

“THE INTERSTITIAL SELF: ON LITERATURE AND AGAMBEN’S POTENTIALITY”¹

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Sommario

Partendo da una riflessione letterario-filosofica sulla differenza tra poesia e filosofia, e tra conoscenza e possesso, questo articolo propone una definizione del linguaggio letterario come framezzo. La medianità letteraria, che trova ampio riscontro in gran parte della letteratura moderna e contemporanea, viene qui affrontata e discussa attraverso il concetto di potenzialità e le modalità con cui questo concetto è stato interpretato in filosofia, con particolare riferimento al lavoro del filosofo italiano Giorgio Agamben.

Literature is a genre located in the space of the interim between knowledge and possession; in that zone, that is, where the urge to possess the object of inquiry is matched by the tension towards knowing it. It is precisely for this reason that a reflection on literature proves useful to reassess issues and ideas about the self and its relationship with language and the “public”, and to explore further the locus of interstitiality and potentiality which for so many years, and with such different results, has preoccupied many branches of the

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humanities, including anthropology, philosophy and sociology. It is perhaps through a new reading of modern and contemporary literature that a new understanding of the “coming self” might commence.

In the “Introduction” to *Stanzas*² by Giorgio Agamben the reader comes across an apparently plain and harmless comment provided by way of delineating the difference between literature and philosophy. It goes like this: “poetry possesses its object without knowing it while philosophy knows its object without possessing it”. The risk of overlooking the real significance of this remark by focussing on the obvious delimitation of discipline borders is great. The risk is even greater because this is what Agamben appears intent on doing. He is describing once again the dispute between philosophy and literature, true, but only by way of introducing his real topic; that is language and the self. It is in this light that the distinction that Agamben draws between literature and philosophy assumes lesser significance than that between knowledge and possession. Although Agamben does not spell it out for us, the emphasis here is on the cause rather than the effect. The irreconcilability of possession and knowledge is the real issue at hand. As one reads more into *Stanzas*, and the many other books by Agamben, one realizes that for the Italian philosopher this fracture is not intrinsic to the disciplines. It originates instead in language: it is poetic language that allows the poet to “possess” rather than “know”, and it is philosophic language that invites the philosopher to “know” rather than “possess”.

But precisely what is the object of possession and knowledge? In *Stanzas*, but also in most of Western philosophy and literature, the object of possession and knowledge is the self and its dealing with the phenomenological world as well as with the supersensible. The object of study is also, if not most importantly, language as the inevitable and

² Giorgio Agamben, *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture*, trans. Ronald G. Martinez, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993. (Originally published as *Stanze. La parola e il fantasma nella cultura occidentale*, Turin: Einaudi, 1977).

necessary aid or stumbling block between knowledge and possession. As we learnt from Plato, philosophy “knows” by methodologically and scientifically studying the object, while poetry “possesses” by repeating its object through a simulacrum. Or perhaps literature “possesses” its object by experiencing it in the “physical” world of fiction, as a more complimentary version of Plato’s view would have it. This canonical horizon containing and separating Western critical and creative discourse has gradually opened up and become more porous and more resistant to clear juxtapositions. Literature is precisely located at the intersection between knowledge and possession and because of this it invites a reappraisal and a review of not only possession and knowledge but also and necessarily of the self and language. If until very recently, at least until Hegel, the subject was uneasily and hesitantly divided between the act of “showing” and “saying”; in other words between possessing “in language” and knowing “through language”, it is now possible to propose a new framework where the distinction between possession and knowledge becomes indistinguishable. It is in this sense that I am tempted to suggest that modern and contemporary literature is simultaneously interested in “showing” and “saying” or in “knowing” and “possessing”. By the same token literature resists the old paradigmatic opposition between possession and knowledge which is, in a certain sense, without analogies with the traditional opposition between the ineffability of the individual and the intelligibility of the universal.

What follows is a series of considerations on Giorgio Agamben’s discussion of interstitiality and potentiality which, I argue, is the base of a new way of talking about the self and language.

Following one of his accredited mentors, Walter Benjamin, Agamben weaves his analysis of poetic language in *Stanzas* by stressing and describing the historical and poetic necessity leading to the creation and delimitation of a physical space which language, and its subject and object, must inhabit. This is not a language through which the subject speaks of its object but rather a language in which

the subject speaks of its object. The enclosed stanzas of poetry, the space of literature, have to be erected in order for a tangible encounter to take place. This “contact zone”, this concrete, even amorous place (as in medieval and Neoplatonic poetry) where the subject meets and possesses its object, occurs in a language whose enclosedness, whose “inness” is reinforced by isolating and protecting it from the outside. This image has characterized poetry throughout its history.

The agent and the object of poetic language have changed, though. The self attending to language and its object of declamation are no longer as we used to see and understand them. This is a change, a paradigm shift really, that has had a profound and permanent effect on modern and contemporary literature and the ways in which we narrate and read the self. Further, it is a change that hit literature through philosophy, especially through that nihilistic, existential and hermeneutic branch of philosophy that, starting with Nietzsche, has turned our lives upside down and inside out. After Nietzsche and Heidegger people can no longer think of the subject as they used to. They can no longer speak about it or write it in the same ways, as if, for instance, the subject is something tangibly at hand, present and visibly part of a community, yet discreet, clearly individual. The subject gradually disappears from view and with it the object of its language loses its very permanency and groundedness as well. The origin of this gradual but inevitable disappearance is again found in language. But, and here the qualification becomes crucial, the subject and its object have not disappeared in language but through language, a qualification which is, as we shall see later, of great significance. It is in this sense that one could well argue that this gradual vanishing starts much earlier than Nietzsche, with Hegel in fact, and that it reaches and encircles us through Heidegger merely because we continue to maintain that the way we function is through language rather than in language. To clarify this point and reassess subjectivity and its articulation and narration one can turn to Benjamin’s seminal essay “On Language as

such and on the Language of Man”,³ or to Agamben’s work. The latter is the option that I’ve chosen to pursue here.

Interpreting Aristotle’s *Book Theta of the Metaphysics*, Giorgio Agamben remarks that “in its originary structure, *dynamis*, potentiality, maintains itself in relation to its own privation, its own steresis, its own non-Being. This relation constitutes the essence of potentiality. To be potential means: to be one’s own lack, *to be in relation to one’s own incapacity*. Beings that exist in the mode of potentiality are capable of their own impotentiality; and only in this way do they become potential. They *can* be because they are in relation to their own non-Being. In potentiality, sensation is in relation to anesthesia, knowledge to ignorance, vision to darkness.” (Italics in the text).⁴

The definition of potentiality as expounded by Agamben finds its origin in Aristotle but it is also connected to the Heideggerian notion of Dasein. Let us read Thomas Carl Wall’s acute interpretation of Dasein: “We have learned from Heidegger that existence is *possibility in general* and therefore it is unrealisable in particular, or it is impossible in particular. Existence as the generality of the possible is precisely the impossible: the uncanny impossibility of *Da-sein* – the being I myself am at my ownmost. That is to say, before I take on the particularity of a person, I am – and am not – an extreme possibility. To say it even better, I am a *potential* possibility: the null event of an inactuality.” (Italics in the text).⁵ Heidegger’s own words on Dasein are thus: “Dasein is not something present-at-hand which possesses its

³ In Walter Benjamin, *Reflections*, Peter Demetz (ed.), trans. Edmund Jephcott, New York: Schocken Books, 1986, pp. 314-332.

⁴ Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999: 182. (This is a collection of essays originally published in Italian between 1982 and 1996. It also contains a lecture, “On Potentiality”, held in Lisbon in 1986).

⁵ Thomas Carl Wall, *Radical Passivity*, New York: State University of New York Press, 1999: 2.

competence for something by way of an extra; it is primarily Being-possible.”⁶ In other words, the elementarity, if not the purity, of Dasein is only potential in that its own very existence as “Being” required it to be thrown into the world of others where its original and elemental language, its identity, is traded for participating in and belonging to a community, a common language and a common identity. The intelligibility of the common space, its meaningfulness, is predicated upon the erasure of the original individual and the disappearance of what made it so unique, that is its original and pure language (Heidegger calls it “voice”). Dasein cannot be seen and understood other than “Being” in that as an individual sign with its unshared language it does not make sense; it does not have a meaning. Its “Being” comes to fruition when Dasein chooses to enter the “game” of the community and to be part of a set of linguistic and cultural trajectories and vectors amongst which its own trajectory and vector become lost and invisible, ultimately opaque.

Agamben’s merit, his important contribution to contemporary philosophical discourse is, as I understand it, to have recast the notion of potentiality within the mould of presence rather than that of absence. In Agamben potentiality is not the locus of negativity and, as Wall calls it, “inactuality”. It is rather the zone of a presence that is determined to play its own potentiality, including impotentiality, to the full, that is prepared to let the “in language” free to roam within the “through language”. This distinction is paramount insofar as the incommensurability, negativity and obfuscation of language and agency is suddenly repositioned as commensurable, comprehensible, practically possible and tenable. “Only when we succeed in [...] experiencing our own impotentiality”, writes Agamben, “do we become capable of creating, truly becoming poets. And the hardest

⁶ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, Oxford: Blackwell, 1962: 183.

thing in this experience is not the Nothing or its darkness, in which many nevertheless remain imprisoned; the hardest thing is being capable of annihilating this Nothing and letting something, from nothing, be.”⁷

Clearly Heidegger’s writing on Dasein is rather more problematic and complex than I make it appear through the convenient label of opaqueness. Starting from a close reading of Heidegger, Levinas and Blanchot, for instance, recuperate the possible actuality of Dasein by writing it within the experience of dying and of a temporal experience which Levinas calls l’entretemps, the “meanwhile.”⁸

Yet it is not in the possibility of dying, but of existing in-between actuality and inactuality, in the interstitial space between authenticity and inauthenticity, in that zone where the threshold between “in language” and “through language” becomes indistinguishable that a new experience of subjectivity can commence.

In *The Coming Community* Agamben proposes a new perspective on subjectivity. He writes: “The Whatever in question here relates to singularity not in its indifference with respect to a common property (to a concept, for example: being red, being French, being Muslim), but only in its being such as it is. Singularity is thus freed from the false dilemma that obliges knowledge to choose between the ineffability of the individual and the intelligibility of the universal. The intelligible, according to a beautiful expression of Levi ben Gershon (Gersonides), is neither a universal nor an individual included in a series, but rather ‘singularity insofar as it is whatever singularity’. In this conception, such-and-such being is reclaimed from its having this or that property, which identifies it as belonging to this or that set, to this or that class (the reds, the French, the Muslims) – and it is reclaimed not for another

⁷ Agamben, Giorgio, *Potentialities*, cit.: 253.

⁸ Levinas, Emmanuel, “La réalité et son ombre” *Les Temps Modernes*, vol. 4, no. 38, Novembre 1948.

class nor for the simple generic absence of any belonging, but for its being-such, for belonging itself. Thus being-such, which remains constantly hidden in the condition of belonging [...] and which is in no way a real predicate, comes to light itself.”⁹ Agamben’s intention is clearly that of rearticulating singularity and subjectivity away from the traditional hermeneutic perspective and into a domain in which “suchness” acquires its own possible actuality; an actuality which is obviously incommensurable with the universalising concepts of authenticity and inauthenticity. In another passage of *The Coming Community* Agamben speaks of ethics and the attendant discourse of good and false, authentic and inauthentic. He writes: “The meaning of ethics becomes clear only when one understands that the good is not, and cannot be, a good thing or possibility beside or above every bad thing or possibility, that the authentic and the true are not real predicates of an object perfectly analogous (even if opposed) to the false and the inauthentic. Ethics begins only when the good is revealed to consist in nothing other than a grasping of evil and when the authentic and the proper have no other content than the inauthentic and the improper.”¹⁰ What Agamben alludes to here is an experience of con-fusion, encounter and mingling whose outcome is not chaos and madness but rather a clarity and brightness made of openness, what I am tempted to call “incompleteness” in the sense of something unstructured by universalising values. “Suchness”, according to Agamben, is that which “presents itself as such, that *shows* its singularity.”¹¹ (Italics in the text) But exactly what is this singularity Agamben speaks of? The answer is to be found in language. As Agamben puts it: “The antinomy of the individual and the universal

⁹ Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt, Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993: 1-2. (Originally published as *La comunità che viene*, Turin:Einaudi, 1990.)

¹⁰ Ibid: 12.

¹¹ Ibid.: 9.

has its origin in language.”¹² Agamben’s work is intent on rewriting this antinomy and in the process he points to a further hermeneutic space and language.

“The movement Plato describes as erotic anamnesis”, writes Agamben in *The Coming Community*, “ is the movement that transports the object not toward another thing or another place, but toward its own taking-place.”¹³ It is in this “own taking-place” that, according to Agamben, “humankind’s original home” can be found. In the article “The Carcass of Time”, Brian Dillon reads this “original home” not as “a process [genesis] or a movement [kinesis].” He adds that this zone is not correlated with a measurable space of time. “The time of pleasurable plenitude”, continues Dillon, “which Agamben discovers in Aristotle is decidedly not, however, that extra-temporal realm which enables Augustine, in the Confessions, to step outside of the abstract flow of time: it is not, in other words, the eternal.”¹⁴ This time is rather the pure “now”, the interim. It is ultimately pleasure. Pleasure, as Aristotle defines it in *Book X of the Ethics* is not a process, “that is, it does not acquire meaning or value in terms of its completeness, but is a certain experience of the present: it is not dependent upon a projected future point at which it will become whole.”¹⁵ Aristotle writes thus: “The act of seeing is regarded as complete at any moment of its duration, because it does not lack anything that, realized later, will perfect its specific quality. Now pleasure also seems to be of this nature, because it is a sort of whole, i.e., at no moment in time can one fasten upon a pleasure the

¹² Ibid: 8.

¹³ Ibid: 2.

¹⁴ Dillon, Brian, “The Carcass of Time”, *Oxford Literary Review*, vol. 19, no. 1-2, 1997: 133-147 (142).

¹⁵ Ibid: 142.

prolongation of which will enable its specific quality to be perfected. For this reason pleasure is not a process because every process is in time, and has an end (e.g. the process of building), and is complete when it has accomplished its object. Thus it is complete either in the whole of the time that it takes or at the instant of reaching its end.”¹⁶ Is it possible for humankind to regain this unlinear and unchronological, uncalendrical time? In other words, is it possible to inhabit a space as if it were a place, a home, a cultural and linguistic habitus in which the notion of process is absent and where the movement is not towards something but simply in itself? More specifically, is it possible for language to be the pure pleasure of in-betweenness, where its potentiality of not-being is celebrated, where “possibility and reality, potentiality and actuality”, authenticity and inauthenticity, “become indistinguishable”?¹⁷ Literature, at least certain contemporary literature, has attempted to be precisely that. As Thomas Carl Wall argues: “the Neuter is the space of literature (an imaginary space en deçà du temps), which is interminable, incessant, and perpetually noncontemporary.”¹⁸ Clearly this is the space of Blanchot’s literature, but also of Pound’s and many other twentieth-century authors amongst whom I would like to place the Italian Giorgio Caproni. They all inhabit the interim, the interzone of the “meanwhile” where action and process are rejected for what I like to call the “waiting”; that is the interstitial time in which, and this is essential, the notion of what-one-is-waiting-for is all of a sudden unimportant and irrelevant. The “waiting” is that zone in-between concrete and tangible “homes” in which literature investigates the meaning of an absence, of that which should have come, or should come or will come but is not here

¹⁶ Aristotle, *Ethics*, trans. J. A. K. Thomson, London: Penguin Books, 1976: 318.

¹⁷ Agamben, Giorgio, *The Coming Community*, cit.: 55.

¹⁸ Wall, Thomas Carl, *Radical Passivity*, cit.: 115.

yet. “To write”, states Blanchot, “is to surrender to the fascination of time’s absence [...] Time’s absence is not a purely negative mode. It is the time when nothing begins, when initiative is not possible [...] Rather than a purely negative mode, it is, on the contrary, a time without negation, without decision, when here is nowhere as well [...] The time of time’s absence has no present, no presence.”¹⁹ This time without time, Blanchot calls it “dead time”, is that space in-between actions where actual life is suspended and where temporality, but also spatiality, becomes supple, porous, ultimately open. This suspended zone does not pertain to a dimension beyond life. On the contrary, it coexists and intersects with actuality in an osmotic interchange. But the space of this interchange, the space in which “empty, dead time is a real time in which death is present – in which death happens but doesn’t stop happening”²⁰, has belonged hitherto to the space of literature in which the suspension of the waiting, its inherent interstitiality, is celebrated and fully experienced. A dimension devoid of a tension towards something ahead of itself and of a linear understanding of time in which the process towards the future is natural if not altogether expected and demanded, must have a different grammar and language. In his last unfinished novel, *Further Confessions of Zeno* (1969), Italo Svevo thought of a “mixed tense” and a different grammar to narrate a story that takes place in-between authenticity and inauthenticity, or, more conveniently, fiction and reality. But there are other examples of a language of the “waiting”, perhaps even more pertinent to an understanding of the differences between “in language” and “through language”.

In 1499 an anonymous incunabulum was printed in Venice with the title of *Hipnerotomachia Poliphili* (*Polifilo’s Dream*). As Agamben

¹⁹ Blanchot, Maurice, *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock, Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1982: 30

²⁰ Ibid: 31.

remarks, “The effect of estrangement that its language produces so disorients the reader that he literally does not know what language he is reading, whether it is Latin, the vernacular, or a third idiom.”²¹ Agamben explains further: “It is not simply a matter of the intrusion of purely Latin (and at times Greek) words into the vernacular lexicon, according to a process of growth that certainly characterized the history of the vernacular in the fifteenth century. Rather, here innumerable new linguistic formations are made through the separate transposition of Latin roots and suffixes, which lend life to words that are grammatically possible but that in reality never existed.”²² Clearly this is an intriguing example of a meeting of two languages in the interzone of the “waiting” where there is no attempt to develop and unfold a process of linguistic and grammatical cleansing and polishing but where the “suchness” of the meeting is presented as such. Agamben goes further when he claims that: “...this dream, which is fully contemporary today, is in fact dreamt every time a text, restoring the bilingualism and discord implicit in every language, seeks to evoke the pure language that, while absent in every instrumental language, makes human speech possible.”²³ Is thus bilingualism as such and not as process, the simultaneous taking place of two languages and cultures in one language, the language of humankind’s original home? Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake* was perhaps alluding to something similar, and clearly Pound’s work with ideograms taken from the Chinese language and his working of metaphors influenced by Japanese haiku had a third language in mind. As Charles Taylor has commented interpreting Pound’s writing, “these juxtapositions [were] just to see reality

²¹ Agamben, Giorgio, *The End of the Poem*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999: 44. (Originally published as *Categorie italiane*, Venice: Marsilio: 1996)

²² Ibid: 45.

²³ Ibid: 60.

undistorted.”²⁴ In Pound’s own words: “[Art] means constation of fact. It presents. It does not comment.”²⁵ Is art here presenting the “such-as-it-is”, and thus locating itself in the space of the interim? It appears so, especially if one compares Taylor’s analysis of Pound’s writing with my discourse on the interstices: “This is the nature of the Poundian epiphany; it happens not so much in the work as in a space that the work sets up; not in the words or images or objects evoked, but between them. Instead of an epiphany of being, we have something like an epiphany of interspaces.”²⁶

Modern and contemporary literature enters the space of the interstices to evoke something, perhaps an absence or a presence, the conflagration of the self or maybe its gradual recomposition in the uncanny space of medianity and possibility. Or perhaps even to celebrate its inadequacy or simply its status as mere copy, as petrified simulacrum which unsuccessfully searches for its own originality in the attempt to escape its nature as the shadow of reality. Here, I suppose, we have the great irony and paradox of art, that is the coexistence of the notions of originality and copy, the fusion and the embedding of an apparently unsolvable dichotomy. This living together of opposite principles is the body and the flesh of art, its fascination but also its irredeemable sin. Never was the hybridity and amphibiousness of art so clearly stated and exposed, its supposed originality problematized as in modern and contemporary art.

Is this then the great lesson that literature has imparted and still imparts? Is literature inviting us to reconsider the ways we are with language and the ways we narrate ourselves and others with language?

²⁴ Taylor, Charles, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989: 474.

²⁵ In Taylor, *Ibid*: 474.

²⁶ *Ibid*: 476.

In other words, is it possible that literature and some contemporary philosophies are trying to tell us that the way to be is not in authenticity nor in inauthenticity but rather in the indistinction of the two where our potential being can be finally lived “as such”?

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