

The Open and the Suspension of Being: A Review Article of New Work by Agamben, Heller-Roazen, and Smock

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**Paolo BARTOLONI**

### **The Open and the Suspension of Being: A Review Article of New Work by Agamben, Heller-Roazen, and Smock**

In his book *L'aperto. L'uomo e l'animale* (2002; *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell, 2004), Giorgio Agamben formulates a singularly fascinating yet conceptually complex theory, prefiguring what might be a new meaning and usage of ontology. In brief, Agamben explores the philosophical possibility of an ontology without Being or, rather, of an ontology where the definition of Being arrived at through differentiating between forms of beings (i.e., humans/animals) is suspended. The philosophical suspension we are referring to is brought about by a redefinition of the open (the world) as the locus of a blissful ignorance (*la grande ignoranza*), resulting from a process that disables the historical and cultural determinants of being through an access of memory. Hence the gradual indistinguishableness of humans and animals that takes place in the space of the open. An entry point into Agamben's thought might be gained by contrasting the concept of the open as elaborated in Heidegger's original interpretation of the pre-Socratic notion of *aletheia* with the poetic narration of the open in Rilke's eighth *Duino Elegy*. This is not to say that Heidegger and Rilke are Agamben's only references, far from it. As a matter of fact, in *L'aperto* Rilke is mentioned only briefly to clarify Heidegger's thinking. And yet this comparison -- and clarification -- takes place in one of the most significant chapters of *L'aperto* titled, emblematically, "l'aperto." At the beginning of the chapter we read: "More than ten years later [more than ten years after Heidegger's *Die Grundbegriffe der Metaphysik*], in full world war, Heidegger returns to this concept [the open. The series of seminars Agamben refers to were later collected in the volume *Parmenides*] and traces a summary genealogy of it. That it arose out of the eighth *Duino Elegy* was, in a certain sense, obvious; but in being adopted as the name of being ('the open, in which every being is freed ... is being itself'), Rilke's term undergoes an essential reversal, which Heidegger seeks to emphasize in every way. For in the eighth *Elegy* it is the animal (*die Kreatur*) that sees the open 'with all its eyes,' in distinct contrast to man, whose eyes have instead been 'turned backward' and placed 'like traps' around him. While man always has the world before him -- always only stands 'facing opposite' (*gegenüber*) and never enters the 'pure space' of the outside -- the animal instead moves in the open, in a 'nowhere without the no'" (57) ("Più di dieci anni dopo, in piena Guerra mondiale, Heidegger torna su questo concetto e ne traccia una sommaria genealogia. Che esso provenisse dall'ottava Elegia duinese era, in un certo senso, scontato; ma, nella sua assunzione come nome dell'essere ('l'aperto in cui ogni ente è liberato ... è l'essere stesso'), il termine rilkeano subisce un essenziale rovesciamento, che Heidegger cerca in ogni modo di sottolineare. Nell'ottava Elegia, infatti a vedere l'aperto 'con tutti gli occhi' è l'animale (*die Kreatur*), opposto decisamente all'uomo, i cui occhi sono stati invece 'rivoltati' e posti 'come trappole' intorno ad esso. Mentre l'uomo ha sempre davanti a sé il mondo, sta sempre e soltanto 'di fronte' (*gegenüber*) e non accede mai al 'puro spazio' del fuori, l'animale si muove invece nell'aperto, in un 'da nessuna parte senza non'" [60]).

The stark differences between Rilke's poetization of the open on the one hand, and Heidegger's conceptualization of it on the other, are not only useful to make sense of Heidegger's philosophy but also, and more pointedly, to dig deeper into Agamben's own refinement of Heidegger's thought. Agamben states clearly that Heidegger found and took the notion of the open in and from Rilke's eighth *Elegy* ("That it arose out of the eighth *Duino Elegy* was, in a certain sense, obvious"). And yet this seems to be the only commonality since Rilke's and Heidegger's reading are diametrically opposed (Heidegger calls this opposition "a gaping abyss" ["eine Kluft" 1992, 159]). Whereas in Rilke the animal sees the open ("Mit allen Augen sieht die Kreatur/das Offene" 1942, 76) -- is in the open -- in Heidegger the animal is unaware of it, and therefore shut out from the open. Both Rilke and Heidegger preserve the paradigmatic distinction opposing humans and animals, but while Rilke does it through romantically anthropomorphizing the animal (Heidegger calls it the "hominization of the animal" [*Parmenides* 161]), Heidegger does it by further emphasizing and insisting on the differences. Heidegger's conceptualization of the open is arrived

at through an original rendition of the pre-Socratic notion of *aletheia* (which might be translated as "truth," "uncovering" but also, although more metaphorically, as the "fight against oblivion"). Heidegger thinks of *aletheia* as unconcealment, as the freedom "to-be-there." Humans' freedom, their breaking from the concealed closure in which all creatures are housed is, according to Heidegger, achieved through language. Following in the footsteps of Plato and Aristotle, Heidegger traces the gap separating humans from animals back to language. It is the human's ability to speak, and therefore to enter a dialogue with tradition, that enables beings to come face-to-face with the open and, ultimately with Being. It is this very ability that perhaps has convinced branches of other schools of thought (i.e., natural science, positivism) to interpret the conscious and rational manipulation of the open as a historical and cultural human right. It is in this sense that the spiritual backlash, an example of which is Rilke's eighth *Elegy*, might be interpreted as a reaction to the arrogance of humans who have turned a gift into a banishment. The painful detachment and exile of humans from the open, so powerfully evoked by Rilke, can be read, then, as a separation enforced and brought about by people themselves. Thus, Rilke's "taking leave" ("Abschied nehmen" 80) from the open is not so much a natural condition as a cultural and historical self-inflicted punishment. The systematic critique that Heidegger mounts against both modern metaphysics and positivism, and that Agamben inherits in *L'aperto*, is that of having mistaken being for Being and, as a result of this, of treating the subject (being) as always already confronting a separate and distinct object (the open). This, according to Heidegger, is the great shortcoming of Western metaphysics the final results of which are Nietzsche's philosophy and Rilke's poetry (Heidegger also refers to modern metaphysics as "popular biological metaphysics" [*Parmenides* 158]). And yet this is precisely the moment at which Heidegger's philosophical project comes to an end. In fact, while it is clear that for Heidegger Western metaphysics has exhausted its purpose, the reasons for metaphysics' decline are not totally clear. More importantly, while Heidegger's theorization of *aletheia* as unconcealment, as that which exposes the open ("*aletheia* is the looking of Being into the open that is lighted by it itself as it itself, the open for the unconcealedness of all appearance ["*offen für das Unverborgene alles Erscheinens*" 162]) finds fruitful outcome in Heidegger's analysis of art and poetry -- especially in *Holzwege* and *Unterwegs zur Sprache* -- its ethical and moral significance remain unthought.

In a book that precedes *L'aperto* by about twenty-five years, *Infanzia e storia* (1978; rept. 2001; *Infancy and History: The Destruction of Experience*, 1993), Agamben developed a theory which might help to place the belief in the erosion of metaphysics, shared by many modern and contemporary philosophers and thinkers, into context. Agamben spoke of the typically modern phenomenon of the destruction of experience which is also to be ascribed, as he argued in that book, to the modern inability to tell, hand down, stories. Modernity is the age when experience and tradition, in their conventional understanding, collapsed for a lack of narrative. Now, if language is that which places being opposite the open, metaphysically turning being into the subject of inquiry, the lack of language is also the moment when this confrontation terminates. With the collapse of language as the instrument of communication and the vehicle through which knowledge, and therefore experience and tradition are transferred, the very basis of Western metaphysics, that is the presence of the subject, is under threat. Clearly, Agamben did not state that modern humans had lost the ability to speak, write, and tell stories. On the contrary, they went on to write and tell, and yet this writing and telling were now predicated not so much on a construction of experience as on the destruction of experience. This paradigmatic shift from construction to destruction announces the end of metaphysics and the beginning of a historical and cultural period that is still in the making. Agamben's notion of this destruction is once again a refinement of Heidegger's thought. In fact, in *Was ist das – die Philosophie?* (1956) Heidegger speaks of destruction in ways and terms that leave no doubt about the importance and the impact that they will have for Agamben. On page 71 of the bilingual edition of *What is Philosophy?* we read: "Destruction does not mean destroying but dismantling, demolishing, putting to one side the merely historical assertions about the history of philosophy. Destruction means -- to open our ears, to make ourselves free for what speaks to us in tradition as the Being of being" (71-73). This is a crucial passage not only because it emphasizes the internal coherence of Heidegger's thought,

but also because it sheds more light on Heidegger's understanding of *aletheia*, open and unconcealment. The key element pertaining to Heidegger's conceptualization of *aletheia*, that is the freedom to unconceal being in the open, is brought about by destruction. Paradoxically, and with one of those very typical Heideggerian linguistic summersaults, Heidegger says that destruction does not equate with destruction but with dismantling, demolishing. By dismantling and demolishing Heidegger means a philosophical availability, that is, a frame of mind that will allow a free engagement with the past (tradition, experience). This availability will demolish the constraints that the past has conventionally placed on the present. It is by accepting this new way of hearing, and therefore speaking, that modernity makes Heidegger's project its own. And it is in this sense that Agamben can interpret the language of modernity not as a lesser language. Conversely, he sees the destruction of experience carried out in modernity as the necessary and indispensable shift which decrees at once the end of metaphysics and the beginning of a new ontology and a new philosophy: the coming philosophy.

Again, destruction does not mean unlearning, forgetting how to speak, and unlearning and forgetting how to be human in order to start from scratch (as in more nihilistic modern experimentations, including Nietzsche's philosophy, futurism, and dadaism). It means, rather, to learn how to be really human, and to remember better, more profoundly. And yet this remembering better must perforce pass from a form of oblivion, which is, ultimately, the questioning of what Agamben in *L'aperto* calls the anthropological machine constructed by Western metaphysics. It is perhaps here, at this important juncture revolving around oblivion and remembering that one might attempt to interpret Heidegger's rendition of *aletheia*, and its implied meaning as the fight against oblivion, as part of a broader philosophical project. In order to unconceal itself through a free disposition with the open, being must fight the oblivion consummated by Western metaphysics against Being. It is only by reconstituting itself in the presence of Being that being, according to Heidegger, and after him Agamben, may regain a fuller and more original place in the open. And it is from this place, as Agamben argues in *L'aperto* that a new ethics and politics may commence. *L'aperto*, as many other books by Agamben, must be seen as one in a long series of approaches to what might be considered the original place. It does not describe so much the place as the stages which might be needed in order to reach it. One of these stages is the destruction of experience (the project of *Infanzia e storia*), another one is the suspension of being (the purpose of *L'aperto*). Agamben conceptualizes "l'aperto" by following closely Heidegger's definition of the open as the name of Being and of the world. From Heidegger, he also takes the main distinction between animals (those which are unaware of the open) and humans (those who face the open), as well as the theory of a possible proximity and similarity between humans and animals. It is the latter theory that enables Agamben to carry Heidegger's thought further. In *Parmenides*, Heidegger compares humans' boredom with the stupefied being of the animal in the open. But whereas stupefaction conceals the world to the animal, boredom, especially if and when understood in the meaning of suspension, has the potential to bring humans into the presence of the world and of Being. Through suspending all the actual possibilities open to being by life, the original potentiality of simply Being might emerge. It is at moments of utter boredom and suspension, when ordinary life, and all its countless activities, is emptied and void that being might find itself available to the possibility of Being; in other words, to that possibility before and beyond metaphysics, and before and beyond the politics and ethics of metaphysics. The difference between Heidegger and Agamben is that for the latter these moments of suspension are precisely the moments when humans and animals become suspended in indistinction, and when animality and humanity are momentarily reconciled. These are the moments at which the anthropological machine (*la macchina antropologica*) comes to a halt. Agamben's interpretation of Heidegger's thought can be defined -- using terminology borrowed from Gianni Vattimo -- as an interpretation from the left. In *Oltre l'interpretazione*, Vattimo argues that there are two main approaches to Heidegger's thought: one is the approach from the right which insists on reading Heidegger's work as leading to the recovery of the essence (Being), the other is the approach from the left which understands his philosophy as the suspension of the essence through what Vattimo calls, rather beautifully, the remembrance of the oblivion

("ricordare l'oblio" 18). Remembering to forget the possibilities of being appears, in fact, the premises on which Agamben constructs not only his reading of Heidegger, but also his philosophical project. However, in *L'aperto* oblivion and suspension are not the necessary passages towards recuperating the essence of Being, but the very sites of thinking and ontology.

An exquisite and elegant book by Daniel Heller-Roazen, *Echolalias: On the forgetting of Language* (2005), helps negotiate notions such as oblivion and suspension, contributing original thoughts which superbly integrate and supplement Agamben's project (it should be noted that Heller-Roazen is the translator into English of a series of significant essays by Agamben published in 1999 by Stanford UP with the title of *Potentialities*; many of the essays in the volume tackle rather directly the notion of suspension and the impact that suspension might have in the conceptualization of the potentialities of being). *Echolalias* is divided into twenty-one chapters, some of which are little more than long aphorisms on language and its relation to being/s. They can be read independently or as parts of an intriguingly woven whole, whose pattern and physiognomy will not be missed by the careful reader. However, it is in Chapters XIII and XIV ("The Writing Cow" and "The Lesser Animal") that Heller-Roazen comes interestingly and significantly close to Agamben's project in *L'aperto*. In "The Writing Cow" he relates the transformation of Io, the daughter of the river god Inachus, as narrated by Ovid in the *Metamorphoses*. The metamorphosis from human into animal takes place when Jupiter's fancy for Io is about to be discovered by the jealous Juno. Jupiter has no option but to turn the unfortunate nymph into a cow: "Coniugis adventum" writes Ovid, "praesenserat inque nitentem/Inachidos vultus mutaverat ille iuvencam./ Bos quoque formosa est" (38) ("Anticipating the arrival of his wife, Jupiter had transformed Inachus's daughter into an exceedingly beautiful cow"; my translation). *L'aperto* opens with the description of a series of illuminations accompanying a Hebrew bible of the thirteenth century. Agamben tells us that the Bible scene of "the messianic banquet of the righteous" (1) ("il banchetto messianico dei giusti" [9]) can be admired. Shadowed by heavenly trees and entertained by divine music, the righteous sit at a richly adorned table. Everything conforms to the norm apart from the fact that the righteous have heads of animals (an eagle, an ox, an ass, a panther, a monkey). As a preliminary interpretation of such a surprising scene, Agamben states that the implied meaning might be that on judgement day the relation between animals and humans will be recomposed in a new form, and that humans will be reconciled with their animal nature: "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" (3) ("nell'ultimo giorno, i rapporti fra gli animali e gli uomini si comporranno in una nuova forma e l'uomo stesso si riconcilierà con la sua natura animale" [11]). The difference between the transformation/recomposition Agamben describes, and the transformation of Io retold by Heller-Roazen is that the former is partial while the latter is total. Or at least this seems to be the case. And yet, as Heller-Roazen reminds us, Io will make her former human identity known to her father by writing her name, "Io" on the sand with the hoof: "For if the transformation," writes Heller-Roazen, "is to be perceptible as such, something must indicate that it has taken place, something in the new form must mark the occurrence of the change. Precisely for the metamorphosis to be without residue, it must paradoxically admit a reminder that bears witness to the event of the mutation: an element both foreign to the new body and still contained within it, an exceptional trait in the body 'strange' that harks back to the earlier shape it once possessed" (124). In other words, the metamorphosis must retain its negation within itself, or better still, it must retain its suspension in order to be apparent and meaningful. It is only by suspending its being and by positioning it on the threshold between animal and human that Io can achieve an entirely new and meaningful form. And so do the righteous at the messianic banquet in the Hebrew Bible.

In the chapter "The Lesser Animal," the relation between humans and animals is taken up again by Heller-Roazen via Spinoza's *Ethics* and, most importantly and decisively, via *The Book of Living Things*, a canonical text of Arab literature written "towards the middle of the eighth century A.D." (129). From *Ethics* Heller-Roazen extracts the sentence "There is much to be seen in animal," which he then compares with the unequivocal celebration of the animal world in *The Book of Living Things*, where admiration for the skills and achievements of animals surpasses those of



humans. "Each of them [animals]," Heller-Roazen quotes from *The Book of Living Things*, "knows how to accomplish certain actions that even the most skilful of men, carrying out feats of excellence, cannot equal" (131). The main difference between animals and humans noted by the Arab author is that animals are always compelled to do exactly the same, whereas humans have the "ability" to carry out "easier actions" (131). While birds "sing with unflinching melodic and metrical exactitude" and "cannot do otherwise," humans can "always also sing an easier, simpler, and lesser one" (131-32). The praises for the animal world that Heller-Roazen finds in the eighth-century Arab book are remarkably similar to what Agamben finds in Linnaeus (see 23-27; 30-34), and connect rather instructively with Agamben's discussion of the work of Ernst Haeckel (author of *Die Welträtzel*) and Jakob von Uexküll. The main thesis underpinning Agamben's work, and implicitly but overtly underscoring Heller-Roazen's discussion, is that if there is really a difference between the animal world and the human world, this must be found in and through the category of potentiality. People can choose to do things differently or not at all. It is precisely this ability to suspend life in potentiality that brings humans face-to-face with the world, and also with their animal nature (on Agamben and potentiality, see, e.g., Bartoloni <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol5/iss1/2>>). Kafka related this ability to memory. In a wonderful aphorism quoted by Heller-Roazen, Kafka stated that: "I can swim just like the others. Only I have a better memory than the others. I have not forgotten the former inability to swim ... But since I have not forgotten it, being able to swim is of no help to me; and so, after all, I cannot swim" (146). It is an excess of memory that brings Kafka to the brink of an ontological realization and understanding that perhaps found articulation in his novels and short stories. What Kafka sensed, and actually captured for a moment, is precisely the taking place of that event in which humans catch their essence by suspending their "humanity." It is by forcing the remembrance of what he really is (a creature that can do less) that Kafka at once comes close to the animal (the reversal to the world of nature before acculturation) and departs from it through the contemplation of his pure potentiality. The significant question that Heller-Roazen asks in his wonderfully crafted and learned book is also the great ontological problem confronting humanity today: would we find us by forgetting our humanity and becoming, like animals, those magnificent beasts that can do only wondrous feats by reifying the same; or would we find it by pausing and remembering that we can also do less, that we can also do otherwise? Similarly, in *L'aperto* Agamben proposes a radical review of the anthropological machine not so much to invite a naïve return to nature, invoking a generic embrace of the animal in us, as to draw attention to a new modality of being that must pass through the suspension of being, which is also the result of a new understanding of the relation between animals and humans.

One of the most compelling articulations and discussions of suspension is found in the work of Maurice Blanchot. Both Blanchot's more specifically theoretical writing (especially *L'Espace littéraire*, *La Communauté inavouable*, *L'écriture du désastre*, and *La Part du feu*) and his fiction (especially *L'Attente*, *l'oubli*) think and narrate with rare consistency a form of writing and being predicated upon what, in *La Part du feu*, Blanchot calls "l'existence sans l'être" (334). In her book *What Is There to Say? Blanchot, Melville, des Forêts, Beckett* (2003), Ann Smock treats this notion, and its attendant literary and philosophical implications as the central issue criss-crossing Blanchot's opus. In fact, it is precisely suspension, potentiality, and waiting that enable Smock to construct an interesting and original comparative analysis of the four authors under investigation. And yet, of the four Blanchot and Melville appear to attract a special attention, and also the largest share of Smock's study, which to my view is understandable and not without significance. Chapter One of *What Is There to Say?* sets the tone of what follows with extreme clarity. On page 6 we read: "I'll keep stressing the resemblance between speech and waiting as this book proceeds, thinking of waiting's unsettled mix of passivity and impatience, and of sentences such as the following, from *L'Attente l'oubli*: "Waiting is always a wait for waiting, wherein the beginning is withheld, and the end suspended, and the interval of another wait thus opened." Or: "The impossibility of waiting belongs essentially to waiting." And on page 9: "a relation of indifference instead of unity or sameness: indistinction thwarting union, in fact. The 'one thing' interrupting and suspending the one, deferring it." But it is on page 13 that Smock's reading of Blanchot

reaches a bold explicitness, which is both symptomatic of her methodological approach, and instructively consonant to our discussion of Agamben's and Heller-Roazen's writing. Smock writes that a "fundamental preoccupation" of Blanchot can be found in "the thought of lifeless beings exiled from death, unable to end. For language has, in liquidating them, given being to their lack and to their absence an ungraspable but inescapable presence" (13). To which Smock adds two more conceptual clarifications followed by a quotation from *L'Espace littéraire*: "In order for there to be a world at all such as the one men inform with value and meaning and in which they undertake their history, beings must lack" (13); "It's on the basis of a lack of being that man, properly speaking, begins; it's in man that not to be is a fundamental mode of possibility" (13); "And this beginning rules that, in order for there to be a world, in order for there to be beings, being must lack" (13). Blanchot's understanding of lack must be understood not so much as a spiritual or transcendental concept as a precise ontological event, whose main feature is that of not to be. But this not to be, as we have seen when discussing Agamben and Heller-Roazen, is nothing other than the taking place of a productive suspension and a deliberate halting of being in which, through arresting the actual possibilities of being, being faces its essential potentiality and its openness.

There could be no better example of this event than Melville's character "Bartleby," the famous scrivener who politely and most courteously declines to carry out any chores. He just sits at his desk and observes, unproductive and *désœuvré*. It is essential in this context to remember that in 1980 Blanchot published *L'Écriture du désastre*, in which, among other things, he offered an intense and original reading of Melville's "Bartleby" as an example of his project of insubordination, whose purpose was rather similar to that of Agamben's, that is, to interrupt the "anthropological machine." In Blanchot's own words, Bartleby's abdication of action, his insubordination, decrees a stop, "a suspension. In that suspension, society falls apart completely. The law collapses: for an instant there is innocence; history is interrupted" (Blanchot in Holland 205). Agamben himself has written an important essay, "Bartleby, or On Contingency" (in *Potentialities*, 1999), on Bartleby's will to inhabit potentiality as such, the potentiality that resists the assimilation into action. Further, when discussing Titian's painting *Nymph and Shepherd* in *L'aperto* as an example of a supreme life event, Agamben takes up again Blanchot's theme of *désœuvrement*. He claims that: "In their fulfilment, the lovers who have lost their mystery contemplate a human nature rendered perfectly inoperative – the inactivity and *désœuvrement* of the human and of the animal as the supreme and unsavable figure of life" (87) ("Nell'appagamento, gli amanti, che hanno perduto il loro mistero, contemplano una natura umana resa perfettamente inoperosa -- l'inoperosità e il *désœuvrement* dell'umano e dell'animale come figura suprema e insalvabile della vita" [90]). Smock is aware of these conceptual connections and articulates her whole argument by bringing to light the considerable significance of these philosophical and literary concerns, which are at the centre of Western modernism. In Blanchot's eyes suspension, which he also called "waiting," "the neuter," is also the beginning of productive creativity, and correlates with, is in fact complemented by a sense of astonishment in the face of what is taking place, and in the language that gives tangibility to production. In *What is Philosophy?* Heidegger defines astonishment thus: "In astonishment we restrain ourselves. We step back, as it were, from being, from the fact that it is as it is and not otherwise" (85). It is at once philosophically significant and poetic that Heidegger chose to define astonishment as an act of self-restraint where, and here lies the beauty and the importance of this statement: restraint is the active resistance to accept that which is pre-arranged and pre-ordained, pre-packaged, arbitrarily complete. Instead, Heidegger invites us to break this artificial, un-philosophical and un-poetic reading of life, to "destroy" it (in the sense that destruction means in Heidegger) in order to pave the way, the path, to seeing it and to saying it "otherwise." It is in this sense that "suspension," as I have articulated so far discussing Agamben's, Heller-Roazen's, and Smock's texts, must be understood. Therefore, suspension is not an idle temporality devoid of *energeia* (intended here in the Aristotelian sense of "actuality"), but rather the opposite, that is the will to suspend our unproblematic acceptance of life, indeed to destroy it. If for Blanchot suspension was the necessary beginning of literature and life, for Agamben suspension is the unavoidable step to take in order to enter a new ontology of being.



*L'aperto*, *Echolalias*, and *What Is There to Say?* are three books that meet at the significant literary and philosophical junction of suspension and potentiality, and provide lucid and illuminating tools to negotiate a concept, an event, and a mode that, despite its history in the tradition of Western philosophy, remains elusive and underdeveloped.

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