

The Notion of Life in the Work of Agamben

Carlo Salzani
Monash University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>

 Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), and the [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#)

Dedicated to the dissemination of scholarly and professional information, **Purdue University Press** selects, develops, and distributes quality resources in several key subject areas for which its parent university is famous, including business, technology, health, veterinary medicine, and other selected disciplines in the humanities and sciences.

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: [<clcweb@purdue.edu>](mailto:clcweb@purdue.edu)

Recommended Citation

Salzani, Carlo. "The Notion of Life in the Work of Agamben." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 14.1 (2012): [<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1760>](https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1760)

This text has been double-blind peer reviewed by 2+1 experts in the field.

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

This is an Open Access journal. This means that it uses a funding model that does not charge readers or their institutions for access. Readers may freely read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of articles. This journal is covered under the [CC BY-NC-ND license](#).

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." In addition to the publication of articles, the journal publishes review articles of scholarly books and publishes research material in its *Library Series*. Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <clcweb@purdue.edu>

Volume 14 Issue 1 (March 2012) Article 1
Carlo Salzani,
"The Notion of Life in the Work of Agamben"
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol14/iss1/1>>

Contents of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 14.1 (2012)
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol14/iss1/>>

Abstract: In his article "The Notion of Life in the Work of Agamben" Carlo Salzani analyzes the notion of "nudity" Giorgio Agamben's understanding of Western culture. Beginning with a reading of the essay "Nudity," in which Agamben proposes an archaeological investigation of the theological apparatus of the concept, Salzani analyzes the pivotal trope in Agamben's *Homo Sacer* project, "bare" or "naked life," that is, the nudity of life in the grip of sovereign power. Nudity and the nudity of life are construed as a "limit-concept" in a double movement of simultaneous positing and negation or in a positing that grants at the same time the inappropriability of its object. Salzani highlights how much this "liminality" owes to a tradition that borders the aesthetics and ranges from Kant's "sublime" to Heidegger's *Ereignis* via Benjamin's "expressionless-ness." In Agamben's thought this risks to resemble a "mystical intuition," as he argues in his first book, *The Man Without Content*, about Kant's aesthetic judgment.

Carlo SALZANI

The Notion of Life in the Work of Agamben

The work of Giorgio Agamben has gained a central place in politico-philosophical debates since the publication of his 1995 book *Homo Sacer*. Agamben elaborates on and defines Western culture with a particular understanding and construction of the meaning of life based on the methodological approach of "archaeology" he borrows from Michel Foucault. Agamben's work has become important in the study of culture in general and in the study of literature in particular (see, e.g., Clemens, Heron, Murray), thus the relevance of his thought in cultural studies (see, e.g., Watkin; Zartaloudis) and in comparative cultural studies (see, e.g., Bartoloni; Tötösy de Zepetnek). In "Nudity," an essay published in English translation in 2011, Agamben returns to the pivotal figure of his *Homo Sacer* project about the "nudity of life" in the grip of sovereign power. Agamben proposes an archaeological investigation of the theological apparatus (*dispositivo*) of "nudity." He is not concerned with politics or life, but, rather, with art and theology. However, the insistence on this trope reaffirms, on the one hand, its centrality to Agamben's project and intends perhaps to shed some light on an indeterminacy that attracted so much criticism. But it also rehearses and reiterates, on the other hand, a recurrent pattern in his thought: a philosophical mode which pursues, as he writes in one of his first books, *Stanzas*, "the impossible task of appropriating what must, in any case, remain inappropriable" (xviii). Nudity and the nudity of life are construed as a "limit-concept" and the new essay highlights, I argue, how much this "liminality" owes to a tradition that borders the aesthetics, and ranges from Kant's sublime (*Erhabene*) to Heidegger's event (*Ereignis*) via Benjamin's notion of the expressionless-ness (*Ausdruckslosigkeit*). This grounding of the analysis in the inappropriability of its object risks to resemble a "mystical intuition" as Agamben argues about Kant's aesthetic judgment, "shrouded in the most impenetrable mystery" (*Man without Content* 45), if not, as some have argued, to a mystification.

To Agamben, nudity is "inseparable from a theological signature" ("Nudity" 57). In the book of *Genesis*, Adam and Eve realize they are naked only after the sin and this is because before sinning, they were not naked, but dressed in clothing of grace. Nudity, therefore, exists only negatively, "as a privation of the clothing of grace" ("Nudity" 57). Through sin, humanity becomes visible as a body without glory: "the nakedness of pure corporeality, a concept Agamben borrows from Erik Peterson, to postulate that "denudation resulting in pure functionality, a body that lacks all nobility since its ultimate dignity lay in the divine glory now lost" ("Nudity" 59). This means that "naked corporeality" pre-exists the clothing of glory, and is merely made visible by the denudation of sin. The fact that grace can be added and taken like a clothing means that "human nature is always already constituted as naked, it is always already 'naked corporeality'" ("Nudity" 63). Naked corporeality is the obscure bearer of divine grace, which disappears under it and is only revealed as *natura lapsa* in the denudation of sin. The theological apparatus works here like the biopolitical paradigm: "Just as the political *mythologeme* of *homo sacer* postulates as a presupposition a naked life that is impure, sacred and thus killable (though this naked life was produced only by means of such presupposition), so the naked corporeality of human nature is only the opaque presupposition of the original and luminous supplement that is the clothing of grace. Though the presupposition is hidden behind the supplement, it comes back to light whenever the caesura of sin once again divides nature and grace, nudity and clothing" ("Nudity" 64). Sin did not introduce evil in the world, only revealed it: sin consisted essentially of the removal of a garb. Thus "nudity" and "naked corporeality" is the irreducible Gnostic residue that implies a constitutive imperfection in creation, which must, at all events, be covered up" ("Nudity" 64-65). However, as for naked life, the corruption of nature revealed in sin did not pre-exist it, but was produced by it. Nudity is thus, in our culture, "only the obscure and ungraspable presupposition of clothing" ("Nudity" 65). It is only a "shadow" of the robe, a mere privation.

One of the consequences of the indissoluble theological bond that combines nudity and clothing is that nudity is not a "state," but an "event," which belongs to time and history, not to being and form: "we can therefore only experience nudity as a denudation and a baring, never as a form and a stable possession. At any rate, it is difficult to grasp and impossible to hold on to" ("Nudity" 65). Nudity is thus defined by non-nudity, by the robe of which it has been stripped. It is therefore "impossible":

there is only denudation, only baring, and the naked body remains obstinately unreachable. Again the analogy with biopolitics is revealing: "naked corporeality, like naked life, is only the obscure and impalpable bearer of guilt. In truth, there is only baring, only the infinite gesticulations that remove clothing and grace from the body" ("Nudity" 78). I insist for the moment on the terminology used by Agamben: nudity subsists only "negatively," as "privation," as "shadow"; it is "obscure," "opaque," "irreducible," "ungraspable," "unreachable," "impalpable," "impossible," and it is defined only by its opposite, by "non-nudity."

The same terminology characterizes the determinations of *nuda vita*, "naked life" (in his translation of Agamben's *Homo Sacer*, Daniel Heller-Roazen rendered the Italian *nuda vita* as "bare life," establishing the norm for all future translations; Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino, in their translation of *Means without Ends* opted for the form "naked life"; I modify here all translations of *nuda* from "bare" to "naked" in order to emphasize the relation with nudity and Agamben's essay on "Nudity"; for a discussion of some issues concerning the translation, see Durantaye 202-05). In Agamben's works, the syntagm "naked life" appears for the first time in the conclusion of his 1982 book *Language and Death* (106) in an analysis of sacrality and sacrifice, but is first inserted in a political discourse in the 1990 *Coming Community* (64, 86). In a 2001 interview, Agamben states that it was only after reading Foucault that he was able to connect the issue of naked life, which had been haunting him for many years with regard to biopolitics and that this became thereafter the fulcrum of his investigations (see Leitgeb and Vismann). Andrew Norris remarks, however, that in the *Homo Sacer* series "naked life" is never defined precisely, but usually presented in examples: *Versuchpersonen*, Karen Quinlan, people in "overcomas," refugees, the *Muselmann* (270; on the *Muselmann*, see, e.g., Peguy). It is nonetheless the "protagonist" of the project whose implication in the political sphere in the form of exclusionary inclusion or inclusionary exclusion, constitutes the originary — although "concealed" — nucleus of sovereign power.

The few determinations we encounter never define the nudity of naked life. Significantly, it is first identified precisely as "excluded": it is "that whose exclusion founds the city of men" (*Homo Sacer* 7). It is then described as "sacred": "The protagonist of this book — Agamben writes in the introduction to *Homo Sacer* — is naked life, that is, the life of *homo sacer* (sacred man), who *may be killed and yet not sacrificed*" (*Homo Sacer* 8; emphasis in the original). It is further portrayed as the life in the sovereign ban, in the state of exception, which becomes indistinguishable and finally coincides with the law; it is the life that is lived in the village at the foot of the hill on which Kafka's castle stands; it is the life of Joseph K., finally indistinguishable from the trial (*Homo Sacer* 53). Not simply natural life (*zoe*), but a life that is naked because it has been stripped in every context of all the forms of life that cohere into a qualified life (*bios*) and is sacred because exposed to death. It is, as such, the originary political element (*Homo Sacer* 88), the "ultimate and *opaque* bearer of sovereignty" (*Means without Ends* 6). It is thus the "hinge" around which *domus* and *polis* are articulated and the "threshold" through which they communicate to each other: "Neither political *bios* nor natural *zoe*, [naked life] is the zone of indistinction in which *zoe* and *bios* constitute each other in including and excluding each other" (*Homo Sacer* 90). Like nudity in the theological apparatus, "naked life is a product of the machine and not something that pre-exists it" (*State of Exception* 87-88).

The meaning of the nudity of "naked life" emerges only in two passages of *Homo Sacer*: it is presented, first, without explanation almost as a cursory remark as the translation of Walter Benjamin's *das bloße Leben* (*Homo Sacer* 65). The concept appears in a number of essays Benjamin wrote in the late 1910s and early 1920s, such as "Fate and Character" (1919), "Goethe's Elective Affinities" (1919-1922), and "Critique of Violence" (1921), which is of course one of Agamben's central references. *nuda* means thus *Bloß*, which in German can mean "naked," but — and this is Benjamin's use — in the sense of "no better than," "nothing but," "mere," and as such "bare" (see Geulen 97-98). Leland de la Durantaye emphasizes the Benjaminian origin of the term, specifying that "Benjamin's expression *das bloße Leben* designates a life shorn of all qualification and conceived of independent of its traditional attributes" (203). Although Benjamin does not offer further directions for how it is to be understood, "it is clear," Durantaye continues, "that bare life is not an initial state so much as what becomes visible through a stripping away of predicates and attributes" (203). It must be pointed out, however, that Agamben de-contextualizes Benjamin's concept and inserts it in a discourse that, although "inspired" by Benjamin, mixes it with a number of different and heterogeneous suggestions which takes

it far from its original meaning. Moreover, the fact that Agamben never discusses nor describes Benjamin's notion or its translation mystifies the reader into believing that the two concepts are identical.

The second — and perhaps only — definition of "naked life" occurs in the conclusion of *Homo Sacer*: naked, Agamben writes here, corresponds, in the syntagm "naked life" to the Greek term *haplôs* by which ontology defined pure Being. There is an analogy between Western metaphysics and Western politics, insofar as the fundamental performance of both is the isolation of a primary kernel, the "proper element," which is *haplôs* ("single," "simple") and that which simply is with no other determination. For metaphysics this is pure Being, which constitutes man as a thinking animal, *zoon logon ekhon*; its *analogon* in politics is naked life, which constitutes man as *zoon politikon*. In the first case, the stake is to isolate from the multiple meanings of the term "being" the pure Being, *to on haplôs* "that which simply is"; in the second, it is the separation of naked life from the multiple forms of concrete life. Metaphysics and politics are shown here as intertwined fundamentally in the quest for a foundation and a meaning which are linked constitutively. Pure Being, naked life, as this foundation and meaning, as the "proper element" of metaphysics and politics, are construed as the "unthinkable" limit against which both clash: "naked life is certainly as indeterminate and impenetrable as *haplôs* Being, and one could say that reason cannot think naked life except as it thinks pure Being, in stupor and in astonishment" (*Homo Sacer* 182). Pure Being and naked life are "empty" and "indeterminate" concepts, but these concepts guard the keys of the historico-political destiny of the West, and are simultaneously the task and the enigma of ontology and politics (*Homo Sacer* 182, 188; the problem of the "historicity" of life and of its stripping has been emphasized by a number of scholars, see, e.g., Eaglestone; Levi and Rothberg; Marchart; Mesnard and Kahan).

The weight of the argument, as Luciano Ferrari Bravo observes, is put on the second component of the syntagm "naked life": life (280). The *Homo Sacer* project is in fact focused on life and it is the notion of "life" that constitutes the enigma. In *Means without Ends* Agamben insists on the intrinsic "unutterability" and "impenetrability" which characterize life in its basic forms (biological, naked, corporeal): "Biological life, which is the secularized form of naked life and which shares its unutterability and impenetrability, thus constitutes the real forms of life literally as forms of *survival*: biological life remains inviolate in such forms as that obscure threat that can suddenly actualize itself in violence, in extraneousness, in illness, in accidents" (8; emphasis in the original). In every instance, naked life constitutes an "inviolable," "obscure," "menacing" shadow which threatens to become actual; it is "the invisible sovereign that stares at us behind the dull-witted masks of the powerful" (*Means without Ends* 8). In *The Open* (2002), Agamben rehearses this argument: in our culture, he writes, the concept of life is never defined as such, it remains indeterminate and yet is each time articulated and divided through a series of caesuras and oppositions which "invest it with a decisive strategic function" in the most diverse fields: life is thus "what cannot be defined, yet, precisely for this reason, must be ceaselessly articulated and divided" (*Open* 13; emphasis in the original). Life is always "played with" (*giocata*), but never possessed, never represented, never uttered, yet it is precisely because of this that "it is the possible but empty site of an ethics, of a form of life" ("Author as Gesture" 68). Around this indeterminate, empty ground revolves Agamben's proposal for a new politics and a new ethics (see *Remnants of Auschwitz*, "Absolute Immanence").

In "Nudity" Agamben aims perhaps at clarifying the first part of the syntagm "naked life": its nudity. It is remarkable that the second half of the essay, as a way of deactivating, of rendering "inoperative" the theological apparatus of "nudity," turns to the theory of representation and the image, using Benjamin's notion of beauty. Nudity, Agamben proceeds, is for Adam and Eve the only content of the knowledge of good and evil: when they tasted the fruit of the forbidden tree the eyes of both of them opened "and they knew they were naked" (*Genesis* 3:7). But the knowledge of nudity, as we have seen, is the knowledge of a privation, the knowledge that something invisible and insubstantial (the clothing of grace) has been lost. However, Agamben argues that this absence of content, this privation, reveals that this is not knowledge of something, but rather knowledge of a pure knowability; knowing nudity, we do not know an object, but only an absence of veils, only a possibility of knowing: "The nudity that the first humans saw in Paradise when their eyes were opened is, then, the opening of truth, of 'disclosedness' (*a-letheia*, 'un-concealment'), without which knowledge would not be possible. The condition of no longer being covered by the clothing of grace does not reveal the obscurity of flesh and sin but rather the light of knowability. There is nothing behind the presumed clothing of

grace, and it is precisely this condition of not having anything behind it, this pure visibility and presence, that is nudity. To see a body naked means to perceive its pure knowability beyond every secret, beyond or before its objective predicates" ("Nudity" 81).

Here, Agamben reproduces an old argument of his, which constitutes the third "stanza" of his second book, *Stanzas*: the theory of the phantasm (*fantasma*) and thus of knowledge, in late medieval erotic poetry. In medieval philosophy and mysticism, the process of knowledge is presented as a progressive *denudatio*, the denudation of the phantasm (the form or image that sensible objects impress in the senses) from all material accidents until the form remains naked in the final act of rational intellection. The process begins in the senses, which, however, cannot strip the sensible form *denudatione perfecta* (in perfect denudation); imagination strips it further *denudatione vera* (in a true denudation), but without divesting it from the material accidents; then the non-sensible intentions (goodness, malice, convenience etc.) are unveiled, and only at this point, when the whole process of the internal sense has been fulfilled, the rational soul can be informed by the completely denuded phantasm (see *Stanzas* 80-81). Thus, in "Nudity" Agamben writes that "through the act of intellection, the image becomes perfectly nude ... Complete knowledge is contemplation in and about nudity" (83). The nudity of the human body is its phantasm, its image, that is, that which makes it knowable, but that must remain, in itself, "ungraspable": Thus Agamben concludes "the image is not the thing, but the thing's knowability (its nudity), it neither expresses nor signifies the thing. Nevertheless, inasmuch as it is nothing other than the giving of the thing over to knowledge, nothing other than the stripping off of the clothes that cover it, nudity is not separate from the thing: it is the thing itself (84). Again, Agamben reproduces here an argument he first explored in the 1984 essay titled "The Thing Itself." In this essay, he analyzed the meaning of the expression *to pragma auto*, the thing itself, focusing in particular on Plato's and Aristotle's definitions. To make a complex exposition short, his argument revolves around the assumption that "the thing itself, while in some way transcending language, is nevertheless possible only in language and by virtue of language: precisely the thing of language" (31). As such, it is not simply the being in its obscurity and as object presupposed by language, but rather "that *by which* the object is known, *its own knowability and truth*" (32; emphasis in the original). The thing itself is the very medium of its knowability, its self-manifestation and announcement to consciousness. Sayability itself remains however unsaid in what is said, and knowability itself is lost in what is known: in language we always simultaneously presuppose and forget the very openness at issue in language, and the task of philosophy becomes therefore "to come with speech to help speech, so that, in speech, speech itself does not remain presupposed but instead comes to speech," or, in other words, "to restore the thing itself to its place in language" (35, 38; emphasis in the original).

To illustrate further this uncovering as the opening of the thing to knowledge, Agamben recurs then, in "Nudity," to the theory of beauty proposed by Benjamin in the third part of the essay on Goethe's *Elective Affinities*. The essentially beautiful, Benjamin argues, rests in an intrinsic relation with semblance (*Schein*). In this relation, beauty does not coincide with semblance, but it ceases nonetheless to be beautiful when the semblance disappears from it: therefore, "beauty appears as such only in what is veiled" ("Goethe" 350). Beauty is not a semblance, not a veil covering something else, it is rather an "essence" (*Wesen*), one that, however "remains essentially identical to itself only when veiled": "the beautiful is neither the veil nor the veiled object but rather the object in its veil" ("Goethe" 351). In the face of this, the idea of "unveiling" (*Enthüllung*) becomes that of the "impossibility of unveiling" (*Unenthüllbarkeit*), and the relationship between veil and what is veiled is defined as "secret" (*Geheimnis*). For Agamben's argument, the following step is fundamental: since it is the unity of veil and veiled, Benjamin writes, "beauty can essentially be valid only where the duality of nakedness and veiling does not yet obtain: in art and in the appearances of mere nature" and thus "in veilless nakedness the essentially beautiful has withdrawn, and in the naked body of the human being are attained a being beyond all beauty — the sublime — and a work beyond all creations, that of the creator" ("Goethe" 351).

In the nudity of the human being, the unity of veil and thing veiled disappears. The possibility of being denuded, for Agamben, condemns human beauty to semblance and its cipher becomes thus the possibility of being unveiled. However, there is a limit to this process: beyond this limit, we find neither an essence that cannot be further unveiled, nor the *natura lapsa*, the "mere corporeality," but rather "only the veil itself, appearance itself, which is no longer the appearance of anything" ("Nudity"

85). Human nudity is this indelible residual of appearance, in which nothing appears. It is what remains when we lift the veil from beauty. And it is "sublime" because the impossibility of presenting sensibly the idea turns at some point, in a Kantian fashion, into a presentation of a higher order, in which it is presentation itself that is presented, in which appearance itself appears, and thus shows itself infinitely "inapparent," infinitely void of secret: "The sublime ... is an appearance that exhibits its own vacuity and, in this exhibition, allows the inapparent to take place" ("Nudity" 86).

The language and the strategy adopted in the second part of "Nudity" emphasize the continuity between Agamben's pre-*Homo Sacer* work on ontology, aesthetics, criticism and language, and the political investigations of the past fifteen years. This continuity has been stressed in scholarship on Agamben and that has broadened its focus of analysis to include the entirety of his work, whereas the early critique limited the focus on the *Homo Sacer* project (see, e.g., Clemens, Heron Murray; Mills, *The Philosophy*; Durantaye; Watkin; Zartaloudis). Agamben himself points out that the question of the political is one that fully involves ontology and that as such is related to the question of language. If the task of philosophy is for Agamben "to restore the thing itself to its place in language" ("The Thing Itself" 38), this task is marked in his early work by an influence by Heidegger and that leads Agamben to retort that "pure Being can emerge only where the word is lacking, but the word is lacking only at the point at which one wants to say it" ("Philosophy and Linguistics" 72). The object of investigation, be it the thing itself, pure Being (*to on haplôs*), or naked life is thus construed in a double movement of simultaneous positing and negation, or in a positing that grants at the same time the inappropriability of its object.

Agamben's first book, *The Man without Content*, provides an example. The book constitutes an attempt to wrestle art from, and thus a critique of, aesthetics. Aesthetic judgment is a paradox insofar as it defines art by always referring to what it is not and thus does not grant access to its reality, but rather presents this reality as a mere and simple nothing. It works like a "negative theology," which tries to bypass its ungraspable object by wrapping itself in its shadow: "the critical judgment, everywhere and consistently, envelops art in its shadow and thinks art as non-art" (*Man without Content* 43). Aesthetics leads art to its own negation, and it is only in this shadow that art finds its reality; unlimited but empty, without content, and it becomes a self-annihilating nothing which eternally outlives itself, which, in turn, traverses all its contents without ever reaching a "positive" work, because it cannot identify itself with any of them (*Man without Content* 56-57). As in ready-made or in pop art, what comes to the presence is the "privation" of a potency that cannot find its own reality anywhere (*Man without Content* 64). Kant is here taken to task for seeking the foundation of the aesthetic judgment in something that has the character of concept, but that, being not determinable in any way, cannot provide the evidence of the judgment, that is, a concept through which nothing comes to knowledge. This grounding the judgment in an indeterminate idea, Agamben argues, resembles to a "mystical intuition ... shrouded in the most impenetrable mystery" (*Man without Content* 45). The same accusation is addressed at Kant's notion of experience in *Infancy ad History*: the transcendental subject cannot "know" an object, but can only "think" it. In the same way, the transcendental subject cannot know itself as a substantial reality. This means that Kant ends up grounding the possibility of experience in the positing of an "inexperiencible" (*Infancy* 31).

This *modus* in Kant becomes almost programmatic in the preface to Agamben's second book, *Stanzas*. Here criticism is defined as "negativity ... nothing other than the process of its own ironic self-negation," a self-annihilating nothing which nonetheless does not renounce to knowledge (*Stanzas* xvi). The awareness that the object which had to be seized has finally escaped knowledge, is claimed by criticism as its own specific character; criticism's authentic *quête* "does not consist in recovering its object, but rather in ensuring the conditions of its inaccessibility" (*Stanzas* xvi). In this impossibility of Western culture to possess the object of knowledge, criticism does not represent but knows representation: "To appropriation without consciousness [of poetry] and to consciousness without enjoyment (*godimento*) [of philosophy], criticism opposes the enjoyment of what cannot be possessed and the possession of what cannot be enjoyed. ... What is secluded in the *stanza* of criticism is nothing, but this nothing safeguards *unappropriability* as its most precious possession (*Stanzas* xvii; emphasis in the original). What is translated as "enjoyment" in this passage is the Italian word *godimento* and *godimento* is *jouissance*. In the four stanzas composing the book, Agamben analyzes the model of Western knowledge in those operations in which "desire simultaneously denies and affirms its object,

and thus succeeds in entering into relation with something that otherwise it would have been unable either to appropriate or enjoy" (*Stanzas* xvii-xviii). The stanzas design, Agamben concludes, a "topology of joy (*gaudium*)," a topology of *jouissance* in which human spirit responds to the "impossible task of appropriating what must in every case remain unappropriable" and therefore "must necessarily guarantee the unappropriability of its object" (*Stanzas* xviii). The Heideggerian framework remains dominant in the following works, *Infancy and History* and especially *Language and Death*. Different and heterogeneous influences (to name just a few, Benjamin, Arendt, Foucault) drive Agamben in other directions, whereby, for example, the language of utopia turns into an anti-utopian emphasis on messianism and the paradigm substitutes for the *topos* as methodological implant. However, the construction of "naked life" as an indeterminable, empty, irreducible concept of limit betrays, I argue, the mystique of inappropriability that marks Agamben's earlier works.

The denouement of "Nudity" raises some central questions concerning the nudity of naked life: how far goes the analogy between naked corporeality and naked life? Is the sublime vacuity that constitutes nudity also the nudity of naked life? Is this phantasmatic knowability, which renounces the possession of its object and, by focusing merely on appearance, guarantees its unappropriability: is it this *haplos* at the core of the Western politico-metaphysical tradition? It seems difficult to reconcile the medieval theory of the phantasm, the Benjaminian analysis of beauty, the Heideggerian narrative of illatency, and the Kantian language of the sublime with the camp as paradigm of modernity, with the nudity of the *Muselmann*. It seems also very hard to reconcile this ontological-linguistic framework with the Foucauldian paradigmatic method Agamben has adopted in his later writings. In particular, the emphasis on the Benjaminian veil, and thus on the sublime as the frustration of representation, shifts the focus onto representation itself, thus from naked life to nudity, and maintains both in a sublime inaccessibility. Ferrari Bravo points out the ambiguity of focusing less on life than on its nudity, more on "negativity" than on the positive potentialities of life. This emphasis on negativity risks, for Ferrari Bravo, to turn into an emphasis on the negation of life, that is, on death (280-81). The fundamental problem here is that, by construing the nudity of life as that inapparent which is nonetheless void of any secret, Agamben confines to inaccessibility life itself and its materiality, thereby blocking, as Catherine Mills points out, any possible question about the body and its history, gender, race, sexuality or class (see Mills, *The Philosophy* 133-37; "Linguistic Survival"; "Biopolitics"; for other critiques from the perspective of gender, see Deutscher; Ziarek).

In conclusion, to construe, as Agamben does, the supposed originary nudity of life as the unthinkable limit against which political philosophy clash, as the enigma at the core of Western politics, means to guarantee its un-appropriability, its un-sayability, its impenetrability. Nothing can really be said of naked life and assertions such as "the production of naked life is the originary activity of sovereignty" (*Homo Sacer* 83) are finally undecidable: nothing can confirm, articulate or invalidate them. "Stupor" and "astonishment," in which both *haplos* Being and naked life should be contemplated (*Homo Sacer* 182) are not useful perspectives through which to conduct and articulate empirical research to analyze events or phenomena. They do not allow understanding, they do not enable investigations, even less do they prompt actions. For Antonio Negri, naked life is therefore a form of "ideology," a "mystification," because it absolutizes nudity and assimilates it to the horrors of the nazi death camp, thereby iterating its denudation. Sovereign power "needs" to show us this nudity in order to terrorize us. By taking nudity to represent life, the ideology of naked life neutralizes the potentialities of life and its capacities of resistance: "It is the exaltation of humiliation, of pity, it is medieval Christianity" (Negri 193-95; Negri's criticism is also voiced in the works he wrote with Michael Hardt, see *Empire* 366, *Commonwealth* 57-58.; on Negri's critique of Agamben, see Neilson). If what remains after life has been stripped of all those determinations that constituted it into a form-of-life is "the thing itself" as its sublime knowability, then this gesture iterate the stripping performed by sovereign power.

Works Cited

- Agamben, Giorgio. "Absolute Immanence." Trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen. *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*. By Giorgio Agamben. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1999. 220-40.
- Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998.
- Agamben, Giorgio. *Infancy and History: On the Destruction of Experience*. Trans. Liz Heron. London: Verso, 1996.

- Agamben, Giorgio. *Language and Death: The Place of Negativity*. Trans. Karen Pinkus and Michael Hardt. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1991.
- Agamben, Giorgio. *Means without Ends: Notes on Politics*. Trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2000.
- Agamben, Giorgio. "Nudity." *Nudities*. Trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella. By Giorgio Agamben. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2011. 55-90
- Agamben, Giorgio. "Philosophy and Linguistics." *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*. Trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen. By Giorgio Agamben. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1999. 62-76.
- Agamben, Giorgio. *Remnants of Auschwitz*. Trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen. New York: Zone, 1999.
- Agamben, Giorgio. *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture*. Trans. Ronald L. Martinez. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1993.
- Agamben, Giorgio. *State of Exception*. Trans. Kevin Attell. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2005.
- Agamben, Giorgio. "The Author as Gesture." *Profanations*. Trans. Jeff Fort. By Giorgio Agamben. New York: Zone Books, 2007. 61-72.
- Agamben, Giorgio. *The Coming Community*. Trans. Michael Hardt. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1993.
- Agamben, Giorgio. *The Man without Content*. Trans. Georgia Albert. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1999.
- Agamben, Giorgio. *The Open: Man and Animal*. Trans. Kevin Attell. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2004.
- Agamben, Giorgio. "The Thing Itself." *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*. Trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen. By Giorgio Agamben. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1999. 27-38.
- Bartoloni, Paolo. *On the Cultures of Exile, Translation, and Writing*. West Lafayette: Purdue UP, 2008.
- Benjamin, Walter. "Critique of Violence." 1921. *Selected Writings*. Trans. Edmund Jephcott. By Walter Benjamin. Ed. Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1997. Vol. 1, 236-52.
- Benjamin, Walter. "Fate and Character." 1919. Trans. Edmund Jephcott. *Selected Writings*. By Walter Benjamin. Ed. Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1997. Vol. 1, 201-06.
- Benjamin, Walter. "Goethe's Elective Affinities." 1922. Trans. Stanley Corngold. *Selected Writings*. By Walter Benjamin. Ed. Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1997. Vol. 1, 297-360.
- Clemens, Justin, Nicholas Heron, and Alex Murray, eds. *The Work of Giorgio Agamben: Law, Literature, Life*. Edinburg: Edinburg UP, 2008.
- Deutscher, Penelope. "The Inversion of Exceptionality: Foucault, Agamben, and 'Reproductive Rights'." *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 107.1 (2008): 55-70.
- Durantaye, Leland de la. *Giorgio Agamben: A Critical Introduction*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2009.
- Eagleton, Robert. "On Giorgio Agamben's Holocaust." *Paragraph: Journal of Modern Critical Theory* 25.2 (2002): 52-67.
- Ferrari Bravo, Luciano. "Homo Sacer. Una riflessione sul libro di Agamben." *Dal fordismo alla globalizzazione. Cristalli di tempo politico*. By Luciano Ferrari Bravo. Roma: Manifestolibri, 2001. 279-86.
- Foucault, Michel. *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. Trans. Alan Mark Sheridan-Smith. London: Routledge, 2002.
- Geulen, Eva. *Giorgio Agamben zur Einführung*. Hamburg: Junius, 2009.
- Hardt, Michael, and Antonio Negri. *Commonwealth*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2009.
- Hardt, Michael, and Antonio Negri. *Empire*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2000.
- Leitgeb, Hannah, and Cornelia Vismann. "Das unheilige Leben. Ein Gespräch mit dem italienischen Philosophen Giorgio Agamben." *Literaturen* 2.1 (2001): 16-21.
- Levi, Neil, and Michael Rothberg. "Auschwitz and the Remains of Theory: Towards an Ethics of the Borderland." *symptome: a journal for the intermingling of literary, cultural, and theoretical scholarship* 11.1-2 (2004): 23-38.
- Marchart, Oliver. "Zwischen Moses und Messias. Zur politischen Differenz bei Agamben." *Die gouvernementale Maschine. Zur politischen Philosophie Giorgio Agambens*. Ed. Janine Böckelmann and Frank Meier. Münster: UNRAST, 2007. 10-28.
- Mesnard, Philippe, and Claudine Kahan. *Giorgio Agamben à l'épreuve d'Auschwitz*. Paris: Kimé, 2001.
- Mills, Catherine. "Biopolitics, Liberal Eugenics, and Nihilism." *Giorgio Agamben: Sovereignty and Life*. Ed. Matthew Calarco and Steven DeCaroli. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2007. 180-202.
- Mills, Catherine. "Linguistic Survival and Ethicality: Biopolitics, Subjectification, and Testimony in *Remnants of Auschwitz*." *Politics, Metaphysics, and Death: Essays on Giorgio Agamben's Homo Sacer*. Ed. Andrew Norris. Durham: Duke UP, 2005. 198-221.
- Mills, Catherine. *The Philosophy of Agamben*. Stocksfield: Acumen, 2008.
- Negri, Antonio. "Il mostro politico. Nuda vita e potenza." *Desiderio del mostro. Dal circo al laboratorio alla politica*. Ed. Antonio Negri, Ubaldo Fadini, and Charles T. Wolfe. Roma: Manifestolibri, 2001. 179-210.
- Neilson, Brett. "Potenza nuda? Sovereignty, Biopolitics, Capitalism." *Contretemps* 5 (2004): 63-78.
- Norris, Andrew. "The Exemplary Exception: Philosophical and Political Decisions in Giorgio Agamben's *Homo Sacer*." *Politics, Metaphysics, and Death: Essays on Giorgio Agamben's Homo Sacer*. Ed. Andrew Norris. Durham: Duke UP, 2005. 262-83.
- Peguy, Marie. "The Dichotomy of Perspectives in the Work of Imre Kertész and Jorge Semprún." *Imre Kertész and Holocaust Literature*. Ed. Louise O. Vasvári and Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek. West Lafayette: Purdue UP, 2005. 171-81.
- Peterson, Erik. "A Theology of Clothes." *Selection*. By Erik Peterson. Ed. Cecily Hastings and Donald Nicholl. London: Sheed and Ward, 1954. Vol. 2, 56-64.
- Watkin, William. *The Literary Agamben: Adventures in Logopoiesis*. London: Continuum, 2010.
- Zartaloudis, Thanos. *Giorgio Agamben: Power, Law and the Uses of Criticism*. London: Routledge, 2010.
- Ziarek Plonowska, Ewa. "Bare Life on Strike: Notes on the Biopolitics of Race and Gender." *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 107.1 (2008): 89-105.

Author's profile: Carlo Salzani conducts research at the Centre for Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies at Monash University. His fields of interests in research include biopolitics, literature and the animal, and the human/animal divide. In addition to numerous articles, Salzani's book publications include *Crisi e possibilità: Robert Musil e il tramonto dell'Occidente* (2010), *Constellations of Reading: Walter Benjamin in Figures of Actuality* (2009), and, with Barbara Dalle Pezze, the collected volume *Essays on Boredom and Modernity* (2009). E-mail: <carlo.salzani@monash.edu>