

Going along for the Ride: Violence and Gesture: Agamben Reading Benjamin Reading Kafka Reading Cervantes

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In a book published in French and Italian in 2003 and translated into English as *State of Exception*,¹ as in many of his other writings, Giorgio Agamben refers to the work of Walter Benjamin at particularly decisive points in his argument. In this book, whose title indicates an indebtedness to Carl Schmitt that Agamben shares with Benjamin, the author elaborates a theory of the “state of exception” as the notion through which a certain Western tradition of “biopolitics” seeks to assimilate the heterogeneity on which it depends and thereby to treat it as the integrating element of its own “death machine” (Agamben, *État* 145). The “state of exception” thus serves as the pretext of a violence bent on justifying and reproducing a political-legal system that presents itself as the indispensable condition of that “minimal order” (Schmitt, qtd. in *État* 145) required in order for life to be livable. One particularly emphatic reference to Benjamin by Agamben in this book occurs in chapter 4, “Gigantomachy around a Void,” in which he contrasts Benjamin’s “Critique of Violence” with Schmitt’s theory of the “state of exception” as that which both defines and legitimates the sovereign as the power that can suspend the reign of positive law—of the constitution—allegedly to restore the minimum order required for legality to function. Benjamin, by contrast, in his essay “The Critique of Violence,” develops a notion of violence as radically distinct from all “law” (*Recht, droit*); this form of violence is defined as “pure means”—that is, a “mediality without end” that serves no purpose and therefore has to be “considered independently of the ends it pursues” (*État* 105).

Agamben, always an incisive and suggestive reader of Benjamin, cites a passage from a letter written in 1919 to Ernst Schoen, which argues for a notion of “purity”—*Reinheit*—that is conditional rather than absolute:

The purity of a being is *never* unconditional or absolute; it is always subjected to a condition. This condition always differs depending on the being at issue; *never* however does this condition reside *in the being itself*. In other words: the purity of each (finite) being never depends upon it itself [*ist nicht von ihm selbst abhängig*]. The two beings to which we attribute purity above all are nature and children. For nature the external condition is human language. (Benjamin, *Briefe* 1: 206; qtd. in Agamben, *État* 104)²

To be finite, according to Benjamin, is to depend on something other than itself, on extraneous conditions. “Purity” is thus not a characteristic of immanence, not an unadulterated property that is no more or no less than just itself, but, as Agamben notes, “relational.” In the case of violence, he continues, “purity” should be sought not in “violence itself” (*pas dans la violence même*), but “in its relation to something external” (*État* 104). Anything that defines its “purity” or identity in terms of its relation to something else can, of course, be considered to relate to that something else as a “means” to an “end.” But in the “Critique of Violence,” Benjamin explicitly excludes this traditional and teleological conception of “means,” a move that for Agamben is of the greatest significance:

Here appears the theme—which shines only for an instant, and yet long enough to illuminate the text in its entirety—of violence as “pure means,” which is to say, as the figure of a paradoxical “mediality without end”: i.e., a means that, while remaining such, is considered independently of the ends it pursues. (Agamben, *État* 105)

For the Benjamin of the “Critique of Violence,” it is easy to identify the “end” that must be excluded in order to arrive at a critique of violence—of its conditions of possibility (and perhaps also of impossibility)—it is *Recht*: “right” or Law (with a capital L) as that which informs the realm of positive laws (small l) and the reign of legality. But it is far more difficult to describe in positive terms the alternative relationship that would comprise the condition of violence as a means without end, a “pure” means. Agamben takes up Benjamin’s suggestion at the end of the passage quoted above, in which language is described as the Other of nature—“For nature the external condition is human language.” In his 1916 essay on “Language in General and the Language of Man in Particular,” Benjamin defines the purity of language as consisting in its ability to communicate nothing other than “communicability pure and simple,” which Agamben then applies to pure violence as well:

Just as, in his essay on language, language is pure when it is not an instrument serving the end of communication but rather communicates it-

self immediately, i.e., communicates a communicability pure and simple; so too violence is pure when it does not find itself in a relation of means to end but rather maintains itself in relation to its very mediality [*avec sa médialité même*]. (Agamben, *État* 106)

The “paradoxical figure” that Agamben associates with a “mediality without end” recurs in his paraphrase of Benjamin’s notion of “pure language” just quoted, but in a slightly different guise, when he describes the mediality of language as that through which language communicates immediately its own communicability. At this point, however, it is necessary to reflect for a moment on the precise formulation used here by Benjamin: the German word used in this context by Benjamin is *Mitteilbarkeit*, usually translated as “communicability,” which in the case of language as such he then qualifies as being “immediate” (*unmittelbar*).³ To translate *Mitteilbarkeit* into English as “communicability,” however, is to efface one of its decisive connotations. A more precise, if less idiomatic, translation that has on occasion been employed is “impartibility.”⁴ But there is perhaps an even better possibility in English, one that is both more literal and more idiomatic, although it resists nominalization and thus cannot be used everywhere. This option is “parting with” (*teilen* = to part, *mit-* = with). The mediality of language would thus consist in a movement that separates from itself, and yet—here, the paradox of what Benjamin himself in that early essay calls the “magic” of language—in so doing, establishes a relation to itself as Other. In relating (to) itself as Other, it stays “with” that from which it simultaneously de-parts. The “purity” of language as medium would thus consist in the constitutive immediacy of its “ability” to stay with that from which it parts. As a medium, it would be a “means without end” only insofar as the word “without” defines a relation not of simple exclusion or negation, but one of participation with the “out”-side of an irreducible and yet constitutive exteriority.⁵

With respect to violence, Agamben formulates its analogical relation to the mediality of language as follows:

And just as pure language is not another language, does not occupy any place other than that of natural, communicating languages, showing itself in them by exposing them as such, in the same manner pure violence reveals itself only as the *exposing and deposing* of the relation between violence and right. This is what Benjamin suggests immediately following [the passages quoted], by evoking the theme of violence which, as anger, is never a means but only a manifestation [*Manifestation*]. [. . .] Pure violence *exposes and cuts* the bond between right and violence, and can thus appear not as violence that governs or executes [*schaltende*], but as vio-

lence that purely acts and manifests itself [*waltende*]. (Agamben, *État* 106; emphasis added)

In this elaboration of Benjamin's notions of "purity" and "mediality" as they operate in his conceptions both of "language" and "violence," Agamben deploys a series of conceptual couples that are as suggestive as they are enigmatic: "exposing and deposing," "exposes and cuts," "executes [. . . and] acts [or] manifests." From the latter pair, however, it is clear that these concepts only reproduce the paradox of a "mediality without end," or as Benjamin formulates it, of a mediality that would be "immediate," un-medi-able (*un-mittel-bar*), by defining the latter ultimately as a function of the self, as a kind of self-reflexivity—as "violence that purely acts and manifests itself." If, however, the Benjaminian notion of purity is "not substantial but relational" (Agamben, *État* 104), then how can the purity of violence consist in an action that manifests violence "itself" or "as such," apart from every exteriority, from everything other than itself? Or is there a kind of manifestation, a kind of act that is defined precisely through just such a relation to something other than itself? What, in short, is involved in a violence that is *waltend* but not *schaltend*? Can the two be as clearly separated or distinguished as Agamben, following Benjamin, seems to believe?⁶

It is in the perspective of such unresolved questions that Agamben turns briefly to Benjamin's reading of Kafka to indicate a possible alternative to the biopolitical "death machine" sustained by a "state of exception" that suspends the rule of law only to totalize it in and as its other. Agamben focuses on two passages in Benjamin's Kafka interpretation. The first is contained in a letter to Scholem, in which Benjamin distinguishes his own reading of Kafka from that of his correspondent: "Your point of departure is the [. . .] soteriological [*heilsgeschichtlichen*] perspective opened by the trial proceeding; mine is the tiny absurd hope, as well as the creatures who on the one hand are concerned by this hope, but in whom on the other its absurdity is mirrored" (*Briefe* 2: 617). The second passage quoted by Agamben is from another letter written by Benjamin to Scholem and concerns the relation of the text to those who study it:

Whether the text [*die Schrift*: scripture] has been lost by the students, or whether they cannot decipher it, amounts to the same since without its key, the text is not text but life. Life as it is conducted [*geführt*] in the village at the foot of the castle. (*Briefe* 2: 618; qtd. in Agamben, *État* 107)

Agamben does not cite another remark of Benjamin's in the same letter that lends further support to his general interpretation and thesis. It concerns the status of the "law" in Kafka's work:

Kafka's own insistence upon the law I consider to be the dead point [*Totenpunkt*] of his work, by which I mean only that it cannot serve interpretation as a fulcrum from which to set the work into motion. (*Briefe* 2: 618)

It is worth noting that Benjamin's notion of "interpretation" here does not involve reproducing the essence or meaning of the work as is but, rather, setting the work into motion. As such, interpretation seems akin to the relational notion of "purity" previously discussed. Thus, Benjamin's reading of Kafka does not seek to elucidate the religious doctrine that might be implicit in the work, but rather to bring out those aspects that call for change and transformation, for a certain "movement." The category that Benjamin invokes has a Hölderlinian resonance: *Umkehr*, "inversion," reversal, or turn-about.⁷ And he glosses this in a passage that Agamben does not cite: "Kafka's messianic category is 'reversal' or study" (*Briefe* 2: 618). Agamben, who does not dwell here on the notion of reversal, places the motif of "study" at the center of his reading of Benjamin's reading of Kafka:

To the baring [*mise à nu*] of mythical-juridical violence effectuated by pure violence corresponds, in the essay on Kafka, as a kind of vestige, the enigmatic image of a legality [*d'un droit*] that is no longer practiced but only studied [. . .] a legality without force or application, like that into whose study the "new lawyer" [reference is to Kafka's story of that name] plunges in leafing through "our old codes." [. . .] What could be the sense of a law that were thus to survive its deposing [*sa déposition*]? The difficulty encountered here by Benjamin corresponds to a problem that can be formulated [. . .] in the following terms: what happens to the law after its messianic fulfillment [*son accomplissement messianique*]? (This is precisely the controversy that opposes Paul to his Jewish contemporaries.) And what happens to the law in a classless society? (This is precisely the debate between Vychinski and Pasukanis.) [. . .] What is important here is that the law—not practiced but studied—is not justice but only the gate that leads to it. What opens a passage toward justice is not the annulling of law, but its deactivation and dereliction [*la désactivation et le désœurement*!—which is to say, another use of it. (Agamben, *État* 109)

In the studies of Kafka's students as Benjamin reads them, Agamben finds the suggestion of an alternative "use" of law, one that would no longer be "contaminated" by application and enforcement and hence would be "liberated from its own value" as use-value: "This liberation is the task of study—or of play," he concludes, inasmuch as

such an activity can relate to the world as something “absolutely un-appropriable” and therefore incommensurate with any judicial order (Agamben, *État* 109).

From what, however, would such “study” or “play”—and I will shortly try to examine their possible relationship—liberate? Agamben’s response conflates Schmitt and Derrida, for it points to the spectrality of a “law” maintaining itself in and through the state of exception. “Study” and “play” would thus presumably provide a liberating alternative to “the process of an infinite deconstruction, which, by virtue of maintaining law in a spectral life, is no longer capable of ever getting to the end of it [in the sense of finishing up with it: in French, *ne parvient plus à en venir à bout*]” (Agamben, *État* 108). Thus, whereas according to Agamben, deconstruction interminably maintains the rule of law in a spectral state of suspended animation, the suspension of the practice of law in its study, or in play, opens the way to a “definitive liberation” (Agamben, *État* 109).

Agamben’s powerful and challenging reading of Benjamin on Kafka thus provides him with a glimpse of a positive alternative both to the Schmittian state of exception and to Derridean spectrality. It rests on an interpretation of Kafka’s characters as engaging and suspending not the rule of law as such, but rather its auto-suspension and spectral reproduction in the state of exception. Since such engagement and suspension are tied, by Agamben reading Benjamin reading Kafka, to the figures of the “students,” let us take a closer look at the role they play in the texts of Benjamin and Kafka.

Benjamin introduces his discussion of them with a brief story. In a Chassidic village one Saturday evening, after the end of the Sabbath, a group of Jews are sitting in a tavern discussing what they would choose if each were granted the fulfillment of a single wish. One opts for money, the next for a son-in-law, yet another for a work bench, and so on. At the end, only the village beggar is left, and after some hesitation, this is the wish he relates:

“I wish I was a powerful king ruling in a distant land and lay asleep at night in my palace and from the outermost border [of the country] the enemy attacks and before dawn cavalry reaches my castle without meeting any resistance and I awake in a panic without any time even to get dressed and have to flee with only a shirt to my name and am pursued through mountains and valleys, forests and hills and without rest day and night until I land safe here on the bench in your corner. That’s what I would wish.” The others stare at him clueless. “And what would this wish get you?” “A shirt” was the answer. (*GS* 2: 433)

"This story," Benjamin comments, "leads deep into the household of Kafka's world." And he elaborates with a messianic allusion that can be found frequently in his writings, although here it seems to raise as many questions as it answers: "After all, no one says that the distortions (*die Entstellungen*) that the coming of the Messiah will one day set right (*zurechtrücken*: straighten out) concern only our space. They also certainly affect our time" (*GS* 2: 433). In this perspective, the beggar's wish is not to rule forever, to *walten*, but rather more modestly to survive for a while, if only with a "shirt" on his back—and to his name.⁸ Without bothering to give the slightest commentary or gloss on this story he has just recounted, Benjamin then goes on to recite a short text from Kafka's collection *The Country Doctor* titled "The Next Village." In it, a grandfather expresses the following concern:

"Life is so astonishingly short. Now in memory it seems so compressed, that for example I can barely comprehend how a young man can decide to ride to the next village without fearing that—not even considering unlucky accidents—even the time of our usual, happily passing life will never be sufficient for such a ride." (qtd. in *GS* 2: 433)

It is necessary to keep in mind this sense of urgency to situate Benjamin's reading of Kafka's students. For, Benjamin continues, there is one group among Kafka's creatures that "in a very peculiar manner reckons with the brevity of life." This group includes "fools" and "apprentices" (*Narren* and *Gehilfen*), but its true "spokesmen and rulers" are the students. Benjamin introduces them through this short dialogue, from Kafka's novel *Der Verschollener*, formerly translated as *Amerika* and more recently as *The Man Who Disappeared*:

"But when do you sleep?" Karl asked and stared at the student in amazement. —"Yes, sleep!" said the student. "I'll sleep when I'm finished with my studies." (qtd. in *GS* 2: 434)

To study is, among other things, to learn by rote, to remember, and, perhaps above all, to repeat. But in listening and observing the student, it becomes clear that there will never be enough time to get to the end of it all—*d'en venir à bout*—before it is time to stop. And yet the response to this dilemma is to repeat it. And yet, or because of this situation, the student responds to Karl's question—"But when do you sleep?"—not by answering it but by repeating its final word in what could almost be an affirmation: "Ja, schlafen!" Which would perhaps best be rendered in English as "Sleep . . . yes!"⁹ But far from being a sign of agreement, the student's affirmative iteration only

echoes the question. And what follows—“I’ll sleep when I’ve finished my studies”—puts off the response indefinitely. If, as Benjamin suggests, the students are the *Wortführer*, the spokesmen of that “tribe” (*Sippe*) “that in the most peculiar way reckons with the brevity of life,” then this response affirms only that the question has arrived, has been heard, even understood, but nothing more.

Benjamin comments on this passage: “In their studies the students keep watch [*wachen die Studenten*]. The hunger artist fasts, the doorkeeper keeps silent and the students keep watch [*wachen*]” (*GS* 2: 434).¹⁰ The *wachen* of the students is not watchful waiting as much as it is watchful waking: that of the insomniac. There is nothing to wait for; these studies lead to nothing, least of all to fresh knowledge. And yet, they are still far from worthless, as Benjamin makes clear:

Perhaps these studies amounted to nothing [*sind ein Nichts gewesen*]. But if so, they stand in close proximity to that nothing, which alone makes anything useful [*brauchbar*—namely, the Tao. (*GS* 2: 435)¹¹

Benjamin’s reference here to the dependence of everything useful—*brauchbar*—on a certain “nothingness”—*Nichts*—recalls Agamben’s arguments in *State of Exception*. But when Benjamin elucidates Kafka’s Tao by citing a passage from *The Chinese Wall*, it becomes evident that his way leads in a different direction from that envisaged by Agamben. For it goes in the direction not of “play” but rather of a certain kind of handwork, such as that involved in the following passage from Kafka, cited by Benjamin:

Hammering a table together with such excruciatingly precise skill [*peinlich ordentliche Handwerksmäßigkeit*] that one could not say, “For him such hammering is nothing at all,” but rather “For him such hammering is real hammering [*ein wirkliches Hämmern*] and at the same time nothing at all [*auch ein Nichts*]”; with the result that the hammering would become even bolder, more determined, more real and, if you like, more insane. (*GS* 2: 435)

The specificity of the kind of “use” or practice involved in such “real hammering,” which at the same time is “nothing at all,” involves a factor that does not seem to play a significant role in Agamben’s considerations, although one might expect it to, given its importance in the complex relation of “law” to “life” that is the dominant concern of *State of Exception*. That factor is repetition.¹² Thus, the appropriation of “life” by “law” through the state of exception can also be seen as the effort to install and impose a certain repetitiveness on a singular-

ity that is no less involved in repetition, but in a different way. For the singular (as distinct from the individual) can only appear—and indeed is only conceivable—as the vestigial or spectral aftereffect of a repetition, as that which does not disappear in the reproduction of the identical and yet which by itself is “nothing at all.” Like the “pure,” the “singular” is “purely” relational.

It is this dimension of repetition that constitutes the medium of the student's studying, as it is described in Kafka's text.¹³ In other words, if, according to Benjamin's remark cited by Agamben, the students no longer possess the “key” to the texts over which they pore, and if this is tantamount to equating those texts with “life,” then this transformation of text into life can also be described as the transformation of repetition from a process aimed at reproducing identity to one that allows for the aporetical resurgence of the singular: aporetical because the singular as such is not identically repeatable, reproducible, unique—but its uniqueness is also not separable from a certain repetition. Such repetition “produces” the uniqueness of the unrepeatable in the form of those unexpected, often uncontrolled movements that Benjamin designates as “gestures” (*Gebärde, Gestus* [GS 2: 435]). And it is precisely in a certain kind of repetitive “gesture” that Benjamin sees the similarity between the studying of the students and that “hammering” that at the same time is “real” and yet also “nothing at all”:

It is just such a decisive, fanatical gesture [*Gebärde*] that the students [*die Studierenden*] have in their studies [*bei ihrem Studium*]. Nothing could conceivably be more bizarre. The scribes, the students are out of breath. They are always chasing off after something [*Sie jagen nur so dahin*]. (GS 2: 435)

It is in such unpredictably spasmodic and interruptive “gestures” that the students, in their own peculiar way—*auf eigentümlicher Weise*—“reckon with” a time that is always in danger of running out. The gestures of the students combine the most extreme concentration with the most hectic exertion, bordering on loss of control. The student that Karl encounters one evening on the balcony of the building in which they both rent rooms spends most of his time reading, “accompanied by rapid lip-movements,” a rapidity that Karl finds repeated:

He watched silently as the [student] read his book, turned the pages, now and then looked something up in another book that he grasped with lightning-like rapidity (*mit blitzesschnelle Ergriff*), and often jotted down notes in a notebook, whereby surprisingly he always sank his face deep into the notebook. (Kafka 215)

“Gesture,” which here renders the student faceless, is, according to Benjamin, the decisive medium of Kafka’s writing. Although he does not dwell on this point in his discussion of Benjamin’s reading of Kafka in *State of Exception*, Agamben does deal with the subject briefly, but again very suggestively, in his short “Notes on Gesture,” published originally in book form in 1978 and first translated into English in *Infancy and History*.¹⁴ Although he is not mentioned by name in them, these “Notes” owe much to Walter Benjamin, whose shadow looms large over an argument that looks to cinema for the reintroduction of gestures into the image: “Cinema leads images back into the realm of gesture. [. . .] Bringing the element of awakening into this dream is the task of the film-maker” (Agamben, *Infancy* 139).

Strangely and significantly, it is not in the more obvious allusions to Benjamin that the most pertinent part of these notes is contained, at least insofar as the essay on Kafka is concerned. Rather, it is in a concluding quote from Varro, which situates gesture “in the sphere of action,” while distinguishing “it clearly from acting (*agere*) and doing (*facere*):

“A person can make [*facere*] something and not enact [*agere*] it, as when a poet makes a play, but does not act it [*agere* in the sense of playing a part]; on the other hand, the actor acts the play but does not make it. So the play is made [*fit*] by the poet, but not acted [*agitur*] by him; it is acted by the actor, but not made by him. Whereas the *imperator* (the magistrate in whom supreme power is invested) of whom the expression *res gerere* is used (to carry something out, in the sense of taking it upon oneself, assuming total responsibility for it), neither makes nor acts, but takes charge, in other words bears the burden of it [*sustinet*].” (*De lingua* 6.77; qtd. in Agamben, *Infancy* 139–40)¹⁵

Varro’s distinction between the poet who makes the play, the actor who acts in it, and the *imperator*, who “neither makes nor acts but takes charge” and assumes the burden of carrying out the act, is illuminating with respect to the peculiar status of Kafka’s students as read by Benjamin. For it is above all in the acting of actors on a stage that Benjamin finds the most telling confirmation of the gestures of the student, both in their suddenness and in their repetitive mixture of reality and nothingness:

Actors must be quick as lightning in catching their cues. And also in other respects they resemble these assiduous students [*diesen Beflissenen*]. For them in fact “hammering [is] real hammering and at the same time nothing at all”—namely, when it is part of their role. They study these roles; only a bad actor would forget any of its words or gestures. (*GS* 2: 435)

The actor, like the student, is a reader, and, above all, a reader whose reading involves memory, attention, speed, and surprise. And the sense or purpose of his acting cannot be separated from its execution, its performance: in that sense, it is like that “hammering” that is both “real hammering and at the same time nothing at all,” since it accomplishes nothing that can be separated from its own repetition. At the same time, Varro’s reference to the *imperator* is no less illuminating, since it highlights, by contrast, what is particularly *eigentümlich*—distinctively peculiar—about the students and actors. Neither of the latter “carry through” or “take charge” in the way Varro attributes to the *imperator*. They do not “bear” the same “burden.” A remark by Agamben from the final chapter of *State of Exception* helps clarify this complex relationship. In that chapter, in a section discussing precisely a passage from the *Res Gestae* of Augustus, Agamben cites the latter’s distinction between the impersonal power of governing officials (*magistrat*) and the notion of “authority” usually associated with the emperor, which is held to be inseparable from his person (Agamben, *State* 136). Agamben thus insists on the “incarnation of an Auctoritas” in “the physical person” of the sovereign, such that the death of that person creates a problem that does not exist with respect to “magistrates.” In this, he sees a forerunner of the “charismatic” Führer or Leader of modern fascism, which belongs “to the bio-political tradition of auctoritas and not to the juridical tradition of potestas” (*State* 140). It is this tradition that foresees a convergence of law and life in the “exceptional” figure of the individual Sovereign or Leader that marks the transformation of “the juridical-political system into a [biopolitical] death machine” (*State* 145).

It is this convergence that is powerfully disrupted and interrupted by the gestures of students and actors, whose studying and acting are both real and nothing at all, which is to say, lead to nothing separable from their own repetitive and spectral reenactment. Such repetitive and spectral reenactment subverts the very notion of “act” as “actualization”: acting is not action but reaction and response, which is why the “actor” is as far removed from the man of action as the stage is from the sage. Or as far removed as are the student’s “gestures” from any form of self-expression.¹⁶ The student’s face is hidden by the gesture with which his head sinks into his books. The gestures of actors or students do not express their selves but rather expose and undo those selves irremediably—which is to say, also, for Benjamin at least, theatrically. The great “chance” of theater, its sole chance to survive

the challenge of the new media, he situated in its *Exponierung des Anwesenden*: in its age-old capacity to “expose the present” in the double sense of that word, including both those present, the “audience” or *Publikum*—a word Benjamin never cared for—and the “present,” insofar as it entails a temporal moment considered to be self-contained and self-enclosed. Benjamin’s notion of gesture entails the interruption and disruption of all such self-containment, and it does this by staging finitude. In his essay “What Is Epic Theater?” Benjamin provides the following account of gesture:

In opposition to the actions and undertakings of people [gesture] has a determinable beginning and a determinable end [*einen fixierbaren Anfang und ein fixierbares Ende*]. This strict frame-like closure of each element of a posture [*Haltung*: bearing], which nevertheless as a whole is situated within the flow of life, is even one of the dialectical foundations [*Grundpositionen*] of gesture. From this an important conclusion follows: gestures are all the more prevalent where an acting subject [*einen Handelnden*] is interrupted. (GS 2: 521)

Gesture thus interrupts not just the “flow of life” in which it is situated, but also its two most essential constituents: the goal-directed action of a subject, “eine[n] Handelnden,” and the end-directed movement of a *Handlung*, a plot or story, but also an action: “For epic theater therefore the interruption of the plot [*der Handlung*] is paramount” (GS 2: 521). In thus interrupting the “flow of life” and the flow of intentional activity, gestures expose and deface the people who “make” them far less than those persons are unmade and undone by them. Just such a gesture accompanies the end of the scene in which Karl encounters the student. Karl has asked him for advice as to whether he should leave his current position, in which he feels himself badly exploited. The answer he receives takes him by surprise: the student tells him to stay where he is.

“You advise me, then, to stay with Delamarche?” Karl asked.

“Absolutely,” said the student, his head already sinking into his books. *It seemed as if it were not he who had said those words; as though spoken by a voice that was deeper than that of the student, they resonated long after in Karl’s ears.* Slowly he went to the curtain, glanced back a last time at the student, who now sat utterly immobile in the light of the lamp, surrounded by profound darkness, and then slipped back into his room. (Kafka 215; emphasis added)

The voice responding to Karl’s uncertainty about what to do echoes in his memory as though it had been disembodied, separated from the

person ostensibly uttering it, its authority one of disincarnation and yet in no way detached from the body; it is the voice of a specter rather than of a spirit, its “deeper” tone suggesting a person far older than the presumably still relatively young student. The voice removes itself from the person to whom it is supposed to belong and resounds in memory before fading away into the silent image of the student sitting motionless in the spotlight of the lamp, surrounded by darkness. This echoing and fading away of the voice—its *Verschallen*—is what defines the “Verschollener.”

“The gate to justice is study,” remarks Benjamin, and the study of the law, Agamben adds, when it comes to replace and supplant its practice, can prepare the way to “liberate” things from their “proper value,” rendering them “absolutely unappropriable” (Agamben, *État* 109) and perhaps also absolutely inappropriate. Study, for Benjamin no less than for Kafka, is inseparable from reading, even and perhaps especially where the text or script or key has been lost: “To read what never was written” was a phrase of Hofmannsthal that Benjamin was fond of quoting. At the end of his Kafka essay, not just “on” or “about” Kafka, but which is dated and dedicated to the “10th anniversary of his death”¹⁷ (GS 2: 409), Benjamin provides an instance of just what such a reading, which repeats that which never was and thereby sets Kafka into motion, might entail. In a short piece, he suggests, Kafka may have “found the law of his journey” and succeeded, “at least once,” in “bringing its breathtaking speed in line with that epically measured step that he no doubt spent his entire life searching for. He entrusted it to a text [*Niederschrift*] that became his most consummate not merely because it is an interpretation:

“Sancho Pansa, who moreover never boasted about it, succeeded over the years, by amassing lots of chivalry and adventure novels for the evening and night hours, in so distracting from him his devil, to whom he subsequently gave the name Don Quixote, that the latter flamboyantly performed [*aufführte*] the craziest deeds, which however for lack of a pre-determined object, which should have been Sancho Pansa, did no one any harm. Sancho Pansa, a free man, perhaps out of a certain sense of responsibility, followed Don Quixote on his crusades, with an even temper, and gleaned from them great and useful entertainment until his end.” (Kafka, qtd. in GS 2: 438; English: *Writings* 2: 816–17)

Benjamin glosses this briefly but conclusively:

Sober fool and hapless assistant, Sancho Pansa sent his rider before him. Bucephalus outlived his. Whether man or horse no longer matters so much as long as the burden is lifted from one’s back. (GS 2: 438)

Sancho Pansa's gesture, which follows rather than leads, has little in common with the imperial *res gestae*, for its "thing" is not action but acting, or rather restaging a spectacle and following it out. Or, as Benjamin puts it in the already quoted letter to Scholem (11 August 1934): "Sancho Pansa's existence [*Dasein*] is exemplary [*musterhaft*] because it consists essentially in rereading his own [*im Nachlesen des eigenen*], however foolish and quixotic" (*Briefe* 2: 618). And if we follow and reread Kafka's short account and Benjamin's even shorter gloss, we may discover that in interpreting (*Auslegung*), rereading, and restaging one's own life, a repetition takes place that lifts the burden from the subject who would be sovereign, granting him a certain freedom—that of divesting himself of his rider and simply going along for the ride.

POSTSCRIPTUM

"Going along for the ride" is not quite as simple or straightforward as it might seem. Following one's master as a "free man" may seem a far cry from a certain messianic pathos of salvation and redemption that can be found in the writings of both Agamben and Benjamin. But perhaps it is not as unrelated to that pathos as it might appear.

This at least is what begins to emerge from the short concluding chapter of Agamben's most recent book, *Profanations*. There, Agamben returns to Sancho Pansa, whom he now follows into a movie theater somewhere in the provinces. Sancho is looking for Don Quixote, whom he finds in the theater, seated on the side of the screen. But as the theater is full of children, Sancho cannot get through to Don Quixote. He is forced to take a seat in the back, and finds himself next to a young girl—"(*Dulcinea?*)" conjectures the text parenthetically. The girl offers him a candy. Then, the film begins and shows a lady in distress: Don Quixote draws his sword and proceeds to demolish the screen, leaving only its empty wooden framework to receive, and efface, the images projected. All this meets with the wholehearted approval of the audience of children—with one exception. The little girl, "alone in the hall," fixes Don Quixote with a disapproving stare.

Of the moral of the story, which Agamben, unlike Kafka and Benjamin, does not hesitate to conclude (*GS* 2: 445–46),¹⁸ I will retain here only the following: it is simply that "Dulcinea, whom we saved, cannot love us" (Agamben, *Profanations* 120). The little girl next door, as it were, could not approve of Don Quixote's spectacular demoli-

tions, however laudable their intention. And the narrator must confess that the price of those demolitions is high.

But who is this “we” who “saved Dulcinea” and who now realizes that he will not be loved in return? Is it Don Quixote? Sancho? The author?

One of the most insistent motifs of *Profanations* stresses the imperative need of restoring or reinventing a certain separation—akin to that through which the opposition of the sacred and the profane was constituted and maintained. For it is just this separation, Agamben asserts, that is in danger of extinction today by what Benjamin, in “Capitalism and Religion,” described as the “cult religion of capitalism.” This cult, Agamben argues, has both universalized and abolished separation—and with it, the possibility of profanation as well.¹⁹ In the light of this critique, it is noteworthy that Agamben’s restaging of Benjamin reading Kafka reading Cervantes seems in turn to suspend, if not abolish, the separation—and with it the distinction—that was so decisive in the previous scenarios from which he draws: that between Sancho Pansa and Don Quixote. In Agamben’s version, Sancho, in the foreground at first, is suddenly and definitively eclipsed once Don Quixote springs into action, so that at the end of the story, the narrator appears to speak in the name of both. Moreover, this speaking is couched in the first-person plural, providing the book with a resounding conclusion, which echoes the first-person-plural discourse that dominates not just this book but most of Agamben’s other writings as well. It is the “we” of a (not only grammatical) subject that precisely by virtue of its redemptive ambition seems justified in assuming the first-person plural, however ironic, disabused, and melancholic its tone may be.

And yet, what Agamben has noted elsewhere with respect to “Kafka’s allegories”—namely, “that at their very end they contain a possibility of an about-face that completely upsets their meaning”²⁰—seems to apply here to his own “allegory” as well. All that is required to upset the reading just given, for instance, is to focus on the invisible, just as Benjamin, citing Hofmannsthal and quoted by Agamben, sought to “read what had never been written.”²¹ The reader need only recall the figure of Sancho Pansa, who in the meantime has vanished from the scene, in order to imagine another scenario that might follow the antics of Don Quixote in that remote provincial movie theater: one beginning, perhaps, with an exchange of glances between Sancho and his disgruntled neighbor and that continues with the gift of another lollipop. . . .

Such a sequel would only demonstrate the trait that for Benjamin distinguishes the genuine story from other epic forms: the fact that

once it is over, one is always justified in asking, "What happened next?" ("Wie ging es weiter?").²²

To be continued . . .

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NOTES

1. Giorgio Agamben, *État d'Exception*, 2003. *State of Exception*, translated by Kevin Attell, 2005. Translations into English are mine.

2. Except for the first two words, emphasis added.

3. "Das Mediale, das ist die *Unmittelbarkeit* aller geistigen Mitteilung, ist das Grundproblem der Sprachtheorie, und wenn man diese *Unmittelbarkeit* magisch nennen will, so ist das Urproblem der Sprache ihre Magie" ("The medial, which is [to say] the *immediacy* [more literally, *unmediability*] of all spiritual imparting is the fundamental problem of the theory of language, and if this immediacy can be called magic, then the originary problem of language is its magic" [my translation]) *GS* 2: 142.

4. On the relationship of *Unmittelbarkeit* and *Mittelbarkeit*, see the remarkable text of Werner Hamacher, "Intensive Sprachen." An English translation of this article is in preparation.

5. Cf. Derrida, "Le sans de la coupure pure."

6. This question is already posed by Benjamin's transformation of the common German idiom, which pairs *schalten* and *walten* to suggest unrestricted control or domination. By condemning and rejecting a "mythical" violence that either posits law or sustains and administers (*verwaltet*) it, in the name of a "divine" violence that is neither *schaltend* nor *verwaltend* but rather *waltend*, Benjamin places a heavy burden on this linguistic-semantic distinction, which can also be seen to hang on the presence or absence of the prefix *ver-*: *verwaltend* vs. *waltend*. The only other determination provided by Benjamin at the end of his highly enigmatic "Critique of Violence" is, however, not without a certain pertinence for the questions raised by Agamben. For Benjamin does not end his distinction of *schaltend* and *waltend* before noting that the latter, by virtue of its being "purely immediate" (*als reine unmittelbare*), is "never the means of sacred execution [*heiliger Vollstreckung*]" but rather "insignia and seal" (*Insignium und Siegel*). These two words may provide a precious hint as to the distinction Benjamin is introducing between *schalten* and *walten*. Both words involve a certain relation of force. *Schalten*, "switching" or "shifting," presupposes a network of exchanges and circulation and is used today, for instance, to designate an "integrated circuit board" (*Schaltbrett*). It suggests a change of direction, or of "gears"; both of these meanings preserve what seems to have been its earliest significance, that of "setting or keeping in movement" (as in "shoving" or "pushing" a boat with poles. Cf. Duden's *Herkunftswörterbuch*, 620). *Walten*, on the other hand, which is far less frequently used in current German, derives from words meaning "to be strong, to dominate" and suggests a more direct manifestation of

strength, but one which is still, to use Agamben's terms, more "relational" than "substantial." Whereas *schalten* suggests a change in direction, *walten* connotes the overcoming of resistances and a certain imposing of "sameness." What happens when this imposition is construed as "insignia and seal" is a question to which we will return later in this article. But even at this point, it is impossible to ignore how Benjamin's choice of terms echoes the celebrated formula of Nietzsche: "To impress the character of being upon becoming—that is the highest will to power" ("Dem Werden den Charakter des Seins aufzuprägen – das ist die höchste Wille zur Macht" (*Werke* 3: 895).

7. Hölderlin develops his notion of the "patriotic reversal" (*vaterländische Umkehr*) in his comments to Sophocles' *Antigone*, noting that "patriotic reversal is the reversal of all forms and modes of representation" (375). In his seminar on Hölderlin's poem, the *Ister* (1942), Heidegger translates *Umkehr* as "catastrophe," noting that in the second chorus of *Antigone*, "man is one single catastrophe," but adding that far from being simply a calamity, this may also constitute his most profound possibility.

8. Although this is probably not the place to go into it, it should at least be noted that the beggar's wish—and the Jewish joke that it punctuates—operates a convergence between Nietzsche's thought of the Eternal Return and Benjamin's ambivalent relation to the Messianic. In what way the affirmation of the Eternal Return might "straighten" or "iron out"—*zurechtrücken*—the distortions and displacements (*Entstellungen*) of time is a question that will have to be addressed elsewhere.

9. It can be noted that this is also a common topos of Yiddish humor: instead of responding to a question, the question is repeated and transformed. The "yes"—"Ja"—does not simply affirm but also reaffirms what the question itself seeks to forget.

10. On "keeping," see Kamuf, "Peace Keeping the Other War."

11. Werner Hamacher has convincingly demonstrated that Benjamin's source for this passage—as well as for many others—is Franz Rosenzweig's *Star of Redemption*. Rosenzweig describes there the *Tao* as "effecting without acting; only deedlessly. [. . .] It is that which, by being 'nothing,' makes a something 'useful' [. . .]" ("Gesture in the Name" 333). Hamacher's reference to this passage from Rosenzweig is also of extreme relevance to Agamben's most recent publication, *Profanations* (2005), which I will discuss briefly at the end of this text. The notion of "profanation" elaborated by Agamben depends entirely on a notion of "use" (*usage*) as a practice cut off from a goal or product, and thus very close to what Benjamin, following Rosenzweig but with a theatrical turn, describes with reference to Kafka.

12. In an earlier discussion of Benjamin, "Benjamin and the Demonic," Agamben does seem to recognize the decisive importance of repetition for Benjamin's thinking: "The dialectic of the singular and the repeatable to which Benjamin entrusts his philosophy of history and his ethics must necessarily reckon with the categories of origin, Idea, and phenomenon that he develops in the 'Epistemological-Critical Preface' to *The Origin of the German Mourning Play*. [. . .] The more one analyzes Benjamin's thought, the more it appears—contrary to a common impression—to be animated by a

rigorously systematic intention" (*Potentialities* 155). However, Agamben does not seem to have pursued this insight into the "systematic" significance of the notion of repetition for Benjamin—perhaps because the soteriology that informs his thought, even before its turn to Foucault and the critique of a juridically structured "biopolitics," leaves little room for repetition, in sharp contrast to Benjamin. Thus, his interpretation of Benjamin's notion of salvation opposes the old to the new as though they were mutually exclusive: "What is saved is what never was, something new. [. . .] In historical redemption what happens in the end is what never took place. This is what is saved" (*Potentialities* 158).

13. Already, the revised title, *Der Verschollene*, in contrast to its English translation as *The Man Who Disappeared*, suggests a certain repetition: someone who is *verschollen* has not been "heard from again," someone whose (acoustical) trace has been lost. The German word connotes the acoustical fading away of a *Schellen* or *Schall*, a resonance that has become inaudible.

14. Agamben, "Notes on Gesture," *Infancy* 135–40.

15. In the English translation, these "Notes" are either truncated or were expanded subsequently by Agamben. The "Notes sur le Geste" that are published in the French edition of *Moyens sans fins* contain a commentary on the Varro citation that goes very much in the direction I elaborate in this article. In it, Agamben defines the gesture as that which "exhibits a mediality, renders visible a means as such" and relates it to theatrical practices such as "dance" and "mimicry." In an argument that is manifestly indebted to Benjamin—without, however, referring to Benjamin's own theory of gesture, for instance, in the essay on Kafka—Agamben defines the gesture with respect to language as that which exposes the mediality of language: "The gesture in this sense is communication of a communicability. Properly speaking it has nothing to say because what it shows is the being-in-language of man as pure mediality" (70). The "purity" of language as medium Agamben then relates to the "gag" as that which "gags" the mouth, preventing it from speaking, and relates this to "the improvisation of the actor who thereby seeks to compensate for a lapse of memory [*pallier un trou de mémoire*] or the impossibility to speak." Although Agamben thus brings out the theatricality of the gesture, as this last example demonstrates, he still thinks of it, in part at least, as the result of a conscious intention of a subject—that of the actor seeking to "palliate" for a "hole in memory"—rather than as that which, as we will see in a moment, defaces and undoes the very notion of "man," at least in the case of Kafka's "student."

16. Benjamin saw the political consummation of the ideal of "self-expression" in fascism: "Fascism seeks to organize the newly emerging proletarian masses without touching the property-relations that they strive to abolish. It sees its salvation [*Heil*] in helping the masses express themselves [. . .]" ("Afterword" to "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technical Reproducibility," *GS* 1: 506).

17. Or more literally, "On the 10th recurrence of his death-day" ("Zur 10. Wiederkehr seines Todestages"; *GS* 2: 409).

18. In his essay on "The Teller," Benjamin distinguishes the tale from "information" by its reluctance to provide explanations: "It does not exhaust itself." On the example of a chapter from Herodotus, Benjamin notes:

"Herodotus does not explain anything. His report is as dry as possible. This is why this story from ancient Egypt is still capable, centuries later, to provoke amazement and reflection" ("Der Erzähler," *GS 2*: 445–46).

19. "In its most extreme form, capitalist religion realizes separation as pure form, without separating anything any more" (*Profanations* 102).

20. Agamben, "The Messiah and the Sovereign," *Potentialities* 173.

21. Agamben, "Benjamin and the Demonic," *Potentialities* 158.

22. Benjamin, "Der Erzähler," *GS 2*: 455.

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