

書 評
Reviews

Sovereignty & Life. Edited by Matthew Calarco and Seven DeCaroli. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007. Pp. 282.

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Language is a virus, a half-life that requires human bodies to complete it. It thrives, spreads, consumes and dies. That's the bare requirement for language. It needs bio-power provided by the human organism. This is the core thesis of William Burrough's research into language. He finds that this virus requires a disguise, an armour to protect it from degeneration. And yet only in degeneration, the kind of abjection witnessed in Burroughs' writings *Naked Lunch* and *Soft Machine*, does the language virus cast off its armour, ideology, to reveal its viral life form. Language degenerates lose their individuality, language degenerating becomes increasingly viral seeking other individuals to infect in order to survive. Language degenerates recognize each other through their state of need, their loss of protective armour. This armour is the ideology of language and of language communities. These are not imagined communities. These are bare knuckle enforcers, gangster thugs of ideology and their language is tough guy cryptic, understood only by those they are oppressing, ignored by all the others of the language community who are shielded from the police, the military, the corporations that make them think they are protected from the virus of degenerate language.

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The unprecedented discovery made by Levi at Auschwitz concerns an area that is independent of every establishment of responsibility, an area in which Levi succeeded in isolating something like a new ethical content. Levi calls it the ‘gray zone.’ It is the zone in which the ‘long chain of conjunction between victim and executioner’ comes loose, where the oppressed becomes oppressor and the executioner in turn appears as victim. A gray, incessant alchemy in which good and evil and, along with them, all the metals of traditional ethics reach their point of Fusion.¹

This quote from Giorgio Agamben’s *Remnants of Auschwitz* is made by Dominic LaCapra in the Stanford University Press book of essays on Agamben, *Sovereignty & Life*. LaCapra identifies the common ground of resistance to Agamben’s most radical political metaphor; that the concentration camp is the garden of a politics to come and the *Muselmann* who inhabits or inhabited the concentration camp, is the new Adam. Ernesto Laclau follows LaCapra in condemning Agamben’s project: “Instead of deconstructing the logic of political institutions, showing areas in which forms of struggle and resistance are possible, he closes them beforehand through an essentialist unification. Political nihilism is his ultimate message.”²

Another attack on Agamben’s *Homo Sacer/ Muselmann* comes from an overall quite helpful essay by Steven DeCaroli called “Boundary Stones.” In this essay DeCaroli mentions “Agamben refers us to the person who goes into exile as a consequence of committing homicide (HS, 110), and to the ancient figure of the homo sacer, whose transgressions expel him from both human and divine law, but the specific character of the transgressions made by this figure, while mentioned, are left largely unexamined.”³ DeCaroli goes on

¹ Matthew Calarco and Steven DeCaroli, *Sovereignty & Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 151.

² Calarco and DeCaroli, *Sovereignty & Life*, 22.

³ Calarco and DeCaroli, *Sovereignty & Life*, 46.

to explore the terrain of this banished character through Aristotle, Cicero, Livy and Thomas Hobbes. The *Muselmann* might most easily be recognized in Hobbes description of bare life as “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.” DeCaroli’s essay is an exemplary compilation of quotations on the problem of banishment and the reasons for it, which he understands to be less the crime than the influence wielded by the figure banished. This comparative approach of political theorists avoids the problematic of the institution busting rhetoric employed by Agamben. “Whatever Politics,” an essay by Jenny Edkins, addresses this problem directly. The *Muselmann* produced by the Nazi concentration camps is the prototype for the new identity-less ‘form of life’ politics.

It is elaborated further in his consideration of the anthropological machine that produces the life of man, as opposed to animal life. His concern throughout is with stopping or interrupting the machine. He proposes that form of life or whatever being, being such as it is, in itself, would evade capture by either machine; ironically, for-of-life is closely related to the very form of life, bare life, produced by the machine, which thus, it appears, contains the seeds of its own destruction.⁴

It is difficult to think of the *Muselmann* and the machine that produces him without thinking of Kafka’s “Penal Colony” and its punitive writing machine. In fact it is difficult not to consider much of Agamben’s writings on Homer Sacer and sovereignty as an extended meditation on Kafka. As with Deleuze and Guattari’s *Kafka Toward a Minor Literature* Kafka becomes the touchstone for meditations on possible and impossible escape. Kafka’s concern with ‘becoming animal’ as Deleuze put it bear remarkable similarities to Agamben’s meditations on the *Muselmann* and the separation between bios (political/anthropological life) and zoe (bare life). This is the gist of Mathew Calarco’s contribution to *Sovereignty & Life* in his marvelously titled essay:

⁴ Calarco and DeCaroli, *Sovereignty & Life*, 72.

“Jamming the Anthropological Machine.” Agamben as an anti-humanist, Calarco suggests, is attempting to move beyond the play of animal life within the human, Kafka’s bug slowly replacing Gregor Samsa to emerge at the end as a meditation on Bug Life. Calarco proceeds to extend Agamben’s anti-humanism to a call for a serious reconciliation with animal/insect life, to put man back into his Egyptian bird, dog head or Burroughs “mugwumps.” Calarco quotes Agamben:

What is man, if he is always the place – and, at the same time, the result – of ceaseless divisions and caesurae? It is more urgent to work on these divisions, to ask in what way – within man – has man been separated from non-man, and the animal from the human, than it is to take positions on the great issues, on so-called human rights and values.⁵

This animal man Agamben finds in a thirteenth-century Hebrew Bible in the Ambrosian Library in Milan, which Calarco writes: “depicts the messianic banquet of the righteous on the last day... the righteous are depicted as having human bodies and animal heads.” Agamben’s response to this illustration is as follows:

It is not impossible... that in attributing an animal head to the remnant of Israel (i.e., those who are remaining, the righteous who remain alive during the time of the Messiah’s coming), the artist of the manuscript in the Ambrosian intended to suggest that on the last day, the relations between animals and men will take on a new form, and that man himself will be reconciled with his animal nature.⁶

However, according to Calarco Agamben does not follow through with the degeneration of man through ceaseless divisions and caesurae to his animal self. “Were sufficient attention given to the question of the animal by

⁵ Calarco and DeCaroli, *Sovereignty & Life*, 166.

⁶ Calarco and DeCaroli, *Sovereignty & Life*, 169.

Agamben his arguments aimed at the limitations of the logic of sovereignty and our current political and juridical models would become significantly more powerful and persuasive. That Agamben chooses to avoid this approach is indicative of what could be called a “performative anthropocentrism” in his texts.⁷

I would suggest the divisions through which man separated himself from the animals were obviously concocted from the language virus, the half life that has always separated the speaking animal from the dumb animal. So was Burroughs the definitive exiled homo sacer of the twentieth century, or did he share that honor with Genet? Burroughs was by far the more didactic and theoretical of the two in terms of exploring what Agamben calls “the grey zone” between bios and zoe. Burroughs called the “grey zone” “Interzone” in *Naked Lunch* and he, like Kafka in “The Penal Colony” created a narrator who was an archeologist and a surveyor of “Interzone.” How did Burroughs get there? His influence, that which forced him into exile in Mexico and then Algiers, was a combination of murder, heroin and homosexuality. But did that give him political power? It gave him the aesthetic power to expose the language virus post-WWII ideology did not want exposed. He created the aesthetic to influence a generation to step outside the ideology of the Eisenhower years. Was Burroughs a man or a *Muselmann*? In Agamben’s sense he was both. Heroin, Burroughs insisted, burnt off the outward trappings of a man and exposed Burroughs to the metamorphoses of men into Mugwumps, agents driven by the need for heroin: essentially another form of *Muselmann*. However, Burroughs did not offer a political solution to the institutionalization of protest, he merely remained an outcast articulating the fate, or witnessing the life inside Interzone. He was in essence a fiction writer, or as he saw it an agent of interzone, never turning away from, nor offering a solution to real horror. He was not part of the machine but he saw its functioning in the downfall of the West: the political escape of the queers, the

⁷ Calarco and DeCaroli, *Sovereignty & Life*, 175.

junkies, the murderers and malcontents from the confines of the panopticon despite the State's increasingly desperate attempts to wall them up, hole them in. In fact Burroughs was the perfect political factotum for Agamben's "Whatever" politics and *Muselmann* ethics, the Alexander to Aristotle's *Nichomachean Ethics*, or the Jean Genet to Foucault's bio-power ethics.

The Muselmann is the guard on the threshold of a new ethics, an ethics of a form of life that begins where dignity ends. And Levi, who bears witness to the drowned, speaking in their stead, is the cartographer of this new terra ethica, the implacable land-surveyor of Muselmannland.⁸

The academics in this volume *Sovereignty & Life* have their institutional virus to protect, they don't need any Interzone agents marking them with out of bounds ground rules. Political nihilism, whatever. Give the Plebs what they want. In the last analysis who is being read and about whom are books being written: Agamben. Agamben you can skip through merrily on his intuitive leaps and bounds, often staggered at the originality of his correspondences. Unfortunately the essays about his work lack his bounce. They are guarded logically from an intuitive grasp of the times: they are "institutive" if I might coin a term, fixing the needs of their institutional machines, understanding Agamben and pointing out his merits and his demerits.

Ernesto Laclau in discussing Agamben's central contention of the distinction between zoe and bios, zoe, bare life (plant, animal, human) and bios (life organized by the anthropological machine, meaning man), argues that zoe is always already inscribed within bios, that zoe is an abstraction. However, one might argue this as the point at which Laclau steps away from Agamben's ambivalence about the nature of zoe. Zoe obviously is a word coming from the language of the bios, of the community, it cannot speak for

⁸ Calarco and DeCaroli, *Sovereignty & Life*, 135

itself. Laclau, DiCaroli and LaCapra all share this distaste for giving speech to that which cannot speak itself. Agamben described that language this way:

This is the language of the ‘dark shadows’ that Levi heard growing in Celan’s poetry, like a ‘background noise’; this is Hurbinek’s non-language (mass-klo, matisklo) that has no place in the libraries of what has been said or in the archive of statements. Just as in the starry sky that we see at night, the stars shine surrounded by a total darkness that, according to cosmologists, is nothing other than the testimony of a time in which the stars did not yet shine, so the speech of the witness bears witness to a time in which human beings did not yet speak; and so the testimony of human beings attests to a time in which they were not yet human.⁹

Either in the first half of the book, entitled “Life” or in the second half entitled “Sovereignty” the question of werewolves, bandits, prostitutes, pimps, Muselmann, homosexuals, and one might add junkies, vampires, mouldwarps and other creatures which live the half-life of the language virus, in other words, the parasites of society become central to the organization of the essayists discourse. You are either for the parasites or against the parasites depending on the direction your linguistic virus takes you. The parasites themselves are obviously indifferent to institutional judgment, they just want to live their natural (zoe) lives and exit the bios of modernity.

Then come the defenders of the non-faith Agamben espouses, in particular, Antonio Negri. Negri counters the analytic deconstruction of Agamben’s philosophical discourse pointed out by Laclau, DiCaroli and LaCapra with the ethical potential of Agamben’s errors.

Indeed, Agamben emphasizes that this nihilistic self-dissolution of being [Heidegger] frees the voice – but another voice, an absolute voice, absolved of the negativity of which it had been the bearer.

⁹ Calarco and DeCaroli, *Sovereignty & Life*, 146.

Effectively, it is now *poiesis*, inasmuch as it endures as the only power of this dissolved universe. The voice is freed of the genealogy of negativity.¹⁰

Now such a statement of rebirth from decay stands out in this book of primarily wary commentaries by those firmly ensconced in their institutional viruses. It is remarkable to find *poiesis* within political nihilism, to create out of negativity, to keep one's mind's eye firmly planted on the destruction of the anthropology/writing machine of the penal colony Agamben grounds himself in. This is to be reminded of Heidegger's favorite contemporary poet, Trakl, whose "dark voice" haunts in a particularly feverish way, this nihilistic moment. "...all roads end in black decay....O prouder mourning! You brazen altars, today the hot flame of the spirit is fed by a tremendous pain: the unborn grandchildren." (Alle Strassen munden in schwarze Verwesung....O stolzere Trauer! Ihr ehernen Altare,/ Die heisse Flamme des Geistes naht heute ein gewaltiger Schmerz, / Die engeborenen Enkel.)¹¹ From this last poem to be written by the junkie Trakl before he killed himself, "Grodek," Agamben and Negri seem to claim the always haunted and haunting "unborn grandchildren" or "ungeborenen Enkel" that is the result of the roads of black decay as the "voice" of the post-political. Negri locates Agamben there in a passage that could be read as an exegesis of Trakl's poem "Grodek":

There is the one [Agamben] who lingers in the existential, destining, and terrifying shadows, where he is perpetually forced into a confrontation with the idea of death. And there is another Agamben, who, through the immersion in the work of philology and linguistic analysis, attains the power of being...The shadow of death spreads lugubriously over the desire to live, pitting itself against the excess of desire.¹²

¹⁰ Calarco and DeCaroli, *Sovereignty & Life*, 114.

¹¹ Leonard Foster, ed, *Penguin Book of German Verse* (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1957), 433.

¹² Calarco and DeCaroli, *Sovereignty & Life*, 118.

Negri's language is descriptive, attempting to bring together the overall contradiction of the unspeaking Muselmann (burnt on the altar of the Hegelian spirit) and out of those ashes, the ghosts of a future generation, the potential (excess of desire).

As one can see Agamben brings out the speculative in political philosophy and this speculation is driven by an irritating itch, an inability to locate Agamben's position between poesis and praxis. The final essay in the *Sovereignty & Life* book, Bruno Gulli's "The Ontology and Politics of Exception," makes this point explicitly. Gulli suggests that Agamben has introduced the State of Exception where the concentration camp is the paradigm for modern political strategies as a "fictitious" structure.

'Fictitious,' not because it has no empirical reality, for it is beyond question that it does, but rather because it is no longer in touch with the ontological structure of neutrality from which it also originated. Having lost connection with the original ontological structure, it has in truth also lost ethical validity and legitimacy... This type of state of exception, a fictitious or spurious one, is nothing but the imposition of a partial will on the totality of existence, of a particular interest on universality.¹³

So, joining all of these fictitious animals, the Muselmann, Anubis, Horus, Osiris, the Mugwump, Gregor Samsa, the werewolf, succubus, incubi, Gulli points out that Agamben has failed to address the nature of poetry in politics.

For Agamben, the metaphysics of the will that characterizes Western thought is based on the blurring of the original Aristotelian distinction between poesis (production) and praxis (action) – and the will is what initiates and sustains the movement of the latter.... In a different handling of the same problem, Etienne Balibar calls Marx's abolition

¹³ Calarco and DeCaroli, *Sovereignty & Life*, 240-41.

of the distinction between poiesis and praxis “a revolutionary thesis,” and I tend to agree with him. In Western metaphysics, the unity of poiesis and praxis had already been accomplished by Vico – this is the meaning of his poetic metaphysics.¹⁴

A blurring of the distinction between “fictitious” theory which explains the horrors of genocide, starvation and global degeneration versus a positive leap which allows the political subject to be poetic/productive in animal life, to re-take work from the nullity of the assembly line appears to be Gulli’s solution to Agamben’s fix (remembering Burroughs). Wherever one looks in this book of essays essayists are attempt to fix Agamben’s shortcomings. Yet in the aporias of Agamben’s thought might lie its poiesis. After all, reading Agamben himself in translation is a lot more aesthetically and theoretically useful, particularly in his fragments, than these meticulous, articulate and mostly ideological pronouncements on his work. They clarify, they enlighten the dark corners of Agamben’s fictions, but who does not feel that we are as Agamben writes, men of the *Muselmann*. “If today there is no longer any clear figure of the sacred man [who can be killed but not sacrificed], it is perhaps because we are all virtually homines sacri.”¹⁵

Dominick LaCapra makes this point about Agamben’s confusion of poetics with theory very clearly and he doesn’t like it: “In Agamben, moreover, a sustained intricacy of formulation and an insistently paratactic or ‘poetic’ style in philosophy make it both difficult to understand him in a way that enables critical exchange and possible for a sympathetic (or perhaps extremely generous) reader (or overwriter) to gloss questionable passages in a quasi-theological manner that always displaces attention to other, less dubious passages, even if they are to be found in another work.”¹⁶

¹⁴ Calarco and DeCaroli, *Sovereignty & Life*, 241.

¹⁵ Calarco and DeCaroli, *Sovereignty & Life*, 115.

¹⁶ Calarco and DeCaroli, *Sovereignty & Life*, 133-34.

The virus of language that infects the academies forces one to take ideological positions on fictive grounds. This is what Paul DeMan referred to as the “resistance of theory.” The aesthetic object, the man/animal or animal/man, of Burroughs, Kafka, Genet, may provide the basis of a new ethics, the ethics of the abject in terms of Agamben, or the positive ethics of the poetic table turner in the Marxist analysis of Bruno Gulli, however the resistance to any such poetic overturning of academic theory, of letting the ghost of Burroughs run the political science department at Harvard seems unlikely.

Works Cited

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