by removing the thing from view.

As we now understand *desœuvrement* carries two meanings, which are mutually implicated. The first meaning determines the inoperativeness of the “anthropological machine” (Agamben), metaphysics (Heidegger) and existence (Blanchot). The second one, more hidden, implies the use [“*mettere in opera, in-operare*”] of that which has remained after the end of history, metaphysics and the anthropological machine.

The threshold, suspension, indistinction, destruction, these are the words that strongly resonate in Agamben's works. They allude to a break, a caesura, a pause, and to a condition that might bring about the movement of mutual appropriation, and an experience of language and being which, having rendered ordinary language and being inoperative, initiate a movement of exploration and production in the gap between negativity and appearances in the attempt, perhaps, to catch the world rather than the "horror" of its disappearance. It might seem ironic that in order to exist in the world, to be in the world, one should choose a "destruction of experience". But, as it should be clear by now, this expression cannot be interpreted literally. It can start to make sense only if we understand it as the life that remains after the end of historical and/or metaphysical being.

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- ⁱ “Possiamo avere speranza solo in ciò che è senza rimedio.” (1990: 74)
- ⁱⁱ “Che cosa significa vivere nel Messia, che cos’è la vita messianica? E qual è la struttura del tempo messianico? Queste domande, che sono le domande di Paolo, devono essere anche le nostre.” (2000: 24)
- ⁱⁱⁱ “Il resto messianico eccede irrimediabilmente il tutto escatologico, esso è l’insalvabile che rende possibile la salvezza.” (2000: 58)
- ^{iv} “L’aforisma kafkiano, secondo cui c’è salvezza, ma ‘non per noi’, trova qui il suo unico senso.” (Ibid.)
- ^v “Existence sans l’être.” (1949: 336)
- ^{vi} “L’horreur de l’existence privée de monde.” (1949: 335)
- ^{vii} “[la] parole meurtrière de l’existence.” (1949: 337)
- ^{viii} “Le parole vient au devant de la chose et la chose apprend à parler.” (1949: 337)
- ^{ix} Kojève’s lecture on the end of history was published, together with all the other lectures he delivered at College of Sociology, in 1947 with the title *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel*. A revised and extended version was published in 1968. The English translation, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, appeared in 1980.