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Whatever: Giorgio Agamben's gender trouble

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Abstract:

Feminist scholars interested in the political ideas of Giorgio Agamben have had to negotiate the 'gender-blindness' of his writing and the absence from his theory of women's bodies. They are nevertheless sometimes prepared to appropriate the concept of 'bare life' as if it were in itself relatively unaffected by its original frame, and easily extricated from it. On the contrary, I argue that gender difference poses fundamental problems for the schema of 'bare life'. Female bodies are not simply missing from Homo Sacer, but included as an absence in the universalising 'man' that is the protagonist of Agamben's discourse. As such they play an occluded role in founding Agamben's authority. I explore the implications of this further in more recent works where

the female body does play an explicit role, in the form of the 'nymph'. Here I show that this insistently feminine figure, whose political implications have not often been considered, acts as a specular supplement to an ostensibly universal, but implicitly masculine, 'man'. I conclude by exploring the drama of castration in Agamben's work on art as a function of the mastery to which his writing aspires, and which sits uneasily with his critique of sovereignty.

Keywords: Agamben, feminist theory, sovereignty, mastery, castration

Whatever: Giorgio Agamben's Gender Trouble[1]

In recent years, a number of feminist scholars in a variety of fields have turned to the political work of Giorgio Agamben for inspiration.[2] Although they are generally wary of what Catherine Mills has called the 'gender-blindness' of Agamben's work,[3] there is a sense that his conceptual framework

[1] My thanks to Daniela Caselli for her invaluable help with this article.
[2] Ann Marie Smith, 'Neo-eugenics: A Feminist Critique of Agamben, in *Occasions* 1:2 (2011); Allaine Cerwonka and Anna Loutfi, 'Biopolitics and the Female Reproductive Body as the New Subject of Law', in *feminists@law* 1:1 (2011); Evan Smith and Marinella Marmo, *Race, Gender and the Body in British Immigration Control: Subject to Examination* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2014).
[3] Catherine Mills, *The Philosophy of Agamben* (London: Routledge, 2014), p.114; first publ. 2008.

can be useful to feminism, and that his gender limitations are worth overcoming. Thus Ewa Płonowska Ziarek suggests that, with 'some fundamental revisions', the concept of 'bare life' can 'open new interpretations of the biopolitics of race and gender'.[4] According to this reading, Agamben's gender limitations would be relatively extrinsic to the key concept of 'bare life', such that the latter could be extricated from the former, intact. Penelope Deutscher's intervention, on the other hand—which has been the most influential, as well as the most sceptical and exacting—raises more fundamental objections to the usefulness of 'bare life'. What would happen, Deutscher asks, if the 'politicized life' under discussion were periodically qualified as 'born of women's bodies'? For one thing, the foetus might present a limit case for 'bare life'. The analogy may seem tempting insofar as the foetus can be seen as a minimal, liminal form of human life, and to this extent *like* 'bare life'. But what, then, would we do with Agamben's dire warnings about bare life's absolute exposure to violence, or the 'killability' of *homo sacer*? Would one, Deutscher asks, have to liken the woman's body to a death camp, or the woman herself to a sinister sovereign?[5] It seems, then, that the notion of 'bare life' *in itself* may be a problematic fit, at least for the defence of reproductive rights. Deutscher in any case wishes to 'open a debate' with Agamben over

[4] Ewa Płonowska Ziarek, *Feminist Aesthetics and the Politics of Modernism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), p.154.
[5] Penelope Deutscher, 'The Inversion of Exceptionality: Foucault, Agamben, and "Reproductive Rights", in *South Atlantic Quarterly* 107:1 (Winter 2008), 55-70, pp.66-67.

the broader problem of his 'nonengagement' with women's bodies, which are 'impressively absent' from his writing. She initially, and perhaps diplomatically, suggests that this absence may be 'one of the doubtless unintended by-products of his response to Foucault'. But shortly afterwards she upgrades it to a 'non-accident' (Deutscher 57-59), and with this raises the possibility that women's bodies may be not just 'impressively' but *systemically* absent. This more radical possibility has not, however, prevented subsequent scholars who enage with Deutscher, yet continue to see Agamben's ideas as useful, from declaring his 'sex blindness [...] immaterial from a feminist perspective' (Cerwonka and Loutfi).

The debate is thus framed in terms of the usefulness of concepts drawn from one area of critical thinking for another. But it seems to me that in this way the more radical possibilities of Deutscher's critique are lost. For if, as Deutscher seems to suggest, the absence of women's bodies is in some way constitutive of Agamben's discourse, it may be that Agamben needs feminist theory more than feminist theory needs Agamben; that is, that feminist theory might offer a privileged perspective on fundamental problems with his theories. In this case, it would no longer be a case of what feminism can learn from Agamben, but what Agamben might learn from feminism. In advancing this line of argument it is not, however, my contention that women's bodies are simply absent from Agamben's work; and this for two distinct but complementary reasons.

Firstly, in *Homo sacer* itself women's bodies are not simply absent but, to pastiche Agamben's own language, constantly included in the form of an exclusion, in the *homo* or *uomo* of Agamben's discourse. Indeed, if we are to take this 'man' as it seems to want to be taken—as a universal term only adventitiously gendered masculine—it *must*, implicitly, undertake to include femininity. The corollary of this, however, is that the universal 'man' functions discursively much like the 'zone of indifferentiation' in which Agamben says the bad universal of 'bare life' is produced. The fatal role thus accorded to a process of indifferentiation ought to make us wary of any universal produced by the simple elision of difference. Curiously enough, Agamben had already proposed, in *La comunità che viene* (1990), a form of indifferentiation, a 'qualunque' or 'whatever' identity, as a utopian goal. There must, thus, be some question as to what separates these forms of indifferentiation, leading on the one hand to disaster, and on the other to salvation. Moreover, since Agamben's critique putatively falls on the hither side of either of these termini, his 'gender-blindness' potentially constitutes a third form of indifference, whose relation to the other two is not immediately clear. If, in short, it gestures towards the utopian 'qualunque', it risks equally conveying the casual dismissal of the English demotic 'whatever'.[6] Whichever way we cut it, we cannot remain indifferent to Agamben's indifference.

[6] I should stress that the Italian word 'qualunque' itself is not used in this latter way.

The rare and brief moments in *Homo sacer* where bodies expressly sexed female do appear are thus of great interest. In these moments, little ripples of an unwonted gender-differentiation disturb, if only at the level of grammar, the otherwise placid progress of Agamben's universal. But if this disturbance is marked, in the play of gendered pronouns, its implications for the theory go seemingly unremarked. In one striking instance, this occurs in a vignette set in the Nazi death camps, the exemplary scene of bare life. The resurgence of sexual difference in the very heart of the zone of indifferentiation ought to cast a troubling light back on Agamben's universal. Yet these differences are quickly and silently subsumed, and the universal *uomo* recovers its monolithic solidity and goes on as before. Given that this universal *uomo* is also, so to speak, the constituent subject of Agamben's theoretical mastery—or, if you will, his sovereignty—this poses fundamental questions for his entire project. What if the theory itself effectively mimics the horrifying process it describes? It is important, then, not to think in terms of a simple absence of women's bodies. Certainly, there is a theoretical deficit here that cannot be set right simply by inventing, as Ronit Lentin has done, a 'femina sacra' as a sort of bride of *homo sacer*.[7] Rather I propose to accentuate these moments where a difference that is routinely subsumed and elided does break

[7] Ronit Lentin, '"No Woman's Law Will Rot This State": The Israeli Racial State and Feminist Resistance', in *Sociological Research Online* 9:3 (August 2004) <http://www.socresonline.org.uk/9/3/9/3/lentin.html>.

cover, the better to understand the difficulties it poses for the otherwise seemingly docile universal that underpins Agamben's mastery.

The second sense in which women's bodies are present in Agamben's work in any case makes the invention of any supplementary figure of feminity redundant. For, since the time Lentin and Deutscher were writing, Agamben has been, in a manner of speaking, busily setting the absence of female bodies in his work to rights. His interest in the figure of the nymph dates back at least to 1975. But in *Ninfe* (2007; trans. 2011) and *Signatura rerum* (2008; trans. 2009), this figure of 'the feminine body in motion' suddenly moves centre stage.[8] It is perhaps surprising that these works have not attracted more attention from feminists and gender theorists; Heather Warren Crow is a notable exception.[9] It may be that this work is simply taking time to filter through into publication. But it may also be that, in seeming to address different disciplinary concerns, it hails a different audience. For scholars dealing expressly with political theory, the work on *homo sacer* may thus remain the obvious locus. Such disciplinary determination can have some odd effects. Judith Butler's comments on Agamben in *Precarious Life*, for

[8] Giorgio Agamben, *Ninfe* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2007; repr. 2012); *Signatura rerum: Sul metodo* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2008).
[9] Heather Warren-Crow, *Girlhood and the Plastic Image* (Hanover, New Hampshire: Dartmouth College Press, 2014).

instance, although highly pertinent, have nothing to say on the gender dimension of his work.[10] Meanwhile, where Agamben's nymphs have been received it is generally in the frame of visual culture, often with little reference to his political theory. Nevertheless, the specular relation and implicit gendering of subject-positions the nymphs articulate can help to illuminate the problematic gendering of *homo sacer*. Agamben, I will argue, is the consistent albeit passive heir to discourses in which femininity is always *for* the subject of discourse, and which posit it as the bearer of a life whose subject it can never be. Because Agamben never problematises this position, and indeed the arrow of critique is always pointing in some other direction, he also inherits a tacit and seemingly impregnable masculine subjectivity, which is complicit with a quasi-messianic ambition to master and own the discourse of disenchantment. It is this matter of mastery, and the rhetorical features of theoretical writing that make it compelling, that concern me. This is, however, more a cautionary tale than a polemic. What I ultimately want to show is how the sad sovereign of a humiliated humanity is inevitably haunted by the queerness of his position and menaced with castration.

Sacred Men

[10] Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2006; first publ. 2004).

In the first volume of *Homo sacer,* Agamben conjures the eponymous 'sacred man' to confront what he says is the 'decisive event of Modernity'; that is, 'the politicisation of bare life', whose paradoxical corollary has been the apparent 'eclipse' of politics.[11] This *homo sacer* is, to be sure, a rather obscure figure from Roman law, which designates a subject so far beyond the pale of human society as to be absolutely killable, with no question of homicide or need for legal justification. But it is also, Agamben suggests, a distant echo of the condition of all humans under what he calls the 'sovereign ban', a sort of primal scene of politics, a hyperbolic state of exception implicated in the foundation of any polity, where everything hangs in the balance, and at the sovereign's behest, but as yet unprovided with whatever rights or protections it may have to offer. In this moment, the (putatively) Aristotelian distinction between the mere life of the organism (*zoe*) and the life of human projects (*bios*) enters into a zone of indifferentiation, in which human being takes on the terribly exposed condition of 'bare life'. What this archaic fable has to do with Modernity is not, perhaps, immediately apparent. But Agamben insists that the sovereign ban is not the sort of event that is ever 'completed once and for all *in illo tempore* [in that particular time]', but rather it is reenacted constantly, in any polis (HS 121). Thus it persists, as 'the hidden foundation

[11] Giorgio Agamben, *Homo sacer: Il potere sovrano e la nuda vita* (Turin: Einaudi, 1995/2005), pp.6-7. All translations are my own.

on which the entire political system rests' (HS 12); and, with particular emphasis, as 'the hidden paradigm of the political space of modernity' (HS 135). Because it is hidden, 'we must learn to recognise' how the archaic structure of the sovereign ban continues to shape political relations today (HS 123). If we do not, the fate of stateless refugees under the floundering, misconceived impotence of universal human rights, will be the fate of all, and we already have a model for the terminus of this trajectory in the Nazi death camps. As these barbarisms show, Modernity marks the remorseless advance of this devastating force towards an imminent endgame, in which we will all ultimately be engulfed. By the same token, this terrible danger presents something like an opportunity, insofar as our present nihilism 'is nothing other than [...] the emergence into the light of this relation as such' (HS 59). Thus we teeter on the edge, between the most awful catastrophe, and some sort of revelation or transfiguration.

Agamben has, shall we say, a weakness for a certain apocalyptic tone. In his peroration, he mentions Foucault's hope, at the end of the first volume of the *History of Sexuality*, for a new 'economy of bodies and pleasures', but suggests that his own study makes such a thing doubtful: the very concept of the body is always already caught in the problematic he has been outlining, and there is no way of reconfiguring it that can offer 'firm ground against the claims of sovereign power' (HS 209). Nor is there any way back, whether with Leo Strauss or Hannah Arendt, to the classic distinctions between *zoe*

and *bios*, private and political life: 'From the camps, there is no way back towards classical politics; in them, city and home became indistinguishable' (210). So what can we do?

> We must, rather, make of this very biopolitical body, bare life itself, the place in which is constituted and installed a form of life entirely poured into bare life, a *bios* that is only its own *zoe*.
>
> Occorrerà, piuttosto, fare dello stesso corpo biopolitico, della nuda vita stessa il luogo in cui si costituisce e s'insedia una forma di vita tutta versata nella nuda vita, un *bíos* che è solo la sua *zoé* . (HS 210)

The perversity of this imperative, urging us in what might seem precisely the wrong direction, is doubtless a large part of its theoretical glamour. Such a move could be understood under the sign of a sort of negative dialectics, as an attempt to have done with transcendence. And yet this promise—that we might, one day, *have done with* transcendence—for all that it aspires to a sort of negative messianism, comes perilously close to straightforward messianism. The mystery surrounding what, precisely, it will be necessary (*occorrerà*) to *do* does nothing to dispel this impression. In what precise manner should life be 'poured into' bare life such as to avoid succumbing to the terrible defencelessness of that state?[12] It is a strangely empty revelation and, since the 'nothing of revelation' is—as Agamben has argued earlier apropos

[12] I have preferred this rather awkward and literal translation of 'versata nella' over the 'exhausted in' of the standard English translation, which doubtless makes more sense, precisely to retain a sense of the strangeness of the figure, and the enigma of the process to which it alludes. See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* trans. by Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), p.105.

of Gershom Scholem's comments on Kafka's 'Before the Law'—the prerogative of the sovereign (HS 59), this may explain why I feel strangely oppressed. And yet, as Agamben moves towards his conclusion, it seems he really does mean that the way beyond the terrible grip of sovereign power on bare life is to give ourselves over entirely to bare life. Seemingly, if we conceive of this new form of life as form-of-life, or 'lifeform' in something like the Natural History sense, we will see opening up 'a field [*un campo*] of research that lies beyond [*al di là*] that which is defined by the intersection of politics and philosophy, medico-biological sciences and jurisprudence' (HS 211). The rather infelicitous occurrence of the word 'campo' here inadvertently underscores the terrible risk of such a strategy. For the 'campo' with which we have been mainly concerned in *Homo sacer* is the death camp; determined, what is more, as a place of research, into human beings treated zoologically, as lifeforms. What distinguishes Agamben's new, salvific 'campo' of research from the 'campo' that is the exemplar of catastrophe, beyond a bare, tendentious 'al di là'?

Agamben has indeed dealt with the issue of pseudo-medical research on camp inmates in an earlier section entitled 'VP', after the *Versuchsperson* or guinea pig of Nazi experimentation. And this is one of the disappearingly small number of places in *Homo sacer* where female bodies make a sudden, and troubling, appearance. In a long parenthesis, instancing 'research' into the reanimation of subjects chilled by long exposure to cold water, Agamben

notes as ‘particularly grotesque’ those experiments into the use of ‘animal warmth’, in which the VP was placed ‘between two bare women’; and in which, on one occasion, the VP even ‘succeeded in having a sexual relation, which facilitated the process of recovery’ (HS 172). Since the camps are already axiomatically the worst, one is bound to ask what makes this scene *particularly* grotesque. The sex act itself is doubtless the focus of a peculiar confusion of pathos. Simply to affirm the *liveliness* of a sex act so overdetermined by its *zoological* frame would be in disastrously bad taste. Yet simply to express disgust would be to betray whatever humanity there might be in the scene. Can we ever hope to resolve this into an appropriate response? Agamben, at any rate, places a cordon sanitaire round the sex act, framing it as something ‘attested’, presumably by the Nazi medic ventriloquised in the troublingly dry remark that closes the parenthesis: ‘which aided recovery’. In this way, our attention is shifted back from the act of sex itself to the act of spectatorship. And any charge of prurience devolves upon the zoological gaze itself, with its grotesque affectation of scientific disinterest.

But might we not, then, read Agamben’s parentheses themselves as walls, immuring the entire scene? And might this not suggest that the grotesque has already begun with the simple apparition of ‘two bare women, also [*anch’esse*] Jewish prisoners from the camps’? Since these *bare women* are ‘also’ Jewish camp inmates, they too ought to be, purely and simply, instances of *bare life*. But they are doubly marked here as *also*-instances: the

apparent need to qualify them as ‘also’ suggests some difference between *them* and the bare life that lies *between them*. Maybe, then, sexual intercourse is only the narrative culmination of a difference or relation that is already somehow excessive and troubling in itself, one that is laid bare by a nakedness that is not identical to the nakedness of bare life. If this is so, a further question suggests itself: are these parentheses *between* which this difference makes this very rare appearance the visible trace of a bracketing elsewhere effected more completely, and in silence?

This last thesis is not as speculative as it sounds. Such a bracketing occurs every time *Homo sacer* deploys the words *homo* or *uomo* in their putative universality, conflating human with man. Agamben’s thesis is that the sovereign ban places all human being in a ‘zone of indifferentiation’, producing ‘bare life’. But the word ‘uomo’ or ‘man’ claims a similar power, insofar as it affects to make sexual difference disappear. Given that this is the sovereign gesture par excellence, might we not suspect a certain theoretical violence? The traces of this violence are most evident where, as in the previous instance, Agamben feels somehow obliged to distinguish female bodies. So, at a certain point, he feels it is necessary to insist that the *vitae necisque potestas*, the ‘power of life and death’ in Roman law, should *not* be confused with a father or husband’s right to kill a wife or daughter caught in flagrante; or with a master’s right over his slaves. Rather, it is strictly a father’s right

over his son. For some pages thereafter Agamben is unusually gender-specific, naming 'i cittadini maschi', emphatically 'male citizens'. The problem is that Agamben also wants to claim that it is precisely because this power exceeds the ambit of the household, and invests 'every free male citizen' from birth, that it may serve as the very model of political power; based, that is, 'not on simple natural life, but on life exposed to death' (HS 97-100). The wife or daughter exposed to domestic violence may be suprised to learn that they are not *sufficiently* 'exposed to death'. Meanwhile the son may take some comfort in the fact that his submission to power is a prerequisite for inheriting it. All of this is doubtless true of patrician and patriarchal Rome; but Agamben's habit of universalising the archaic as a conceptual archè risks uncritically countersigning patriarchy in the very foundations of Modernity.

Such ripples in the theory only make themselves felt because female bodies suddenly appear; so why does Agamben mention them at all? One answer might be that suppressing them can equally produce some bizarre results. Thus the brothels of Sade's pamphlet *Français, encore un effort si vous voulez être républicains*—which features in *La Philosophie du boudoir*, subtitled *Dialogues destinées à l'éducation des jeunes demoiselles*—become the political locus par excellence 'where any citizen [*cittadino*] can publicly summon any other to oblige him to satisfy his own desires' (HS 149). Although Sade is by no means averse to sexual action between male citizens, 'cittadino' evidently fails to do justice to his encyclopedic ambitions with regard to the

manner and orientation of coupling. Agamben's gendering of the term is, on the other hand, faithful to the political theatre of which he says the brothel is a hyperbolic microcosm. For, as he tells us, the French Revolution instituted modern biopolitics by making 'birth' or 'nativity' (*la nascita*) the 'foundation of sovereignty and law'. This politics and Agamben's discourse alike thus include female bodies, but only insofar as they are implicit in the substantivised past participle 'nascita', making them the *bearers* of a life that may, provided it is emphatically male, go on to bear the political rights of a *cittadino*, but which they themselves, as the bearers of that life, will never bear.[13] Again, having nothing to say on this matter, Agamben's schema leaves women in a position seemingly so abject as to make the supposed disaster of bare life seem positively hopeful. As I move on to explore Agamben's nymphs, it is this business of the manner in which life is borne that I want to keep on the horizon.

Imagos

The 'nymph' first appears in Agamben's early (1975) essay 'Aby Warburg and the Nameless Science',[14] and comes to prominence again more recently

[13] The theory and history of women's rights after 1789 is complex, and some women did, of course, play notable political, historical, and symbolic roles. But it is broadly true to say that the move to exclude women from full citizenship prevailed.

[14] Giorgio Agamben, 'Aby Warburg and the Nameless Science', in *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy* ed. and trans. by Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), pp.89-103.

in *Ninfe* (2007), and *Signatura rerum* (2008). In each case, Agamben gives a privileged place to Aby Warburg's unfinished *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne*, a 'picture-atlas' consisting of sixty-three panels, each covered with a collage of reproductions, sketches, and photographs illustrating a different *Pathosformel*, or 'feeling formula'. In *Signatura rerum*, Agamben calls upon panel forty-six, in which each image is 'in some way in relation to the theme' of the 'feminine figure in movement', to illustrate his notion of a paradigm as a fluid constellation in which 'none of the images is the original, just as none of the images is simply a copy or repetition' (SR 30-31). In other words, the panel defies the usual hierarchies of exemplarity. Crucial to this determination, as so often in Agamben's comments on modern art, is the patently second-order and cut-up nature of the images—they are clippings, photos, sketches, excerpts—and the techniques of collage and montage used to assemble them. What is supposed to emerge from this, rather than an exhaustive catalogue or genetic account of the topic 'nymph', is something more dialectically restless: the nymph 'is the paradigm of the single images and the single images are the paradigms of the nymph' (SR 31).

The fact remains, nevertheless, that it is always panel 46 and its nymphs which serve, paradoxically, as the exemplar of this disturbance of exemplarity. Maybe this is why Agamben introduces it so coyly. Take panel 46, he says—'Sia la tavola 46' (SR 30), or 'Si prenda la Pathosformel Ninfa' (N 17)—as if he might just as well have chosen another example. Only he

never does. The question that follows in both texts—'where is the nymph?' (SR 30; N 18)—is likewise in bad faith, its epistemological wistfulness already belied by the privilege Agamben gives to one of Warburg's images over all the others. This is 'Fraulein Schnellbring', a fruit-bearing servant excerpted from a fresco of Ghirlandaio, in whose retinue the other images trail, as what there is '[b]esides Ghirlandaio's fresco' (SR 30). One might speculate that what grants her this preeminence is the distinctive step, with the heel of the back foot sharply lifted, made famous by the Gradiva of Jensen and Freud. Agamben does not make this connection, but other critics have.[15] The explicit mark of her privilege, however, is the byname which Warburg and his collaborator André Jolles 'familiarly' (SR 30) or 'jokingly' (N 17-18) gave her in the whimsical correspondence they devoted to her. This jokingly familiar view of a female servant who, hilariously, 'brings quickly', is furthermore laced with playfully gratuitous erotic projection. She is, in the words of Jolles, as cited by Agamben, 'the object of my dreams, that transform every time into an enchanting nightmare' (N 18). If Agamben wishes to register any critical or historical distance from such casual, *fin-de-siècle* eroticisation of female domestic service, he does not say so. Then again, neither do other recent critics such as Spyros Papapetros who declares Fraulein

[15] Geoffrey Hartman, 'Psychoanalysis as a Cultural Ideal: "Form Feeling" in Freud's Essay on "Gradiva"', *American Imago* 65:4 (Winter 2008), 505-22; Georges Didi-Huberman, *Aperçues* (Paris: Minuit, 2018); Daniela Sacco, 'Ninfa e Gradiva: dalla percezione individuale alla memoria storica sovrapersonale', *Cahiers d'études italiennes* 23 (2016), 45-60.

S—'amusingly' in the view of Geoffrey Hartman—'closer to the headhuntress Judith unwavering in her mission to decapitate Holofernes than to Freud's liberating Gradiva' (Hartman 519-20).[16] Least of all is there any sign of concern that this sort of scholarly game might be, as Heather Warren-Crow has suggested, 'a queer interaction', in which the image of the girl is 'passed back and forth between men' as 'the chattel of homosociality' (Warren-Crow 116).

Fraulein S's Gradivan step, with its distinctively raised back foot, does nevertheless arguably have a determining role in the significance of the nymph in general. As Geoffrey Hartman suggests, these figures of the 'feminine figure in motion' are vehicles for Aby Warburg's notion of 'klassische Unruhe', the resurgence of a Dionysian 'unrest' within the classical that reverses the terms of, and troubles, the German classical ideal of 'rest in motion', or 'Ruhe in Bewegung' (Hartman 518-19). What is at stake in this argument is a reform of German classical education, of *Bildung*. But we surely need also to notice the gendered zoology on which this still tacitly masculine *Bildung* rests. I say 'zoology' partly as a nod to Jensen's Zoë Bertgang, but partly also to underline the form of life implicit in this brightly-walking lifeform, and its specular nature. In Jensen's tale, and Freud's reading, Zoë

[16] In support of this reading, one might see in Fraulein S's gait an echo of a number of quattrocento Judiths, albeit not on the trail of Holofernes, but carrying his head in place of a fruit-bowl. But, one feels bound to protest, sometimes a fruit-bowl is just a fruit-bowl. And is it in entirely good taste to heap an additional burden on a busy servant?

is the means for Norbert Hanold of quitting his alienation in the fetishism of classical imagery, so as to embrace life in the flesh. Agamben's Warburgian nymphs are, a fortiori, the bearers of life *for others*. It remains to show the work this gendered configuration does for Agamben's theory.

In *Signatura rerum*, the nymph-as-paradigm beats a path for the re-tooling of the medieval doctrine of 'signatures'. These, it transpires, are the elusive but vital force that allows the paradigm and its instances to remain in perfect equilibrium. Signatures are the 'subtle and inapparent threads' which lead the researcher through the interminable mass of the archive (SR 74). They bridge the gulf between semiotics and hermeneutics, for 'signs would not speak if signatures did not make them speak' (SR 62-63). They are not concepts, but that without which concepts would remain 'inert and unproductive' (SR 77). To a degree, then, signatures articulate a version of something like a reader response theory, but one that involves a curious sort of conceptual vitalism. It may be reasonable enough to imply that texts 'live' in their encounter with interpretation. But Agamben's signatures themselves seem to have some sort of life of their own, independent of the agency of a given historian or reader. It is as if there really were a mysterious force that could trace a path through a mass of otherwise undifferentiated material, lighting up family resemblances between images, and spontaneously drawing them into constellations. Indeed, some such force is needed to assure us that the community of nymphs is no mere projection; that their constellation is

still visible in the starry sky of ideas because it is fired by something like Warburg's *Nachleben*, the 'afterlife' or 'survival' of antiquity.

In *Ninfe,* Agamben does not speak of signatures, but again his nymphs articulate a sort of vitalism, this time in the notion that they are 'caricate' (N 9, 11, 14, 25, 29). One might render this as 'freighted' or 'loaded', as with a cargo. But it becomes increasingly clear that we should think more of the way a battery is 'charged'. The theme first appears in relation to Bill Viola's *The Passions*. As slo-mo re-enactments of the group postures of classic paintings, Viola's video installations embody a certain equivocation between movement and stillness. But the crucial moment comes, 'exemplarily' in the film *Greetings*, at the point where the actors have 'recomposed' Pontormo's *Visitation* and the images seem to stop, but are 'in reality charged with time [*caricate di tempo*]', and imprinted with a sort of tremor: 'una sorta di tremito' (N 9). What Agamben is after in his exemplary images is thus a sort of pause between movements that seems pregnant with movement even in its stillness. This is taken up in his next example, the dance step named 'fantasma' by the fifteenth-century dance-master Domenico di Piacenza (N 11-14), which also serves to develop the relations between memory, imagination, and movement; and this, in turn, later provides the segue into Walter Benjamin's theory of dialectical images (N 27-32). Such images crystallise the dialectic 'at a standstill', and as such they have energy, potential; for 'the life of images does not consist in simple immobility, nor in the successive

resumption of movement, but in a pause charged with tension between them' (N 29).

This is also why Agamben's images always depict 'un essere di passaggio' (N 36). The question is, what is at stake in gathering this 'being of passage' or 'passing being' under the rubric 'nymph'.[17] One rather dismayingly banal answer would be that nymphs, in classical mythology, just are elusive, fleeting life forces that animate natural processes, as in the passage Walter Benjamin cites from the *Palatine Anthology* at the end of *The Arcades Project* (Z3), in which it is the nymphs who turn the water-wheel of the mill.[18] Agamben does not cite this passage, and there is perhaps no absolute reason why he should. Then again, his discussion of the dialectical image in *Ninfe* cites no images, seemingly preferring to operate on a formal, conceptual plane above mere examples. We might deem this a determinate omission if we once thought that the wheels of this ostensibly formalist argument were secretly driven by mere thematic content. Agamben privileges Benjamin's fragment N3,1 as coming closest to giving a definition of the concept (N 27). But in *Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century*, Benjamin gives another sort of definition when he announces, as the crowning instance of the dialectical

[17] One might also think of Benjamin's remarks in the *Passagenwerk*, on prostitutes and other denizens of the 'Passagen'; the arcades or 'passages'.
[18] Walter Benjamin, *Das Passagenwerk* Vol. 2 (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1982), p.851; *The Arcades Project* trans. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (London: Belknap Press, 2002), p.697.

image, 'the whore, who is seller and ware in one': 'die Hure, die Verkäuferin und Ware in einem ist' (P I 55; AP 10).[19] This figure that haunts the passages of Paris later turns up again in the section 'O Prostitution, Spiel', in a passage taken from Alfred Delvau:

> It's a pleasure to see them walking on this asphalt, the dress racily hitched up, right to the knee, so as to leave sparkling in the sun a leg fine and nervous like that of an arab horse, full of adorable quiverings and impatience, and ending in calf-length leather boots of an irreproachable elegance! You don't bother about the morality of *these* legs!...What you want is to go where they are going.
>
> C'est plaisir à les voir marcher sur ce bitume, la robe retrousée lestement, d'un côté, jusqu'au genou, de façon à laisser étinceler au soleil une jambe fine et nerveuse comme celle d'un cheval arabe, pleine de frémissements et d'impatiences adorables, et terminée par un brodequin d'une élégance irréprochable! On ne s'occupe pas de la moralité de ces jambes-là!...Ce qu'on veut, c'est aller où elles vont. (P I 634; AP 509)

Doubtless we may see one form of dialectic at a standstill here in the luxurious refinement of an arab horse treading the tawdry asphalt of the rue des Martyres. But a scholar of biopolitics must also surely note the bad faith of the desire to 'go where they go'. For, really, they are going nowhere; nowhere that is not already determined by the desire of the buyer, and marking time until a sale is made. Their steps serve only to display their wares; to display

[19] In a bizarre passage towards the end of B Mode, Benjamin speculates that woman must have achieved erect posture later than man (P I 131-32; AP 80-81). But the art of the Parisian street strongly associates feminine sexuality with artful walking.

themselves as wares. The prostitute thus shares *this* with the nymphs that drive the mill-wheel, and with Fraulein Schnellbring: each is animated only in the service of others. Indeed, one might say that they are all variants on the domestic labour that Hannah Arendt, another of Agamben's touchstones, associates with the mere reproduction of life processes below the pale of political life, and which has perhaps less to hope for from biopolitics than any other sphere of life.[20] Like mitochondria, necessary to the functioning of every cell yet forever debarred from the drama of coding, such a thing may *naturally* power the dialectical understanding of an other, yet never take a single step forward in its own right.

This is also what underwrites the cruellest of dialectical reversals, in which the work such ancillary figures perform for us comes to appear as dependency on us.[21] Agamben, indeed, suggests that nymphs depend, for the life they selflessly donate to us, on our attention. Like signatures, which 'may easily escape [*sfuggire*] the gaze of the historian' (SR 33), nymphs, being fugitive, require a certain look. Without this, their 'life'—since it is only potential, lacking the spark of an oppositely-charged pole—is curiously close to death. Thus it is 'only in the encounter with a *living* individual that images

[20] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* 2nd edn (London: University of Chicago Press, 1998).
[21] For the work of the ancillary, see also Stephen Thomson, 'Ancillary Narratives: Maids, Sleepwalking, and Agency in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture', *Textual Practice* 29:1 (2015), 91-110.

can reacquire polarity and life' (N 35; emphasis mine). Left to their own devices, they have a tendency to 'harden into spectres', 'a irrigidirsi in spettri', and they need art and art criticism to restore them to life: 'di restituirle alla vita' (N 22). In this regard, the collage technique of Warburg's *Pathosformeln* is once more exemplary, for it kindles the flicker of *Nachleben* (afterlife or survival) that subsists in images, so as to restore their energy: 'restituire loro energia' (N 25).

We are back, thus, to a sort of reader response theory; but one now tinged with a curious erotics, which takes a baroque turn with Paracelsus. His nymphs, belonging to a second order of creation—between man and animal, and made by God in the image of man rather than of Himself—have no soul (N 40). But they can acquire one if they join in sexual union with a man, and produce with him a son: 'se si uniscono sessualmente con un uomo e generano con lui un figlio' (N 43). Clearly this gendering is part and parcel of the conventions of courtly love on which Agamben now draws. For Paracelsus, the nymph names the object of passionate love par excellence: 'la ninfa nomina l'oggetto per eccellenza della passione amorosa' (N 39). And in Boccaccio's *Corbaccio*, to love means to love a nymph: 'amare significa amare una ninfa' (N 47). In countersigning these discourses, however, Agamben seems not at all concerned to put their gendering into question. Rather we are to attend to the more important, epochal matter of the birth of modern literature out of a scission in the mediaevel imago: 'La letteratura moderna nasce,

in questo senso, da une scissione dell'*imag*o medievale' (N 50). This fracture or 'cæsura' is exemplied in Boccaccio's quip, which also provides *Ninfe* with its epigraph, that the Muses *are* women, only they don't piss: 'Egli è vero che tutte son femine, ma non pisciano' (N 49). Boccaccio breaks with the epoch of Dante insofar as he opts to affirm the 'cæsura' between reality and imagination, rather than 'suture' it (N 49). Perhaps the 'brusque realism' with which real, pissing women are distinguished from nymphs, is meant to have done with the question of gender, by indicating that it exists on another plane. And perhaps there is a certain naivety in thinking that Agamben's nymphs simply are women. And yet femininity is constantly needed as one pole of the non-adequation of the real and the concept which produces a sublime or farcical fracture ('una sublime o farsesca frattura') in the imagination, the very place where Mediaeval thought hoped to find a secure connection between the phenomenal world and thought: 'congiunzione fra il mondo sensibile e il pensiero'.

Sheaths

Having thus delivered the modern out of a cleft in the imaginary, Agamben goes on to outline the prospectus for a final liberation from images. This thematic is closer to the thematics of *homo sacer* than one might at first suspect. The two topics come into their closest proximity in a section of *La communità che viene* (1990) to which I will turn presently, and which might be said to

play an enigmatic and little-remarked part in the genesis of the Agambenian concept of *homo sacer*. As Leland de la Durantaye tells us, this was a long process: Agamben first broached the term as far back as 1982 in *Il linguaggio e la morte* (pp.131-32), and developed it in essays of the early '90s such as 'Beyond Human Rights' (1993) and 'Form of life' (1993).[22] In the midst of this process, in the peroration of *La comunità che viene*, Agamben condemns our culture's 'hypocritical dogma of the sacredness of bare life'; hypocritical, he goes on to explain, because bare life is 'sacred' only in the sense of *homo sacer*: excluded from the world of men, and able to be killed without homicide.[23] Against this he wagers the 'singolarità qualunque', a human subject that owes its 'singularity' to no attributes or qualities, and is thus qualifiable only as 'qualunque', or 'whatever'. The 'simple absence of conditions' may seem to bring this subject perilously close to bare life, but Agamben's claim is that it can finally bring us to the threshold 'of belonging itself': 'dell'appartenenza stessa' (CCV 67). And in this there is the hope of a new sort of collectivity, exemplified by the crowds in Tianenmen Square who were united by no determinate claim (CCV 69). In a postscript of 2001, Agamben casts himself as having outlived (*sopravvissuto*) such hopes, yet still manages to wrangle this very belatedness—as one who lives 'after the last day', in a

[22] Leland de la Durantaye, *Giorgio Agamben: A Critical Introduction* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), pp.206-8.
[23] Giorgio Agamben, *La comunità che viene* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2001; repr. 2008), p.68. First publ. 1990.

time in which all have 'found themselves in the position of a *relic* [*resto*]'—into an 'unprecedented generalisation of the messianic condition' (CCV 91-92).

Agamben finds salvation in the unlikeliest places. In an earlier section of *La comunità,* entitled 'Collants Dim', he finds it in a 1970s advert for the said affordable brand of tights, featuring a line of models all dancing to the same tune, yet filmed separately. The 'minimal discrepancy [*minimo scarto*] in their gestures' that resulted wafted towards the spectators 'a promise of happiness that unequivocally concerned the human body' (CCV 41). Agamben sets his analysis in the lineage of Kracauer and Benjamin, who found in capitalism's increasing marketisation of the human body the 'corrupt text of a prophecy' of capitalism's beyond. For this marketisation had at least one positive feature: to redeem the body of the stigma of ineffability (*riscattarlo dallo stigma di ineffabilita,* CCV 42). The most evidently reified bodies may thus have a preeminent role in 'the age-old [*secolare*] process of emancipation of the human form from its theological foundations'. So it is in mechanically reproduced pornography that, 'neither generic nor individual, neither images of divinity nor of the animal form, the body became now truly whatever' (CCV 42). Here, however, we come to an important scission. For it is 'not the body that has been technicised, but its image'. Behind the 'transfigured body [*corpo glorioso*]' of publicity, 'the tiny, fragile human body con-

tinues its precarious existence', and the 'geometric splendour of the showgirls covers the long line of anonymous denuded figures to the death camps, or the daily carnage of the motorway' (CCV 43-44). The challenge, then, is to appropriate what capitalism wants to confine to the realm of spectacle; to 'interpenetrate [*compenetrare*] image and body in a space in which they can no longer be separated', so as to produce the indifferentiation of the *qualunque*:

> this is the good [*il bene*] that humanity must learn to wrest from the commodity [*merce*] at sunset. Advertising and pornography, which accompany it to the tomb as mourners, are the unknowing midwives of this new body of humanity.
>
> questo è il bene che l'umanita deve saper strappare alla merce a tramonto. La pubblicità e la pornografia, che l'accompagnano alla tomba come prefiche, sono le inconsapevoli levatrici di questo nuovo corpo dell'umanita (CCV 44)

One has to pay close attention to the detail of the sublation of the commodity on which this apocalypse depends, and according to which a new good (*bene*) will be raised from the abolition of goods (*merce*). What the negative moment of this process will destroy is the 'corpo glorioso', the false promise of transfiguration held out by advertising. As a line of mourners on their way to the bonfire of the vanities, these rhyme uneasily with the queue for the camps invoked shortly before. But in *this* holocaust, we are assured, it is only the image-commodity that will perish. It is a line of argument that comes dangerously close to suggesting that National Socialist racial policy was guilty

mainly of a category error. Meanwhile, the spirit of ‘qualunque’ identity, hitherto sequestered by capitalism in the fetish, is now set free to permeate the body. Any sniggering at the back prompted by the claim that a line of dancing girls might waft a ‘promise of happiness that unequivocally concerned the human body’ is thus silenced. To think that this had anything to do with women’s legs was a vulgar error; only the ‘minimo scarto’ between them concerns us, for in this we glimpse the whatever, ‘whose *physis* is resemblance’.

And yet this simultaneous deployment and abolition of the gendering of the specular object will not quite do. Although Agamben notes in passing, in parenthesis, that the massive manipulation of the human body we see today does concern ‘above all the feminine one’, the examples of such manipulation that follow are somewhat equivocal. After remarking that ‘the opacity of sexual differences has been refuted [*smentita*] by the transsexual body’, Agamben goes on to remark that mortality has been brought into question by the ‘body without organs of the commodity’ (CCV 43). The implication that the transsexual body played a large role in advertising, or even pornography, in 1991 is intriguing. At any rate, it seems these bodies may be, in their capacity to blur boundaries and disarticulate, among the products of the capitalist imaginary that pave the way for the *qualunque* status which the ‘real’ body will inherit. If this is so, then it seems the ‘whatever’ state will be as indifferent to sexual difference as it is to anything else. In the meantime,

however, the boundary that man will have to cross to reach this state is still somewhat overdetermined by sexual difference. Agamben has, after all, only just cited 'the dream of Pygmalion' as the exemplar of the aspiration to break down 'the organic barriers that impede the unconditioned human claim to happiness'. Pygmalion's *technical* solution is 'not simply to form an image for the body, but another body for the image' (CCV 43). In the meantime—I keep returning to this phrase, I think, because I simply do not believe in Agamben's apocalypses; in their ability to reveal something purely formal that dispenses with what they substantially show—in the meantime, we have to ask why this universal promise of happiness comes sheathed in the image of female bodies sheathed (*inguainate*; CCV 43) in tights.[24]

Castrati

Agamben returns to Pygmalion in *L'Uomo senza contenuto* (1994). But here art's promise of happiness—this time explicitly derived from Stendhal's 'promesse de bonheur' as quoted by Nietzsche—concerns the happiness of the *artist*, which marks a turn against Kantian aesthetics, the disinterest of the *spectator*, and indeed the spectator in general.[25] The problem, Agamben suggests, is that the artwork is now so mediated by aesthetics and the canons of

[24] The space is lacking to do justice to 'l'argument de la gaine', or argument of the sheath, that Derrida explores in *Glas* and *Éperons*, but some of its effects will presently become apparent.
[25] Giorgio Agamben, *L'uomo senza contenuto* 4th edn (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2005), pp.9-10. First edn 1994.

taste that it occurs 'independently of any content', and this is why, *pace* Robert Musil, the man of Agamben's title is 'without content'. This idea quickly gives rise to ideas of violence and cutting. The cut lies in aesthetics itself: the Kantian relation of spectator to image produces an alienation of self in other which amounts to a 'laceration' (USC 57). Only artists such as Rimbaud or Artaud who embrace alienation have the chance to 'to remake [*rifare*] their own body and reconcile their own laceration' (USC 83). Thus the art of late modernity is characterised by a series of preemptive cuts: in the ready-made, pop art, and the work-in-progress, the artwork has taken it upon itself to 'strip itself [*spogliarsi*] of its aesthetic potential' (95), to bring 'privation' itself to presence (96), to 'consciously assume' its own 'impotence' (99). Whether these strategies are successful is not, perhaps, entirely clear, but they are at any rate apotropaics against the greatest privation of all which would be the loss of art itself to its alienation in aesthetics.

> What man risks losing with the artwork is not, in fact, simply a cultural good, however precious, and not even the privileged expression of his creative energy, but the very space of his world, in which alone he can find himself as man and be capable of action and knowledge.
>
> Quel che l'uomo rischia di perdere con l'opera d'arte non è, infatti, semplicemente un bene culturale, per quanto prezioso, e nemmeno l'espressione privilegiata della sua energia creatrice: ma è lo spazio stesso del suo mondo, nel quale soltanto egli può trovarsi come uomo ed essere capace di azione e di conoscenza. (USC 155)

There are practically no women in *L'uomo senza contenuto*. But they are included everywhere in the folds of a convoluted argument that bristles with the logic of a word it never utters: castration. How else are we to construe the heroism of the artist who believes he has 'really penetrated into a zone where no other man would want to follow, in the proximity of a risk that menaces him more profoundly than any other mortal' (USC 83)? Then there is the flirtation, seeded by Nietzsche's idea of the artwork 'that gives birth [*partorisce*] to itself' (108), with ideas of sexless generation; of the 'autoproduction of man' (125), and of art as 'the eternal autogeneration of the will to power' (140). This 'auto-' of self-affection also seems to have something to do with the utopian moment in which artist and spectator may rediscover common ground and let art be (USC 154). What, then, is this utopia if not a community of anxious phalluses that have agreed amongst themselves to a simulacrum of humiliation so as to avoid the ultimate peril of involution into the sheath?

It would be easy to show that castration is a key signature in Agamben's diagnosis of the plight of modern man. Thus, under Guy Debord's 'spectacle', in which the capitalist imaginary finally usurps reality, 'the practical power of man is detached from itself and presents itself as a world apart [*un mondo a sé*]' (CCV 63). Of course, one might object that this formulation is gender-neutral, and that any gender polarities arising are just part of the antique décor of the sources from which Agamben elaborates his conceptual parables. Thus, the role of elementary spirits as 'the ideal archetype of any

separation of man from himself [*dell'uomo da se stesso*]' may be, on occasion, illustrated by a determinedly female nymph's pursuit of a soul through sexual congress with an equally and oppositely determined human 'man' (N 42). But this gendering would be purely the affair of Paracelsus, and extrinsic to Agamben's more pressing conceptual ends. We would accept, thus, that 'nymph' simply means 'image', and that it is really 'images' that are the place of mankind's 'incessant lack to itself' (N 52-53).

Similarly, in the account of the cabbalistic parable of the 'isolation of the Shekinah' with which Agamben glosses Debord's spectacle (CCV 63-65), it would be a matter of sheer indifference that he fails to mention the conventional feminine gendering of the Shekinah, of which he is nevertheless presumably aware through his reading of Gershom Scholem.[26] The important point would be that the rabbi who, upon entering paradise, takes cuttings from the trees rather than contemplating the entirety of creation, thus alienates the Shekinah—God's immanence or 'speech'—from the divine presence as a whole and so reprises the sin of Adam, 'separates the tree of science from that of life', and initiates the process that reaches its endgame in the spectacle. Why dwell on the (inevitable) gendering of Adam and the rabbis? Why pause to deconstruct the massive historical gendering of the opposition of active

[26] Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* 3rd edn rev. with a foreword by Robert Alter (New York: Schocken, 1995), p.229.

science to passive nature when we can, simply by realising that linguistic alienation is what we all have in common, aspire to be like the other rabbi in the tale, who enters and exits the garden (of language) unharmed?[27]

Agamben's (incredible) wager is thus that he can project a utopian future, in which difference will cease to signify, out of texts whose conceptual present is nevertheless tacitly organised by a massively insistent gendering, more or less passively inherited from the past. It is a road that leads from disavowal to disavowal, bearing within it at every step the undigested thought of femininity as the supplement of 'man'.[28] Perhaps the surest, certainly the most active, sign of this disavowal and of the hollowness of the utopian future, is the way in which, in the meantime, Agamben cleaves (silently) to castration. Thus, Agamben insists that Henry Darger's Vivian Girls are without question nymphs, even though 'munite di un piccolo sesso maschile' (N 20); that is 'equipped with a little male sex organ'. As equipment, the penis is an excrescence, something that has been arbitrarily added, and that can, and ought to, be removed so as to restore these 'girls' to their natural state as the already-castrated. Having thus disposed of them, Agamben does not waste any more time on these irrelevant organs, or on any confusion of the

[27] It would be interesting to compare this with Jean Paulhan's parable of the sign forbidding the bearing of cut flowers into the garden in *Les Fleurs de Tarbe* (1936/1941). See Jean Paulhan, *Œuvres complètes III* (Paris: Gallimard, 2011).

[28] Juliana Schiesari's comments on the tacit gendering of melancholia and its absent object are highly pertinent here. See Juliana Schiesari, *The Gendering of Melancholia: Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and the Symbolics of Loss in Renaissance Literature* (London: Cornell University Press, 1992).

gender schema they might entail. Rather, he moves swifly on to a more comfortable, more familiar sort of cut, hailing Darger's images for the 'effect of extraordinary modernity' that comes from their collage composition out of clippings (N 21).

Agamben's attachment to an essential cutness of the image is not, thus, simply a matter of art history. He needs this thing that is cut off or isolated yet also uncannily resembling. But, to manage its supplementarity and the menace this poses to identity, he also needs it to be gendered feminine. In this sense, curiously enough, the feminine image in Agamben *is* the phallus. It is the site of an absconded sovereignty; a masterful power of which Agamben is ostensibly the implacable critic, but to which his own critique relentlessly aspires. For if Agamben's writing is often compelling, it is not least through a certain pose of heroism evinced by its subject; a highwire act that snatches victory from the jaws of defeat through a dialectical pirouette. It is not just, as Derrida has argued, that Agamben's rage to declare himself first, or the first to recognise who was first, places him in the sovereign position.[29] This is only the symptom of a hankering after the splendid isolation of a monad after which everything must follow. Agamben's discourse compels through the sort of masterful orchestration that can manœuvre a line of dancing girls and the queue of abject bodies awaiting the gas chamber into a single

[29] Jacques Derrida, *Séminaire: La bête et le souverain I* (Paris: Galilée, 2008), pp.134-39.

cortège. For all that we are invited to participate critically in the horror, it is from a bird's-eye vantage point that can survey a desolated world teeming with infinitely exposed, helpless humanity. In this inferno, no hand reaches out to grasp us, no voice to hail us, as we pass. Its subjects are the marionnettes of our disenchanted desire. But they are also, thus, the disavowed principle, and the indispensable vehicles, of a mastery we cannot *properly* incorporate, only nostalgically, by proxy; which is to say, the phallus. Derrida's remarks on the phallic properties and the gendering of the marionnette seem pertinent here.

> It [*elle*] brings to mind the phallus, for all that it remains sometimes a little girl, and the taste, the fascination, the modes and the genres that cultivate the marionnette or the marionnette theatre, would thus participate in the phallic cult.
>
> Elle fait penser au phallus, toute fillette qu'elle reste parfois, et le goût, la fascination, les modes et les genres qui cultivent la marionnette ou le théâtre de la marionnette participeraient ainsi du culte phallique. (*La bête I* 296)

Exilic and nostalgic as the condition of its messianism, Agamben's discourse lives the agony and the ecstasy of this cult. Dissolving the cult would *not* mean simply disavowing the phallus, but acknowledging it as an operator within the complex field of gendered determinations that are a part of the inherited conceptuality with which we must all deal, and which cannot be conjured away through any masterful pose of indifference.

If I keep returning to Derrida in these concluding remarks, it is because

his patient charting of the convoluted imbrication of power and gender in '*la* bête' and '*le* souverain', and elsewhere, seems to me to suggest that a discourse on power that excludes gender is also inevitably a discourse of power over gender, securing its certainty at the expense of femininity-as-difference, and offering a relation to power that cannot be corrected by the mere interpolation of gender criticism. Derrida's remarks, in *The Politics of Friendship*, on one of Agamben's sources, Carl Schmitt, seem to me highly pertinent. Derrida points out that Schmitt's vision of history and politics as an affair of warring brotherhoods never speaks of the sister.[30] Indeed, this history is a 'desert', seen 'from very far and very high up', full of men, through centuries of war: 'You would seek in vain a single figure of a woman, a feminine silhouette, and the least allusion to sexual difference' (*Politics* 179). But this 'blindness', Derrida suggests, 'gives one food for thought': 'what if woman were [...] the other absolute enemy of this theory of the absolute enemy' (*Politics* 181)? Of course, Agamben might say, like so many other left critics who have drawn on Schmitt's thinking, that he does not need to accept everything Schmitt has to say: that an enemy is necessary to the foundation of any polity, that war is therefore the condition of politics, and so forth. But he does seem, like Hannah Arendt—another declared influence, through whom his vision of Schmitt is filtered—to exclude relations between men and women from

[30] Jacques Derrida, *Politiques de l'amitié, suivi de L'oreille de Heidegger* (Paris: Galilée, 1994), p.172.

the political, as belonging to the universally human, the mere life process and so forth. And his map of the process of depoliticisation coincides, as Derrida suggests it does in Schmitt—and as, indeed, it does in Arendt—with the history of women's long, slow, and still incomplete, accession to political power (*Politics* 182-83).

Agamben does not ostensibly share Arendt's patrician nostalgia for the agora of Greek antiquity in which men would appear in the world only through speech and action, liberated from the mere reproduction of the domestic sphere, and even from the sphere of 'work' whose 'erections' give us world.[31] But he does share a vision of history in which 'the actions of men appear like the gestures of puppets' (Arendt 185). He also exercises the 'human surveying capacity' whereby man 'withdraws himself to a distance from everything near him' (Arendt 251). And when he does, what he, like Schmitt, sees is a desert of men; men who have, moreover, become almost incomprehensibly impotent through a process of depoliticisation that leaves them exposed to politics in its most fundamental and violent guise, and who can console themselves only by regaling themselves with the spectacle *either* of this impotence itself as if from a great distance of critical wisdom, as if it were other, *or* of that *other* other that is near to hand, the image of woman. Never will the thought intrude into this schema that its unhappiness is at least in part

[31] On the 'erection of a world of things' see esp. *The Human Condition*, pp.144-55.

not the unhappiness of the world pure and simple, but of the discourse itself, its quest for mastery, and its hopeless inability to offer any account of this sundering within itself. As I suggested at the outset, the byzantine architecture of this effort to erect a pastiche phallus has nothing to offer feminism, if not the challenge of starting to dismantle it.