The Motif of the Messianic

Law, Life, and Writing in Agamben's Reading of Derrida

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Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been submitted, either in the same or different form to this or any other University for a degree.

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Summary

This is a study of the relationship between the works of Giorgio Agamben and Jacques Derrida. It explains how the vantage point of Agamben's thought is achieved by rendering Derridean terminology inoperative. It is argued that this enactment of suspension with regards to Derrida is Agamben's way of undoing a theological structure of thought that philosophy has unknowingly appropriated. Agamben claims a position that is decidedly post-Derridean, and it is from this position that his sometimes baffling claims about philosophy and its tradition obtain their justification. The closure of the Derridean era and the inoperativity of Derridean terminology is sealed and traced by a messianic motif.

Only Derrida can object to the naivety of Agamben's claims, as he did in his final seminar-series. For anyone else to make such objection would be to take the bait. This is because the apparently dizzying magisterial position that Agamben occupies makes sense only in a philosophical landscape wherein Derrida has become obsolete. However, this thesis will argue how Derrida's thought even in its desuetude continues to exert influence, now as a paradigm of language. As Agamben recalls in his essay "The Messiah and the Sovereign": "[...] in the Jewish tradition the figure of the Messiah is double. Since the first century B.C.E.., the Messiah has been divided into Messiah ben Joseph and a Messiah ben David. The Messiah of the house of Joseph is a Messiah who dies, vanquished in the battle against the forces of evil; the Messiah of the house of David is the triumphant Messiah, who ultimately vanquishes Armilos and restores the kingdom" (Agamben 1999a, 173). The

vanquished messianic force here represents Derrida's work that in its defeat releases its positive messianic twin, the thought of Agamben.

In the first chapter of this thesis I will give an introduction to Agamben's thought specifically speaking to the motif of the messianic in its relation to infancy. In the second chapter the outline of the messianic exhaustion of the law of potentiality will be examined closely in the literary figure of Herman Melville's scribe Bartleby. In the third chapter it will be argued that in the philosophical constellation Bartleby's role as the paradigm of the self-capacity and passion of writing is fulfilled by Derrida. This is argument is presented against the background of the theme of life in philosophy. Furthermore, this chapter presents a close reading of Derrida's *khōra* essay as a counterpart to Agamben's text on Bartleby. Finally, in the fourth chapter, the positive gains of Agamben's thought are explored by looking at two messianic tableaus: life and writing. Life is explored the shape of a contingent "being", a "creature" in the theological sense – yet one that has vanquished its theological condition of abandonment. In this sense, the modality of contingency is sought in a condition of being theologically disenchanted. Furthermore, passing beyond the Derridean paradigm of pharmacology, a new paradigm of writing is indicated.

Contents

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Introduction

> But when they satisfied themselves that this man in the white hat was not only doing no harm as he sat quietly on the slope of the trench, or with a shy courteous smile made way for the soldiers, but walked about the battery as calmly as though he were strolling along a boulevard, their feeling of hostile ill-will was gradually transformed into a playful tenderness like the affection soldiers feel for the dogs, cocks, goats and animals in general which share the fortunes of the regiment.
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> Lev Tolstoy, *War and Peace*

Philosophy values truth over life. Socrates refuses banishment, choosing rather to drink a cup of hemlock, and with this dramatic and inaugurative gesture – that is of course immediately the beginning of the end – he becomes the ultimate hero of philosophy (even if he can be swayed to temporarily leave Athens in pursuit of writing). That is, until Nietzsche exposes the cowardice and madness of his choice: "Formerly one would have said (– oh, and did say, and loudly enough, and our pessimists most of all!): 'Here at any rate there must be something true! The *consensus sapientium* is proof of truth.' – Shall we speak thus today? are we *allowed* to do so?" (Nietzsche 1990, 39).[1] Naturally Nietzsche's objection is pertinent, yet to embrace life at all costs leads us into another aporia: it removes from us the possibility of passing judgment, the possibility of critique, and separation itself – all essential to Western thought. This charge of the decadence and the degeneration of sophisticated (and sophist) philosophy, its original sin – that philosophy is not, and can never be, itself wise – will remain with us for the entire course of this thesis.

This thesis intends to understand this dilemma, albeit on different terms. The reconciliation between truth and life will be sought by exploring the terms of law, life, and writing, pursuing an ontology of banishment. Giorgio Agamben's philosophical archaeology on the concept of potentiality – "haunted" by Nietzschean

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[1] "Ehemals hätte man gesagt (– oh man hat es gesagt und laut genug und unsere Pessimisten voran!): "Hier muss jedenfalls Etwas wahr sein! Der consensus sapientum beweist die Wahrheit." – Werden wir heute noch so reden? *dürfen* wir das?" "Hier muss jedenfalls Etwas *krank* sein" – geben *wir* zur Antwort: diese Weisesten aller Zeiten, man sollte sie sich erst aus der Nähe ansehn! Waren sie vielleicht allesammt auf den Beinen nicht mehr fest? spät? wackelig? décadents?" (Nietzsche 1926, 62). See also *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: "From the heart of me I love only Life – and in truth, I love her most of all when I hate her! | But that I am fond of Wisdom, and often too fond, is because she very much reminds me of Life!" (Nietzsche 2003, 132).

motifs like genealogy, the will to power, and the thought of the eternal return (Agamben 1986, 16; Agamben 1999d, 91; Thurschwell 2003, 1204–1206) – means to absolve thought of its presuppositions: it constitutes an attempt at thinking the absolute. This thought of the absolute, I will argue, means to embrace a particular Derridean concept of writing/scripture that furnishes a reconciliation in abandonment between law and life, or *nomos* and *physis*, *logos* and life, truth and life.[2] Agamben claims a post-Derridean position, which only becomes attainable with Agamben's archaeology of potentiality, the *archē* with which the Derridean experience of language will be commensurable – in a way, Derrida will stay with Agamben in this post-Derridean landscape. As I argue in the second and central chapter of this thesis, this archaeology depends on the figure of Herman Melville's scribe Bartleby – a figure that, for this reason, I compare with Derrida.

Philosophy, to linger for a moment on this more familiar Nietzschean theme (even if it is ultimately not decisive for Agamben), remains in an insufferable tension between life and (its) truth, truth and (its) life. For while Socrates evinces his complicity in an exhaustive distinction wherein all of life must be scrutinized, Nietzsche's ethics too reveal a dictum that is without exception: *amor fati*. Perhaps the *euporia* between these two strongholds is to embrace their remnant. For what becomes of philosophy when it assumes exactly the condition of *banishment*, as it does in the work of Agamben? And what are the rules of survival that tacitly forbid this acquisition, as they are exposed in the work of Derrida – Agamben's crucial interlocutor as I claim? This means, within a framework that is entirely Agambenian, a confrontation between the philosopher of difference and impossibility and the philosopher of indifference and possibility – between the trace as the miracle of interpretation and the remnant as the paradigmatic opportunity for thought – to expose the way in which their works atone for each other.

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[2] It is Kevin Hart who highlights this other English translation "scripture" to the Derridean term *écriture*, arguing it is a structural undecidable, which allows for the theological import of deconstruction to be foregrounded (Hart 1989, 50). If "writing" is an undecidable value within philosophy, like *pharmakon*, it is furthermore an undecidable that distorts the boundaries between philosophy and theology.

By reading Agamben with a view to his understanding of Derrida, this thesis will demonstrate how – precisely in being rejected – the work of Derrida becomes an indispensable condition for that of Agamben. To borrow from Derrida: Agamben rejects Derrida on the level of the declaration, only to embrace him at the level of the description (Derrida 1976, 217). This is in the sense that the work of deconstruction would saturate and exhaust the register of impossibility to which it is tuned – much like the Messiah who, from within the law, deposes the law – and delivers to Agamben a new kind of possibility: impotentiality. This thesis, then, brings out the political theology of deconstruction. In a way similar to Nancy's judgment that deconstruction "is Christian because Christianity is, originally, deconstructive, because it relates immediately to its own origin as to a slack [*jeu*], an interval, some play, an opening in the origin" – I argue that deconstruction is theological (Nancy 2008, 149). Or better: how it begins to indicate, emerging from political theology and economic theology – traversing theological jurisdiction – how what remains after onto-theology is a *philosophical theology*, a *profane* theology, an *a*theology. From a theological point of view, philosophical archaeology is profanation. To the extent that a messianic ontology means an ontology of contingency that is reclaimed from (onto-)theology, this thesis is, then, also a work of theology; not a work of negative theology but a negative work of theology.

Indication of the research territory: Rousseau, Kleist, Tolstoy

The purpose of this thesis is to trace a messianic motif that connects the works of Jacques Derrida and Giorgio Agamben: my argument is that from Agamben's more overtly messianic contemplations on metaphysics and politics, the messianic is cast backwards to involve a certain interpretation of Derrida. The messianic, in this sense, is not a term that signifies or represents a particular substantive. Although the messianic is irreducibly imbedded in monotheist religion and theology, it does not pertain to a particular content, but acts instead as the signature between philosophy and theology (for Derrida it denotes the connection between thought and faith) (Agamben 1999a, 163; Derrida 1994, 65). This is why this thesis will not identify the messianic as a concept, or as a theme for the philosophy of religion. Instead – in a way that draws from deconstruction and from philosophical

archaeology but simultaneously as a contemplation *on* these philosophical disciplines – this thesis will investigate the way in which the messianic motif is the mobile memory of the heritage that philosophy shares with theology. In this sense, this thesis is the performance of a reading rather than the presentation of a theory. Indeed, I will argue how the messianic operates first and foremost in writing. Let me stress again that this thesis works within a hermeneutic circle: deconstruction and philosophical archaeology in a *methodological* sense allow the exposure of the messianic *within the works of* deconstruction and philosophical archaeology – these apparatuses are engaged with methodologically *and* substantially.

When Derrida begins an address of the term "democracy" (which in his work has strong messianic connotations) he does not first state what to his mind it essentially *is*: "We do not yet know what we have inherited; we are the legatees of this Greek word and of what it assigns to us, enjoins us, bequeaths or leaves us, indeed delegates or leaves over to us" (Derrida 2005b, 9). This need not surprise us: Derrida suspended definitions of justice, negative theology, the life of animals, and just about any other topic he wrote about, the topic of writing itself first among them, in favour of a contemplation on the oblique and occasioned entry that these concepts require (Derrida 2002a, 237; Derrida 2007b; Derrida 2008, 11). Ultimately, as is well known, Derrida takes the meaningfulness – the zone in which there is any *vouloir-dire* at all – of language to lie in the suspense between the presence of representation and the presence of significance, between their semiotic and semantic manifestations: *différance*. This is the zone wherein interpretation takes place, and while deconstruction is engaged in marking this zone, rather than occurring within it, it is not the same as hermeneutics. To Agamben this means that Derrida's deconstructive readings constitute a science of the signature: not a science of posited contents, but a science of the way in which signs speak to us at all (Agamben 2009: 79; Agamben 2011a: 4). Furthermore, the suspense of linguistic significance of which Derrida speaks becomes paradigmatic in Agamben's conception.

I cannot commence this thesis by giving an explanation of what the messianic is or means, for the reasons I have just explained. Because this thesis is the investigation

of the repercussions of an original proximity between philosophy and theology that are exposed, I hold, by a messianic motif, it will be a matter of tracing, rather than defining, the messianic. The research is exploratory, not deductive. For this reason I now devote a brief section to introducing the thematic field I intend to explore. I do not think that the messianic motif can be identified exclusively in the works of Agamben and Derrida – to the contrary, I think there is a host of philosophical and literary texts that demonstrate an awareness of it. That is to say, the philosophical problem is not restricted to the works of these two great contemporary thinkers. If this thesis addresses a technical question concerning their works, it is because this question corresponds to a strong and intriguing, if fleeting, experience in life – that of mercy or grace. And because Agamben and Derrida are highly difficult as well as controversial authors (so: not just controversial philosophers, but divisive *writers* as well), I want to introduce the site on which this investigation will take place by referring to sources that are by comparison uncontroversial. Since the object of this thesis is something rather vulnerable and precious, I want to bring out its sense or flavour by way of other, literary texts, and take my cue from a minor observation by the phenomenally successful German writer W.G. Sebald, and juxtapose some figures from the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Heinrich von Kleist, to finally linger briefly on Tolstoy's *War and Peace* – figures that anticipate, I think, the messianic motif in Agamben's work.

Sebald, in an essay following Rousseau to the Île Saint-Pierre in the Swiss Lac de Bienne, sketches his subject's ambivalence towards the work of literature by way of a reference to the monograph *Transparency and Obstruction*: "If he nevertheless persevered with writing, then only, as Jean Starobinski notes, in order to hasten the moment when the pen would fall from his hand and the essential things would be said in the *silent* embrace of reconciliation and return" (Sebald 2013, 54).[3] Indeed,

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[3] "Wenn er dennoch am Schreiben festhielt, dann nur, wie Jean Starobinski bemerkte, um den Augenblick herbeizuführen, da ihm die Feder aus der Hand fallen und das Wesentliche in der *stummen* Umarmung der Verschöhnung und Rückkehr gesagt sein würde" (Sebald 1998, 61). "S'il persévère dans sa volonté d'écrire, c'est pour provoquer le moment où la plume lui tombe des mains, et où l'essentiel se dira dans l'étreinte *muette* de la réconciliation et du retour" (Starobinski 1971, 170–171; See also: Starobinski 1988, 141). It appears from Starobinski's analysis that Rousseau

Starobinski's book traces Rousseau's writing by way of its motif to insist on a childlike or innate innocence to be regained through a highly sophisticated, transparent account of oneself. This written justification is supposed to efface itself in an ultimate reconciliatory gesture. It also records, however, the way in which writing always adds insult to injury. With every word noted down in a bid for expiation, Rousseau needs to find excuses for more vanity, more narcissism. The literary attempt to bring about a return to silence seems doomed from the outset. Sebald deems Rousseau to be exceptionally aware of this problem: "No one, in the era when the bourgeoisie was proclaiming, with enormous philosophical and literary effort, its entitlement to emancipation, recognized the pathological aspect of thought as acutely as Rousseau, who himself wished for nothing more than to be able to halt the wheels ceaselessly turning within his head."[4] Rousseau's efforts are spent, then, in a way that is riddled with paradoxes. As is well known, Rousseau entered the literary world in 1750 when the Académie de Dijon awarded him a prize for his essay "A Discourse on the Moral Effects of the Arts and Sciences", which claimed to show the moral corruption caused by these disciplines. Indeed, Rousseau's emergence as a critic comes with a warning against the corrupting effects of writing that is perhaps even stronger than that found in Plato, as he notes in his *Confessions*:

> He [Denis Diderot] urged me to give free rein to my ideas and to enter the competition. I did so, and from that moment on I was lost. The whole of the rest of my life and all my misfortunes were the inevitable effect of this moment of aberration (Rousseau 2008, 342).[5]

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seeks not silence, as much as a redundancy of words, perhaps the possibility of poetry – if not that for Rousseau modern poetry is already couched in writing (Rousseau 1998, 300–301; Starobinski 1988, 137–142, 304–322) – for it would allow him for the first time to enjoy them. Language degenerates when it is used as a means to an end. It appears that Rousseau was after a similar deliverance of his life, one that is recorded, perhaps, in the *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*: "These pages may therefore be regarded as an appendix to my *Confessions*, but I do not give them this title, for I no longer feel that I have anything to say that could justify it" (Rousseau 1979, 33; Starobinski 1988, 122; Derrida 1976, 142).

[4] "Niemand erkannte den pathologischen Aspekt des Denkens in der Ära, als das Bürgertum mit einem enormen philosophischen und literarischen Aufwand seinem Emanzipationsanspruch verkündete, so genau wie Rousseau, der sich selbst nichts so sehr wünschte, als die in seinem Kopf sich drehenden Räder anhalten zu können" (Sebald 1998, 61).

[5] "Il m'exhorta de donner l'essor à mes idées et de concourir au prix. Je le fis, et dès cet instant je fus perdu. Tout le reste de ma vie et des mes malheurs fut l'effet inévitable de cet instant d'égarement" (Rousseau 1959, 351). The essay itself has foresight of this ill fate on the account of writing, just as

And even if Rousseau eventually physically withdrew from the literary world and into the natural one, to the île de Pierre where Sebald conceives his essay, there he immediately commenced a botanical study – he again began to write.[6] Rousseau finds himself locked in a dead-end, an aporia. Transparency and obstruction pertain to the same thing: to the words that Rousseau invokes to account for himself, to his literary work. For to the extent that these words do in fact speak in defence of his character, they also create an obstacle that prevents us to see the man himself, and even more crucially, they constitute the very offense for which they ask forgiveness. Rousseau's attempt is to have done with writing, from within writing – to depose the law from within the law. Perhaps, I will reflect on this question in the final section of this thesis, he achieves this in his *Reveries*, where "[…] exile can no longer be called exile" (Starobinski 1988, 141).

Indeed, with Rousseau thought embraces banishment, undecided between life and truth, in testimony pursuing their remnant (see Davis 1999, 89–106). As in contemporary hermeneutics, in Rousseau significance accepts its own displacement. While Plato was able to mourn how Athens killed the best of men, Rousseau testifies to the injustice of his own banishment: "The most sociable and loving of men has with one accord been cast out by all the rest" (Rousseau 1979, 27).[7] Rousseau's account of his exile can serve as an explanation of Agamben's *homo sacer*, the double exclusion of its banishment and the role of potentiality in sustaining the ban:

> […] they have already used every weapon at their disposal; by stripping me of everything, they have left themselves unarmed […] They were so eager to fill my cup of misery that neither the power of men nor the stratagems of hell can add one drop to it

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the later "Essay on the Origin of Languages" connects a history of degeneracy to one unfortunate moment.

[6] In fact, this might be far worse for Rousseau than merely to relapse, as Derrida explains: "That botany becomes the supplement of society is more than a catastrophe. It is the catastrophe of the catastrophe" (Derrida 1976, 148; Derrida 1967, 212). This suggestion, however, will be revisited at the very end of this thesis.

[7] "Le plus sociable et le plus aimant des humains en a été proscrit par un accord unanime" (Rousseau 1959, 995).

> [...] Actual misfortunes have little effect on me; it is easy for me to accept those which I suffer in reality, but not those which I fear (Rousseau 1979, 28–29).[8]

There is another intuition that drives this thesis. Heinrich von Kleist, born in 1777 – a year before Rousseau's death, and indeed Kleist was influenced by him – published in 1810 an essay entitled "The Puppet Theatre". The essay is written in the form of a dialogue between an unnamed narrator and a gentleman, Herr C., who is the *premier danseur* at the Opera, discussing the grace of puppets.[9] It explores a problem that would have been familiar to Rousseau, yet, crucially, with Kleist it loses its *romantic* dimension: we cannot *return* to a state of grace or innocence.[10] Instead of a return, Kleist illustrates how grace can only be recovered in a new form. The essay examines this insight with regard to the very small – the unrepeatable beautiful pose resembling the *Spinario* that a young man achieves unintentionally and then, to his (unpleasant) frustration, is unable to reproduce; a bear that is invincible to even the greatest fencing master – yet it concludes on a note of immense scale: the final chapter of history, to be read when humanity fulfils its potential for conscious reflection (the very thing constituting the need for a return, while standing in its way – as we saw with Rousseau – conscious reflection means separation, signification, critique and judgment) and attains an infinite breadth of consciousness, which would amount to not being conscious at all.[11]

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[8] "[...] ils ont d'avance épuisé toutes leurs ressources; en ne me laissant rien ils se sont tout otés à eux-mêmes [...] Ils se sont tellement pressés de porter à son comble la mesure de ma misére que toute la puissance humaine aidée de toutes les ruses de l'enfer n'y sauroit plus rien ajoûter [...] Les maux réels ont sur moi peu de prise ; je prends aisement mon parti sur ceux que j'éprouve, mais non pas sur ceux je crains" (Rousseau 1959, 996–997).

[9] For more on the grace of puppets, see: Kenneth Gross: *Puppet, an Essay on Uncanny Life*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011. Chapter 5 compares the puppet with the human dancer: "It is more material and more spiritual at once, an Edenic creature [...]" (Gross 2011, 63).

[10] The notes to the English translation of "The Puppet Theatre" present this as the central theme.

[11] "[...] so findet sich auch, wenn die Erkenntnis gleichsam durch ein Unendliches gegangen ist, die Grazie wieder ein; so, daβ sie, zu gleicher zeit, in demjenigen menschlichen Körperbau am reinsten erscheint, der entweder gar keins, oder ein unendliches Bewuβtsein hat, d.h. in dem Gliedermann, oder in dem Gott. | Mithin, sagte ich ein wenig zerstreut, müβten wir wieder von dem Baum der Erkenntnis essen, um in den Stand der Unschuld zurückzufallen? | Allerdings, antwortete er; das is das letzte Kapitel von der Geschichte der Welt" (Kleist 1955, 391–392; See also Kleist 1997, 416). See also Nancy 2008, 147: "Sense is then completed, or, to say the same thing differently, used up. It is *complete sense in which there is no longer any sense*."

The supreme commander of the Russian army that defeated Napoleon, General Mikhail Kutuzov, appears as a character in *War and Peace*. In one scene, he is asked by his former aide-de-camp and protégé Prince Andrei Bolkonsky: "But we shall have to accept battle, shan't we?" Kutuzov replies: "Of course, if everybody insists on it, there's no help to it...". Upon leaving, Andrei contemplates his inexplicable confidence in this old general "who has as it were outlived his passions, leaving only the *habit* of them" – who is capable beyond his will: "He will not stand in the way of anything expedient or permit what might be injurious" (my emphasis; Tolstoy 1968, 885–886). The explanation of Kutuzov's extraordinary persona that the novel offers, to do with his life experience and his Russianness, clearly does not suffice. Instead, Kutuzov is like the invincible bear in Kleist's essay. He will not attempt to outwit his enemy – indeed, while his interest lies least of all in doing battle, he cannot be defeated in war. In fact, his strategy could be summarized as 'I would prefer not to do battle' – Kutuzov is Bartleby the Soldier, capable beyond his will. Tolstoy does not tire of repeating this strategy that the historians have not been able to reconstruct – presumably because there is no representation of it.[12] Historically, Kutuzov is sovereign (his counterpart Platon Karatayev the *homo sacer*): the character who is not under the spell of history – unlike Napoleon who, in the book, is completely engrossed in his own legend, a mere puppet in the story about Napoleon – but awake to what history demands. Indeed, Kutuzov gives the example of a graceful (yet hardly elegant), redeemed character – an angel of history. In this thesis I will examine the metaphysical modality of this grace through Agamben's essay on Melville's story *Bartleby the Scrivener*.

With Kleist's awareness that there is no getting back at consciousness and words, and that they must be developed instead, he prepares the way for Hegel, Husserl,

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[12] See Tolstoy 1968, 715–717, 811–815, 895–900, 928–933, 974–980, 1168–1193, 1217–1226, and especially the solid defence Tolstoy mounts for Kutuzov from page 1285 to 1288 ("With obvious reluctance, with bitter conviction that he would not be understood, he more than once, in very diverse circumstances, gave expression to his real thoughts [...] he alone persisted in declaring that *the battle of Borodino was a victory*, and this view he continued to assert both verbally and in his dispatches and reports and right to his dying day"), as well as the second epilogue which is entirely dedicated to the subject.

Heidegger, and Derrida, whose respective projects of the phenomenology of spirit, phenomenological reduction and *Rückfrage*, *Wiederholung* and *Destruktion*, and deconstruction begin with this insight (as Derrida says: '*Ti esti* is already charged with history;' Derrida and Ferraris 2001, 66). Indeed, all modern and contemporary European philosophy contemplates the historicity of thought. Yet, in a way that is even more striking, Kleist's essay anticipates the work on the Aristotelian notion of potentiality that Agamben has carried out over the last forty years, from *The Man Without Content* onwards (Agamben 1999d, 65). Like Rousseau and Kleist, Agamben is obsessed with the notion of a return. When Agamben explains his concept of ethics, he says: "Habit, the dwelling place in which one always already exists, is the place of scission; it is that which one can never grasp without receiving a laceration and a division, the place where one can never really be *from the beginning*, but can only return to *at the end*" (Agamben 1991, 93).[13] Agamben reveals in the quotation the romantic, but also philosophical, sensitivity that I exposed by way of Rousseau and Kleist. The notion of potentiality will serve Agamben to bring philosophical substance to this intuition: to think the mind as the potentiality for thought, or to think of the existence of language as potentiality as such, means to take up this return in a schema wherein return finally becomes intelligible, rather than a mere romantic dream. What Rousseau imagines at the cradle of language is Adamic speech. Words used to immediate effect, words as act and gesture – the magical names of Creation by which nothing but language itself is conveyed (Agamben 1999a, 52). Indeed, it is on this level of the significatory power of words that Agamben's philosophy of infancy examines them. The science of signatures explores terms in their relationship to Paradise.

What if Rousseau's autobiographical ambition could have been realized, or indeed, what if it has been realized? What if Rousseau was successful in his opening determination: "I am resolved on an undertaking that has no model and will have no imitator. I want to show my fellow-men a man in all the truth of nature; and this man

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[13] The ethical connotations of habit are examined further in *The Highest Poverty* (2013), both in the form of the monk's cloth as in Agamben's preparations for a theory of 'use'.

is to be myself" (Rousseau 2008, 5).[14] Would this not bring about the transformation that Walter Benjamin speaks of in a letter to Gershom Scholem? "I consider the sense of the inversion toward which many of Kafka's allegories tend to lie in an attempt to transform life into Scripture", or the condition Kafka himself described to his fiancée Felice Bauer: "I have no literary interests, but am made of literature, I am nothing else, and cannot be anything else" (Agamben 1998, 54; Kafka 1974, 304).[15] To insist on the tragic image of Rousseau as a great writer and a human failure might betray a rather reactionary position. It is indeed to reduce the literary work to the life of its author, and to conclude on her narcissism. It is, then, also to forget how the life of the author might amount to the literary work – in the service of which Rousseau spent great efforts – and to forego the chance of redemption pre-emptively.[16] If Rousseau was successful, he may have left some evidence: the return to silence embedded in a superfluous word, a kind of writing that no longer has to excuse its author, the messianic remainder of life and writing. In the final sections of this thesis I will show how Agamben's work opens such a perspective of mercy.

The envisioned rewards here are incredible, it seems. And yet it appears that the contemporary philosopher Giorgio Agamben has made them his objective. For while it seems astonishing that the questions Rousseau and Kleist struggled with might be answered, we might also consider what will become of our world and our lives if

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[14] "Je forme une enterprise qui n'eut jamais d'éxemple, et dont l'exécution n'aura point d'imitateur. Je veux montrer à mes sembables un homme dans toute la vérité de la nature; et cet homme, ce sera moi" (Rousseau 1959, 7).

[15] "In dem Versuch der Verwandlung des Lebens in Schrift sehe ich den sinn der »Umkehr«, auf welche zahlreiche Gleichnisse Kafkas – von dene ich »Das nächste Dorf« und den »Kübelreiter« herausgegriffen habe, hindrängen" (Benjamin 1998a, 479). "Ich habe kein literarisches Interesse, sondern bestehe aus Literatur, ich bin nichts anderes und kann nichts anderes sein" (Kafka 1967, 444).

[16] In 2009 the South African writer J.M. Coetzee published a fictionalized autobiography, piling up accusations of mediocrity against himself (Coetzee 2009). This book, entitled *Summertime: scenes from provincial life,* works to expiate exactly the life of the writer from expectations and demands of greatness, and in that sense gives us the polar opposite of Rousseau's *Confessions*. Where Rousseau proves his guilt on account of his defence, Coetzee demonstrates his innocence notwithstanding his self-incriminations. Another example is Karl Ove Knausgaard's *My Struggle* (the first four volumes of which are translated into English). Knausgaard's mammoth autobiography, penned at breakneck speed between 2009 and 2012, is expressly a messianic project: "What I was trying to do, and perhaps what all writers try to do – what on earth do I know? – was to combat fiction with fiction" (Knausgaard 2012, 198). The last sentence of the final volume will reportedly translate as follows: "And I'm so happy that I'm no longer an author" (Lerner 2014).

they are not. Friedrich Hölderlin, contemporary of Kleist who like him had left the romanticism of his time behind, wrote in 1802, in a poem entitled "Patmos", the famous line: "Where there is danger, some | Salvation grows there too" (Hölderlin 1996, 54).[17] Agamben in turn argues for an opportunity handed to humanity now, at the moment of its greatest peril. It should be understood that Agamben investigates Western politics not with a view to what it *is*, but to what it is capable of, its potentiality, what, in presupposing it, it has *set aside* in a paradigmatic example. Agamben addresses a potential that is currently operative, by examining paradigms of our time. Our moment is so perilous because – in analogy with Rousseau's utter susceptibility to literature – it has taken in all of the prescriptive power of the law, up to the point of a state of exception where the law cannot prescribe anymore. For this reason Agamben considers our time to be profoundly unpredictable, our situation utterly volatile: there is no law that applies itself to it; it is ruled by the exception of the law. In *Homo Sacer I* and *II-1 – Homo Sacer* and *State of Exception* – the exception of law rules our time exclusively and totally; no other force is permitted and nothing of life is exempt from the exception of law. In subsequent works, *Homo Sacer II-2* and *Homo Sacer III – The Kingdom and the Glory* and *The Highest Poverty* – there is a form of power found, government, that rules not by exception, abandonment, but to the contrary in absolute proximity to the population.[18] The movement that the *Homo Sacer* project follows is that of the realization of a form of life, a way of being, that is immanent to itself: "[...] nothing less than thinking ontology and politics beyond every figure of relation, beyond even

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[17] "Voll Gütt' ist; keiner aber fasset | Allein Gott. | Wo aber Gefahr ist, wächst | Das Rettende Auch." (Hölderlin 1951, 179). The most important motif of the poem "Patmos" is indeed that of separation, diaspora, and abandonment, as Eric L. Santner argues (Santner 1986, 105–106). This is significant as the poet's acceptance of God's absence means to go along with the concept of potentiality in a way that is opposed to that of Agamben, as we will see. This means that even this most iconic articulation of potentiality cannot be associated with Agamben's thought in a straightforward manner.

[18] Watkin takes *The Kingdom and the Glory* to make a decisive correction to *Homo Sacer* (Watkin 2014, 210–211): whereas *Homo Sacer* defended a political theological model wherein power was explained by way of sovereignty, in *The Kingdom and the Glory* an intrinsically impotent power is introduced, which produces government through its own inoperativity. I think there is an explanation that marries both *Homo Sacer* and *The Kingdom and the Glory*, and would mean a further application of Agambenian archaeology: the latter book simply constitutes a further development of the actual archaeological project, in which it was possible to bring the inoperative, indifference, closer to the *archē* – it is a later stage of the same excavation. What a Franciscan monk and Bartleby both present to Agamben is a manifestation of Walter Benjamin's divine violence.

the limit relation that is the sovereign ban" (Agamben 1998, 46). For another formulation of what it means to exist or to remain beyond such a ban, as a form of life, I suggest the following:

> Prince Andrei had been wont to reflect that happiness was purely negative – but he had said so with a shade of bitterness and irony, as though he were really saying that all our cravings for positive happiness were implanted in us merely for our torment, since they could never be satisfied. But Pierre acknowledged the truth of this without any qualification. The absence of suffering, the satisfaction of elementary needs and consequent freedom in the choice of one's occupation – that is, of one's *mode of living* – now seemed to Pierre the sure height of human happiness (my emphasis; Tolstoy 1968, 1198).

I note that Pierre's insight is not spontaneous – it is his friend's ethics redeemed.

The forms of legal, governmental, and monastic subjection that Agamben examines in subsequent parts of the *Homo Sacer* sequence each time signify a closer relation between the regulative form and life itself – in pursuit of the moment of their indistinction. According to Agamben, we are subject to the Kafkaesque (or Rousseauist, perhaps) legal procedure that turns life into writing, and writing into life. The question remains whether redemption can follow upon this moment, or if, to the contrary, redemption is always deferred in the space and the difference between the present and an ultimate moment, the *eschaton*.

A Problem for Philosophy

The previous section brought out the thematic area to which this thesis speaks, by way of a few literary formulations. Yet this is the introduction of a problem for philosophy. What other option is there than heroically facing this pathological aspect of thought that was so pressing on Rousseau? Can thought not heal, and be whole again? Martin Heidegger brought to light the limitations that Leibniz's principle of reason puts on thought, and challenges it by its radicalization: "nothing *is* without *reason*" (Heidegger 1991, 40). Here we get a glimpse of what the principle of reason presupposes, and this supposition keeps tormenting the philosophy that assumes it as its ground – how even the principle of sufficient ground is ontologically divisive. Theodor W. Adorno begins his *Negative Dialectics* thus: "Philosophy, which once seemed obsolete, lives on because the moment to realize it was missed"

(Adorno 1983, 3).[19] To which Derrida, who entertains no eschatological position with regards to the destiny of philosophy, might have quipped: "It succeeded so well at being missed that it left an active and provocative trace, a promising trace, with more of a future ahead [...]" (Derrida 2005c, 137). With Agamben undeniably wedded to the pathos of Adorno's assessment, the playfulness of Derrida's reflection on the missed opportunities from his meetings with Hans-Georg Gadamer is illuminative with regards to the distinction this thesis will explain. Yet then again, the ways in which we are prone to use words as "frivolity" and "solemnity," "light" and "dark," might prove somewhat mobile within the context of the debate between Derrida and Agamben, as the noted pessimist Agamben evinces his capacity for a lofty thinking without ground, while Derrida – ever affirmative of what was to come – can be found meticulously contemplating the shadiest, bottomless pits of philosophemes.

Like autobiographical literature for Rousseau, philosophy for Adorno remains aporetic. And for structurally similar reasons as well: as Rousseau is unable to create a faithful portrayal of the man himself – because its subject is, as the author of the work, always ahead of it – so too the critical momentum of philosophy is always already passé: "[a] practice indefinitely delayed is no longer the forum for appeals against self-satisfied speculation; it is mostly the pretext used by executive authorities to choke, as vain, whatever critical thoughts the practical change would require" (Adorno 1983, 3). [20] Philosophy, for Adorno, would require more speculation, would have to aim over its target in order to hit it, to keep up with reality (Adorno 1978, 127).[21]

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[19] "Philosophie, die einmal überholt schien, erhält sich am Leben, weil der Augenblick ihrer Verwirklichung versäumt ward" (Adorno 1966, 13). David Kishik juxtaposes this attitude to Agamben's enthusiasm for Hannah Arendt's work, attention to which was waning during Agamben's formative years: "[...] as the events of the 1960s subsided, as Arendt's work was somewhat forgotten and generally dismissed by the professional naysayers, the air of possibility was replaced by that of a missed opportunity" (Kishik 2012, 9).

[20] "Praxis, auf unabsehbare Zeit vertagt, ist nicht mehr die Einspruchinstanz gegen selbstzufriedene Spekulation, sondern meist der Vorwand, unter dem Executiven den kritischen Gedanken als eitel abwürgen, dessen verändernde Praxis bedürfte" (Adorno 1966, 13).

[21] The radical works of Emmanuel Levinas and Alain Badiou breathe an awareness of this problem, as if their philosophical audacity would be a mere attempt to keep pace with the real world. In this regard I take Badiou's separation of philosophy from ontology: "If the establishment of the thesis

Opening the final aphorism of his reflections from damaged life, Adorno writes his strongest messianic statement: "The only philosophy which can be responsibly practiced in face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption. Knowledge has no light but that shed on the world by redemption: all else is reconstruction, mere technique" (Adorno 1978).[22] Jacob Taubes is harsh on Adorno on this point: "There you have the aestheticization of the problem" (Taubes 2004, 74–75). It appears that Adorno has mastered the art of mourning the loss of civilization to such an extent that it might *substitute* for that civilization: our culture lives on, in the act of remembering it. Taubes rejects Adorno's kind of treatment of the problem, for it would make of redemption something gratuitous, to be had either this way or that, and prefers the approach of Walter Benjamin. Recently the difference between Adorno and Agamben has been articulated as follows: "Rather than rescuing the subject by remembering its loss, as Adorno would have it, Agamben would prefer to lose the subject to allow for its redemption" (Yoni Molad in Murray and Whyte 2011, 20). And Agamben himself – while appreciative of Adorno's opening statement in *Negative Dialectics* – has distanced himself from Adorno for this reason (Agamben 2000b, 38).

It is to this philosophical problem that the messianic responds. Philosophy is a discipline of thought concentrated around the metaphysical notions of ground, foundation, origin, and justification. A great deal of contemporary ontology is organised around the problem of avoiding the onto-theological reduction to ground, origin, or a first principle. Alain Badiou's prolific notion of the "event" was formulated to this end (Van der Heiden 2014, 7, 115). This thesis, however, in

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'mathematics is ontology' is the basis of this book, it is in no way its goal. However radical this thesis might be, all it does is *delimit* the proper space of philosophy [...] its function is to introduce specific themes of modern philosophy, particularly – because mathematics is the guardian of being qua being – the problem of 'what-is-not-being-qua-being'" (Badiou 2005, 15; Badiou 1988, 21–22).

[22] „Philosophie, wie sie im Angesicht der Verzweiflung einzig noch zu verantworten ist, wäre der Versuch, alle Dinge so zu betrachten, wie sie vom Standpunkt der Erlösung her auf die Welt scheint. Erkenntnis hat kein Licht, als das von der Erlösung auf die Welt scheint: alles andere erschöpft sich in der Nachkonstruktion und bleibt ein Stück Technik" (Adorno 1969, 333).

exposing the connection between Derrida and Agamben, will trace another current in contemporary ontology. The dominant school of Western thought has been a metaphysics whose "meta-" pertains to a transcendental level of unity that provides the ground or foundation for the actual physical reality that is available to experience. This is the knot that binds philosophy to theology. What it presupposes is that the diversity of actual physical events can be reduced to the transcendental level, on which they remain potential – metaphysics studies the potentiality of beings. This presupposition assumes different guises – the Aristotelian concept of potentiality, Saint Anselm's ontological argument, Leibniz's principle of sufficient reason, and Carl Schmitt's definition of sovereignty are examples – and it may take these guises precisely because it has not been exhaustively thought through, because it is the essentially inexhaustible. Agamben's thought attempts the absolution of philosophy, in thinking this presupposition.

If writing is pathological, sinful, then life cannot be redeemed by it; Rousseau's apology remains paradoxical, Kafka's inversions enigmatic parables – this could be an aporia for philosophy. But only as long as life remains in abandonment of language, a language that might be disclosed in the self-receptivity of writing.

Outline of the relation between metaphysics and the messianic

Let me briefly give an outline of the relation between metaphysics and messianic thought. In *Speech and Phenomena*, Derrida addresses the inevitability for Husserl of affirming absolute self-presence:

> Moreover, in philosophy there is no possible objection concerning this privilege of the present-now; it defines the very element of philosophical thought, it is evidence itself, conscious thought itself, it governs every possible concept of truth and sense. No sooner do we question this privilege than we begin to get at the core of consciousness itself from a region that lies elsewhere than philosophy, a procedure that would remove every possible security and ground from discourse (Derrida 1973, 62).

Further on, Derrida gives a clear statement of the metaphysics of presence:

> We have experienced the systematic interdependence of the concepts of sense, ideality, objectivity, truth, intuition, perception, and expression. Their common matrix is being as presence: the absolute proximity of self-identity, the being-in-front of the object

available for repetition, the maintenance of the temporal present, whose ideal form is the self-presence of transcendental life, whose ideal identity allows idealiter of infinite repetition | While everything that is purely thought in this concept is thereby determined as ideality, the living present is nevertheless in fact, really, effectively, etc., deferred ad infinitum (Derrida 1973, 99).

Evidence, any *reason* to believe anything, presupposes the possibility of their (re-) *presentation*; any other plea for credibility would be esoteric.[23] Derrida, who has often enough equated philosophy with metaphysics, thinks, then, that there are typically *metaphysical* notions, like ground and security, and that their force is binding. Furthermore, we can see how *life* remains subordinate to *truth*: as the always obliging host for ideality to call on, life itself is interminably adjourned. Life is, as it was with Socrates, sacrificed for truth. And even if for Derrida the end of metaphysics is near, there is nothing other than its own deconstruction with which to supplement it: the main motifs of metaphysics (presence, security, justification, evidence, ground, origin) may have their significance suspended, but not their force. Derrida evinces this attitude, which is conservative in a way:

> But because it is just such a philosophy – which is, in fact, the philosophy and history of the West – which has so constituted and established the very concept of signs, the sign is from its origin and to the core of its sense marked by this will to derivation or effacement. Thus, to restore the original and nonderivative character of signs, in opposition to classical metaphysics, is, by an apparent paradox, at the same time to eliminate a concept of signs whose whole history and meaning belong to the adventure of the metaphysics of present. This also holds for the concepts of representation, repetition, difference, etc., as well as for the system they form. For the present and for some time to come, the movement of that schema will only be capable of working over the language of metaphysics from within, from a certain sphere of problems inside that language (Derrida 1973, 51).

And even if further on in the same essay Derrida holds that the history of being as presence is closed, this closure is only available from a certain perspective: *within*

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[23] Though Derrida himself undermines this, for instance in his essay "Poetics and Politics of Witnessing" when he considers what giving evidence, testimony, means. Any witness means first and foremost the *absence* of evidence: the witness appears instead of evidence, incarnates the absence of evidence: "What does "I bear witness" mean? What do I mean when I say "I bear witness" (for one only bears witness in the first person)? I do not mean "I prove," but "I swear that I saw, I heard, I touched, I felt, I was *present*"" (Derrida 2005c, 75–76). And earlier: "[…] one can *testify* only to the unbelievable" (Derrida 1998b, 20). Derrida's critique of the idea of evidence strikes a chord with Agamben's use of potentiality: the presentation of the evidence always exposes its absence – evidence is a value of potentiality.

the metaphysics of presence, *a closure has taken place* – but this is not to say that to Derrida there is an alternative position: his position remains within the closure (Derrida 1973, 102; Derrida 1976, 14; Derrida 1978, 110; Derrida 1982, 38–39, 51).

These paragraphs from *Speech and Phenomena* indicate the separation between Derridean deconstruction and Agambenian archaeology. While Derrida believes that 'for the present and for some time to come' the only way of re-establishing certain concepts and values that are considered subordinated must remain faithful to the main metaphysical schema – and thus to the *present* of a particular metaphysics of history, or better: of *the* metaphysics that constitutes '*the* philosophy of history of the West' – Agamben holds that this metaphysics is entirely contingent, and that philosophical archaeology is the way to its undoing, its rendering inoperative: "Archaeology moves backward through the course of history, just as the imagination moves back through individual biography. Both represent a regressive force that, unlike traumatic neurosis, does not retreat toward an indestructible origin, but rather forward toward the point where history (whether individual or collective) becomes accessible for the first time, in accordance with the temporality of the future anterior" (Agamben 2009, 109). This separation I shall explain further in Chapter 3. Archaeology does not destroy a phenomenon, nor its meaning; rather, archaeology undresses it of its power. Furthermore, Agamben does not target the reigning concept of origin or ground *at its origin or ground* – for fear of merely offering a salutary critique – but instead seeks their disintegration in fulfillment.

This avenue of pursuing the inoperativity of the *archē* seems unavailable to Derrida. Indeed, Derrida thinks Agamben's claims to originality incredibly naïve (Derrida 2009, 92, 330).[24] Yet, Agamben takes the tradition of philosophy to accommodate for another kind of response to the insistent resolve on foundation:

> In our tradition, a metaphysical concept, which takes as its prime focus a moment of foundation and origin, coexists with a messianic concept, which focuses on a moment

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[24] Derrida also complains that Agamben confuses himself with the sovereign he describes, by claiming the position of *archē*. Yet Agamben does this deliberately: to claim the seat of power to accordingly deplete it.

of fulfillment. What is essentially messianic and historic is the idea that fulfillment is possible by retrieving and revoking foundation, by coming to terms with it. When these two elements are split up, we are left with a situation like the one so clearly witnessed in Husserl's Crisis of European Sciences, that of a foundation which is part and parcel of an infinite task. If we drop the messianic theme and only focus on the moment of foundation and origin – or even the absence thereof (which amounts to the same thing) – we are left with empty, zero degree, signification and with history as its infinite deferment (Agamben 2000b, 103–104).[25]

When in March 2009 Agamben spoke in the Notre-Dame Cathedral before an audience involving high church representatives, he put it as follows:

In the eyes of the Church Fathers – as well as the eyes of those philosophers who have reflected on the philosophy of history, which is, and remains (even in Marx) an essentially Christian discipline – history is presented as a field traversed by two opposing forces. The first of these forces – which Paul in a passage of the Second Letter to the Thessalonians that is as famous as it is enigmatic, calls *to catechon* – maintains and ceaselessly defers the end along the linear and homogenous time of chronological time. By placing origin and end in contact with one another, this force endlessly fulfils and ends time. Let us call this force Law or State, dedicated as it is to economy, which is to say, dedicated as it is to the indefinite – and indeed infinite – governance of the world. As for the second force, let us call it messiah, or Church; its economy is the economy of salvation, and by this token is essentially completed. The only way that a community can form and last is if these poles are present and a dialectical tension between them prevails (Agamben 2012, 34–35).

Agamben's philosophical position regarding the *katechonic* force of law is contained in this passage – an opposition that will take shape primordially, I hold, in a confrontation with the thought of Derrida.[26] Not because Derrida would be a conservative supporter of the force of law and the state (like Carl Schmitt, for example – nothing could be further from Derrida's thought),[27] but because of the way in which deconstruction maintains the law beyond its content: the deconstruction of metaphysics takes place *within* the confines of the law of metaphysics and might even be said to present a conclusion that is proper to the metaphysical (in fact, Derrida himself claims that the deconstruction of

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[25] "[…] or even the absence thereof (*which amounts to the same thing*);" the parentheses are directed at Derrida, as will become clear as we proceed.

[26] For an explanation of the katechon, see Paolo Virno: "*Katechon* is the institution that best adapts itself to the permanent state of exception, to the partial indistinction (or reciprocal commutability) between the questions of law and the questions of fact" (Virno 2007, 62); and Carl Schmitt's *The Nomos of the Earth* (Schmitt 2003, 59).

[27] Above, I have called Derrida's thought conservative. It is conservative in the sense that Derrida thinks of himself as a guardian of memory (Derrida 1995b, 145; Bennington and Derrida 1993, 7; Derrida and Ferraris 2001, 41). Deconstruction means to keep, not to destroy.

phenomenology is the conclusion proper to metaphysics; Derrida 1978, 165). In the same way, political theology cannot think of a body or creature beyond the condition of sovereignty. This is the image of deconstruction as Agamben represents it: "Deconstruction is a thwarted messianism, a suspension of the messianic" and it applies in equal measure to political theology (Agamben 2000b, 103). The *katechon* is exactly this: a suspension of the messianic. Carl Schmitt's famous thesis of political theology is that contemporary structures of political thought are reducible to theological structures. Derrida, who stands opposed to Schmitt politically, is however like him a thinker of secular politics, and in this sense he is also a proponent of political theology: we find our political thought shorn of religious content or dogma, but not free of its structure and logic. Agamben, on the other hand, who has engaged deeply with Schmitt's thought and political theology – far more frequently and explicitly than Derrida – proposes a profane politics. And a profane politics means a politics beyond political theology, its structure the same but for a tiny displacement.

As the greatest theologians of the last two centuries, Agamben presents Franz Kafka and Fyodor Dostoevsky (Agamben and Coccia 2009, 12: 'il più grande teologo del ventesimo secolo' on disguised angels as messengers or assistants; Agamben 2012, 27: on the role of the Church as Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor). Metaphysics for Agamben literally means a Kafkaesque theological regime or bureau: metaphysics is nothing else than an intrigue that prohibits access to the hidden core of meaning it suggests (Agamben 1995, 115–117; Snoek 2012; Moran and Salzani 2013, 261). Potentiality is the crucial concept in this manoeuvre: the modality of the existence of language – which to Agamben is the theological principle of revelation that is as such never itself revealed. And thus the ban is the most essential gesture of metaphysics. William Watkin describes "[...] the basic model of the metaphysical tradition to be the presentation of a concept through the primary scission between two heterogeneous and asymmetric elements. One element always occupies the position of the common or unconditioned power, the other that of the proper of the supposed singularity of the conditioned fact" – their mediation performed by the concept of potentiality, as long as it remains undeveloped (Watkin 2014, 5–6).

Furthermore, because of the fundamental influence that metaphysics has on the way we use signatures like life, language, poetry, and politics, the Kafkaesque bureau administers the domains of experience that these signatures open up as well. The messianic motif can be read in the internal re-organization of this bureau, in the prescient traces of its overturning.

Explanation of source material and method

Choosing the works of Derrida and Agamben can be, and to an extent already has been, justified from what has been discussed: Rousseau's question of the possibility of a return, which would also be a repetition, is dealt with in exemplary fashion by Derrida, while Kleist's insistence on an abandonment of that return is taken up and given content in the work of Agamben – both guided by a slightly different sense of the messianic. If it appears from Derrida that "A repetition requires that nothing is altered, that nothing is created which would not have been created before the repetition takes place. At the same time, I could not speak of a repetition if I were unable to distinguish it from what it repeats" (Düttmann 2001, 5), so if repetition and the return are miraculous, then Agamben's statement that "'pure history' – history without grammar or transmission, which knows neither past nor repetition, resting solely in its own *never having been*" reveals a deliberate disenchantment with the miracle (Agamben 1999a, 60). In contemporary philosophy, no other author has addressed the theme of the messianic with the sensitivity that Derrida and Agamben demonstrate, in the double sense of acutely examining its philosophical ramifications as well as the awareness of its irreducible own character.

More than anyone else, moreover, it is Derrida who has thought about the association between writing and sin, writing and the fall, from whom I have taken my cue: "The sign is always a sign of the Fall" (Derrida 1976, 283). Kevin Hart writes: "[…] arguably Derrida is one of only two philosophers [the other is Hegel] who have taken the Adamic myth as providing some sort of explanation as to the genesis of philosophy as such" (Hart 1989, 8). Yet his work has challenged profoundly the way in which philosophy has incorporated the theme of the Fall. Derrida's argument

showed how the philosophical privileging of spoken language and subordination of written language are mutually conditioned. So after Derrida it is impossible to simply take the written sign to be the substitute for the vocal element – after Derrida we have to carefully explain what we mean by this "substitute" and have to accept that it withstands rigid definitions. Yet perhaps there remains a way in which our use of language is troublesome, and maintains its theological rapport with the Fall. Agamben's work brings out this problem and even the sinfulness of our use of language, and for its strongest enunciation we turn to his critique of Derrida. The way in which Derridean language (language according to Derrida, as well as Derrida's language) operates is perfectly analogous to the way in which the sovereign decides on the law: playing on, and thus reinforcing and exploiting, a fundamental discord at the heart of man and thought, the difference being that Derrida does not pity or despise humanity for this discord. Derrida thinks the reported 'lack of being' should be embraced. Agamben however, does see a pressing ontological problem, albeit one regarding not presence, actuality, but potentiality. If to Agamben, as Dickinson puts it, "what is in fact sinful, *originally* sinful, is that signification exists at all", then what are we to make of a philosophy that *substitutes* the threatened core of meaning – Eden – with signs, with signification (Dickinson 2011, 13)? As Agamben explains in the context of Benjamin's essay "On Language as Such and the Language of Men:" "The original sin for which humans are driven out of Paradise is, first of all, the fall of language from being a language of insignificant and perfectly transparent names to signifying speech as the means of an external communication" (Agamben 1999a , 52). By making language a means to an end, the human being effectively commenced the bio-political exploitation of its own house, and cast itself out of the Garden. The linguistically challenged, eternal, meaningful core that philosophy protects, the discourse of content, is here placed on a bipolar field: between signification and *différance* (its traditional danger, embraced by Derrida: suspending or displacing every meaningful content) and the existence of language as such (not *what* it says but *that* it says, the signature of language – an indifference to content, demonstrated by Agamben in what Tom Frost calls a "hyper-hermeneutics:" a hermeneutics not of meaning, but of significance itself) (Frost 2013, 81). If philosophy's defence of content gets caught up in a paradox, this is

because it necessarily has to trespass where it means to preserve, and if Derrida's work is the best way of reconciling ourselves with this Paradise lost, then Agamben's hyper-hermeneutics of the signature mean nothing less than to reclaim Paradise – yet a Paradise irrevocably removed from God.

Agamben's work displaces Derrida's onto the theological domain, where it performs the task of *katechon*, the restrainer of the Antichrist: Derrida as the philosopher who contemplates the givenness of language to the extent that the lingual dimension of the name is obscured. And even if Agamben appears to reject Derrida as a false Messiah, this might very well be an appropriate response to the honourable yet thankless *katechonic* responsibility.

This study examines this messianic force as a philosophical question, though not only as just another philosophical question, but more importantly, and for reasons indicated above, as a question for philosophy. Not, first and foremost, as a philosophical theme, but as philosophical motif. The reason for this is that the debate I am about to set up does not concern a particular philosophical question, nor the destiny of philosophy itself exactly. Instead, what is at stake is the very fabric of the philosophical.[28] Any philosophy, Derrida's or Agamben's, that contemplates the status of the "final interpreter" (Agamben 1999a, 37), the significance of the written mark, has left behind the domain of the theory of a given object or concept, and ventures into a realm of real language – the existence of language – where it performs, intervenes and decides to the same extent as it attempts to understand:

> Signatures (like statements with respect to language) are then that which marks things at the level of pure existence. *On haplōs*, "pure being," is the archi-*signator* that imprints its transcendental marks on existent entities. The Kantian principle according to which existence is not a predicate, reveals here its true meaning: being is not "the concept of something that could be added to the concept of a thing," because in truth being is not a concept but a signature. Hence, ontology is not a determinate knowledge but the archaeology of every knowledge, which explores the signatures that pertain to beings

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[28] William Watkin also addresses this feature of Agamben's thought, by considering the way in which Agamben confronts ontology with linguistics: "That a total reappraisal of ontology through indifference should depend on deixis seems almost a crime to the rich language of all our philosophers with their marvellous networks of categories, neologisms and reinventions" (Watkin 2014, 97).

> by virtue of the very fact of existing, thus predisposing them to the interpretation of specific knowledges (Agamben 2009, 66).

Derrida must be considered as first among those contemporary philosophers thanks to whom we "[...] finally find ourselves alone with our words; for the first time we are truly alone with language, abandoned without any final foundation" (Agamben 1999a, 45). It is Derrida who exposed the signature of language in the first place. If Derrida exposed the way in which the existence of language remains in philosophy necessarily presupposed, his work, on the theological register, comes to bear responsibility for that assumption. Agamben's justification, then, for presenting the idea of language to philosophy, once again, draws precisely from Derrida.

With regards to *Agamben and Indifference*

William Watkin's *Agamben and Indifference: A Critical Overview* (2014) has been incredibly helpful to this thesis. I do not believe that Watkin's book, a landmark text in Agamben-scholarship, has to completely eclipse my thesis. While I generally agree with his analysis of the relationship between the respective oeuvres of Derrida and Agamben, I argue that the rapport between these works can be brought out even further by the messianic motif. Indeed, Watkin refers to De la Durantaye's work on Agamben when the theme of the messianic is concerned, by invoking the influence of Walter Benjamin (De la Durantaye 2009; Watkin 2014, 36), while that book, though it picks up on the right cues, to my mind leaves quite a bit to be desired in this respect. Furthermore, Watkin concludes that Derrida cannot be an associate in Agamben's philosophy of indifference, instead pointing to Deleuze as a philosopher of indifference. In contrast, I hold that Derrida is Agamben's ally: precisely in being radically unavailable for such a project, Derrida's work is exiled, eclipsed, or banned from Agamben's,[29] and in this abandonment it provides the paradigm for it, satisfying its conditions of impossibility – which reinforces, by a perhaps not unpredictable turn, once again Derrida's own comportment towards the history of philosophy. For this is a story of redemption, and therefore of selection: Agamben requires Derrida's unavailability more than he needs Deleuze's

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[29] Watkin beautifully captures the sorrowful manner of this abandonment (Watkin 2014, 127).

companionship. For this reason, I will juxtapose Watkin's discovery of indifference as the main theme in Agamben's work to a logic of saturation.[30]

This logic of saturation captures the messianic operation: "This recapitulation of the past produces a *plērōma*, a saturation and fulfillment of *kairoi* (messianic *kairoi* are therefore literally full of *chronos*, but an abbreviated, summary *chronos*), that anticipates eschatological *plērōma* when God "will be all in all." Messianic *plērōma* is therefore an abridgment and anticipation of eschatological fulfillment" (Agamben 2000b, 76). This messianic recapitulation itself is the task of philosophical archaeology. Agamben, in this essay on Paul's *Letter to the Romans* as well as at the conclusion of his theory of the signature, calls the trace with which Derrida's grammatology is concerned: "a suspended *Aufhebung* that will never come to know its own *plērōma*" and "a *kenōsis* that never knows its own *plērōma*" (Agamben 2000b, 13; Agamben 2009, 79). The trace, then, harbours a *plērōma*, a fulfillment – yet one that it necessarily means to be ignorant of. Indeed, the knowledge of the *plērōma* of the trace is the prerogative of Agamben's philosophical archaeology. What this means is that philosophical archaeology – Agamben's work – is messianic in that it fulfils the *archē* of its phenomena, releasing in their saturation the knowledge that is forbidden to the trace.

Having explained why I am not concerned with the religious essence of the messianic, how can I justify my focus on the messianic as a philosophical *motif*, rather than exclusively as a signature – the way in which Watkin successfully analyses it? Watkin argues that Agamben's philosophy of indifference keeps within the wider bounds of what we might call "the philosophy of relation". The step forward that Agamben himself suggests – the manoeuvre of indifferentiating indifference, the stage of thinking a form of relation beyond relation, the ban beyond the ban – is not made within his work, Watkin says (Watkin 2014, 205). However, it

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[30] Watkin's study has the additional merit that it traces the role of Gilles Deleuze's thought in Agamben's work – an influence perhaps even more difficult to assess than Derrida's, as Agamben mentions Deleuze even less than he does Derrida, but this thesis is not in a position to judge upon such matters.

is my thesis that the messianic captures and explains the way in which Agamben's work in effect displaces itself beyond relation – beyond relation to the sovereign ban – and onto the threshold of relation, and that furthermore it does so through its complicated abandonment of Derrida. This means two things. First, it means that Agamben's work is not exclusively the philosophy of indifference, although it is also this, but that at the same time it is already the coming philosophy. Watkin, following Agamben, speaks of "a 'now' composed as the 'after'" with regards to the separation between consciousness and the conscious (Watkin 2014, 35; Agamben 2009, 99). David Kishik confirms this view: "[…] we must realize that his propositions in *Homo Sacer* are similar to the rungs of a ladder: we need to climb up on these propositions and beyond them, and then *we need to throw the biopolitical ladder away*" (Kishik 2012, 27). Agamben addresses the now and after simultaneously, for instance in his comment on Kafka's *Penal Colony* in *The Coming Community* (Agamben 1993b, 6). I will return to this theme in section 3.2.1. Second, it means that the image of a motif helps us to better explain what goes on between the works of Derrida and Agamben – I hold that the messianic is found between their works, in their mutual rapport, and in that sense, just as much in Derrida's deconstructions as in Agambenian archaeology. To be sure, it is the case that Agamben wields the messianic in an amplified form, and this is what many commentators pick up on, but only by the momentum he gains in his leap away from Derrida.

The final and most important difference between Watkin's book and this thesis follows from this: Watkin holds there to be some separation between indifference and the messianic:

> *Indifference in Agamben is the suspension of clear difference between a founding common and an operative proper where even the concepts of identity and difference are themselves indifferentiated (their clear oppositional separation rendered questionable)*. My last conclusion, which is only hinted at in Agamben but is surely the logical end point of the system, is that if communicability is what renders concepts visible as fictions of opposition, then communicability itself will at some point be rendered noncommunicable. Communicability must be a discourse formation, otherwise, it would become necessary. This being the case and because communicability is dependent on indifferent suspension between opposing terms to pass from discursive critique to messianic project, then indifference itself must, at some future date, be indifferentiated (Watkin 2014, 14).

To the contrary, in describing the messianic as a motif, rather than as a signature involved in the operativity of indifference, I can grasp the way in which Agamben's thought flows further than his text, as it, in taking its cue from Derrida, is itself already swayed by the messianic. The messianic, then, I take to be a motif that from the moment of its *archē* in Agamben's work extends back onto Derrida's writings.

Indeed, I hold that Watkin's "now" composed as an "after" is already perceptible in Derrida's early work, and that there it brings out the messianic.[31] Coming to the close of *Speech and Phenomena,* Derrida sets out his general argument of how Husserl's phenomenological project, in effectively placing the presence of mind in the stead of any possible presence of knowledge, is from the outset always already metaphysical and teleological. Derrida expressly mentions the absence of a *parousia* in Husserl's conceptuality – a messianic term (Derrida 1973, 101). Yet Husserl's concept of presence-of-mind, attained through the reduction, is at that moment of Derrida's text entirely destabilized: the presence of meaning by the indicative sign, speech by writing, the presence of a life by its relation to death, and, more generally, by *différance*: all these values that Derrida connects to the tradition of the metaphysics of presence are constantly delayed and divided from within by their supplements. Yet *différance* does not deposit thought to a new position or a new thesis, it keeps strictly within this infinite opening of phenomenology – as the difference between its infinity and a finiteness:

> In this sense, within the metaphysics of presence, within philosophy as knowledge of the presence of the object, as the being-before-oneself of knowledge in consciousness, we believe, quite simply and literally, in absolute knowledge as the closure if not the end of history. And we believe that such a closure has taken place [...] It must indeed be so understood, but also understood differently: it is to be heard in the openness of an unheard-of question that opens neither knowledge nor upon some nonknowledge which is a knowledge to come. In the openness of this question we no longer know (Derrida 1973, 102–103).

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[31] Michael Marder, in *The Event of the Thing,* attempts to bring out "Derrida's post-deconstructive realism" through an immanent reading of his work, and asks a question that sounds rather Agambenian: "What does it mean to go through, experience, or to suffer deconstruction, and what remains of these goings-through, experiences, or sufferings?" (Marder 2009, 135).

"It must indeed be so understood, but also understood differently" – Derrida addresses here a historical phenomenon that cannot be satisfied or exhausted within the history that produced it, precisely because it is the epiphenomenon of absolute knowledge, which is absolutely saturated. Derrida does present an injunction to think indifference. The domain of the *voice* exceeds the metaphysics of presence, is what remains of it. Thus, without us realizing it, Derrida has already commended us to Agamben's *terra incognita*, the place of absolute presentation, absolved of representation – to listen to a "*voice without differance*" (Derrida 1973, 102). Furthermore, in *Of Spirit* Derrida addresses three types of indifference (Derrida 1989c, 18–21). A reliable guide on this Derridean trajectory is Marder who traces fragments of subjective intentionality, the fetish, and the signature to bring out the thing itself as within the scope of Derrida's thought (Marder 2009, xii–xiv).[32] So I hold that the messianic is intrinsic to Agamben's thought, and is not something that Agamben means to achieve, in the way Watkin understands indifference, and for this critical difference my thesis can expand on the analysis of indifference in Agamben's work.

This thesis is concerned, then, with deconstruction and its remnants. If the thesis from "Violence and Metaphysics" stands, if there is no such thing as an innocent, harmless use of language, then Rousseau's naïve dream of a return is doomed. Yet we might find that a more sophisticated, "Kleistian" reading of such a Rousseauist dream is possible. This would be a reading that searches for a fulfillment of life in scripture, an exhaustion of writing in life, and thus renders a surplus, a trace or a remnant beyond the scope or the gravity of *logos*.

Question and objective of this thesis

The main question that this thesis sets out to answer is the following: what kind of contingency is activated by the messianic in Agamben's thought, particularly

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[32] Marder actually states that Agamben's interest in the scholastic category of *quodlibet ens*, being whatever, is prompted by Derrida (Marder 2009, 160 n22). I will return to this question of remaining and being-after in Derrida's thought, in the context of Derrida's thought on animal life and on the supplement.

through its reference to Derrida? I will argue that there is a theism involved here, and will explain how it announces and discharges itself through its messianic motif. This messianic motif connects the works of Derrida and Agamben, by making the former a necessary condition to the latter. Let me also underline that while I am undertaking a systematic reading of Agamben's work, it is not the purpose of this thesis to also provide a systematic reading of Derrida's. What I want to demonstrate instead are the Derridean resources that Agamben uses, explicitly or implicitly.

This question is to be answered by way of three sub-questions:

1. In what way is the messianic in Agamben's work a response to the power of law? I will argue that Agamben's work, by way of a messianic archaeology of the concept of potentiality, depletes the law of the power it represents. My argument will focus on how the concept of potentiality means an alliance between philosophy and theology that needs to be thought through, rendering a new understanding of contingency.

2. In what way do Agamben and Derrida diverge on the theme of life in philosophy? I will argue that, across a complicated debate on the foundations of metaphysics and theology, their discord homes in on their irreconcilable conceptions of life. For Derrida, undercutting the metaphysics of presence, life is survival – there is nothing of life that is foreign to death and vice versa. Life is constituted by the trace of its other: death. For Agamben, the question of what life is requires a politico-ontological intervention, rather than a philosophical contemplation. Life can be redeemed, can be happy, and is therefore not necessarily bound to its history of survival – life may find itself in the wake, not of death, but of a messianic moment. My argument will focus on the plane on which the alliance between philosophy and theology is received.

3. How can the contingent being of the irreparable, the remnant, finally register, if not through its ground? This question will be addressed through animal life and the supplement of writing. In what way might the creature outlast theology? In what way can the title "writing" be applied to the modality of contingency that the messianic redeems? Indeed, Agamben's work is highly

critical of grammatology. Yet he appears to reinvent the concept of writing when it comes to his explorations of a zone of indistinction between law and life, between rule and life: handwriting, as he shows, defeats the deductive and inductive ways of recognition. For Derrida, writing, from the outset, has been the concept charged with the highest of stakes: writing is capable of deeply upsetting the traditional dichotomies that organize Western thought. But can writing operate also in excess of survival? My writing inaugurates the possibility of my death – can it also affect beyond the spell of death?

First, I will provide a chapter that introduces Agamben's work with a view to the messianic: what are the particular cues that Agamben gives to this motif? I will draw out the messianic in relation to Agamben's project of a Platonic philosophy without presupposition, by speaking to his theme of infancy. Then, the three sub-questions will be dealt with in three corresponding chapters: on the themes of law, life, and writing – the law that is overturned by the messianic, the life that is the subject of the messianic, and writing that gives shape to the sense of contingency that the messianic brings about.

Chapter 1

Philosophy of Infancy and the Messianic

> It is worth noting how, in contact with that strange man, all things reverted, as it were, to the roots of their existence, rebuilt their outward appearance anew from their metaphysical core, returned to the primary idea, in order to betray it at some point, and to turn into the doubtful, risky and equivocal regions which we shall call for short the Regions of the Great Heresy.
>
> Bruno Schulz, *The Street of Crocodiles*

Introduction

One of Agamben's preferred stylistic instruments is what he calls the threshold – *soglia*. Nearly all his books are punctuated by numerous thresholds that contain not so much a summary of what came before, nor do they operate as a bridge to what comes next. Instead the threshold appears an integrated part of Agamben's messianic thought: it means for any given discourse the relation to "an idea, that is, to the totality of its possibilities" (Agamben 1993a, 67). In the threshold, a discourse or theory is put in relation with its own exteriority – an exteriority that is not, however, a realm simply beyond it, but that is located at the site of the experience of its own limit. Agamben's methodological concerns that I will examine over the course of this chapter – the paradigm, the signature, and philosophical archaeology – can all be found in the threshold, already a token of the messianic motif. Like the parody to its original (Agamben 2013a, 5), the threshold is a discourse or theory to which an emptiness is added – it says exactly the same, only no longer of necessity but freely. This tiny difference is the motif of the messianic.[33]

Before continuing, a preliminary clarification about the messianic must be made. There is a popular assumption that the messianic denotes the end of time. However,

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[33] "There is a well-known parable about the Kingdom of the Messiah that Walter Benjamin (who heard it from Gershom Scholem) recounted one evening to Ernst Bloch, who in turn transcribed it in *Spuren:* 'A rabbi, a real cabalist, once said that in order to establish the reign of peace it is not necessary to destroy everything nor to begin a completely new world. It is sufficient to displace this cup or this bush or this stone just a little, and thus everything. But this small displacement is so difficult to achieve and its measure is so difficult to find that, with regard to the world, humans are incapable of it and it is necessary that the Messiah come'. Benjamin's version of the story goes like this: 'The *Hassidim* tell a story about the world to come that says everything there will be just as it is here. Just as our room is now, so it will be in the world to come; where our baby sleeps now, there too it will sleep in the other world. And the clothes we wear in this world, those too we will wear there. Everything will be as it is now, just a little different'" (Agamben 1993b, 53). Whyte corrects the genealogy of this story, attributing it to Scholem instead (Whyte 2013, 190 n1).

in the works of the thinkers, writers and philosophers that I consult, the messianic is not confined to the eschatological. When Jean-Luc Nancy explains the Christian proclamation, he says: "The Christian message of proclamation is therefore something entirely different from prophecy in the vulgar (and not Jewish) sense of divination or prevision [...] Christianity, then, is not proclamation as a predisposition in one way or another of the end; in it, the end is operative in the proclamation and as proclamation, because the end that is proclaimed is always an *infinite end*" (Nancy 2008, 150). The end of time would be the object of a prophet or a seer; messianic is the way in which the apostle appeals to the time of the end (Agamben 2000b, 61). I admit that this is still a puzzling explanation. Obviously the messianic is essentially a religious concept. Derrida comes to speak of the messianic when he turns to religious questions and themes (see Naas 2012). However, the messianic in its proper, religious sense is not the concern of this thesis. Instead, I will deal with the messianic in Agamben's work on the concept of potentiality and its non-religious effects or better: its *a*theological effects and repercussions involving the work of Derrida. The messianic, I argue, can be uncovered as a philosophical motif, a formal or structural aspect of philosophical thought, and furthermore as the undoing of an old alliance between philosophy and theology.[34] Dickinson observes: "[...] the messianic has been 'reborn' as that structural force which undoes all given norms from within, thus acting within any given representation in order to expose its shortcomings, not from *without*, as some presumed universal (objective) positions have often claimed, but from *within* the particularity of a given situation (its *subjective* dimension), thus evading the misleading ('objective') premises of attempting to present one narrative for all to subscribe to" (Dickinson 2011, 86). One of the objectives of contemporary thought, broadly construed, is the thought of immanence. I address the messianic as a motif within this current in contemporary thought. What I take to be the messianic is the way in which the realization of a particular potential means not the reduction to an

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[34] That the messianic can be addressed as an abstract or formal term finds support in Erich Przywara's distinction (1959) between material and formal "primal Christian terms", the messianic falling into the formal category. As such, the messianic is not part of any revealed content but pertains to the manner of revelation itself (Przywara 2014, 574).

actual or positive state of affairs, but a realization and fulfillment of that potential as possibility itself. This sense of the messianic explains how certain concepts are beyond deconstruction, irreparable. What is the singularly disenchanted position of concepts such as "supplement", "sign", "writing", "trace", "remnant" or "irreparable"? "[…] Is not the sign something other than a being – the sole "thing" which, not being a thing, does not fall under the question 'what is …?'" (Derrida 1973, 25). So the messianic is addressed as something very different from the end of time, or perhaps as that which allows us to think of the end of time not merely as the annihilation of the world. Whereas complete annihilation is the end of documentation and the archive, the messianic is the undoing of documentation and archive, an undoing that leaves freedom rather than nothing. Ultimately, I think for this reason that the messianic is nothing outlandish or mysterious, but possible, possibility itself – the true shape of possibility.

Up to this point, I have resisted the inclination to ascribe any content to the messianic, as this content could possibly interfere with my analysis of a messianic motif, or even bar my access to it. To say what the messianic *is*, to speak of its essence, is to distract from its characteristic in writing – as if the messianic appears first and foremost outside of writing, outside of inscription and incarnation, outside of the law that it deposes from within. To the contrary, it is Agamben's conviction that immanence cannot be conceived without the archaeology of potentiality, which indicates first and foremost a theological structure. Immanence cannot be had, as it were, by philosophy alone – theology must be implied in the question. Philosophy must give up a part of itself, in the form of theology, to attain immanence. For this reason the messianic is an important force rallied in the critique of metaphysics – the thought that conceives of meaning as transcendent essence. To put an essence to the messianic, and to reduce it to an ontology, is to miss the point of it. So it is important to begin looking for a way in which we can appropriately address the messianic. Maurice Blanchot's *The Writing of the Disaster* exposes certain dimensions of the messianic that are important to this thesis:

> If the Messiah is at the gates of Rome among the beggars and lepers, one might think
> that his incognito protects or prevents him from coming, but, precisely, he is

recognized: someone, obsessed with questioning and unable to leave off, asks him: "When will you come?" His being there is, then, not the coming [...] Finally, the Messiah – quite the opposite in this respect, from the Christian hypostasis – is by no means divine. He is a comforter, the most just of the just, but it is not even sure that he is a person [...] the coming of the Messiah does not yet signify the end of history, the suppression of time. It announces a time more future (Blanchot 1995, 141–142).

This is the messianic as we find it in Derrida's explicit contemplations, mostly pertaining to the undecidability of democratic politics. *That* there is a future, this is the substance of the messianic in Blanchot – not a content in the usual sense, and least of all is it the content *of* that future, *what* it is. Rather than the excess of a future time over the present, this indicates to me a certain inexhaustibility of the present by the future: that there is no particular extension of future time that can satisfy the present, and that therefore there is always more, or something else, to come; Derrida makes a similar argument about his wish for his works not to be completely understood immediately – for these works to have a future (Derrida and Ferraris 2001, 30). Our time is open, our fate undecided. In this sense, the messianic is the opposite from what appears in apocalyptic thought, wherein a future time is supposed to make good on all the stakes held in the present, in a perfect gesture of reckoning.

The question that is asked of the Messiah – "when will you come?" – is indeed absolutely pertinent. The time of the Messiah that, as Blanchot says, does not belong to ordinary time, is disputed between Derrida and Agamben. Particularly within the context of Blanchot or Derrida's thought, the presence of the Messiah is not sufficient, and is translated into an imminent arrival. This same question of messianic time is often put to Agamben. When Agamben speaks of a coming community, the disappointed response is that he does not tell us what or when. This kind of disappointment is notably expressed in Jessica Whyte's *Catastrophe and Redemption* (2013), but the exasperation with Agamben for not having provided the messianic content is widespread. "When will you come?" Yet in his case it no longer speaks to the same temporal dichotomy between presence and absence, but to the Messiah's taking place. So if in Blanchot's story the Messiah is precluded from arriving by the barrier of the question "When will you come?", to Agamben this same question reveals the Messiah's apparent presence. Indeed, what Agamben tries to

contemplate philosophically is not *what* the coming community is, but *that* and *how* it is – that it *is coming*, just as he flags the existence of language: *that* there is communication. And *how* is it coming – what is the philosophical comportment that allows for a coming philosophy (Kishik 2012, 49; Van der Heiden 2014, 280)? When Agamben assigns the task of exposing the idea of language to a coming philosophy, or when he attributes the challenge of connecting an ethics to the wonder of the existence of language to future generations, he is not speaking on behalf of forthcoming thinkers, nor is he exactly making way for them, but instead he is readying the territory on which their claims could make sense (Agamben 1993b; Agamben 1999a, 37; Agamben 2007a, 10–11). I will return to this issue in the third chapter in a discussion with Adam Thurschwell.

Let me emphasize that this thesis does not occupy a metaphysical position concerning the time of the Messiah; instead, it traces, by a messianic *motif,* the ethico-theoretical decisions that make such a position cogent and defensible – more particularly Agamben's position with regards to the work of Derrida.

Blanchot is important in another sense as well. He appears at the heart of an important debate within contemporary continental thought, which began with Georges Bataille and was extended by Jean-Luc Nancy – that of a community of those who have no community. The community, the common, has become a major question in contemporary continental ontology and politics (Badiou 2005, 23–30; Hardt and Negri 2000, 93–113; Virno 2004, 21–26; Žižek 1999, 127–167, 2006, 111-118; Van der Heiden 2014, 9–21). The classic gesture by which the common is conceived of as prior to and higher than the proper or singular has become, over the course of the twentieth century and its political disasters, a suspicious one. The messianic is a notion that is involved in this debate in neutralizing this power of the common, reconciling it with the singular. I will return to this debate and its context in section 3.2.1. Furthermore, Agamben's concepts of *désoeuvrement* and the irreparable stem, to an important extent, though not exclusively, from Blanchot's writings.

If this chapter turns out mainly to be a reflection on the project of a philosophy of infancy, this is because Agamben's stance with regards to the discipline of theology and the messianic motif in his work follow on immediately from his attempt at thinking the existence of language. A philosophy that insists on thinking infancy, on thinking this capacity for using language that reserves language, is a philosophy open to the messianic. Furthermore, even if infancy is a form of potentiality, to Agamben it means also a way of precluding its schema and commencing its archaeology. I introduce the philosophy of infancy as Agamben's way of avoiding the mistake that in his view Derrida made: by always insisting on the particularity of philosophical language – and by stressing the unavailability of a transcendental language – Derrida ultimately consolidates the essential reserve of the concept of potentiality.

The messianic is, then, on the ontological, the political and the linguistic level, the motif of the undoing of a law, the unravelling of its fabric. Hence my resolve to study the messianic as an intrinsic motif of philosophical thought. Agamben's attempt to think potentiality, then, must be understood as a philosophical and political intervention of great significance: to think potentiality is to deplete sovereign power completely, as well as to profane abandoned being from sacred Being. This is the messianic task of philosophical archaeology. David Kishik has a striking way of bringing out what philosophical archaeology does here (although he does not call it by that name – he calls it "philosophical *détournement*" or "historical derailment"), its taste for what is submerged, by juxtaposing Plato's itinerary of enlightenment to Dante's experience of abandonment and the Kafkaesque disillusionment of suddenly finding oneself on the wrong side of the law: "The most famous image in Plato's book is of a prisoner who is released from the chains to face the sunlight of truth, of this gloomy cave from which the reader is supposed to emerge with a little help from the philosopher. In Agamben's work, the experience seems to be the reverse: in the middle of life, while sitting on a comfortable chair with a lamp and maybe even a hot drink in a reasonably secure corner of the earth, the reader

suddenly finds herself in a dark forest" (Kishik 2012, 17–18, 61). [35] As Kishik explains under the rubric of a "Dialects of Endarkenment," for Agamben the source of light towards which philosophy strives is not the sun, but darkness (Agamben 1995, 119; Kishik 2012, 17–18). Yet Plato's model is merely reversed and certainly not dismissed, and Agamben shares with him the task of a philosophy without presupposition, the absolution of presuppositions – absolute thought. In wording predating Agamben's resource to archaeology, he described this ambition in terms of the art of recollection: "The movement Plato describes as erotic anamnesis is the movement that transports the object not toward another thing or another place, but towards its own taking place – toward the Idea" (Agamben 1993b, 2; Doussan commences her monograph by highlighting this line, in particular its use of "taking place"; see Doussan 2013, x). And this means thinking at the threshold. Furthermore, it is this ambition of thought without presupposition, and of a confrontation with theology, that commits Agamben to a philosophy of infancy – innocent of presupposition, and innocent with a view to the central theological thesis of the Fall.

1.1   Thought beyond presupposition

Over the course of this thesis, I bring out the following separation between Agamben and Derrida: Derrida, evincing an ethics of responsibility, often wrote in response to a call, a name, an event, a date (Derrida and Ferraris 2001, 65: "What exonerates me, in part from this suspicion of presumption is that I was *asked* to come, I was *asked* a question, and so I feel less ridiculous, because I was 'answering' an occasion"), while Agamben, from whom responsibility signifies not so much the ethical as much as the legal realm ("The gesture of assuming responsibility is therefore genuinely juridical and not ethical"; Agamben 1999b, 22) – which is to say it has to presuppose the existence of language – means to conduct on experiment of language, the *experimentum linguae*, which for that reason is not in response to a prior *logos*, and,

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[35] To Dante and Kafka's, in this itinerary contrary to Plato's of entering a world of shadows rather than escaping from it, we might add the name of Melville: "Have you, then, so long sat at this mountain-window, where but clouds and vapors pass, that, to you, shadows are as things, though you speak of them as of phantoms [...]?" (Melville 1984, 632; Arsić 2007, 4). Kishik names Dante explicitly in this context.

as I will argue, cannot be dated.[36] This distinction reflects in the wide separation in philosophical style between them: Derrida, an unbelievably careful reader, and Agamben, astonishingly resolute in his assertions. As stated above, this thesis explains and defends Agamben's bold stance as relying on the circumspection appropriate to deconstruction.

Derrida makes his claims in response to a prior injunction, for which he simultaneously is and is not responsible. In so far as his stance is never original, authoritative, Derrida is not responsible: he cannot be held responsible as the sole author of his discourse. But then again, precisely to that extent he *is* responsible. It will be up to him – Derrida, conscientious writer – to respond or not. And in that sense the response is inevitable: there will have been a response, even a silent one. Furthermore, this stance implies that the place from where the injunction comes is hypothetical: the *logos* is from the other, presupposed without being simply given. To Derrida, all interpretation, however necessary and unavoidable, regarding the other is ultimately violent and unreliable. Derrida's position is always ambiguous in this way, radically innovative yet expansively conservative, effacing the trace that substituted for the living voice, and it is this ambiguity that makes him the pivotal reference for Agamben. Agamben, against a view that is dominant in the history of philosophy, takes it not as self-evident that the human being is lingual – he does not take language as a given. Agamben explains the structure of the presupposition of language as follows:

> *Only because there is a point at which language signifies-one is it possible to signify about that one, uttering meaningful statements.* The nonhypothetical principle is the foundation, that alone *through the presupposing of which* there can be knowledge and *logos*; it is possible to speak and to state propositions about a subject *(kath' hypokeimenou)* because what is thus presupposed is the fundamental intentionality of language, its signifying-and-touching-one. (What was the weakness of *logos* for Plato becomes for Aristotle the strength of *logos*. The Platonic constitution of truth, unlike the Aristotelian, never comes to a halt at a presupposition) (Agamben 1999a, 109).

[36] The concept of an "ethics of responsibility" does obviously not say that we always have to respond, that it is a moral obligation to always respond. Derrida explores the possibilities of responding and not-responding in the essay "Passions: An Oblique Offering" and in "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials" (Derrida 1995a, 15). Rather, the concept entails that ethics is a matter of responding *and* not responding, and that responding and not responding are modes of responsibility. So the ethics of responsibility presuppose not the answer, but rather the prior calling for that response.

This does not mean that Agamben embraces Aristotle's stronger use of *logos*; on the contrary: Aristotle's *logos* is stronger because it has appropriated that which was ineffable in discourse, and substituted it with presupposition of the *gramma* (Agamben 1999a, 37). Agamben holds that every hypothesis, every presupposition leaves a remnant. In the case of the presupposition of the givenness of language for the human being, this remnant is the infant, the *Muselmann*, or the foreigner (who speaks a different language, though admittedly still a language).[37] Time and again Agamben develops these remnants of the presupposition, attempting to absolve philosophy of presupposition, attempting the absolution of thought: "The Idea of language is language that no longer presupposes any other language; it is the language that, having eliminated all of its presuppositions and names and no longer having anything to say, now simply speaks" (Agamben 1999a, 60). In this way, thought beyond presupposition takes its cue not from a thesis, but from the remainder of a thesis. In this sense Agamben is very close to Derrida's deconstruction and philosophy of margins, though the caveat must be added that while the margins are the inevitable and indefinite, necessary epiphenomena of their structures, the remnant is the particular, contingent remainder *of* a particular thesis.

In this section I argue that the principal problem for Agamben is the theological heritage of traditional metaphysics that posits a highest or first being. This heritage is continued in hermeneutical, grammatological, and deconstructive thought, that respectively posit the priority of the word, the written mark, or, in the last instance, the inevitability of negative ground. For instance, with regards to hermeneutics, Ricoeur and Gadamer both agree on this necessary postulate (Ricœur 1974, 24; Gadamer 2004, 383; Van der Heiden in: Kasten, Paul, and Sneller 2013, 92; Van der Heiden 2014, 2). With regards to grammatology and deconstruction, the presupposition lies in their response to a trace. Agamben, contrary to all these currents, means to employ a thought that does not presuppose – which accounts for

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[37] Van der Heiden's examples (Van der Heiden 2012, 212).

the remarkable experience of its reading, as I will demonstrate. Agamben attempts this by seeking at each and every point the moment of indistinction, suspension, or, in Watkin's term, indifference, between potentiality and actuality, between the one and the many, the common and the proper. So while Derrida will show how the difference between the one and the many undermines the philosophical appreciation of the one over the many, Agamben locates the point of indistinction between them. He finds this point in the example, the paradigm, which is the exemplary figure that exposes its own belonging to a class or set by virtue of being temporarily suspended from it. The question, then, of this thought that presupposes nothing, refers to the plane on which it takes place. I will argue in the next section that this means, for Agamben, a turn towards the pre-discursive, towards infancy. When it comes to thematising a "belonging" in suspense, Agamben's political potential becomes immediately clear: the possibility to articulate the form of a community that Continental thought has sought since World War II: a community – a set – identifiable merely by the belonging of its members. These members, then, occupy the threshold of the community, rather than its centre. As this "belonging" is always suspended belonging, the dreaded inherent perversions of the concept of community are exorcized from the outset.

This reflects on Derrida's understanding of the example. As I explained, in Agamben the example contains the form of the paradigm: it is excluded, suspended, from a set by exposing its inclusion. Something decisive occurs in the example – its suspension is effective. Yet, for Derrida, the example remains locked into its conditions of (im-)possibility, remains miraculous: it *can* be exemplary by way of its belonging, only in excess of its belonging – but to the extent of its belonging, or in excess of its belonging, it *cannot* be exemplary: "The example itself, as such, overflows its singularity as much as its identity. This is why there are no examples, while at the same time there are only examples" (Derrida 1995a, 17). Derrida's ethics of responsibility follow immediately: "[d]iscourse on the promise is a promise in advance: *within* the promise" (Derrida 2007, 153). Furthermore, in *Of Spirit* Derrida demonstrates how Heidegger's use and mention of the word *Geist* involve an element of both mention and use, and that therefore it is impossible to tell when the

word is effectively suspended, supporting his stance on the formal impossibility of examples (Derrida 1989c, 29–30). Derrida does not deny that there are examples. And he also does not deny the conditions that are pertinent to them. What he denies is that the conditions of possibility of the example add up to the example. So while for Agamben the suspension of the example is effective, for Derrida this exclusion is as effective as its inclusion, and it is the conditions that remain in effect. I will argue that Agamben's trust in suspension is not simply naïve, but employs Derrida's double coverage of the example. In exactly the same way, Derrida and Agamben argue Kafka's Man from the Country to be respectively caught within the spell of the law (the example as belonging) and released from it (the example as suspended) (Agamben 1998, 55). In exactly the same way, furthermore, deconstruction and the philosophy of infancy understand the signification of the sign: as the substitute for a transcendent meaningful content and the enunciation of the signature – the fact of their statement (Agamben 2009, 78–79). Agamben's use of paradigms depends on this redeemed status of the example, as I will explain in section 1.3.1.

1.2   Philosophy of infancy

In this section, I connect Agamben's philosophy of infancy with his preoccupation with theology. When Kevin Attell points at Agamben's insolence in 1989 to state that "philosophy has hardly ever posed the question of the voice as an issue …", this indeed appears to snub Derrida's *La voix et le phénomène* (the provocation is even more direct as it was first made in the *French* edition of *Infancy and History*, predating the English one) (Attell 2014, 41).[38] Yet what Agamben means is that the *archē* of the Voice has not been raised, and that deconstruction and metaphysics alike treat the Voice as absent. From as early as *Stanzas,* Agamben credits Derrida with having commenced an archaeology of language, albeit without completing it: "Placing writing and the trace in an initial position means putting the emphasis on this original experience [of being always already caught in a fold of appearance *and*

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[38] In the English translation this line appears as a citation from Agamben's own unpublished papers (Agamben 2007a, 4).

essence, signifier *and* signified], but not transcending it" (Agamben 1993a, 156).[39]
So with regards to the parable of the man before the law, Derrida has already
exposed that the law consists only in the dictation of its own suspension – the
suspension of its dictum – but has not made the demand on that law to ultimately
articulate this suspense (Derrida 1992a, 204–205; Agamben 1998, 54).

Infancy is the term by which Agamben means to preclude the philosophy of
presupposition. Against the view that is dominant in the philosophical tradition,
that the human being is the living being that has language, the *zōon lógon échon*,
Agamben holds that the human being actually maintains her infancy. Only animals
have their language absolutely; human beings have language relatively – relative to
their education, aptitude, physical factors, and so forth.

Agamben has written a short essay entitled "For a Philosophy of Infancy" (as well as
"The Idea of Infancy", which also gets underway with help of the curious amphibian
the axolotl, and a book called *Infancy and History*). Taking a cue from Rousseau –
"Conventional language belongs only to man. That is why man makes progress,
whether for good or bad, and why the animals do not at all" (Rousseau 1998, 293)[40]
– he writes: "while other animals (the mature ones!) merely obey the specific
instructions written in their genetic code, the neotenic infant finds itself in the
condition of also being able to pay attention to that which is not written, of paying
attention to arbitrary and uncodified somatic possibilities" (Agamben 2001, 121;
see also Agamben 2004a, 36). In the book, published much earlier, he states it as
follows: "Animals do not enter language, they are already inside it. Man, instead, by
having an infancy, by preceding speech, splits this single language and, in order to
speak, has to constitute himself as the subject of language – he has to say *I*"

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[39] There is an echo of Levinas's "Reality and its Shadow" to be heard here: "Reality would not be only
what it is, what it is disclosed to be in truth, but would be also its double, its shadow, its image"
(Lévinas 1987, 6).
[40] It is clear, though, that for Rousseau all "progress" is for the worse – as is not irrelevant to the
problem this thesis is trying to understand. A similar cue can be found in the early Marx: "The animal
is immediately one with its life activity, not distinct from it. The animal is *its life activity*" (Marx 1994,
63) .

(Agamben 2007a, 59; Agamben 2011b, 71). Agamben rejects the human being as the rational animal to whom language is given, as it implies the theological presupposition of language: in the beginning was the word. Implied in Agamben's response is the theological notion of the Fall: the human being is fallen from absolute language, and has to reclaim it, learn it, as knowledge; however, the human being always retains its paradisiacal capacity for not-speaking – and in this way Agamben commences his messianic trajectory.

In stark contrast to Derrida, then, for Agamben philosophy is referred back to itself, prior to this or that particular vocabulary or vocation, and reduced, revoked, to the *voice* in both of them. I will mount my entire argument about the messianic motif between Derrida and Agamben on this distinction between them: Derrida as the philosopher attuned to the particularity of language – it always already being spent and circulated through distinct vocabularies – and Agamben as the philosopher in touch with the infancy of language – the creature capable of language that might actually reserve it. It is by way of infant naivety that Agamben means to preclude the theological structure of potentiality, and accordingly to enter it in the right way to perform its archaeology.

Agamben means to understand precisely the taking place of the voice. If Derrida criticizes the tendency of philosophical thought to credit the voice that is present to itself over the written mark that must always rely on that voice to animate it, for Agamben philosophy is once again *logocentric* – yet in a way that is not immediately vulnerable to a Derridean critique (Attell 2009, 839; Attell 2014, 38): Agamben is not so much interested in *what* this voice has to say – in the hermeneutics of the meaningful content of which it is the messenger, and which depends on the trace of writing, as Derrida shows – but rather in the fact *that* it says. So the logocentric element here is not the guardian of a supposed meaningful core, but the manifestation of the voice itself. Not the (given) presence of the voice, but its (critical) taking place. For reasons that will be more fully elaborated later, Agamben means to think the ontology of potentiality, the paradigm of which he finds in the

existence of language. It is for this reason that many of his readers, myself among them, share in an experience that Alice Lagaay connects to reading Agamben:

> In this state, which even as a child would sometimes overcome me, the activities of every day life are suddenly put on hold, making space for the perception of a state of bare existence, whatever that may be, yes something like neutral, meaningless, material existence. This state corresponds to a very intimate, indeed quite unique (and at the same time uncannily "general") and perhaps even (despite this attempt here) quite *incommunicable* feeling. It is on the one hand an individual, personal experience, in the sense that it has to do with a sensing of my own being. Yet on the other hand, there is something about it that is clearly more impersonal, more general than perhaps any other experience I've ever had [...] (Lagaay and Schiffers 2009, 326; Dickinson 2011a, 1).[41]

Perhaps for some the connection with childhood is stronger even than Lagaay suggests (Kishik cites Agamben's claim to have designed the basics of his philosophy at the age of seven; Kishik 2012, 8) – I believe it is the essential element in this passage: Agamben's philosophy of infancy exposes our existence within language, and thus repeats the infant experience of discovering a world that is yet to be named and brings out the being of language. Even though infancy for Agamben does not mean the stage of developmental psychology of early childhood, but is instead an ontologico-lingual feature of the human being – only the human being is *capable* of language – it does also suggest a pre-cognitive innocence. As Dickinson summarizes the response from an unnamed member of the audience at Lagaay's interview: "[...] the recounting of such an experience, no matter how indescribable, points to the limits of language, as well as of academic discourse. That is, the experience which has just been recounted is one which seems to indicate a place where the typical divisions between the individual and the universal are dissolved" (Dickinson 2011, 2). Lagaay adds later on during the interview:

> The first thing that strikes me as important is the particular experience of language that Agamben has in mind and that is referred to throughout his texts as *experimentum linguae*. It is an existential state in which language is encountered on a level beyond that of its everyday use. Here language is experienced neither as mere sound nor as meaning. It has to do with a confrontation with, and an attempt to sustain in thought, the mere existence, that is, the mere *fact* of language (Lagaay and Schiffers 2009, 327).

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[41] Kishik expresses a similar intuition to Lagaay's: "There is a certain passion in Agamben's thought; there is a life that appears to be embedded in his words" (Kishik 2012, 6).

This experience makes us aware of the linguistic world that we have assumed and how that world covers a more general existence. In the context of the discussion between Anselm and Gaunilo on the ontological argument for the existence of God, Agamben explains this thought of the existence of language as follows:

> [...] there is a being whose nomination implies its existence, and that being is language. The fact that I speak and that someone listens implies the existence of nothing – other than language. *Language is what must necessarily presuppose itself*. What the ontological argument proves is therefore that the speech of human beings and existence of rational animals necessarily imply the divine word, in the sense that they presuppose the signifying function and openness to revelation (only in this sense does the ontological argument prove the existence of God – only, that is, if God is the name of the preexistence of language, or his dwelling in the *arkhē*). But this openness, contrary to what Anselm thought, does not belong to the domain of signifying discourse; it is not a proposition that bears meaning but rather a pure event of language before and beyond all particular meaning (Agamben 1999a, 41–42).

Agamben's work operates on this level, prior to particular meaning, and it is the decision for this stage that Lagaay brings out, and that marks its difference from the work of Derrida.

As the reference to Anselm and Gaunilo indicates, at stake is the proximity between philosophy and theology. The existence of language is, structurally, a theological thesis or assumption. As Agamben explains in the context of the problem of the relation between poetry and life, and which pertains to philosophy in equal measure, and to deconstruction even more so:

> What thus comes to the foreground of formalist criticism, however, is – without ever appearing consciously as such – a purely theological presupposition: the dwelling of the word in the beginning, of *logos* in *archē*, that is, the absolutely primordial status of language. This uninterrogated persistence of a theological foundation shows itself in the fact that the original structure of the poetic work remains marked by negativity: the primordiality of *logos* thus quickly becomes a primacy of the signifier and the letter, and the origin reveals itself as trace. (It is here that the deconstructionist factory establishes residence.) (Agamben 1999c, 77).[42]

So, philosophy – including Agamben's – is constitutionally tied up with theology, in exactly the same way that it has to assert potentiality: what is revealed to

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[42] "Deconstructionist factory;" this is Agamben at his most dismissive, but presumably Derrida himself is not the target here, but instead the enthusiastic following his work has gained.

philosophy, at the beginning, is the existence of language – the potentiality for this or that particular thought or idea. And this is the threshold from which philosophy is always afraid to depart – this is logocentrism. Agamben's project, then, is a deconstruction of sorts of this entanglement and this presupposition. But unlike Derridean deconstruction, Agamben's is not content with reducing its target concepts to their own conditions of impossibility – as that would amount to explaining how these structures are in force *in spite of* being paradoxical, as phantasms or spectres, as force without significance, leaving them all the more inevitable and powerful (Michael Naas brings out this feature of Derrida's work in a review that will be revisited later; Naas 2009, 46). Instead, Agamben's method of philosophical archaeology means to find in the paradigm a zone of indistinction between the common and the proper (for Watkin), the universal and the individual (for Lagaay's discussant), between potentiality and actuality, and to thereby actually undo the irresistibility of its potentiality, achieving its concept – its *taking place*, its Idea, as Jenny Doussan conceives it (Doussan 2013, 5–6).[43] And this means to articulate potentiality in a true fulfillment and saturation of its idea. If potentiality finds its comprehension in Agamben's thought, then the law can no longer apply by not-applying – its realm of non-application being already fully implemented. The subjects of this law are then cast beyond the relationship of the ban: "[...] the life that is lived in the village at the foot of the hill on which the castle stands" (Benjamin, quoted in Agamben 1998, 53; Agamben 2005b, 63). Which is to say that archaeology is messianic work. Yet deconstruction is messianic in equal measure, as it prepares the ground for philosophical archaeology to work on.

Examples pertaining directly to this theological hang-up of philosophy can be found in *Language and Death* (Agamben 1991, 27), the ironic attack on Karl-Otto Apel and Jürgen Habermas in *Remnants of Auschwitz* (Agamben 1999b, 64–65),[44] and the

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[43] I have indicated this tension between Derrida and Agamben with regards to the status of the example in the previous section.

[44] Maurizio Ferraris, in conversation with Derrida, also attacks this school of thought: "I'm not at all convinced by the generally accepted version of this entrance [of writing into philosophy], which holds that, after 'the end of metaphysics', philosophers no longer dealt with truth, but limited themselves to a sort of social welfare service based on conversation" (Derrida and Ferraris 2001, 7).

essays on language in the *Potentialities* volume (Agamben 1999a, 27–88, 104–115).[45] Indeed, Agamben's work is at its profound level a confrontation with the theological underpinnings of philosophy, exposing our philosophical theology. In this sense, Agamben's work means another step in the critique of onto-theology – the philosophy that posits Being as a first entity – in that it criticises traditional philosophy's presupposition and ignorance of the existence of language.[46] In so far as we can already gauge the political agenda here – in advocating some kind of mode of the voice – in challenging metaphysics, and in making way for a coming philosophy, Agamben attempts to profane philosophy, to think an *a*theology. For this is not a philosophy that from the outset manages to avoid theological presuppositions – it is the philosophical archaeology of philosophy as originally connected to theology. Indeed, Agamben contemplates a certain death of God staged in "the definitive and absolute utterance of God's name in speech" (Agamben 1999a, 58).

This fact or event of language comes structurally prior to whatever is conveyed in its discourse. And for Agamben this fact of language is what is denoted in theology by the term "revelation": "The meaning of revelation is that humans can reveal beings through language but cannot reveal language itself" (Agamben 1999b, 40). Agamben takes Derrida's work at large to be the strongest formulation of this impossibility of revealing language itself – as language itself becomes the principle of concealment (Agamben 1993a, 156; Agamben 1995, 104). So while philosophy might take revelation to be foreign to reason, it nevertheless co-opts revelation in its structure by taking language as the revelatory principle (Agamben 1999a, 39). This bears repeating: Agamben conducts the *experimentum linguae* in order to expose the particularly theological heritage of philosophy that onto-theology, hermeneutics and deconstruction never fully conceived: the existence of language. As Kevin Hart puts it: "Derrida argues that the weak link in the conceptual chain

[45] Gert-Jan van der Heiden gives a brief overview of onto-theology, at the start of his foray into contemporary ontology (Van der Heiden 2014, 10–11).
[46] Nietzsche makes a very similar observation: "I am afraid we are not getting rid of God because we still believe in grammar…" (Nietzsche 1990, 48).

'interpretation-sign-God' is the middle term, the upshot being that we must take interpretation, not God, as the originary term [...] if 'interpretation' is taken to precede 'sign', it is to be regarded – so Derrida and Barthes contend – as groundless play and affirmation" – in the beginning there was interpretation (Hart 1989, 36, 48–49; Van der Heiden 2014, 114–115). To avoid taking language for granted and instead to actually understand its taking place, philosophy must preclude the particularity of vocabulary. And therefore, philosophy must be what Agamben gives a short statement of in the Bartleby essay, approximating Lagaay's experience even closer: "In its deepest intention, philosophy is a firm assertion of potentiality, the construction of an experience of the possible as such. Not thought but the potential to think, not writing but the white sheet is what philosophy refuses at all costs to forget" – philosophy must be this, and then overcome it (Agamben 1999a, 249).[47] For as long as thought leaves "potentiality" a possibility, it is always on the brink of forgetting it, and consequently it remains oblivious to the existence of language. Only when potentiality is conceived can the existence of language be thought.

We have now gained a sense of the particular difficulty or intrigue of Agamben's work: it means to think thought as potentiality in actual thought. It means to put actual words to the experience of language in general. It means, then, to find the zone of indistinction between potentiality and actuality, between thought and ideas, between language and discourse. The difficulty here is that Agamben must think and indeed affirm the concept of potentiality that he means to depose. This is the fine line that Agamben walks, through a philosophically uncharted land of suspended judgments and distinctions – indeed, through the philosophically uncharted zone par excellence: indifference. In my introduction, I have claimed the inseparable connection between philosophy and the possibility of critique, crisis, discrimination, yet Agamben means to move beyond this limitation, and think the remnant of critique, the division of the division (Agamben 2000b, 50). In the final chapter to this thesis, I will bring into sharper *relief* this zone of *indistinction,* as it is also the place

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[47] See also "The Thing Itself:" "*The task of philosophical presentation is to come with speech to help speech, so that, in speech, speech itself does not remain presupposed but instead comes to speec*h" (Agamben 1999a, 35).

in Agamben's work that registers the messianic. To illuminate the proximity – the indistinction – between the existence of language and what is conveyed in language, between a philosophy *of* potentiality (subjective) and a philosophy of *potentiality* (objective), between potentiality and actuality that appears so remarkable to Lagaay, let me refer to Thurschwell's essay to which I will return in the third chapter:

> A redeemed political life would be "relationless" in the sense of "without presupposition," neither an "actuality" whose essence or potential lies elsewhere, nor even a "potential" in the classical Aristotelian sense which would be marked by the unrealized possibility of its actuality. It would thus be, in the words of *The Coming Community*, "a zone in which possibility and reality, potentiality and actuality, become indistinguishable" | Among the notable features of this formulation is how closely it mirrors Agamben's description of that which is to be overcome in the messianic moment, the ontological structure of the sovereignty as ban. Agamben says that "the sovereign is precisely [the] zone of indistinction" at the limit where "pure potentiality and pure actuality are indistinguishable." This is virtually the same description that Agamben provides in *The Coming Community* of the redeemed world (Thurschwell 2003, 1231).

Thurschwell makes a point of explaining the similarity between a sovereign potentiality that is overturned and the redeemed, immanent life that appears in its wake. This similarity is striking indeed, and also significant. It is redeemed life that in its being-called as such experiences language as such, presupposes nothing else – this is microscopically different from the structure in which bare life is caught: bare life is abandoned being, the relation of the ban materializes in bare life (Attell 2014, 132). Redeemed life has claimed this law for itself, thus separating it from its constitutive character. This tiny adjustment is the mark of messianic redemption:

> Benjamin both cites and falsifies [Schmitt's definition of sovereignty] in the Eighth Thesis. Instead of "the rule as such lives off the exception alone," he writes: "the 'state of exception' in which we live is the rule." What must be grasped here is the sense of this conscious alteration [...] In establishing this analogy, Benjamin does nothing other than bring a genuine messianic tradition to the most extreme point of its development (Agamben 1999a, 162).

The difference worked by Benjamin on Schmitt's definition of sovereignty that is described here, runs parallel to the separation between Scholem and Benjamin that I recounted earlier: in both debates Benjamin, by a minute intervention, suggests that life survives the law, rather than the other way around.

De la Durantaye writes that Agamben's philosophy of infancy means a vocabulary that is later largely substituted with potentiality (De la Durantaye 2009, 81, 90). Kevin Attell, in his reading of the relationship between Agamben and Derrida, says: "At stake in Agamben's 'impotential' reading of this passage is his broader critique of the primacy of actuality in the philosophical tradition, which we already saw an element of in his more or less Heideggerian affirmation of potentiality of actuality"; and repeats: "[...] the point arrives toward the end of the 1980s where potentiality presents itself as the first principle of Agamben's philosophy" (Attell 2014, 97, 100). Yet this seems not entirely correct. Potentiality is the timeless problem of Western thought that must be deconstructed from within. Attell's latter claim especially is misleading when Agamben's work is entirely an effort to absolve thought of first principles. Instead, Agamben thinks the apparent primacy of actuality in the philosophical tradition is its excuse for not thinking potentiality in itself. The Heideggerian affirmation of potentiality only serves Agamben as the prompt on which thought can seize potentiality together with its co-original impotential – this occurs in the Bartleby essay, as I will demonstrate in Chapter 2. That Aristotelian potentiality was always already the impregnable law of metaphysics is exactly Agamben's objection to Derrida: in metaphysics, Voice is already removed; its silence is the real foundation of language, philosophical and religious thought (Dickinson 2014, 70). Attell indeed continues his analysis along such lines, and brings out how Agamben means to fulfill Aristotle's concept of potentiality, yet he never admits that this means Agamben executes its fatal critique. And when he says that for Agamben "the ultimate task at hand is to break the sovereign structure that holds us in the ban of being", there is no mention of the necessity of a comprehensive archaeology of potentiality (Attell 2014, 99–100).

Infancy, contrary to potentiality, is something that Agamben embraces unreservedly. As Van der Heiden explains, the well-known Aristotelian (and Augustinian; for its ontological implications, see Przywara 2014, 199) argument of the irrefutability of the principle of non-contradiction depends on the idea that any opponent will, in performing her argument, respect it. Aristotle holds that any opponent is obliged to communicate, as not communicating reduces her to the level

of a plant. Yet Agamben, as he understands the notion of infancy, argues that not to communicate, not to engage in communication, means not to be incapable of communicating but exactly proves one's capacity for it.[48] In fact, by not enacting one's capacity to speak, one gives evidence of one's potentiality to use language as well as not to use language – suspending the principle of non-contradiction (Van der Heiden 2014, 117–118). Here, the principle of non-contradiction, and its implied presupposition of the existence of language, in its logical suspension becomes a paradigm for *thinking* the existence of language – I will return to Agamben's use of the paradigm in the next section. If we add that Aristotle's concept of potentiality is aligned with his argument of the inevitability of the *logos* – because in the absence of language, the word must be assumed (as in Derrida's thought) – the notion of infancy, of being capable of language without being conditioned by it, stands out as the emancipatory concept. Infancy is the capacity for language, its impotentiality.

Watkin's *Agamben and Indifference* also homes in on this feature of thought's priority over language, particularly in its chapter on Derrida (Watkin 2014, 107–133). It is conceived in different ways by De la Durantaye as Agamben's revocation of vocation (De la Durantaye 2009, 3), and by Thurschwell by way of Agamben's engagement with Nietzsche in the figure of the return (Thurschwell 2003, 1206). In Watkin's analysis, the paradox of sovereignty lies at the heart of Western thought – yet it lies there precisely as a paradox: "At certain key moments then, due to the paradox logic of the system, the ceaseless movement from common to proper and back again, the lack of clear distinction over precedence and the historical truth at the root of the system (that in fact there need not be such a division at all), the oppositions within the system blur, become indiscernible, are suspended, reach a state of indistinction, become inoperative and so on" (Agamben 1998, 44–46; Watkin 2014, 5–6). The task of philosophical archaeology is to expose and criticize this paradox, as it is harboured by the philosophically inevitable logic of potentiality.

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[48] This is the reason why Kalpana Seshadri's characterization of Agamben's work as thought of *sterēsis* (privation) is not exactly correct either (Seshadri 2014). Marder too develops the thinking of Aristotle's plant-man (Marder 2013, 134; Marder 2014, 30–31).

Indifference, as Watkin employs it, pertains to the gains of philosophical archaeology: the relative ease by which the student of law can relate to her subject is one of indifference. The attitude that we take to the present-at-hand in Heidegger too brings out indifference. This indifference in another context is called the suspense or *epochē* that belongs to contingency (Van der Heiden 2014, 279). Indifference, in this sense, for example with regards to particular parties or positions, also implies this preclusion of the particularity of language that I mean to bring out here (Watkin 2014, 51). And the zone of this indifference is potentiality. The pre-discursive zone I am presently indicating is closely connected to this zone of indifference in Watkin's essay; it is indeed Watkin's ambition to explain how "language as communicability is effectively indifference" (Watkin 2014, 50). Potentiality always already contains indifference. So where Derrida would embrace the difference that is prior to any metaphysical hierarchy (speech over writing, presence over the past and future), Agamben follows this difference to the point of indistinction.

The *experimentum linguae*, the experience of the existence of language as such, is the central feature of Agamben's thought (Daniel Heller-Roazen in: Agamben 1999a, 2; Thurschwell 2003, 1210; Mills 2008, 35; Watkin 2010; Doussan 2013, x; Watkin 2014, 249–250). I argued for its singular position above, and brought out how it features in secondary literature. And this section so far, in demonstrating Agamben's stake in thinking the potential of language before its vocabularies, sentences and discourses, has served as an introduction to this *experimentum linguae*. The experiment also marks the moment when the messianic in Agamben announces itself. Agamben turns thought towards its own potential, its own infancy and innocence, and thus circumvents discourse and its fallenness, aspires to a state of redemption. Agamben's term for the exposure of the being of language, as we have already seen, is overtly theological: *revelation* (Agamben 1999a: 39). This is where Agamben's theological and messianic import lies.

Now we know a bit more about Agamben's subtle trajectory. To solve the problem of a philosophy that presupposes the existence of language instead of thinking it, he

must think the damaging concept responsible for leaving language (and Being, and sovereignty) unthought: potentiality. The potentiality of language means that language itself, as the principle of revelation, remains implicit. Furthermore, the presupposition implies ontology, because it means existence in the ban of Being. And, not least, politically, it means the paradoxical power of the sovereign over bare life. For Agamben, this is the metaphysical regime that is best understood as a Kafkaesque bureau. And the problem is a robust one: this concept of potentiality is precisely kept in reserve by the philosophical tradition; it leaves itself unthought. Potentiality is, then, the paradigm of an enigmatic metaphysics. It remains potential. Agamben's task of philosophical archaeology is then to actualize this harmful concept, to retrieve it as the *archē* of Western thought.

1.3   Paradigms and signatures

Agamben is, like Derrida, an extremely controversial philosopher. A highly erudite and even eclectic reader of philosophy, legal theory, theology, history, literature, poetry and linguistics, his idiosyncratic interpretations are rejected by many experts in their field[49] – yet perhaps our previous reflection can help us understand why. Agamben's notoriety has everything to do with his method, the contemplations on which he introduces with the words: "I have therefore preferred to take the risk of attributing to the texts of others what began its elaboration with them, rather than run the reverse risk of appropriating thoughts or research paths that do not belong to me" (Agamben 2009, 8). If J. Gordon Finlayson objects to Agamben's reading of Aristotle for various exegetical inaccuracies, we can now account for them: Agamben would rather attribute to Aristotle what he learned while reading Aristotle, than claim these ideas as his own (Finlayson 2010). However, Agamben's introductory note refers not only to his way of avoiding confusion concerning the authorship of ideas. Much more importantly, it is part and parcel of the way in which Agamben relates to the history of philosophy. Watkin writes that Agamben is "[…] proposing a fundamental reconsideration of what constitutes the historical, our intent towards it in the contemporary moment and the means by which systems of

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[49] For critiques of Agamben's interpretation of Aristotle, see Finlayson 2010 and Whyte 2013: 108.

intelligibility are not just revealed, as in Foucault, but ultimately suspended" (Watkin 2014, 5). Once again, we have a clear statement of the task of philosophical archaeology: to articulate a historical phenomenon or paradigm in a way that renders it inoperative by exposing its origins.

Agamben's method, then, that he has described as "reading the signs of the times", is the study of paradigms and signatures (Agamben 2009; Agamben 2012: 41). I must now establish the meaning of the terms "paradigm" and "signature" in the context of his work. This is required as these terms are crucial to Agamben's pre-discursive turn and also when it comes to answering some of Agamben's critics. Both the signature and the paradigm are essential in Agamben's preclusion of lingual content: they are involved in his seizing of the statement as fact, rather than as the conveyor of a particular content, and thus the focus on communicability as such (Agamben 1999b, 138–139; Watkin 2014, 50). I will now explain the terms "paradigm" and "signature".

1.3.1 Paradigm

To explain the paradigm I will use the same example that we encountered in the previous section: namely, the principle of non-contradiction. Van der Heiden analyses this example of the suspension of fundamental logic, only he does not connect it to the paradigm explicitly (Van der Heiden 2014, 117; Van der Heiden 2012, 211). In *Remnants of Auschwitz* – in the context of another argument of the human being's infancy, this time considering the paradigm of the *Muselmann* – Agamben addresses the theory of discursive ethics that implies that the human being is obliged to use language, to speak. He reduces this theory to Aristotle's defence of the principle of non-contradiction. Aristotle holds that the principle of non-contradiction cannot be positively confirmed, but rather any challenge of it will, by making an argument – and thus depending on this fundamental principle of logic – refute itself (Agamben 1999b, 64). Thus by merely assuming the word the disputant co-opts into the schema of non-contradiction. Yet what Aristotle excludes is the possibility that the discussant refuses to speak: "[…] such a person, insofar as

he is such, is altogether similar to a vegetable" (Agamben 1999b, 65).[50] Agamben denies Aristotle's point:

> [...] the simple acquisition of speech in no way obliges one to speak. The pure pre-existence of language as the instrument of communication – the fact that, for speaking beings, language already exists – in itself contains no obligation to communicate. On the contrary, only if language bears witness to something to which it is impossible to bear witness, can a speaking being experience something like a necessity to speak (Agamben 1999b, 65).

Agamben holds that the disputant to the principle of non-contradiction is not obliged to language at all. If she declines to speak, leaving the principle uncontested, she in fact gives evidence of her *capacity to speak*. As Van der Heiden says: "[...] it is only by not actualizing one's potential to communicate [...] that one shows that the potential to communicate is also the *potential not to communicate*" (Van der Heiden 2014, 118). What has occurred in the process is the deactivation of the principle of non-contradiction, precisely by *not contradicting* it. While every attempted contradiction of this fundamental principle of logic necessarily buys into its schema, by *not*-contradicting it, by ceasing to speak, its operation is suspended. Agamben's analysis transforms the fundamental law of logic into the paradigm of logic, an example, its legal power depleted by an indifferent subject.

This shows the way in which the paradigm is an integral part of Agamben's philosophy beyond presupposition: the paradigm is the mechanism by which the remainder of the presupposition is philosophically activated.

Paradigm is originally a Greek term. It derives from *paradeiknunai*, which means "show side by side": para-deiknunai – *para* means "on the side of" and in *deiknunai* we recognize "index". Agamben has explained his method as always expanding and elaborating those aspects of his masters' thought that allow for elaboration, what was potential in it: "[...] the genuine philosophical element in every work, whether

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[50] "We can, however, demonstrate negatively even that this view [that the same thing can both be and not be] is impossible, if our opponent will only say something; and if he says nothing, it is absurd to seek to give an account of our views to one who cannot give an account of anything, in so far as he cannot do so. For such a man, as such, is from the start no better than a vegetable" (Aristotle 1928, 1006a 13–15). Aristotle allows himself a negative demonstration, but appears to deny his opponent the same privilege.

it be a work of art, of science, or of thought, is its capacity to be developed (Agamben 2009: 7–8; De la Durantaye 2009: 245). The paradigm is the content that a particular conception of politics or metaphysics, by presupposing it and leaving it thus unthought, *remains capable of*. Now it appears as if that content, the content that allows for development and expansion, is available paradigmatically: it is indicated alongside, rather than within. Here we have an important source of confusion with regards to Agamben's works: to Agamben, historical documents, materials or cases appear not as *containing* any particular significance, but as paradigmatically saturated. It is not the content that they actually transmit, it is the fact of their statement in the first place and what they henceforth allow to be posited that is significant. David Kishik compares Agamben to Socrates, the midwife of knowledge: "Agamben seems to follow Socrates's basic insistence that he does not give birth to his own ideas, but only engenders them in his interlocutors" (Kishik 2012, 4).

This much we have seen in the example of Aristotle's defence of the principle of non-contradiction: in Agamben's treatment of it, its operation is suspended. Exposed in this suspension is the excluded: the vegetable-man, but also the infant and the speaker of a foreign language (and perhaps most blatantly though voiceless in a less literal way, the slaves inseparable from Aristotle's *polis*) – these are revealed "on the side of" the principle of non-contradiction. This fundamental law of logics in its paradigmatic suspension points towards the focal paradigm of *Remnants of Auschwitz*, the *Muselmann*.

What the paradigm means to do is not so much avoid the problem of deciding between the common and the proper, or the one and the many – the basic questions of metaphysics – but instead exhaust their inevitability. These problems are presented as seemingly inevitable by the structure of potentiality that Agamben perceives as omnipresent in Western thought. Potentiality obtains its inevitable application through its usual presentation as a paradox that Agamben exposed in the figure of sovereignty. Agamben shows in *Homo Sacer* how potentiality and sovereignty are part of the same classical metaphysical gesture: to keep the concept of the one or the common in reserve means casting the proper and the many in abandonment – there is no singularity that can satisfy the norm set by the common.

The proper and the many are exceptions to the law, and in their being excluded we find the life of the law. While the exception is included by being excluded, the example's inclusion is suspended by its exposure (see Watkin 2014, 15). The paradigm, as a philosophical instrument, employs just this exposure. The paradigm is absolutely immanent to the set or the community it explains, while at the same time it remains absolutely singular. For this reason it precludes the separation between one and many, and common and proper, that is crucial to metaphysical thought. It also precludes the dialectic between these concepts, as it always already unifies them. And it precludes the presupposition of language that weakens hermeneutics – in its *epochal* status, in its suspense, the paradigm does not presuppose, but confronts. It posits the intelligibility of the paradigmatic content, not its existence.

Let me refer to the most famous paradigm in Agamben's work: the *homo sacer*. The *homo sacer* is the example of an ancient legal figure. However, it is not just any example. In fact, it is the example *of* the example – the example of a suspended exemplarity. For the *homo sacer* is not simply a case of legal sanction or punishment. If so, we could think of quite a few examples: a decision on a private financial dispute, imprisonment or capital punishment when criminal cases are involved. In the presentation of such examples, their application is suspended – there is a difference between the study of legal cases and the actual legal trials on which they are based. Yet the *homo sacer* is an example of a legal figure that already involves its own suspension: the law commands its own withdrawal onto the *homo sacer*. Therefore, the *homo sacer* becomes the example of all these examples: because in casting the *homo sacer* from the realm of the law, and thus in suspending the application of law, it exposes the way in which the law is generally applied – which is what is obscured by other examples. In the legal figure of the *homo sacer*, exemplarity itself comes to the fore, or rather: is presented alongside. As I go on, there will be reason to explain Agamben's approach of the eternal philosophical objective of 'the thing itself' (*to pragma auto*). Agamben, following Nietzsche and the indistinction between *noumenon* and *phenomenon*, will define it as the *knowability of the object* (Agamben 1986, 13). Essentially, this knowability is the paradigm: it is

the way in which a certain object or phenomenon spontaneously presents its own intelligible form. In the same way, Derrida's work becomes a paradigm of language: while in Derrida the meaningfulness of language is always suspended, in Agamben this suspense itself is held in abeyance.

Now that I have explained the meaning of the technical term "paradigm" within Agamben's work, let me present my own position on the question of messianic time. I maintain that the messianic gives us the paradigm of time. The messianic is a remaining time: the time it takes to take time to the end, *to* the *eschaton* – not to be equated *with* the *eschaton*. Messianic time is *kairos*, critical, pivotal time, and not the end of time. I hold this remaining time is an *added* time: a time that is supplemented to historical time – not after but onto history – that becomes the face of that time, in the same way as the thing itself becomes the knowability of an object, as Agamben argued: "[...] the thing itself is no longer simply the being in its obscurity, as an object presupposed by language and the epistemological process; rather, it is *auto di'ho gnōston estin*, that *by which* the object is known, *its own knowability and truth*" (Agamben 1999a, 32). If so, messianic time is the paradigm of time – a time that presents itself in its immediately knowable form, in its "innermost exteriority" (Agamben 1993b, 15). Messianic time is the example of the example of time, a time that in its suspension from a temporal edifice (like history or chronology) becomes exemplary and available for *use*. As Agamben writes: "Saturday – messianic time – is not another day, homogeneous to others; rather, it is that innermost disjointedness within time through which one may – by a hairsbreadth – grasp time and accomplish it" (Agamben 2000b, 72). So even if Agamben is, to some extent, a romantic, his romantic sense of return is not to a golden age or to a future, millennial epoch – it is a return to the present, the present revisited (De la Durantaye 2009, 243). This is why Agamben's use of *kairos*, what Benjamin called "now-time", is not vulnerable to Derrida's deconstruction of the metaphysics of presence. Where "presence" in the metaphysical sense can be shown to rely on absence, and more profoundly on the *différance* it maintains with absence (Derrida 1973, 54), messianic time is an added time that attaches itself to historico-chronological and linear time. It is already a supplement, a substitute – not one of *différance*, but

instead an indifferential one. Indeed, this kind of superfluous or contingent addition, what I call a messianic deposit, will be the question once again in the final chapter of this thesis.

1.3.2 Signature

The signature too is instrumental in Agamben's turn towards the pre-discursive plane: philosophy cannot be content with what is said in language, and take language for granted – it must also consider the fact of language. Yet at the same time, the way in which this fact of language sets itself apart as the potentiality of language and of thought – the way in which it keeps itself in reserve – is complicit with and reinforces the paradoxical logic of sovereignty. For potentiality is what allows modern politics to separate the human being from his bare life, and this is, more than anything, what Agamben seeks to counter. Agamben's consideration of language, then, means to draw it out of this reserve: to realize language as potentiality, and thereby to exhaust its impotentiality – the impossibility of which Derrida is the surveyor. What this means is a saturation of the logic of sovereignty that ultimately emanates onto the plane of form-of-life.

The best known example of the signature is from Augustine's *De Trinitate* in the context of an examination of the love of study – the student does not know what she desires: "Suppose someone hears the word *temetum*, and in his ignorance asks what it means" (Augustine 1963, 292). Augustine reflects on the human being's capacity to discriminate between foreign words – words they do not know the meaning of – and mere sounds. The example is temetum, an old word for wine: one will readily recognize that it is indeed a word from a human language, admitting that one does not know what it means. What is identified, then, is the signature: the word's mere intention to signify.

Agamben's great inspiration Émile Benveniste writes: "La sémiotique (le signe) doit être reconnu; le sémantique (le discours) doit être compris" (Benveniste 1974, 64–65; Doussan 2013, 7). If Agamben's work is the site whereon we experience the existence of language as such, then the signature is crucial to that experience. It is as

if Foucault's archaeology for Agamben means the possibility of a code with which he can decipher the way in which the existence of language conditions the making of particular statements (Watkin 2014: 21–23). Agamben quotes Enzo Melandri: "A *signature* is a sort of sign within a sign; it is the index that in the context of a given semiology univocally makes reference to a given interpretation. A signature adheres to the sign in the sense that it indicates, by means of the sign's making, the code with which it has to be deciphered" (Melandri in Agamben 2009, 59). More clearly, Agamben explains the signature by referring to Claude Lévi-Strauss' work: "[...] signification is originally in excess over the signifieds that are able to fill it, and this gap translates into the existence of free and floating signifiers that are in themselves devoid of meaning. In other words, it is a matter of non-signs or signs having '*zero symbolic value*, that is a sign marking the necessity of a supplementary symbolic content'" (Agamben 2009, 78. Lévi-Strauss quoted by Agamben). This structural excess of a sign over its signified is its signature. In the signature, the sign signifies neither its signified nor itself, but its own significance by way of its significatory excess. As Kevin Hart explains in a related setting: "No context can circumscribe a sign's meaning; the sign's meaning will alter if repeated in a different context; but the sign is structurally open to repetition: therefore, alterity is a structural feature of the sign" (Hart 1989, 13). This excess is necessary for signification to make sense: if the sign were fully caught up in signifying its signified, it would not be perceptible, at least not as a sign – its signification would be immediate and perfect. This is another way of saying that: "[...] a perfect language purged of all homonymy and composed solely of univocal signs would be a language absolutely without ideas" – a language without ideas leaving no space for any interpretation whatsoever (Agamben 1999a, 47). Homonymy is the excess of the signifier – one and the same signifier might refer to two or more different signifieds. The signature is then indeed the sign at the zero-degree – the formal face of the sign, its outside. It appears that the signature can only be accounted for if we accept the logic of saturation that I have been bringing out: it is the satisfaction of the signified, which emanates back onto the sign, constituting its signature.

By analysing significance, signs or marks, at the zero-degree of their marking – their signature, the fact that they refer (as force without significance) – Agamben is able to suspend or to render inoperative the signs of the times. As appears from Agamben's juxtaposition of Scholem and Benjamin with regards to the question of the force of law – a juxtaposition that is reiterated in the rapport between Agamben himself and Derrida, as Simon Morgan Wortham establishes – it is in this suspenseful moment not enough to hone in on the element of removed significance – it is vital to overturn them by their suspension (Agamben 1998, 48–53; Agamben 2000b, 105; Wortham 2007, 99).

The signature is thus the herald of language; it announces that language 'takes place'. In the third chapter of this thesis, I will examine the crucial role of this 'taking place' in its connection to Derrida's thought.

1.4   The ban and the secret

I claim that for Agamben the tradition of metaphysics appears as a Kafkaesque regime, which reserves a transcendent meaningful core (potentiality) by way of the sanction of the ban. In this section I will explain this operation of the ban. Furthermore, I will juxtapose the ban in Agamben's thought with the notion of a secret in Derrida's. I will argue that for Agamben Derrida's discourse takes place entirely in the ban of a secret – in Derrida's terms: as the trace of a name. Yet I will commence by explaining the tension that Agamben understands there to be between Plato and Aristotle – a tension that continues between Agamben and Derrida, as their respective uses of a strong and a weak messianic correspond to the weakness and strength of language for Plato and Aristotle.

In the essay "The Thing Itself", Agamben speaks of Plato's thought of the conditions for knowledge of an object: its name (*onoma*), the definition (*logos*), the image (*eidōlon*), the knowledge, and, as a fifth: the thing itself: *to pragma auto* (Agamben 1999a, 29). The thing itself, Agamben learns through a short philological genealogy, means the object's *own knowability and truth* (Agamben 1999a, 32). Agamben argues that over time Plato and his editors introduce this knowability and truth to

prevent the grammatico-metaphysical implications of subject and predicate, substance and quality: "Language – our language – is necessarily presuppositional and objectifying, in the sense that in taking place it necessarily decomposes the thing itself, which is announced in it and in it alone, into a being *about which one speaks* and a *poion*, a quality and a determination *that one says of it*" (Agamben 1999a, 33). This grammatico-metaphysical structure, which is subsequently implemented by Aristotle, conceals the existence of language itself – the *thing* of language, the thing itself. This philosophy, which obscures the existence of language, is also the thought of potentiality which keeps all beings in abandonment.

Yet what is the particular manner in which this thing itself – the object of pure presentation, language – has to go underground in philosophy? If we understand this eclipse, we understand the most fundamental operation of the ban: the ban of the thing of language. While Plato considered the thing itself a crucial, even the ultimate, element of knowledge, of *episteme*, in Aristotle it is substituted by the *gramma*, the self-indicating and self-effacing element of the voice. Then, Agamben says: "In this logico-temporal process, the Platonic *thing itself* is removed and conserved, or rather, conserved only in being removed: e-liminated" (Agamben 1999a, 37). In being removed, the thing itself – language – is conserved for the coming philosophy. It remains as an exigency for philosophy to contemplate (Agamben 2000a, 39). The ban does not simply cast out; it also retains – as is precisely its problematic force as well as source of hope. Many years later, in the essay "Philosophical Archaeology", in the context of Freud's description of the substitution of Mosaic religion with Judaic monotheism, Agamben explains the possibility of his own particular entry to these things that are covered up by the tradition: "[...] with respect to its *traditum*, tradition functions as a period of latency in which the traumatic event is preserved and at the same time repressed (according to the etymology that unites *tradere* and *tradire*)" (Agamben 2009, 100–101).[51] This applies perfectly to the secret watchword "the thing itself" being passed on

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[51] More concisely, illuminating the critical, traumatic entry to and *matter of* history, Agamben concludes his recent essay *Pilate and Jesus*: "Here is the cross; here is history" (Agamben 2015, 45, 58).

throughout the history of thought. The ban is the only relation, a negative relation that our tradition maintains with the existence of language. Furthermore, this position of language in abandonment, forgotten but unforgettable, establishes the exigency for philosophy of thinking language as the thing itself. This, once again, makes clear how Agamben's thought is not a philosophy of potentiality, but a philosophical archaeology deeply concerned with potentiality.

The weakness of language, for Plato, the reason for his sometimes esoteric recommendations, means the absence in his thought of language's presupposition. The strength of language in Aristotle is that, by positing an atomic linguistic particle – the *gramma* – he is capable of naming everything that takes place in language. The strength of the messianic in Agamben – furthering the weakness of Plato's language – is a response to Aristotle's strong language: a strong sense of the messianic is involved in the undoing of the force of potentiality as represented by the *gramma*. The weakness of the messianic in Derrida – furthering the strong language of Aristotle – is a response to the weakness of Plato's language: given the irreducible value of the *gramma,* a weak sense of the messianic is involved in defending that *gramma* against the presumption of an ultimate interpretation.

Plato and Aristotle are absolutely vital in preparing the moment of the *archē* of language, for Agamben's work: Plato indicated the thing itself and Aristotle covered it, put the seal of the *gramma* over it, freezing it in time for millennia to come, until in contemporary philosophy – notably through Derrida among others – by the contemplation of the excess of the signifier over the signified, of this very seal of the *gramma*, Aristotle's final interpreter exploded, once again bringing thought into a direct relationship with language itself, its very thing.

Agamben's key technical term "abandonment" is the default situation with regards to the Platonic thing itself, covered by Aristotelian hermeneutics. Agamben acquires his use of the term abandonment in its connection to the law from Jean-Luc Nancy's essay "Abandoned Being" (Nancy 1993, 36–47). Nancy is credited in *Homo Sacer* as "the philosopher who has most rigorously reflected upon the experience of law that

is implicit in this being in force without significance" (Agamben 1998, 58). Yet the ban not only appears in Agamben's analysis of the legal law as the way in which the law creates bare life. It is also the way in which we relate to our tradition (cultural, legal, and metaphysical) in general. As will become clear, in the figure of Bartleby, Agamben seeks a way of developing banishment beyond its intrinsic relationality – an abandoned banishment.

The corresponding term from the Derridean vocabulary is the secret. While Agamben's hermeneutics (of culture, legal theory, and history) are marked by abandonment, Derrida's hermeneutics are concerned with the secret that they inevitably violate, but never actually breach. The crucial difference between them is that while Derrida takes this hermeneutical aporia to be actually fruitful, Agamben's efforts aim at undoing the ban – and their respective weak and strong use of the messianic reflect this distinction.

The Derridean response to the secret will be explored in section 3.2. For the remainder of this section, I discuss Agamben's abandonment by briefly analysing Nancy's essay. Nancy ensues from the ontological difference the following: "If from now on being *is* not, if it has begun to be only its own abandonment, it is because this speaking in multiple ways is abandoned, is in abandonment, and it is abandon (which is also to say *openness*)" (Nancy 1993, 36–37). Being, that which for Aristotle was said in many ways (*pollakōs legetai*), and whose plurality inspired Heidegger's ontology of *Dasein* and *openness*, has assumed the form of abandonment. Abandonment, to Nancy, has assumed the role of the condition of possibility for being. Being, as abandoned by all categories and transcendentals, has abandonment as its sole category and transcendental. Nancy shows how being can no longer be understood to be the one, the true or the good. What *is*, is then only what was abandoned by Being itself, as Being itself *is not*. Whatever is, is in abundance of what is not, of Being, and is therefore abandoned by it. What we see here is very similar to the sense of Creation in Agamben's reading of the Cabalists wherein God exhausts the Nothing, leaving or abandoning something: "Abandonment is not nothingness" (Nancy 1993, 38; Agamben 1999a, 252). This comparison brings out the

contingency of abandoned being that is also apparent from Nancy's essay: "One always abandons to a law [...] to be *banished* does not amount to coming under a provision of the law, but rather to coming under the entirety of the law" (Nancy 1993, 44).

Watkin has a clear explanation of why Being would be in withdrawal in the first place, and thus why all that there is exists in abandonment of Being, in reference to Gödel's incompleteness theorem:

> If language is the self-consistent system of Being, the one element of language that cannot be said is the system itself (in mathematics this pertains rather to natural numbers). This is why, according to Hegel and Heidegger according to Agamben, Being is always in withdrawal. The Being of Being is language, but language as such can never be said because it is the ground of all saying (Watkin 2014: 49–50).

Nancy describes exactly the relation between sovereign law and abandonment at stake in Agamben's work. Yet for Nancy, this is a definitive account: "Abandonment respects the law; it cannot do otherwise [...] That 'it cannot do otherwise' means it cannot be otherwise, it is not otherwise" (Nancy 1993, 44). As we have seen, Agamben seeks precisely an abandonment that does not respect the law: "Only if it is possible to think the Being of abandonment beyond every idea of the law (even that of the empty form of law's being in force without significance) will we have moved out of the paradox of sovereignty towards a politics freed from every ban" (Agamben 1998, 59). This difference is substantial – for Nancy, "Ontology is thus a phonology" (Nancy 1993, 45). For Nancy, the law, in some way, still commands, even if it does not command anything in particular, and it does so by way of a voice. Yet for Agamben, the voice is always already removed in our philosophical tradition. So Nancy's literally irrevocable law is to Agamben always already groundless.

David Kishik gives a summary of *Homo Sacer*:

> The ultimate task of Western metaphysics since the time of the Greeks has been to comprehend the single essence behind the multitude of concrete beings, to distill from the term "being" (which, Aristotle observes, is "said in many ways") a sort of "pure being" (*on haplōs*). Nevertheless, Heidegger tells us, this task remained concealed for millennia, so in the beginning of *Being and Time* he calls upon us "to raise anew the question of the meaning of Being," which he presents as "the fundamental question of

philosophy." In a barely disguised similar vein, Agamben describes "the separation of bare life from the many forms of concrete life" as the fundamental, though once again hidden task of Western politics. Life, which according to Aristotle, is also "said in many ways," is revealed in *Homo Sacer* to be the very thing that politics incessantly seeks to capture and reduce to bare life, to the mere fact of being alive (Kishik 2012, 73).

In setting aside the bare life of the *homo sacer*, Western politics creates the paradigm that reveals its secret. Kishik admirably presents three different stages of thought here: (1) the motive of metaphysics to identify that Being *of* beings; (2) Heidegger's interruption by the ontological difference: in seeking this Being *of* beings, metaphysics had always already forgotten about *Being*; (3) Agamben's assessment of politics as operating according to the same schema as metaphysics. Yet a fourth stage appears to be missing: that metaphysics' original forgetfulness of Being is not a simple oversight – it is what makes the metaphysical schema possible. That metaphysics does not think about Being, does not think Being, but only the Being *of* beings, leaves a potential Being to which entities are abandoned. The fourth stage that Kishik does not list is that of the philosophical archaeology that does not mean to recover *or salvage* – like Heidegger's *Destruktion* of the history of Being – as a more original question to then properly attend to it, but rather that seeks to expose a concept whose operativity depends upon the forgetfulness of thought – potentiality – and that, by finally thinking this concept, fulfills and disintegrates it: "We cannot speak of there being something (Being) that subsequently forgets itself and conceals itself (we cannot speak of a name that withdraws, destining itself in events of speech). Rather, what takes place is simply a movement of concealment without anything being hidden or anything hiding, without anything being veiled or anything veiling – pure *self-destining without destiny*, simple abandonment of the self to itself" (Agamben 1999a, 131). Archaeology, then, means not to remember what was, but to think what was not: potentiality. In this sense, the messianic element in archaeology of lifting the spell of abandonment is not about salvation but about justice, and Bartleby is a figure of greater wisdom even than Jesus (Agamben 1999a, 270; Agamben 2015, 45).

Chapter 2

Agamben: Law and the messianic in potentiality

> Certainly one must think, one must even think a great deal. But to comply, that is much more refined, much more than thinking.
>
> Robert Walser, *Jacob von Gunten*

Introduction

The present chapter is devoted to a close-reading of Agamben's long 1993 essay "Bartleby, or On Contingency" (Agamben 1999a). Contingency is an ontological or existential modality that harbours the possibility of a suspension from the principle of sufficient reason: it is the modality of that which could be otherwise. Indeed, for that reason, contingency is the main problem of the philosophy of Leibniz who insists that there are contingent events, but they cannot be accounted for. Contingency is examined here as the messianic destiny of potentiality, and it involves a modification of the conventional sense of contingency. Agamben's source when thinking contingency is Herman Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener*, a story published in 1853.

Even if potentiality is his most important and enduring concern, Agamben's thought does not straightforwardly constitute a philosophy of potentiality, in the sense that Agamben does not unreservedly embrace the Aristotelian concept (De la Durantaye talks about a "philosophy of potentiality"; De la Durantaye 2009, 6; Watkin clearly presents Agamben's position concerning potentiality, see Watkin 2014, 23, 137–138; Attell misleadingly speaks of potentiality as "the first principle" of Agamben's philosophy, see Attell 2014, 100). Admittedly, Agamben states that "[i]n its deepest intention, philosophy is a firm assertion of potentiality, the construction of an experience of the possible as such. Not thought but the potential to think, not writing but the white sheet is what philosophy refuses at all costs to forget" (Agamben 1999a, 249). Yet this is the condition of thought that Agamben's work, in achieving it, means to deplete. Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener* contains, to Agamben's mind, "the strongest objection against the principle of sovereignty" (Agamben 1998, 48). Bartleby remains at the limit of the ban, still not free of it. I will locate the messianic within Agamben's concept of potentiality, which he takes from Aristotle. I will argue

in the next chapter against interpretations wherein Agamben's messianic is presented as eschatological, because for Agamben the redemptive gesture does not come *from the end*, nor does it occur *at the end*, but is instead a gesture *towards the end*. And this means that the messianic must be the inner unworking of what Agamben deems the gravest problem of Western philosophy.

So the careful consideration by which Agamben seeks to understand what potentiality *is*, should not be mistaken for attributing a sense of legitimacy to it. As stated, for Agamben potentiality is the problem or paradox of Western thought. Let me bring out this problem by way of the ontological, political and linguistic connotations that potentiality implies. *Ontologically*, potentiality is what commits beings to being in the absence of Being, as in Jean-Luc Nancy's analysis of "Abandoned Being" (Nancy 1993). *Politically*, potentiality is what allows the sovereign to rule by withholding his law-making power in a state of exception. And, above all, *linguistically*, potentiality is what allows language to designate in its own absence. Potential is a force without presence, a force that insists on its own absence, and thus also on its insignificance. We can already see the slight but significant distinction with Derrida's term *différance*: *différance* means that there is always a separation – a deferral, difference, and perhaps a deference – between a sign (a word or a text) and its (transcendent) signified. It implies that meaning is constituted by or within this separation. Potentiality, by contrast, is a force without meaning. While Derrida gives an account of the differential way in which meaning in Western philosophy is actually conceived, Agamben argues that this conception in fact means the perennial removal of meaning – thought takes place in the ban of a hidden meaningful core; this is what philosophy means. This is to Agamben the metaphysical regime that I described as a Kafkaesque bureau. The slight mistake of identifying Agamben's with a philosophy of potentiality, in the sense of an unambiguous embrace of potentiality, indeed, is easily made, as Agamben seeks the answer to this problem *within* this very concept of potentiality. This is crucial to his use of the messianic. Thus, a great deal of his work is devoted to *defending* this particular conception of potentiality – the one Agamben thinks is the true one, the most damaging one.

This most damaging concept of potentiality holds the key to its own inoperability: its harmful hold over Western thought is due to its being misunderstood. I argue that the philosophical concept of potentiality has kept itself in reserve. Or better: it is the essential reserve of potentiality that allows it its paradoxical sovereignty. Agamben holds that "In [thus] describing the most authentic nature of potentiality, Aristotle actually bequeathed the paradigm of sovereignty to Western philosophy" (Agamben 1998, 46). Agamben subscribes to Heidegger's reading of Aristotle in *Being and Time*: "As a modal category of presence-at-hand, possibility signifies what is *not yet* actual and what is *not at any time* necessary. It characterizes the *merely* possible. Ontologically it is on a lower level than actuality and necessity. On the other hand, possibility as an *existentiale* is the most primordial and ultimate positive way in which Dasein is characterized ontologically" (Heidegger 1962, 183) Furthermore, the lecture-course of summer 1931, *Aristotle's Metaphysics Θ 1–3*, where Heidegger joins Aristotle's argument against the Megarians, appears seminal to Agamben's thought: "[…] one sees that being capable of something, and precisely thereby being at work, are in each case something different […]" (Heidegger 1995a, 182). And so potentiality is the quintessentially withdrawn concept, in the ban of which thought attempts to establish itself. This is the relation Jean-Luc Nancy indicates in his essay "Abandoned Being", and that Agamben seeks to overturn. Potentiality is, then, the paradigm of Western thought: as the concept which in being presupposed is set aside and disregarded, Aristotle's idea of potentiality remains unthought: "This is not to say that we do not already have a conception of 'potentiality' – we do have one, a brilliant one, Aristotle's – but this conception of potentiality itself remains fundamentally unthought" (Thurschwell 2003, 1242). [52] Agamben explains this degree of unawareness of potentiality in *State of Exception*:

> For reasons that we must try to clarify, this struggle for anomie [between Schmitt and Benjamin] seems to be as decisive for Western politics as the *gigantomachia peri tēs ousias*, the "battle of giants concerning being," that defines Western metaphysics. Here, pure violence [potentiality] as the extreme political object, as the "thing" of politics, is the counterpart to pure being, to pure existence as the ultimate metaphysical stakes;

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[52] Jenny Doussan admirably explains how Agamben's thought of para- (paradigm, parody) means to literally sidestep the meta- of metaphysics, as well as its problem with ground and the assumptions in its context (Doussan 2013, 97–98).

the strategy of the exception, which must ensure the relation between anomic violence and law, is the counterpart to the onto-theo-logical strategy aimed at capturing pure being in the meshes of the *logos* [...] (Agamben 2005b, 59–60).

The law of politics and the *logos* of metaphysics depend for their significance on a zone of indistinction in which they become wedded to the signature of life absolutely – and this means that the notion of potentiality, power, which arranges this union, remains unthought.

This chapter captures the entire messianic trajectory, and for this reason it cannot immediately address the issue of what redeems. Instead, I will commence with the explanation of the Aristotelian concept of potentiality as it appears in Agamben's work. The messianic means an immanent rendering inoperative – it is vital for my argument and the contribution this thesis makes that I expose the messianic motif at the heart of Aristotle's potentiality. Aristotle's concept of potentiality, to Agamben's mind, is responsible for the major faults of Western thought: it is responsible for the structure of presupposition that it shares with theology, and for providing the apology and justification for sovereign power. Because this concept itself resides in hiding – hides even in Aristotle behind actuality ("The 'potential not to' is the cardinal secret of the Aristotelian doctrine of potentiality"; Agamben 1999a, 245 – I will return to this feature in the next section), or "when truth seems to close itself off forever in a world of things" (Agamben 1995, 56) – it is always read from the position of the exile. As I explained in section 1.4, if for Heidegger metaphysics has always already *forgotten* about Being – thinking only the Being of beings – for Agamben being is *in the ban of* Being (Agamben 1998, 60; Agamben 2005a, 59–60; Van der Heiden 2014, 234).

The examination of Agamben's concept of potentiality must, then, keep constant reference to the concept of abandonment. The question is of the entry to a concept that philosophy must not presuppose: Being. Everything in Agamben's writing resists this assumption. If Being is forgotten, as Heidegger thought, and we cannot think of beings as belonging to Being anymore, for Nancy, being is in abandonment (Nancy 1993, 44). Being is, then, to Agamben a forgotten unforgettable – what

Agamben calls exigency (Agamben 2000b, 39). The particular prowess of potentiality in Western thought, in the figure of sovereignty for instance, is due to this relationship of abandonment, due to the memory of what is exigent – what philosophy cannot allow itself to forget (Agamben 1999a, 249), what coincides with the possibility of philosophy (Agamben 2000b, 39).

From Agamben's writing it is not immediately obvious exactly what remains in abandonment, Being or beings. His invocation of Heidegger's *Beiträge* is clear enough: "What is abandoned by whom? The being by Being, which does and does not belong to it" (Agamben 1998, 59).[53] In Nancy's "Abandoned Being" the relation of abandonment appears to be reciprocal: that the concept of essence is abandoned means being is in abandonment. Yet Agamben draws from this the radical conclusion that "[...] Being in this sense is nothing other than Being *in the ban of* the being [*l'essere* a bandono *dell'ente*] [...]" – here it seems as if, in an inversion of Heidegger's formulation, Being is in the ban of the existent. If Being is the abandonment of beings – the structure of potentiality – then there is no ground to support this relationship of banishment in the first place. Being is in the ban of the existent: "To read this relation as a being in force without significance – that is, as Being's abandonment to and by a law that prescribes nothing, and not even itself – is to remain inside nihilism and not to push the experience of abandonment to the extreme" (Agamben 1998, 60). Instead, to push the experience of abandonment to the extreme is to take it to the point where it no longer means a relation, but rather a zone of indistinction between Being and beings, potentiality and actuality. This point, as I will explain in this chapter, is approached most closely in the figure of Bartleby.

In deciding on this sole essay from Agamben's work, I assume that it performs a seminal role within it. This avenue is informed by the premises that Agamben's work is entirely a contemplation and a critique on the concept of potentiality, and that

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[53] "Was ist wovon verlassen? Das Seiende von dem ihm und nur ihm zugehörigen Seyn" (Heidegger 1994, 115). "What is abandoned by what? Beings are abandoned by be-ing, which belongs to them and them alone" (Heidegger 1999, 80).

Aristotle, through Heidegger's reading in *Being and Time* and *Aristotle's Metaphysics Θ 1–3 On the Essence and Actuality of Force*, is his most important source. Both premises find considerable justification in the literature (Mills 2008, 3; De la Durantaye 2009, 4; Attell in Murray and Zartaloudis 2009, 162; Whyte 2013, 32; Watkin 2014, 23).

2.1   Aristotle's potentiality

In this section, I give a comprehensive presentation of Agamben's concept of potentiality. The Aristotelian concept of potentiality operates in secret (Thurschwell 2003, 1242; Van der Heiden 2014, 244). This means that, on the level of the declaration, it assumes a subordinate role to actuality, while on the level of the description it is always already reinscribed in that actuality: the highest actuality is a potential actuality. Agamben means to draw potentiality out of its sanctuary. In this sense his work is philosophical archaeology: it wants to articulate the *archē* of potentiality.[54] This means that undertaking an analysis of the concept of potentiality means also to transform it: to draw potentiality out of its sanctuary means to profane it, means blasphemy against its value, its meaning. In this sense Agamben's archae-ology is philosophically, politically, and theologically an-archical.

In the first chapter, I presented the connection between the philosophical assumption of the existence of language and the operation of potentiality, by way of the paradox of sovereignty. Potentiality exerts itself through sovereignty, and this is what allows the existence of language a philosophical *passe-partout*. In this way, the concept of potentiality authorizes the alliance between philosophy and theology that takes language as a given. The archaeology of potentiality means, then, also to expose the framework that philosophy shares with theology, and to undo it by philosophically engaging with the existence of language. In this schema Derrida has a pivotal position: for Derrida language is first of all "of the other" and that means

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[54] Here appears the strong Hegelian influence on Agamben: "The owl of Minerva begins its flight only with the onset of dusk" (Hegel 1991, 23). Profound contradictions are not solved at the intellectual level alone; Agamben compares them to the cutting of a Gordian knot (Agamben 1998, 48–49). To Hegel, they require objectification and sublation – archaeology. What is implied furthermore is the incompatibility between a phenomenon's vitality and its knowledge.

there is no lingual sovereign – even if language remains presupposed. While philosophy conventionally takes language to be given through the sovereign position, for Derrida the givenness of language makes the sovereign irrelevant. However, it also makes him impenetrable. Indeed, for Agamben the deconstruction of origins is not sufficient, in terms of his messianic project (Attell 2014, 245).

So this chapter will answer two questions: first, how is the concept of potentiality in Agamben's work fulfilled through a transformative archaeology? And second, how is the monotheist assumption of the existence of language exorcized? In the Bartleby essay, Agamben explores three relationships of potentiality: the relation between thought and thoughts; that between God and Creation; and, most fundamental, that between the scribe and his letters – the potentiality of writing. We will see how the assumption of the existence of language in the Aristotelian tradition keeps potentiality from its comprehensive realization: according to the theologians, God's potentiality over Creation is mediated and subdued by his *logos.* Similarly, as Derrida demonstrated, thought's capacity for thought is mediated and compromised by writing. Yet the scribe who does not write, Bartleby, is the figure of a perfect potentiality – in him the existence of language is not assumed but articulated at its proper level of potentiality: "[...] there is, finally, a complete or perfect potentiality that belongs to the scribe who is in full possession of the art of writing in the moment in which he does not write [...] The scribe who does not write (of whom Bartleby is the last, exhausted figure) is perfect potentiality, which a Nothing alone now separates from the act of creation" (Agamben 1999a, 247). I will conclude this section with a reflection on the structural feature that I call the messianic motif.

It is well known how Aristotle in the *Metaphysics Λ* conceives of a first principle of Being, an Unmoved Mover, that is completely actual and void of all becoming (Aristotle 1928, 1073a–1073b). The importance for philosophy of Aristotle's principle cannot be overestimated: the Aristotelian Unmoved Mover serves as the principle of ground in classical and medieval thought until it is taken up and adapted in modern philosophy, notably by Spinoza and Leibniz – indeed, it is not seriously questioned prior to Heidegger. From the thesis of the Unmoved Mover it appears

that Aristotle thinks actuality as prior and higher to potentiality – also a priority critically examined by Heidegger – and it is this structure that we find repeated across the entire history of ontotheology.

To Agamben, this supposed highest actuality is really a receptivity engaged in receiving itself. As he explains by reference to Albert the Great's contemplation of the *tabula rasa*: "The potential intellect is not a thing. It is nothing other than the *intentio* through which a thing is understood; it is not a known object but simply a pure knowability and receptivity" – this is the white sheet of philosophy, which is its potentiality (Agamben 1999a, 251). Indeed, Agamben invites us to read the *Metaphysics* further in the subsequent book on the question of divine thought: "Therefore it must be of itself that the divine thought thinks (since it is the most excellent of things), and its thinking is a thinking on thinking" (Aristotle 1928, 1074b). Agamben, inspired by Heidegger, overturns the hierarchy between actuality and potentiality in Aristotle: the highest actuality is a potentiality. Van der Heiden explains the form of actuality that Agamben finds in Aristotle: "[…] what exists or what *is* in actuality, is *in the ban of the sovereign potential to create and not to create*; it is banned from and entrusted to this sovereign potential for its existence in actuality […] In its effort to understand being out of a highest being, *metaphysics does not simply affirm the pure actuality* of this highest being, but *rather brings into force the relation of abandonment between actuality and potentiality*" (Van der Heiden 2014, 244). So Agamben provides a radical re-evaluation of the relationship between potentiality and actuality as it is often ascribed to Aristotle. Furthermore, this re-evaluation immediately involves the notion of the ban: Being itself is here conceived of as abandonment.

Potentiality is defined by Aristotle as follows: "[…] a thing is capable of doing something if there will be nothing impossible in its having the actuality of that of which it is said to have the capacity" (Aristotle 1928, 1047a 24–26). Perhaps it would not be an exaggeration to say that Agamben's work in its entirety means to correct the conventional reading of this sentence. Indeed, while one would be inclined to read this as: "What is possible (or potential) is that with respect to which

nothing is impossible (or impotential). If there is no impossibility, then there is possibility" (Agamben 1999a, 184, 264), Agamben offers an idiosyncratic reading of this statement: "A thing is said to be potential if, when the act of which it is said to be potential is realized, there will be nothing impotential" (Aristotle quoted in Agamben 1999a, 264).[55] While the first formula sees to the logical and practical possibility of the potential, the second one sees to the sublation or vanquishing of its impotential: "What is potential can pass over into actuality only at the point at which it sets aside its own potential not to be" – impotentiality is not destroyed here but set apart, suspended in a paradigmatic turn (Agamben 1999a, 263). The first formulation makes the fulfillment of potentiality reducible to the principle of non-contradiction; it assumes the ground and the existence of language. The second formulation, which sees to the completion of potentiality, is the horizon toward which Agamben's work strives – it hosts an experiment with truth (Agamben 1999a, 259–260; see also Attell 2014, 87).[56] Now we can understand why Agamben, in his efforts to take Aristotle's concept of potentiality to its fulfillment, is not writing a philosophy *of* potentiality: his work does not keep to the schema of potentiality, but instead means to violently upset it. I explained in Section 1.2 Agamben's difficult position on this point. In this chapter, I must demonstrate how Agamben's fulfillment of the concept of potentiality actually disintegrates it, redeems it. In a way that is very similar to, but ultimately distinct from, deconstruction, Agamben's work seeks the messianic fulfillment and collapse of potentiality.

The essay on Bartleby immediately brings out the enticing feature that Alice Lagaay described, of the childlike encounter with the existence of language:

> The late Byzantine lexicon that goes under the name of *Suda* contains the following definition in the entry "Aristotle": *Aristotelēs tēs physeōs grammateus ēn ton kalamon apobrekhōn eis noun*, "Aristotle was the scribe of nature who dipped his pen in thought" [...] [W]hat is decisive is not so much the image of the scribe of nature (which is also to be found in Atticus) as the fact that nous, thought or mind, is compared to an ink pot in

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[55] Agamben returns to this passage in other places: namely, *Homo Sacer,* and the essay "On Potentiality".

[56] Very similar to Jesus's experience of a "trial without judgment" (Agamben 2015, 52).

which the philosopher dips his pen. The ink, the drop of darkness with which the pen writes, is thought itself (Agamben 1999a, 243–244).[57]

Where Lagaay relates of being overcome by a childhood experience wherein from underneath the world of names and terms, a new kind of bare existence emerges, here Agamben begins his essay by pointing at the way in which Aristotle was considered a philosopher who thought in the stead of thought itself – the actuality of Aristotle's thought matches the potentiality of the *nous*. From both citations, from Agamben and Lagaay, we get a sense of a confrontation not with any particular and determined concept, but with Being, thought, or language as such. Indeed, to medieval philosophers Aristotle was known simply as "the philosopher", and Agamben continues this usage. I will keep emphasizing this feature of Agamben's writing, because it is essential in bringing out its messianic motif: as Agamben finds the zone wherein language as such comes to the fore, he carries out the work of philosophical archaeology. For it is exactly the structure of potentiality that denies language to ever appear as such. Instead, language applies itself through the paradox of sovereignty, and we experience language as such only in the absence of the right word:

> But when does language speak itself as language? Curiously enough, when we cannot find the right word for something that concerns us, carries us away, oppresses or encourages us. Then we leave unspoken what we have in mind and, without rightly giving it thought, undergo moments in which language itself has distantly and fleetingly touched us with its essential being (Heidegger 1971, 59).

Here Heidegger marks the relationship of the ban and how it mediates our own *experimentum linguae*. So, by demonstrating this feature of operating in the zone of indistinction between actuality and potentiality, Agamben performs the following tasks: (1) to confront the theological underpinnings of philosophical thought; (2) to exhaust potentiality in its own fulfillment; and (3) to conduct the *experimentum linguae*. The praise for Aristotle from the *Suda* captures a general philosophical ideal that connects to Derrida's critical assessment of the metaphysics of presence: to

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[57] Metaphors involving writing, ink, paper and ink-reservoirs are important to Agamben (see De la Durantaye 2009, 369–370, and 2012, 53–54).

think in the stead of thought itself is for thought to be forever immediate, unadulterated, and present to itself. This ideal, which involves a theory of the *life* of philosophy, is the one that Derrida deconstructs; yet it is also the one that Agamben is able to salvage – as I will demonstrate in the next chapter.

As I said, potentiality is often understood as being reducible to actuality, and thus extremely hard to consider in its own right – the deep influence of potentiality and the sovereign on Western thought actually depend upon this aloofness. As Agamben says: "The 'potential not to' is the cardinal secret of the Aristotelian doctrine of potentiality" (we have seen how it keeps itself secret: by posing as actuality) – this is its exigency, this is what constitutes the relationship of abandonment (Agamben 1999a, 245). Agamben takes the example of the human being's potentiality for thought. How is it possible? How can the mind be capable of thoughts? For if it is to be capable of thought rather than reducible to its actual thoughts, it must be capable of thought itself as well as being capable to not think. How can a potential to think, think itself? Presumably, the result would have to take the form of a particular, actual thought. And furthermore, as Agamben asks, "How is it possible to think a potential not to think?" (Agamben 1999a, 250). The result would be a performative contradiction. The highest thought – the thought of thought itself, of its own potentiality – falls into the following aporia: "[...] the highest thought can neither think nothing nor think something, neither remain potential nor become actual, neither write nor not write" (Agamben 1999a, 250). It must remain a potential (for) thought. To avoid this aporia, Aristotle turns it around: "Thought that thinks itself neither thinks an object nor thinks nothing. It thinks its own potentiality (to think and not to think); and what thinks its own potential is what is most divine and blessed" – in the next chapter, I will discuss the same inversion with regards to the Platonic concept of *khōra* (Agamben 1999a, 251). This thought is deemed "most divine and blessed" – as is often the case, Aristotle lends himself here to a theological reading, which is another way of saying that theology was constructed upon an Aristotelian foundation (Agamben 1999a, 251). To Agamben, what Aristotle does here is to reinsert potentiality into the highest actual thought. The thought that is the most divine and blessed does not discriminate anymore between potential and

actual; instead it makes of itself a zone of indistinction between them. Yet Agamben also points out how the self-capacity and receptivity of thought are philosophically captured through the metaphor of writing, and thus involve the thesis of the existence of language.

Agamben posits the question of thought's self-potential squarely with the theological theme of divine creation, *creatio ex nihilo*: "The prince of the *falasifa* [Muslim Aristotle scholars] himself, Avicenna, conceived of the creation of the world as an act in which the divine intelligence thinks itself" (Agamben 1999a, 246; Watkin 2014, 161). The relationship between the mind and its thought runs perfectly analogous to the relationship between God and Creation. Both tacitly depend upon the relationship between the scribe and the letters he writes – both tacitly depend on the potentiality of language.

The philosophical constellation that Agamben sets out to chart is immediately crossed by a theological system: Aristotle's theory of the mind's capacity for thought, by its special kind of potentiality, involves a theory of Creation. In the context of a discussion of early Arab and Jewish scholars of Aristotle, Agamben unearths the very positing of the presupposition of the existence of language: "In the process of acquiring knowledge, the science of letters [grammatology] marks the transition from the inexpressible to the expressible; in the process of creation, it indicates the passage from potentiality to actuality. Ibn Arabi defines existence, pure Being, which for the Scholastics is simply the ineffable, as 'a letter of which you are the meaning'" – here, the knowability of the mind as a potentiality goes underground and is concealed by a letter (Agamben 1999a, 247). This means that a thought that was without presupposition and only accepted the paradigmatic knowability of its object is substituted by a philosophy marked by a fundamental assumption: the existence of language – call it Voice – which it henceforth has to exclude and leave unthought. Agamben describes exactly the same manoeuvre in the essay "The Thing Itself", dedicated to Jacques Derrida, the last of the grammatologians: "In this logico-temporal process, the Platonic *thing itself* is removed and conserved or, rather, conserved only in being removed: e-liminated | This is why the *gramma* appears in

De interpretatione" (Agamben 1999a, 37). The *gramma* is here the placeholder of the existence of God. Here we also have the cause for the disagreement between Agamben and Derrida: Derrida, as the last grammatologian, brings the presupposition of language to the fore, provides the means of thinking the *archē* of the division that excluded the non-lingual – the potential to not use language – yet he does not do away with it, does not execute the archaeology. Derrida turns to the moment of this division, makes it into a philosopheme – "restored philosophical standing" to the concepts of absence and privation "developing them into an actual ontology of the trace and originary supplement" – but does not reveal their *archē* (Agamben 2000a, 102). Instead, grammatology turned into deconstruction, cementing the philosophy of presupposition further by anchoring it in its own impossibility: "*The concept 'trace' is not a concept* (just as 'the name *"différance"* is not a name'): this is the paradoxical thesis that is already implicit in the grammatological project and that defines the proper status of Derrida's terminology. Grammatology was forced to become deconstruction in order to avoid this paradox (or, more precisely, to seek to dwell in it correctly) [...]" (Agamben 1999a, 213). So when Derrida writes: "The concept of the supplement is a sort of blind spot in Rousseau's text, the not-seen that opens and limits visibility", he says that because the supplement can never be actualised in an unambiguous way, philosophical understanding is limited to grasping the differential play of its contradictory signatories (Derrida 1976, 163). This is, then, another statement of Derrida's unconditional deference to the sovereign ban of potentiality (see also Derrida 1981a, 71: '[...] if at the limit an undeferred *logos* were possible, it would not seduce anyone'; and Derrida and Ferraris 2001, 31: '[...] there is a demand in my writing for this excess even with respect to what I myself can understand of what I say – the demand that a sort of opening, play, indetermination be left, signifying hospitality for what is to come [*l'avenir*]'). If Derrida's grammatology exposes the thought of presupposition, deconstruction provides the negative ground for it. Agamben at times blames Derrida bitterly for this, yet he also champions Derrida's discovery of philosophy's core assumption. In Derrida's thought, we can identify the presupposition of language in the following form:

> [...] it is there, before us, without us – there is someone, something that happens, that happens to us, and that has no need of us to happen (to us). And this relation to the event or alterity, as well as to chance or the occasion, leaves us completely disarmed; and one has to be disarmed. The "has to" says yes to the event: it is stronger than I am; it was there before me; the "has to" is always the recognition of what is stronger than I | And there has to be a "has to". One has to have to (Derrida and Ferraris 2001, 63–64).

I will explain this further in the following chapter: in the secret of the other, in what is to come – which, for Derrida, is the messianic dimension of our existence – Derrida presupposes the existence and givenness of language, and it necessitates his ethics of responsibility.

Theology is a discipline that keeps God to his word, *theo-logos* – Creation. God's potential is held in absolute proximity to his will, and this bond makes use of the paradox of sovereignty. Indeed, as Kevin Hart says, theology is a discipline for paradisiacal exiles: "It is only after the Fall that a theology is needed" – and the theological experience of language is one of abandonment (Hart 1989, 4–6: '[...] these signs must be interpreted, yet only in ways which acknowledge that timeless truths wait behind them and can be separated from them'). As the sovereign is capable of implementing his power, or withholding it, so God is conceived as capable of Creation, while he remains at the same time transcendent of it. Yet as Van der Heiden explains: "A law that demands nothing in particular is a law that may potentially demand everything, since its structure of demanding – its being in force – remains intact. Yet, *the potentiality to demand everything does not include the potentiality not-to-demand*" (Van der Heiden 2014, 252). The sovereign is not capable of unilaterally relinquishing the relationship of the ban – it is what constitutes him as sovereign. Theologically, God is not capable of Nothing, of non-creation or de-creation – the Church condemns Gnosticism and Marcionism. Indeed, what the paradox of sovereignty in this case obscures, and perhaps is meant to obscure, is the assumption of existence. The paradox removes offstage the fact that the theological thesis does not actually involve *creatio ex nihilo* – for God is implicitly rendered incapable of the Nothing. Indeed, at this point of the text, Agamben examines the notion of the Nothing: "more and more, the Nothing begins to resemble something, albeit something of a special kind" (Agamben 1999a, 252). The Nothing appears to be a concept of onto-theology. This critique of the philosophical

and theological use of a concept of Nothing is justified by the particular scope of Bartleby's contingency: while the Nothing is merely a metaphysical or theological default situation, contingency in the sense that Agamben is after – the contingent realization of potentiality, of the potential *not to* – implies not a reduction to the Nothing, but a revolution that involves even the Nothing. As Whyte puts it:

> By rejecting "traditional interpretations", which take this [Aristotle's formula of the realization or actualization of potentiality] to mean that the possible is that with respect to which nothing is impossible, Agamben re-orients the problem of modality; if, in the passage to actuality, nothing is able not to be, he argues, this does not suggest the nullification of the potential not to, but rather its complete realisation in the act. If the formula of sovereignty first appears in Aristotle, this, Agamben argues, is because the passage to actuality is not the destruction of the potential not to be, but its realisation, a "gift of the self to the self", which is possible only to the extent that potentiality and actuality are rendered indistinguishable (Whyte 2013, 107).

For this reason, Agamben favours the heretical view that "The act of creation is God's descent into an abyss that is simply his own potentiality and impotentiality, his capacity to and capacity not to" (Agamben 1999a, 253). In this view, God's existence is co-extensive with the Nothing, with Hell. Indeed, from the outset, Agamben has aligned himself with another tradition, which can be found in in Neoplatonism and that is continued in Jewish mysticism, wherein God's potentiality is conceived of without its bond to his *logos*: "[…] the Nothing from which all creation proceeds is God himself. Divine Being (or rather hyper-Being) is the Nothing of beings, and only by, so to speak, sinking into this Nothing was God able to create the world […] Only when we succeed in sinking into this Tartarus and experiencing our own impotentiality do we become capable of creating, truly becoming poets" (Agamben 1999a, 252–253; Watkin claims this reference to the Cabalists is actually directed at Deleuze, see Watkin 2014, 162). In this image, God is not aloof from Creation and only involved in it by way of the paradox of sovereignty – by way of the Church – but instead he creates by making himself co-extensive with the Nothing. And this is the true form of the potentiality of Creation; here we see its potentiality beyond abandonment. As said, this offers an account of Creation that has no recourse to the thesis of the *logos*. Last, this is the condition of the true poet. Agamben demonstrates that Bartleby is such a poet, and so too, as I will argue in section 3.3, is Derrida. If in the move from grammatology to deconstruction, Derrida appears to provide a

negative foundation for the philosophy of presupposition, this negative foundation is a way of saturating the assumption, redeeming thought from it. The image of God creating the world by sinking into and thus saturating the Nothing appears to have been influential to Agamben. De la Durantaye makes much of Agamben's citation of Benjamin that his philosophy is "steeped in theology", a rapport similar to the one that God maintains with the Nothing (De la Durantaye 2009, 369–370; De la Durantaye in Agamben 2012, 53–54). This thesis holds that it is actually Derrida who descends the Nothing, filling it up, allowing Agamben to step onto a world, *terra incognita* (Agamben 1991, 39; Agamben 1993b, 6–7). This is the gesture that philosophical archaeology makes, leaving a form of narrative, of life and of writing, that exceeds the Tartarus to dwell in the garden (Agamben 1999a, 218; Agamben 2009, 108).

This image of a descent into the Nothing will return towards the end of his Bartleby essay, in the context of a discussion on Leibniz's table of modalities, and the way in which Bartleby with his ascetic formula succumbs to it, and consumes it completely. This thesis explores the terminology of the messianic, by looking at the relationships between law, life, and writing/scripture and the way in which life succumbs to law – makes this same descent – but by that compliance defeats it, saturates and exhausts the demands that it must make, making way for a kind of writing that would be off-the-record, post-historical, messianic.

Let me briefly summarize what we have seen so far. Aristotle is appreciated in the philosophical tradition as the thinker truly capable of thought – in a way, moreover, that runs structurally analogous to God's capacity for creation. In fact, both the divine capacity for Creation and the human capacity for thought are reducible to the metaphor of the scribe's passion and capacity for writing: the white sheet. Yet the success of the metaphor betrays how it provides a tacit foundation to both the philosophy of mind and the dogma of *creatio ex nihilo*: the mind can be capable of its own contents only if it conceives of itself as a potential actual, or an actual potential – a writing tablet. God can only be capable of the world as its sovereign – depending on his *logos*. The theist principle of language is assumed in both the philosophy of

mind and the theological doctrine of God's omnipotence. And therefore the ontology of potentiality, the ontology of abandonment, is the same as the ontology of language: the idea of power depends upon the presupposition of language.

The main claim of this section relates to how potentiality, as it is involved in the story of Creation as well as the Aristotelian conception of the mind, depends upon the assumption of language through the principle of sovereignty. Instead, Agamben thinks that a true conception of potentiality, the potentiality of wBartleby, would mean a potentiality without assumption: a potentiality beyond will, beyond *logos*. This would mean to conceive potentiality beyond the relation of abandonment; indeed, on the threshold of its proper relation of abandonment. In thematizing this other conception of potentiality, we came across the image of God's descent into the Nothing, allowing Creation's existence. The structure of this Creation is extremely important to Agamben, referring to it particularly with regards to Benjamin's *boutade* concerning the relationship between his thought and theology (Agamben 1999c, 58), and it is expressly significant for understanding the motif of the messianic. The messianic, I argue, comes about by way of this saturation of potentiality.

The central question of this thesis, the messianic, is apparent in these examples, and they explain Bartleby's relationship to the Nothing: Bartleby's is an *a*theology.[58] Agamben's use of the concept of the ban, and the way that this is informed by Nancy's notion of abandoned being, depend upon this atheology.

2.2 Bartleby the Scrivener

Now I will discuss the figure of Bartleby. To Agamben, *Bartleby the Scrivener* belongs to both a literary and a philosophical constellation. Fictional scribes such as Gogol's Akaky Akakievich, Flaubert's Bouvard and Pécuchet, Dostoevsky's Prince Myshkin, Walser's Simon Tanner, and notably Kafka's courtroom assistants make up for the

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[58] Dickinson suggests that Agamben deconstructs theology altogether (Dickinson 2011a, 8; Dickinson 2014, 65).

literary constellation in which Bartleby shines. These are clerks and copyists who write yet do not force themselves onto the world, figures who are able to reconcile the demands of sainthood and artistic creation within themselves, characters that do not imprint their signature, their mark, on the pages that they handle, and finally then, "writers" who do not share in the common problem of authors upon viewing their own work as "either a magnificent expression of the human condition or a pile of rubbish meaningful to no one" precisely because, as Dickinson puts it, these are "two reactions often felt in close proximity to one another" (Dickinson 2011a, 7).[59] Bartleby, like his fellow-scribes, is a figure that conducts an experiment wherein Being and language are questioned, held in suspense. He will not simply help himself to the value of language and its truth.

A very different character, then, from those writers that this thesis also deals with – namely, Rousseau and Derrida – who were highly apprehensive regarding their authorial responsibility. On the other hand, the first list of names are of fictional characters, the second of authors, and the ease with which Agamben's clerks and copyists live among their papers might just be a symptom of the apprehension of their creators.[60] The reason I dwell on this briefly is that I think, contra Agamben, that the literary constellation is not to be separated from the philosophical one: both Prince Myshkin and particular creatures of Robert Walser's appear elsewhere in Agamben's work, and the ideal they stand for, of an innocence regained (Dostoevsky's *Idiot* is not immature: he desires Aglaya Yepanchin), is crucial to the problem that the philosophical constellation is attempting to capture, as well as to this thesis.

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[59] Geoffrey Bennington, at a seminar on Derrida's "Che cos'è la poesia?" held at the University of Sussex in July 2013, said that he always thought of translators as angels. Copyists might make a claim to comparable status. Copyists, however, do not guard anything like angels do, and offer no protection to that which they convey. If translators are angels, copyists perhaps are saints.

[60] The dizzying, magisterial confidence that speaks from Agamben's pages – for which he is sometimes ridiculed – suggests he made his peace with his authorial responsibility. This is not merely an anecdotal observation: Agamben's work claims a naivety and straightforwardness that is almost unique in contemporary thought, and I argue that Derrida provides the counterweight to this claim.

In the previous section, I have explained what is involved in thinking potentiality in philosophical archaeology: it must do away with certain assumptions and in doing so lift the ban that belongs to potentiality. I presented questions concerning the potentiality of the human mind and the potentiality for creation that is God's. Into this environment Agamben introduces Bartleby:

> This is the philosophical constellation to which Bartleby the scrivener belongs. As a scribe who has stopped writing, Bartleby is the extreme figure of the Nothing from which all creation derives; and at the same time, he constitutes the most implacable vindication of his Nothing as pure, absolute potentiality. The scrivener has become the writing tablet; he is now nothing other than his white sheet. It is not surprising, therefore, that he dwells so obstinately in the abyss of potentiality and does not seem to have the slightest intention of leaving it (Agamben 1999a, 253–254).

Bartleby is the exemplary figure for Agamben to follow, as he maintains, between will and act, between Being and Nothing, his potential to write. Agamben objects to a dominant tradition in ethics that reduces the problem of potentiality to the terms of will and morality:

> Not what you *can* do, but what you *want* to do or *must* do is its dominant theme. This is what the man of the law repeats to Bartleby. When he asks him to go to the post office ("just step around to the Post Office, won't you?"), and Bartleby opposes him with his usual "I would prefer not to," the man of the law hastily translates Bartleby's answer into "You *will* not?" But Bartleby, with his soft but firm voice, specifies, "I *prefer* not" ("I *prefer* not," which appears three times, is the only variation of Bartleby's usual phrase; and if Bartleby then renounces the conditional, this is only because doing so allows him to eliminate all traces of the verb "will," even in its modal use) (Agamben 1999a, 254).

Bartleby, then, does not make his potential to write secondary to his will to write. To the contrary:

> Bartleby is capable only without wanting; he is capable only *de potentia absoluta*. But his potentiality is not, therefore, unrealized; it does not remain unactualized on account of a lack of will. On the contrary, it exceeds will (his own and that of others) at every point (Agamben 1999a, 254–255).

He is positioned, then, exactly at the site whence the sovereign ban draws its force – this is Agamben's signature move in depleting sovereign power, by occupying the throne. So if Derrida accuses Agamben of hubris by claiming the position of *archē* for himself, it should be understood that Agamben has not simply become the dupe

of his object in a psychological way; his move is deliberate (Derrida 2009, 92; see Agamben 2014). As we have seen in Van der Heiden's formulation cited in the previous section, the sovereign ban works as it displaces the value of a highest being onto the relation between actuality and potentiality: the highest being, the supreme actuality, is a potential actuality, an actual potentiality (Van der Heiden 2014, 244). Bartleby assumes office at exactly this point of the potentiality of writing and this is what makes him intolerable, not just to his employer – the man of the law – but also to the philosophy of presupposition. For what Bartleby makes manifest is the existence of language in the form of potentiality: a scribe who yet does not write. Contrary to a law that demands nothing in particular, but potentially everything, in close analogy to Benjamin's idea of a general strike, Bartleby's reply "I would prefer not to" means a complete enactment of his own potential not to write.

Bartleby is the figure, then, that makes potentiality manifest in mastering its impotentiality, in the same way that Kafka's Man from the Country engages in the relationship of the ban and, perhaps, masters it.

Agamben seeks the origin of Bartleby's statement "I would prefer not to" in a term of scepticism: *ou mallon*, "no more than". It denotes *epochē*, suspension of judgment, suspension of meaning, and also indifference (Watkin 2014, 51). Agamben explains that this *ou mallon* is connected to the disinterested way in which a messenger makes an announcement. The comportment of *ou mallon* – no more than – is indifference, is the neutral comportment of the messenger. And in the sceptic tradition this comportment is attached to language itself: language itself is the messenger, language itself expresses the *ou mallon*: "The Skeptic does not simply oppose aphasia to *phases*, silence to discourse; rather, he displaces language from the register of the proposition, which predicates something of something (*legion it kata Tinos*), to that of the announcement, which predicates nothing of nothing" – language does not need to say something in particular (Agamben 1999a, 257). Bartleby is a messenger, then; but a messenger of what?

Indeed, Agamben's short characterization of the Skeptic reminds us of Derrida. For this reason, in the next chapter I devote considerable attention to the work of Jacques Derrida. I claim that in describing an experience of potentiality (and thus of impotentiality, the capacity not to), Derrida is Agamben's closest collaborator. Suspension in this sense, wherein Bartleby neither accommodates nor refuses, is a key motif in Derrida's work: the presence of meaning is, in Derrida's work, neither destroyed nor affirmed – it is suspended by a prior difference. Yet the "no more than" in Derrida is a result of the mechanism of *différance* – it is a relative "no more than". Agamben's ambition is precisely to think contingency beyond relation: being absolutely consigned to being-thus. Being-thus means not undivided being-*as-it-is* but being-*called*-thus, being-as-such – it denotes the thing in itself insofar as the thing in itself means the thing taking place in language. It is not, as Bielik-Robson says, what "just-is" but what "is-just-so" (Bielik-Robson 2010, 104). In the next chapter I will give a fuller account of how Derrida's work is a necessary condition that the messianic in Agamben's work has to presuppose. For now we maintain the sense in which Bartleby's "I would prefer not to" implies a deferral similar to the one brought about by *différance*.

Leibniz's principle of sufficient reason makes a connection between reason and Being: "there is a reason for which something does rather than does not exist"; for Aristotle and Augustine too, the principle of non-contradiction and the principle of ground were mutually implied (Agamben 1999a, 258). Bartleby's formula, by insisting on only this "rather than" or "no more than" as implied in "I would prefer not to" destroys this bond – in Bartleby's world, reason is not servile to Being: "In the ascetic *Schlarrafenland* in which Bartleby is at home, there is only a 'rather' fully freed of all *ratio*, a preference and a potentiality that no longer function to assure the supremacy of Being over Nothing but exist, without reason, in the indifference between Being and Nothing" (Agamben 1999a, 258–259). In dissolving the bonds between reason and Being, Being and potentiality, in his infinite suspense of his capacity to write, Bartleby is the herald of pure potentiality:

> To be capable, in pure potentiality, to bear the "no more than" beyond Being and
> Nothing, fully experiencing the impotent possibility that exceeds both – this is the trial

> that Bartleby announces. The green screen that isolates his desk traces the borders of an experimental laboratory in which potentiality, three decades before Nietzsche and in a sense that is altogether different from his, frees itself of the principle of reason. Emancipating itself from Being and non-Being alike, potentiality thus creates its own ontology (Agamben 1999a, 259).

Potentiality is irreducible to both Being and Nothing. Potentiality can be and not be at the same time; in fact, it is this contradictory coincidence. As we have already seen, in a number of volumes and essays Agamben identifies the existence of potentiality with the phenomenon of language (Agamben 1990, 85–88; Agamben 1999a, 47; Agamben 2011b, 68-69).

Let me briefly summarize the argument. The tradition of metaphysics is aligned with theology in presupposing a first principle: the existence of language. Yet it does not simply posit this existence, but redefines it as an actual potentiality – we have seen this with regards to Aristotle. Aristotle's metaphysics that posit an Unmoved Mover is in harmony with his philosophy of mind in which divine thought is a thought engaged in receiving itself. Leibniz's principle of sufficient reason is also obviously theist (Van der Heiden calls it the "ontotheological principle par excellence", see Van der Heiden 2014, 15–16). In this way, the principle of potentiality operates by way of the paradox of sovereignty, which means by the relationship of abandonment. I have already compared it to a Kafkaesque bureau. Every interpretation that keeps entities in the ban of Being, moreover, is complicit in this structure – it is the messianic and exigent task of the coming philosophy to overturn it. Bartleby is instrumental in this revolution in the following way: the schema of potentiality depends upon abandonment. Yet Bartleby announces his full potentiality, by being master over and dislodging and suspending the connection "rather than" from the principle of sufficient being. So Bartleby is not merely a scribe who prefers not to write – so: a scribe who would rather not write – but, to the contrary, a scribe who in being capable of this preference, who in being capable beyond his will and beyond reason, experiences and suffers the indifference between Being and Nothing. If the principle of reason says that there must be a reason for something to be rather than not – which Heidegger puts in question – Bartleby is capable of this "rather than" and permanently releases it from its mediating role between reason and Being.

There is another explanation of this argument, and it speaks to Agamben's method of the paradigm. As Agamben often points out, every presupposition excludes something. The principle of reason, *nihil fit sine causa*, says "that there is a reason for which something does rather than does not exist". The principle excludes, in seizing its own "rather than" – its *ratio* – that there might be something without reason, or that there might *not* be something *with* reason. As in his complicated response to the Aristotelian principle of non-contradiction, which I discussed in the first chapter, Agamben homes in on what the presupposition excludes at the pivotal point: the "rather than". This "rather than" is accordingly suspended, and indeed, it is rendered *suspension* itself, by way of its counterpart in the Sceptic tradition: *ou mallon*, "no more than". Bartleby's "I would prefer not to" announces the paradigmatic suspension of the principle of sufficient reason.

In working this separation from Being and reason, Bartleby, according to Agamben, runs an experiment without truth: the conditions under which the Bartleby formula is true are suspended in its very pronouncement. Instead, the formula conveys a sense of an "experience of a thing's *capacity* to be true and, at the same time, not to be true" (Agamben 1999a, 261). This brings Agamben to consider the ontological modality of contingency. Contingency means an actuality that is potentially not as it is: it could not-be, it could be otherwise. Interestingly, this sense of contingency is the polar opposite of the sense that Agamben means to install in it: that of the being-whatever. This is a kind of being "it does not matter which, indifferently […] being such that it always matters" (Agamben 1993a, 1). The contingent in Agamben is committed to its *haecceity* – its being absolutely as it is such. This is the contingency of Agamben's political form-of-life. This is also the modality of things and figures that are irreparable: "Irreparable means that these things are consigned without remedy to their being-thus, that they are precisely and only their thus" (Agamben 1993a, 39). So while contingency in the usual sense means "the object could have been otherwise, depending on its conditioning factors", to Agamben it means "the object's absolute resignation to its being-thus". Contingency is the being-itself, the thing itself of a thing or an object – it is the thing or object in its paradigmatic exemplarity. What Bartleby releases from the spell of potentiality is a contingent

existence: redeemed of potentiality, it has fulfilled its capacity to *not be*. While contingency as we know it is that modality of being that *can* not be, Agamben thinks a fulfilled contingency that finally can *not not be*.

> The greatest punishment – the lack of the vision of God ["the barring of access to the eternal way, with everything left as before" (Agamben 1999c, 106)] – thus turns into a natural joy: Irremediably lost, they [those who are in limbo] persist without pain in divine abandon. God has not forgotten them, but rather they have always already forgotten God; and in the face of their forgetfulness, God's forgetting is impotent. Like letters with no addressee, these uprising beings remain without a destination. Neither blessed like the elected, nor hopeless like the damned, they are infused with a joy with no outlet (Agamben 1993, 5–6).

Particularly the sentence about letters with no addressee helps to connect the examination of contingency with this contemplation on limbo, given Agamben's interest in Bartleby: Bartleby's previous employment, the one that he appears to have quietly resumed at the law practice on Wall Street, was at the Dead Letter Office in Washington.

Agamben considers various checks and restraints on contingency: "If Being at all times and places preserved its potential not to be, the past itself could in some sense be called into question, and moreover, no possibility would ever pass into actuality or remain in actuality. The aporias of contingency are, as a result, traditionally tempered by two principles" (Agamben 1999a, 261). Indeed, to retain contingency, it is traditionally thought incapable of revoking the past and the present. The past is conceived of as void of potentiality, and the present too is thought to be necessary insofar as it is. Agamben then adds a third restraint on contingency, which pertains to future events. The only restraint Agamben accepts is that of conditioned necessity – which pertains to the contingency of the present. For this restraint comes about exactly in the formula of the fulfillment of potentiality. Aristotle's use of the principle, as Agamben invokes it, runs as follows: "what is is necessary as long as it is, and what is not is necessary as long as it is not" (Agamben 1999a, 262). This is the principle of conditioned necessity that Aristotle defends in the formula of potentiality that I am bringing out: "A thing is said to be potential if, when the act of which it is said to be potential is realized, there will be nothing impotential" – this is not the actualization that leaves its potential, but one that exhausts its potential by fulfilling it. The act that remains simply in the ban of its potential is at all times a

necessitated act – only the act that fully implements its potentiality is contingent in having depleted its conditions of impossibility. And these conditions it manages to "set aside", and suspend together with the assumption they make on it – it becomes pure singularity, pure being-called by language as such. Thus this kind of contingency is not the contingency that might have been otherwise, in reference to its potentiality. It is the contingency that is absolutely and irremediably consigned to its being-thus.

Because Bartleby means the occurrence of potentiality as such, his experiment cannot content itself with merely the potentiality of the present – it must reinsert potentiality into the past. How can potentiality be turned toward the past? First, there is Nietzsche's eternal return: the past is potential of itself in that it is destined to infinite recurrence. Yet Agamben remarks that this is only the recurrence of the actual. Potentiality is projected back onto the past, but it is not the potentiality of the past. Agamben unearths certain ethical problems with this option: "[…] once this possible is realized, what happens to what was capable of being?" (Agamben 1999a, 265); "The will to power is, in truth, the will to will, an eternally repeated action; only as such is it potentialized. This is why the scrivener must stop copying, why he must give up his work" (Agamben 1999a, 268). What is the difference exactly between the way in which Bartleby separates potentiality from the principle of reason and Nietzsche's eternal recurrence? For Nietzsche, past events return as potential to test the will. Yet Bartleby objects precisely to this return.

Here Bartleby's former employment becomes interesting: the Dead Letter Office that I mentioned in the context of Agamben's short essay on limbo. Bartleby is precisely attuned to the potentiality of what never was: "On the writing tablet of the celestial scribe, the letter, the act of writing, marks the passage from potentiality to actuality, the occurrence of a contingency. But precisely for this reason, every letter also marks the nonoccurrence of something; every letter is in this sense a 'dead letter' – for every letter that is written, contingently, there are infinite letters that were not" (Agamben 1999a, 269). The copyist, copying the letters that were in fact recorded, repeats only the actual, and this is why Bartleby, as a scribe who does not

write but keeps to his post, fulfills the potentiality of these dead letters. In this sense Bartleby is a messianic figure:

> [...] if Bartleby is a new Messiah, he comes not, like Jesus, to redeem what was, but to save what was not. The Tartarus into which Bartleby, the new savior, descends is the deepest level of the Palace of Destinies, that whose sight Leibniz cannot tolerate, the world in which nothing is compossible with anything else, where "nothing exists rather than something." And Bartleby comes not to bring a new table of the Law but, as in the Cabalistic speculations on the messianic kingdom, to fulfil the Torah by destroying it from top to bottom (Agamben 1999a, 270).

So if Jesus, submitting himself to a trial without judgment – to the most ignominious death – attempts to redeem what was, Bartleby, conducting an experiment with truth, presenting the question "Under what conditions can something occur and (that is, at the same time) not occur, be true no more than not" means to save what was not (Agamben 1999a, 259–260; Agamben 2015, 51–52). In the next section, I will explore Bartleby's messianism further.

Bartleby, then, is the figure who is capable of his potential, in excess of his will, articulating his potentiality in full and thereby evincing the emasculated potentiality within God's act of Creation in the theo-logical sense as well as the classical understanding of the relationship between mind and thought.

2.3 Bartleby as a messianic figure

How is Bartleby, the messenger of potentiality, a messianic figure? Agamben understands Bartleby as the euporia between Nietzsche's eternal return and Améry and Adorno's (and Ivan Karamazov's) resentment. Where (on Agamben's reading) for Nietzsche everything that was is redeemed, simply by way of its reappearance (so that it may be innocent once again) yet in spite of everything that was not ("Zarathustra teaches men to will backward, to desire that everything repeat itself"; Agamben 1999b, 99), for Améry and Adorno the very idea of redemption is a travesty (innocence lost forever) – these positions separated historically by the crisis of the holocaust (Agamben 2000b, 38–39). If Leibniz's pyramid of possible destinies is enacted in Nietzsche's return of the same, for Améry it is overturned, and can be felt from the depths of the Tartarus: "If everything had taken place only

between SS-man Wajs and me, and if an entire inverted pyramid of SS men, SS helpers, officials, Kapos, and medal bedecked generals had not weighed on me, I would have died calmly and appeased along with my fellow man with the Death's Head insignia" (Améry 1980, 70). Bartleby, however, is a figure of selective, critical atonement.

Bartleby's potentiality means the messianic reconciliation between what was but could not have been, and what was not but could have been. Together, they are taken up and reunited in the mind of God – a God become capable *de potentia absoluta* (Agamben 1999a, 270). For Agamben, Bartleby stands at the foundation of a new creation, God's second creation. In this moment, life steps away from its reference to writing and the law. In this moment, "the creature" is saved in being irreparably astray from God. For Agamben, irreparable means an entity's being relinquished by the law, its being absolutely consigned to its being-thus (Agamben 1993b, 92). The extraordinary power of the irreparable comes across clearly in Agamben's recent essay *Pilate and Jesus*: "Justice and salvation cannot be reconciled; every time, they return to mutually excluding and calling for each other [...] [T]he world, in its fallenness, does not want salvation but justice. And it wants it precisely because it is not asking to be saved. *As unsavable, creatures judge the eternal*: this is the paradox that in the end, before Pilate, cuts Jesus short" (Agamben 2015, 45). What all this suggests is that Bartleby's statement means the undoing of writing and of the law. In this sense, Bartleby is to Agamben a messianic figure. Pure potentiality, then, means something beyond the dichotomy between Being and non-Being, and in extending this far, it also points beyond justice, when justice sanctions either of these two. Potentiality, then, deposits a contingent remnant, the irreparable.

This requires some unpacking. We have looked at a particular heretical conception of *creatio ex nihilo* wherein God descends into the Nothing, satisfying it so completely that the world comes about by emanation. This Nothing, Agamben thinks of as the infinite catalogue of Leibniz's possible worlds, the Palace of Destinies:

> [...] an immense pyramid that shines at its peak, extending infinitely downwards. Each of the innumerable apartments that compose the palace represents one of Sextus's

> [Tarquinius] possible destinies, to which corresponds a possible world that was never realized [...] The best of all possible worlds projects an infinite shadow downwards, which sinks lower and lower to the extreme universe – which even celestial beings cannot comprehend – in which nothing is compossible with anything else and nothing can take place (Agamben 1999a, 265–266).[61]

Now, lets recall Agamben's suggestion: [...] if Bartleby is a new Messiah, he comes not, like Jesus, to redeem what was, but to save what was not (Agamben 1999a, 270). As God descends into the Nothing creating the world in the first place, so Bartleby immerses himself in the Nothing of possibility so deeply and fully that once again Creation is occasioned – yet this time not as creation or as re-creation but as de-creation, which reunites all that happened and all that did not happen in the mind of God.

Bartleby ends up in jail, in the Halls of Justice. I have pointed out how, to Agamben's mind, the concentration camp is a state of exception, one that no will can assume. Bartleby also creates a state of exception, a zone of pure potentiality, beyond the grasp of any will. In this zone, we find the indistinguishability between "what could not have been but was [and] what could have been but was not" (Agamben 1999a, 270). The zone of that indistinction – which is beyond justice – then, becomes the *ethos* of a new creature. At this point, Bartleby's formula has exhausted the modalities of metaphysics, destroyed their law, and within his spell unfolds the as yet undetermined scope for a new form-of-life. This constitutes the messianic event within philosophy.

2.4   Messianic contingency

To conclude this chapter, I need to consolidate the mode of Bartleby's contingency. From other sources as well as from Agamben's own writings, all drawing from the meontology (the account of things that are not) of Saint Paul's Letters, it is apparent how a certain messianic contingency means to exist as not-existing (Heidegger

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[61] The structure of Leibniz's Palace of Destinies recurs in Frances Yates' description of Guilio Camillo's memory theater. This idea holds a powerful sway over Agamben's thought, and he has spent some time working with Yates when she was director of the Warburg Institute (Yates 1966, 129–159).

2004, 83–84; Taubes 2004, 53; Badiou 2003, 46; Agamben 2000b, 23; Critchley 2012, 177). In this section, I explain that this in Agamben is contingency, and how this follows on from his argument on Bartleby. Contingency to Agamben means not to exist arbitrarily or absurdly – not the heroic contingency of existentialism – but rather means to exist *as not existing*: an existence the negative dimension of which is not a constant possibility, but on the contrary is already enacted in it. And this is because this existence has exhausted its own impotentiality within itself. Where existentialist contingency means to be inexplicably cast onto the world, Agamben's contingency means to be irreparably cast from ground. While existentialism always thinks the relation of abandonment to the Nothing, Agamben lifts the spell of the Nothing and collapses it onto the existent – the Nothing no more the overbearing counterpart to the existent: "the hardest thing in this experience [of the Tartarus] is not the Nothing or its darkness, in which many nevertheless remain imprisoned; the hardest thing is being capable of annihilating this Nothing and letting something, from Nothing, be" (Agamben 1999a, 253).

I have already made clear that the decisive feature of this kind of contingency is not its possibility for being otherwise, depending on its conditioning factors. On the contrary, the feature that is so striking of Agamben's contingency is that it means an irreparable assignment to being-as-such:

> Irreparable means that these things [various perceptions reported in Robert Walser's stories] are consigned without remedy to their being-thus, and that they are precisely and only their thus […] [I]rreparable also means that for them there is literally no shelter possible, that in their being-thus they are absolutely exposed, absolutely abandoned. This implies that both necessity and contingency, those two crosses of Western thought, have disappeared from the *post iudicium* world. The world is now forever and necessarily contingent or contingently necessary (Agamben 1993b, 39–40; Walser 2012, 54, 118).

This *being-thus* is the object's absolute exposure before language. It is its own knowability and truth, the thing itself that only appeared as a paradigm, a residue to the presuppositions concerning it. At the same time, this absolute assignment to a being-thus is contingent – it is that which both can be and can not be. The irreparable condition is contingency: that which is its thus absolutely, is the contingent. This is because only that which is irremediably such as it is has so completely realized its potentiality as to fulfill in existing its existential impotentiality. A truly contingent

event has no ground beneath it, but wears its own taking place like a halo suspended above – a halo of profanity.

Bartleby, who is capable of writing beyond his will, and of whom we can only say that he might have written, performs the perfect act of writing: "The perfect act of writing comes not from a power to write, but from an impotence that turns back on itself and in this way comes to itself as a pure act" (Agamben 1993b, 37). Bartleby's writing, then, is not the actualization of a potentiality that is structurally prior to it – it is the fulfillment of a potentiality, of the power not to write. In turning back onto this impotentiality and making it real, Bartleby's gesture liberates itself from the modalities of necessity, possibility, and impossibility, as it frees itself from the will. Furthermore, Bartleby's experiment revokes the necessity of the past. History is reconceived as contingent, as having the possibility of having-been-otherwise.

The inoperability of the law after Bartleby's experiment does not mean its destruction. Rather, the nature of the law is radically transformed. This law: "[...] is written with the breath of God on hearts of flesh. In other words, it is not a text, but the very life of the messianic community, not a *writing*, but a *form of life*" (Agamben 2000b, 122; Kishik 2012, 5).

To consolidate contingency with a view to necessity, possibility and impossibility, we then arrive at Aristotle's statement that I quoted at the opening of this chapter: "A thing is said to be potential if, when the act of which it is said to be potential is realized, there will be nothing impotential". I have already marked the difference between Agamben's translation and traditional translations. The phrase in its traditional wording involves the modalities of necessity and possibility and impossibility, and designates the space between them to contingency. Agamben means to think contingency independently of these modalities.

For the remainder of this section, I want to deepen this discord between Agamben and Nietzsche on the contingency of the past.

There are three sources we can consult on this issue: the present essay on Bartleby, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, and *The Time that Remains*. At this moment in the Bartleby essay, Agamben refers to the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where Aristotle speaks of the impossibility of wanting Troy to be sacked (Agamben 1999a, 262, 267). As we cannot want it, we have to resent the fact that it was. Nietzsche judged severely on resentment, on the spirit of revenge, and accordingly demanded of the will to "will backwards". However, "Solely concerned with repressing the spirit of revenge, Nietzsche completely forgets the laments of what was not or could have been otherwise" (Agamben 1999a, 267). There is a certain space of resentment, then, that Agamben defends. Let us consider an example more dramatic even than that of Troy's destruction. Agamben writes:

> The ethics of the twentieth century opens with Nietzsche's overcoming of resentment. Against the impotence of the will with respect to the past, against the spirit of revenge for what has irrevocably taken place and can no longer be willed, Zarathustra teaches men to will backward, to desire that everything repeat itself [...] Auschwitz also marks a decisive rupture in this respect (Agamben 1999b, 99).

Auschwitz is the event of which no will could ever be capable. Let me briefly explore the structural reasons for this. Agamben refers to Primo Levi's mode of resentment: "One cannot want Auschwitz to return for eternity, since in truth it has never ceased to take place it is always already repeating itself" (Agamben 1999b, 101). This can be explained by looking at the "friendly" football match between the SS and the Sonderkommando that was related through Miklos Nyszli and Primo Levi (Agamben 1999b, 25–26). Without a spark of hope or humanity, to Agamben it marks instead the most terrifying horror of the camp. This moment of openness – a brief return to civilised life – within the camp, means that the camp itself can never be closed: the camp finds its essential potentiality in a return to the rule of law, and implementing that rule of law from outside the camp is not to negate its logic. Indeed, this means that the camp exists in a state of exception: "For we can perhaps think that the massacres are over – even if here and there they are repeated, not so far away from us. But that match is never over; it continues as if uninterrupted" (Agamben 1999b, 26). As Agamben writes in *Homo Sacer*: "The camp – and not the prison – is the space that corresponds to this originary structure of the *nomos*. This is shown, among other things, by the fact that while prison law only constitutes a particular sphere of

penal law and is not outside the normal order, the juridical constellation that guides the camp is (as we shall see) martial law and the state of siege" (Agamben 1998, 20). The brief interruption of the massacre in the camp infinitely reinforces the paradigmatic force of the camp. Furthermore, it establishes Agamben's "idea of an inner solidarity between democracy and totalitarianism", and justifies his contention that the camp is the paradigm for our own, contemporary political culture (Agamben 1998, 10–11, 166). Now it becomes more obvious why Agamben dreads the experience of pure potentiality.

Agamben's argument renders Nietzsche's will, capable of everything, superfluous. With a view to the state of exception, with a view to absolute potentiality, the will is powerless: the will is not capable of potentiality. In potentiality, what is, is equal to what is not, and the camp is not the camp. Against this testing of the scope of the will in Nietzsche, Agamben places the exigency of resentment, identified in Jean Améry's essay, comparing it with the sense of exigency that Walter Benjamin unearths in Dostoevsky's *The Idiot* (Benjamin 1998, 80; Agamben 2000a, 39). I have already explained why exigency is the philosophical comportment that Agamben holds to potentiality and abandonment – this is why it is not considered, in the final analysis, messianic. Messianic thought would be a response to this kind of exigency. Exigency, to Agamben's mind, coincides with the possibility of philosophy itself – it is what makes philosophy possible with regards to its theist principle of the existence of language, potentiality and abandonment. Exigent, then, in the Jewish mystical strands to which Agamben has resource, is the way in which God descends into the Nothing, allowing the world to be in his stead – the world coinciding with a forgotten memory of God. As I will demonstrate, this same relationship exists between Derrida and Agamben: the nihilistic occupation of deconstruction is the condition of possibility, the exigency, for Agamben's entire work of thought.

Chapter 3

Agamben and Derrida: The life of philosophy

> It is more correct to say that in Paradise, Aurelian learned that, for the unfathomable divinity, he and John of Pannonia (the orthodox believer and the heretic, the abhorrer and the abhorred, the accuser and the accused) formed one single person.
>
> Jorge Luis Borges, *The Theologians*

Introduction

In the previous chapter I have comprehensively described the workings of a messianic motif in Agamben's work, analysing his conception of contingency by a close reading of the Bartleby essay. I have explained how the messianic motif is found at the heart of a philosophical archaeology on the concept of potentiality. Instead of a political solution in a narrow sense, the messianic is the way in which a particular mode of contingency suspends the principle of sufficient ground and its relation to the modalities of necessity, possibility, and impossibility. Messianic is the profane depletion of a sovereign ban. In chapter 1, furthermore, I have provided the background to this analysis by explaining Agamben's *experimentum linguae*: potentiality as the unthought connection between philosophy and theology in the givenness or revelation of language. Now, the task of the present chapter is to reveal how this messianic motif turns back onto Derrida's thought.[62] It will not be a matter of juxtaposing Agamben and Derrida's works systematically, following Agamben's remarks on deconstruction from *Stanzas* and *Language and Death* to *Homo Sacer*, and finally up to *The Time that Remains* and *The Signature of All Things* as other writers have done.[63] What I will do instead is show how such a general juxtaposition is reflected in the differing ways in which the messianic announces itself in the oeuvres of Derrida and Agamben.

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[62] Michael Naas shows the same consistency between early deconstruction in *Speech and Phenomena* ("a critique of the centrality of voice as opposed to writing") and Derrida's later concern with the autoimmunity on which religion structurally – divided between the stake of an unscathed meaningful core and the necessity of disseminating that core – depends (Naas 2012, 126–127).

[63] For the influence of Nietzsche's thought, see Thurschwell 2003; for the themes of friendship and politics, see Wortham 2007; for the contested role of Saussure in logocentrism, see Attell 2009; for an account of Derrida as a collaborator to Agamben, see Watkin 2014; for a systematic overview of the sources that Derrida and Agamben read, see Attell 2014.

Let me rehearse the most basic and general juxtaposition of Derrida and Agamben's thought and follow Agamben's cue from *Homo Sacer* (included in elaborated form in the essay "The Messiah and the Sovereign") about Kafka's parable *Before the Law*. In Kafka's tale, a man from the country spends a lifetime waiting before the law, never being admitted. Instead, his entry is always suspended, albeit with the suggestion of admittance at a later stage. For Derrida, this countryman's position is the one indicated by *différance*: the meaning of the text is always deferred by its letter, the acting doorkeeper. Yet Agamben observes that ultimately the doorkeeper expresses the resolve to shut the door – indicating that the law's deferred content is no more.[64] Agamben concludes this episode as follows: "The final sense of the legend is thus not, as Derrida writes, that of an 'event that succeeds in not happening' (or that happens in not happening: 'an event that happens not to happen,' *un événement qui arrive à ne pas arriver* ['Préjugés,' p. 359]), but rather precisely the opposite: the story tells how something has really happened in seeming not to happen, and the messianic aporias of the man from the country express exactly the difficulties that our age must confront in attempting to master the sovereign ban" (Agamben 1998, 57; Derrida quoted from Derrida 1983, 359; see Derrida 1992a, 210). This same difference informs the distinctive ways in which Derrida and Agamben use the messianic as a politico-temporal modality: for Derrida it keeps open our future as *à-venir*, because an exhaustive political programme to install conditions of justice adequate to any demand – and this means also to eradicate *différance* – would be, to Derrida, the worst of all possible evils. Derrida's two key motifs, the name (impossible and only circumscribed) and the trace (necessarily and violently understood), necessitate that the messianic is addressed and followed: "If an existing being – any 'entity' and hence, likewise the highest or super-essential being called 'God' or 'the other' – comes into presence or represents absolute presence, then the latter is a prior 'determined,' that is to say, predetermined or structured (we could even say, fated or *predestined*) by differences and differentiations, temporalizations and spatializations, that *are not quite it* (or even *quite up to it*), that potentially betray and pervert it, and that will, of necessity, never allow it to fully

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[64] Admittedly, Kafka's tale does not include the actual closure of the door.

come into its own […]" (De Vries 2015, 24–25). Derrida's philosophical habitat remains always strictly between these two motifs – the trace of the name, the name of the trace – coinciding with the theological impossibility of Adamic language. The work that maintains this reciprocal relation between the name and its trace – deconstruction – is messianic: "The Divine name […] draws and pulls our concepts and discourses, acts and affects, both backward and forward, into an *immemorial* past and an unidentifiable, as of yet unrecognizable, *future-for-ever-to-come*" (De Vries 2015, 38). For Agamben, on the other hand, messianic is the manoeuvre of the man from the country: it liberates a certain experience of the present. I will return to these issues specifically in section 3.2.1; however, this distinction between Derrida's and Agamben's responses to Kafka will reverberate throughout this entire chapter.

This chapter must meet the following four challenges. First, I will give an assessment of Derrida's position with a view to questions of religion and theism. It is vital that I explain some of the background of Derrida-scholarship on these themes of recent years. Second, I will explain the way in which Derrida's work sits in relation to Agamben's, with a view to the messianic time of politics and to the rapport between theology and philosophy. This is important, as I am giving an account of the way in which Derrida can be appropriated as a messianic assistant to Agamben's project. Third, because for a philosophy of the Fall the question of *place* is crucial, I will present a reading of Derrida's essay "Khōra" (informed by other writings in its context) which is in many respects the Derridean counterpart to Agamben's text on Bartleby, notably in that it addresses the monotheist concept of *creatio ex nihilo* with respect to its abyssal experiment. Yet while I take the Bartleby text to be central to Agamben's oeuvre, I make no such claim with regard to Derrida's and the *khōra* essay.[65] I hold only that within Agamben's scheme, wherein Derrida is associated with Aristotelian grammatology and scholastics, the latter is best represented by his

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[65] If any of Plato's dialogues would merit such distinction for Derrida, it would have to be the *Phaedrus* with its scene of writing (Naas 2014, 231). Rodolphe Gasché, however, mentions *khōra* in the same breath as *pharmakon* (Gasché 2014, 212), while Martin Hägglund treats "spacing" as synonymous to *khōra*, and thinks it the most important term of deconstruction (Hägglund 2008, 2).

reading of Plato's *Timaeus*. It is from this reading that a sophisticated Derridean account of the thesis of language emerges. Furthermore, it is in the context of Derrida's thought on *khōra* that we find the resources to deepen Derrida's ethics of responsibility, as well as his rapport with theology. Fourth, I will present an account of how their respective stances on politics, theology, religion, with Derrida's *khōra* in juxtaposition to Agamben's Bartleby, imply Derrida and Agamben's conception of the life of philosophy.

This might not seem an obvious way to arrive at an understanding of life. However, through studying how these thinkers conceive of thought's rapport to language – and language is the stake held throughout these four questions – we may grasp the way in which life is addressed in philosophy. Derrida has claimed that "[...] phenomenology, the metaphysics of presence in the form of ideality, is also a philosophy of *life*" (Derrida 1973, 10). Indeed, considering the messianic time of politics, theology and religion, and more thoroughly the myth of *creatio ex nihilo*, presents the opportunity of weighing Derrida and Agamben's stances on life. Derrida's deep concern with survival is informed through and through by his conviction that, on some level, the secret – the secret of secrets – must and will be honoured. The statement "no one will ever know from what secret I am writing and the fact that I say so changes nothing" is an "admission of a mortal" (Derrida quotes his own diary in Bennington and Derrida 1993, 207–208; and Derrida 1973, 54). Rodolphe Gasché too has argued this intimate connection between Derrida's two principal concerns, the secret and survival: "Derrida has consistently reminded us of the fact that within our own heritage and memory something infinitely resists, and does so in the shape of an 'infinitely impassable remainder {*restance*}' to all appropriations and reappropriations [...]" (Gasché 2014, 208).[66] Paola Marrati,

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[66] Furthermore, Gasché describes the task that comes with this heritage in (Derridean) messianic wording: "To think this immemorial remainder – a remaining that Schelling might have called *unvordenklich* – and to watch over it, this is the task he has bequeathed to us" (Gasché 2014, 208). Agamben uses this idea of an Immemorable, *Unvordenkliches*, to describe the paradox of the potentiality of thought – forever capable of thought in a way that is irreducible to actual thoughts. This is also the paradox of the eternal return of the same: "Pure passion, as the final coincidence of *potentia passiva* and *potentia activa*, is in itself immemorable. The like, the image perpetually

furthermore, makes a connection between survival and writing as inherently located: "*inscription in a place is inseparable from a notion of temporality as survival*" (Marrati 2005, 186). Paul Allen Miller, in an essay on *khōra*, brings out its crucial role in upholding a messianic *à-venir*: "The question of the absolute other is also of central importance because it is only the presence (or better, the non-presence) of the absolute other that makes difference possible, that keeps the world as world from collapsing into the stasis of an idealist and totalitarian unity [...] In *khōra*, this moment of openness to the absolute other is located in the conception of *khōra* itself" (Miller 2010, 331–332). In support of my understanding of *khōra* in connection to Agamben's concern with revelation in philosophy, Anne Norton reports that in Derrida "*khōra* is the place of revelation" (Norton 2015, 107). As both Gasché and Marrati bring out, the nexus between secret and survival lies in the Greek term *khōra*: "This very singular impropriety [*khōra*'s feature of retaining nothing properly], which precisely is nothing, it is just what *khōra* must, if you like *keep*; it is just what *must be kept for it*, what *we* must keep for it" (Derrida 1995a, 97).

3.1   Derrida and theism – survival

Martin Hägglund's *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life* has been highly influential in recent Derrida-scholarship (Hägglund 2008). It focuses on the irreducible notion of 'spacing' that I have just brought out by referring to Gasché and Marrati. Hägglund claims that by this notion of spacing, Derrida's work implies a *radically* anti-theist stance: not only is Derrida an atheist, but his work implies even the undesirability of theism. This radical atheism does not merely claim that God is dead, but goes much further: God is death itself, and because of this he is categorically undesirable: desire is not capable of God, desire for God is contradictory (Hägglund 2008, 8). Furthermore, at stake in this atheist thesis is a certain Derridean conception of life: life as survival. So for Hägglund, the most

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returning, cannot be retained in memory. Its eternal return is its passion, in which between the writing and its erasing, there is, as Nietzsche says, *keine Zeit*, no time" (Agamben 1986, 17).

dominant theme of Derrida's writing, its atheism, implies the temporality of survival.

Hägglund seems careful to avoid any claims as to Derrida's (sometimes alleged) overcoming of metaphysics. I admit that there are many moments when Derrida hints at the possibility of such an "overcoming of metaphysics", but I consistently hold that the moment of this overcoming is not found in Derrida's work, nor is it claimed by it. Instead, there is the moment of the *closure* of metaphysics – a closure that is perennially suspended, and within which the opening of Derrida's work is staged (Derrida 1973, 51; Derrida 1976, 19; Derrida 1978, 20). Hägglund's itinerary is understandable, then, but it is surprising that Hägglund thinks Derrida capable of such radical atheism without ultimately vanquishing metaphysics as well – the connection between theism and metaphysics is a dominant challenge for contemporary philosophy, as Christopher Watkin and Gert-Jan van der Heiden have evinced in recent publications (Watkin 2011, 1–16; Van der Heiden 2014, 9–12). Indeed, the atheism that Hägglund speaks of concerns the God of the philosophers and scholars, not the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Hägglund thinks of Derrida's work as the fatal blow to many onto-theological theses. In connection with this, *Radical Atheism*, after analytical fashion, claims the right and the power to dismiss these theses, expelling delusions from Derrida-scholarship. This aspect appears to be its foremost problem, because in rejecting what it can argue to be false it proves itself rather foreign to the exercise of deconstruction – premised upon the impossibility of simply discarding obsolete notions, on the need of *deconstructing* them. This premise is, of course, that "*there is no outside-text:*" there is no "view from nowhere," no transcendent ground from which such a judgment could be cast (Van der Heiden 2014, 2–3; Van der Heiden 2011). So when Hägglund argues that, because the concept of God implies the absence of life and our capacity to desire anything whatsoever, the desire for God must be rejected as a contradiction, imaginary, a phantasm, Michael Naas's response is, indeed, "about nothing more or less than the possibility of such a phantasm" (Naas 2009, 46; For entire treatises on phantoms, see Derrida 1989c; Derrida 1994; See also Derrida and Ferraris 2001, 89: "[...] I would not free myself so easily of phantoms, as some people all too often think

they do"). [67] When Derrida shows the paradox and autoimmunity of religious practice, he is indeed exposing its very *survival*, not its demise – showing that its presence is not simple and unadulterated, but always a survival, divided from within. Indeed, Naas writes in response to Hägglund: "The unconditionality of spacing can, it seems, *undermine* the very Idea of a sovereign instance without necessarily compromising the power of that Idea" (Naas 2009, 55).[68] This is the side of Derrida that Hägglund ignores and over which Agamben exasperates.

As Hägglund's book represents the foremost opposition to any association being made between Derrida's work and religious, theist or theological ideas, it will be an important source for this thesis – as Agamben holds that Derrida has not sufficiently followed the trajectory of abandonment, and remains in theological discourse. Furthermore, as indicated above, it is Derrida's stance in relation to spectral concepts and powers that is at issue in understanding the messianic between himself and Agamben. Finally, as *Radical Atheism* raises the theme of life for Derrida, it must be reckoned with. In this section, I will show how, from Hägglund's account of how the Derridean logic keeps theism at bay, a *katechonic* operation emerges: rather than arguing the inadmissibility of God, deconstruction restrains the Antichrist – in this sense Agamben can say that deconstruction founds a church, in this sense deconstruction is a thwarted messianic (Agamben 1999c, 77; Agamben 2000b, 104). So instead of a radically atheist stance, I take Hägglund's argument to imply a position that is anti-eschatological: "Messianic hope is for Derrida a hope for temporal survival [...]" (Hägglund 2008, 11). Indeed, Hägglund makes this explicit: "Derrida can thus be seen to invert the logic of religious eschatology" (Hägglund 2008, 134). Rather than a messianic hope that pertains to the possibility of an intervention in my life by the other, an other who is always still to arrive, Hägglund thinks it sees to a temporal extension of life as survival, as living-on: "At every moment I have to hold on to myself as a memory for the future, which may be lost

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[67] See also Shakespeare 2009, 19: "if these ideas [of God's simplicity, undividability] are caught in contradictions, they do not (simply) die."

[68] Gasché makes a similar observation: "Rather than effacing all possible reference to the tradition, deconstructive work on the tradition irrevocably *reaffirms* – albeit not without multiple warnings – continued referral to the tradition and its code" (Gasché 1994, 61).

and lead to mourning" – for Hägglund, the interruption by the other appears reducible to the intervention of death (Hägglund 2008, 108). I hold that, for Derrida, it is the other way around: life and death are both undercut by difference, repetition, and alterity. This same inversion appears when Hägglund denies Caputo's claim, to wit "deconstruction says yes, affirming what negative theology affirms whenever it says no", by stating: "negative theology says no to what deconstruction affirms" (Caputo 1997, 3; Hägglund 2008, 116–117). This is not an effective contradiction.

So *Radical Atheism* is an important text for this thesis to discuss, as it represents an interpretation that wants to remove Derrida from religion and theology by an argument about life as survival.

Hägglund's argument has a twofold foundation that implies on the one hand the following understanding of the Derridean notion of spacing:

> [...] spacing is shorthand for the becoming-space of time and the becoming-time of space [...] Derrida repeatedly argues that *différance* (as name for the spacing of time) not only applies to language or experience or any other delimited region of being. Rather, it is an *absolutely general condition*, which means that there cannot even in principle be anything that is exempt from temporal finitude (Hägglund 2008, 2–3).

On the other hand, there is the thesis that theism must involve an immortal entity that is God. It is the supposed immortality of God that allows Hägglund to claim Derrida's inference that God is death itself. Hägglund includes negative theology: "Negative theology adheres to the most traditional metaphysical logic by positing an instance that is exempt from temporal finitude" (Hägglund 2008, 4). Together, these premises imply Hägglund's radically atheist stance. I will now proceed to examine both premises.

3.1.1 *Différance* and metaphysics in *Radical Atheism*

Rather than as the principle that exposes the constitution of meaning within a metaphysical framework, for Hägglund *différance* is itself the quintessential metaphysical principle: *différance* means the general ontological condition of *being* immersed in temporal finitude – this is my objection. Let me briefly present the

evidence for both positions – Hägglund's and my own – on the scope of *différance*. Of course, Hägglund provides textual evidence for his own position. I have already mentioned the importance he attributes to spacing, for which he finds justification in Derrida's *On Touching* (Derrida 2005a, 207). However, he refers to Derrida's earliest works too:

> For Derrida, there is only one realm – the infinite finitude of *différance* – since everything is constituted by the trace structure of time. Hence, deconstruction has nothing to do with showing that the signifiers of language are inadequate to a transcendent signified such as God. As Derrida maintains in *Of Grammatology*, the trace structure does not only apply to the chain of signifiers but also to the signified itself. Indeed, 'the signified is essentially and originally (and not only for a finite and created spirit) trace' (Hägglund 2008, 4).

To the contrary, I understand *différance* in a restricted sense. This restricted *différance* is the difference between meaning and its representation, between *Sinn* and *Bedeutung*, and between signified and signifier. It also means the deferral of meaning by its representation, and ultimately the respect (*différance* implies also deference) for meaning by its representation (I will elaborate on this last aspect in section 3.2.2).[69] *Différance* in this sense is constitutive of meaning, while it always suspends meaning. Furthermore, even though it makes realms of being possible, conceivable, *différance* is not a domain of being. Indeed, Hägglund appears to have since weakened his claim, on two accounts. He has first limited his ontological deployment of *différance*: "[...] Derrida does not generalize the trace structure by way of an assertion about the nature of being as such. The trace is not an ontological stipulation but a *logical structure* that makes explicit what is implicit in the concept of succession" (Hägglund 2011, 265). However, I cannot agree with this weaker variant either, because the trace is not simply a logical structure, but rather the way in which logic is accommodated by language – in the way the *khōra* text describes. Second, Hägglund has nuanced his critique of religious thought: "Radical atheism does not pursue an external critique of religious concepts, but rather seeks to read these concepts *against themselves*, thereby unearthing their atheological and irreligious condition of possibility" (Hägglund 2014, 166). This brings Hägglund's

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[69] Marder objects to the frequent translation "there is nothing outside the text" of the famous claim "il n'y a pas de hors-texte" – *there is no outside-text* (Marder 2014, 197).

interpretation back into more conventional readings of Derrida. Furthermore, in *Dying for Time: Proust, Woolf, Nabokov*, Hägglund has applied his theory of the temporality of desire, chronolibido, to modern literature (Hägglund 2012).[70] In this work he brings out an ambiguity of desire that is glossed over in *Radical Atheism*. Interestingly enough for us, the part on Nabokov deals with the question of a transcendent afterlife of writing, like the one to be explored in the final chapter of this thesis. However, the afterlife, and its desirability, discussed and rejected here is that of eternity, not – as this thesis examines – one of contingency redeemed of sovereignty (Hägglund 2012, 84). The reason for this is that Hägglund's application of the logic of autoimmunity does not accept any kind of fulfillment, because it would imply the existence of anything on its own: "Even the most ideal fulfillment is necessarily inhabited by non-fulfillment – not because fulfillment is lacking but because the state of fulfillment itself is temporal and thus altered from within" (Hägglund 2012, 4, see also 162; Hägglund 2011, 269). Indeed, Hägglund mounts a case against a radical conception of contingency – Quentin Meillassoux's, not Agamben's: "Everything is possible, anything can happen – except something that is necessary, because it is the contingency of the entity that is necessary, not the entity" (Meillassoux 2009, 65). Hägglund attacks this understanding on the basis of the Derridean logic of autoimmunity, claiming this absolute power of time – that time would be capable of the absolute – belies the structure of temporality. Yet Meillassoux and Agamben's conceptions of contingency – each an attempt at thinking the absolute, the thing itself, through a critical intervention on the principle of reason and the structure of correlation – differ. While Meillassoux's contingency comes about as a *rejection* or *preclusion* of "correlationism" (the philosophy that cannot conceive thought and being separately) by way of "ancestral knowledge" (knowledge of events prior to manifestation – Van der Heiden (2014, 208) points out that Meillassoux is not talking about ontology here) in the form of a "*principle of unreason*" ("There is no reason for anything to be or to remain thus and so rather

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[70] This work takes an important cue from Michael Wood's reading of Ada's character in *The Magician's Doubt: Nabokov and the Risks of Fiction*: "She is his happiness […] and she is also […] unhappiness itself, the moan which awaits even the most perfect bliss, not because happiness is doomed, or because fate is unkind, but because happiness is intelligible only under threat" (Wood 1994, 220; Hägglund 2012, 89).

than otherwise"), Agamben's contingency is located at the moment where the correlation is *completed in its suspension*, and becomes indistinction: action and passion, actuality and potentiality collapse into indifference: "what happened and what did not happen are returned to their originary unity in the mind of God, while what could have not been but was becomes indistinguishable from what could have been but was not" (Meillassoux 2009, 5, 9–12, 53; Agamben 1999a, 270). As Van der Heiden notes, Meillassoux's impatience with the principle of reason betrays his allegiance to its structure: "Meillassoux [...] is strictly speaking not interested in exploring what it means to suspend the principle of reason [...] This makes one wonder why *Après la finitude* maintains that being is *thought* differently – in fact, that it is the very core of being to be capable of being different – without accounting for thinking as potentially different" (Van der Heiden 2014, 224). The difference between Meillassoux and Agamben's concepts of contingency is that while Meillassoux equates contingency with potentiality (as opposed to facticity, actuality), Agamben's concept is redeemed of it (along with actuality). And because contingency in Agamben's thought is redeemed of potentiality, because it is messianic contingency – the absolution of a theological premise – it is also impregnable to the deconstructive operation that Hägglund conceives.

Kevin Hart, whose book is dismissed by Hägglund, addresses Derrida's question to Levinas – "and if God was an *effect of the trace*?" – as follows: "what Derrida can only mean is that the *concept* of God is an effect of the trace" (Hart 1989, 37; Derrida 1978, 108). In this context Hent de Vries writes: "As a matter of fact and of principle, 'God' – like all 'religion' – need neither be first nor last to play a historical and phenomenal role and, hence, remains *an eminently quotable quotation at best*" (De Vries 2015, 22). What is implied is the way Derrida's thought never dismisses the tradition of which it sometimes appears to be a fatal critique – which I hold is Hägglund's mistake (De Vries' delineation even implies God's relative *immunity*). In his analysis De Vries appears to attribute to the conjunction "Derrida and Religion" an intimacy only matched by "Derrida and Husserl" – Derrida's patience with the archive of divine names is connected to his patience with Husserl, which he expressed with the following clause: "This does not impugn the apodicticity of the

phenomenological-transcendental description, nor does it diminish the founding value of presence [...] It is only a question of bringing out that the lack of foundation is basic and nonempirical and that the security of presence in the metaphorical form of ideality arises and is set forth again upon this irreducible void" (Derrida 1973, 7; De Vries 2015, 22–23). What is wrought in deconstruction is the minimal displacement of the value of presence. When Michael Naas, turning Hägglund's persuasiveness against him, asks of Hägglund: "if every identity is indeed, in fact, refuted, contradicted, or undermined in this way, if every sovereign instance *is* autoimmune in the way Hägglund thinks Derrida believes – and, let me hasten to add, I also agree with this claim – what are we to make of the lingering 'presence' of such notions of the absolute in metaphysics? Put another way, how did metaphysics as the search for such absolutes ever take hold, and ever take hold of us, if all its notions were, from the beginning, condemned to an autoimmune self-refutation, undermining, or undoing?" – I take him to ask after Derrida's delicate position within the closure of metaphysics and the difficult status of its concepts as phantasms (Naas 2009, 51–52). Naas indeed goes on to ask how, given Hägglund's analysis, the so obviously misguided tradition of metaphysical thought keeps us spellbound, keeps us in abandonment.

For Hägglund, Derrida's thought constitutes the fatal critique of theism, theist thought and metaphysics as onto-theology. But deconstruction is not the same as critique: it is not only an immanent critique that exposes the instability of its host by its implicit contradictions, as it also points out the explicit contradictions that indicate, what Gasché calls, the ethico-theoretical decisions by which this host assumes its place within the ranks of philosophy (Gasché 1994, 35–36). By granting absolute priority to *différance* Hägglund raises its profile to the level at which it is the transcendental condition of (im)possibility. Rather than conceiving *différance* as the notion that, in its very own suppression, guarantees the cogency of the metaphysical discourse, in *Radical Atheism* it assumes the role of the first metaphysical principle. But to identify such a first principle is what, according to Derrida, can never be successfully done.

Let me provide the textual evidence to support my position. In *Speech and Phenomena*, Derrida undermines Husserl's conception of a "principle of principles" – intuition – as follows. Intuition for Husserl is caught up with a conception of human consciousness that is transcendental, ideal and in its endless repeatability always simply and atomically present to consciousness (Husserl 2001, 190–196). Yet the implications of this employment of the value of presence, that involves the persistence of presence through death, are far-reaching:

> [...] *I am* originally means *I am mortal. I am immortal* means an impossible proposition. We can even go further: as a linguistic statement "I am he who am" is the admission of a mortal. The move which leads from the *I am* to the determination of my being as *res cogitans* (thus, an immortality) is a move by which the origin of presence and ideality is concealed in the very presence and ideality it makes possible (Derrida 1973, 54–55).

We can see why this paragraph is of importance to Hägglund: "Even the divine declaration 'I am that I am' is in Derrida's reading 'the confession of a mortal'" (Hägglund 2008, 8). Though Hägglund omits the point that for Derrida, "I am he who am" is *as a linguistic statement* the admission of a mortal. Also, he glosses over how Derrida relates here something 'made possible'. And this is the restriction that I mean to bring out: Derrida is attempting a quasi-transcendental argument that conceives of all these things – being, presence, and ideality – through the mediation of a linguistic field. Which means that *différance* does not imply that an immortal and divine being is an impossibility or a contradiction, but that the onto-theological rendering of such a being (accommodating even for negative theology) involves an *a priori* difference between presence and absence. In other words, that the *I am* for Husserl appears to lead to an immortal *res cogitans*, and thus effectively makes possible a particular content of presence and ideality, is not something Derrida argues against. On the contrary, it is what he tries to explain.

In the essay "Différance" Derrida states the following:

> The letter *a* of differance, therefore, is not heard; it remains silent, secret, and discreet, like a tomb | It is a tomb that (provided one knows how to decipher its legend) is not far from signalling the death of the king [...] Doubtless this pyramidal silence of the graphic difference between the *e* and the *a* can function only within the system of phonetic writing and within a language or grammar historically tied up to phonetic writing and to the whole culture which is inseparable from it (Derrida 1973, 132–133).

So while the silent operation of the *a* in *différance* is not far from reporting the death of the sovereign, it can only do so as the king's envoy – in its proper subordinate role. Granted, Derrida goes on to claim that, for this reason, there is no such thing as phonetic writing. But again the logic does not work to negate this system, but indeed to unearth its inaudible workings: "The difference that brings out phonemes and lets them be heard and understood [*entendre*] itself remains inaudible" (Derrida 1973, 133). An earlier passage from *Speech and Phenomena,* which I cited already in my introduction, runs exactly analogous to the passage used above: "Thus, to restore the original on nonderivative character of signs, in opposition to classical metaphysics, is, in an apparent paradox, at the same time to eliminate a concept of signs whose whole history and meaning belong to the adventure of the metaphysics of presence" (Derrida 1973, 51). Indeed: "There is no trace *itself*, no *proper* trace" (Derrida 1982, 66). The subordinate position of the sign, of writing, against which Derrida argues, is ultimately the only position it could ever maintain. Neither Western philosophy, the metaphysics of presence ("*the* philosophy and history of the West") nor its deconstruction is capable of assigning to writing any higher status – this is what it means to think the supplement. As the mirror image of Agamben's assertion of the non-derivative character of the concept potentiality, Derrida insists on the derivative character of the supplement.

Hägglund himself points at this restriction, quoting from the most topical context of a discussion on the notion of the messianic in *Specters of Marx*: "[...] we intend to understand *spirits* in the plural and in the sense of specters, of untimely specters that one must not chase away but sort out, critique, keep close by, and allow to come back. And of course, one must never hide from the fact that the principle of selectivity which will have to guide and hierarchize among the 'spirits' will fatally exclude it in turn. It will even ann[i]hilate, by watching (over) its ancestors rather than (over) certain others" – the spectre here standing in the place of the sign (Derrida 1994, 87; Hägglund 2008, 139). The frightening thought articulated here is of letting the dead bury the dead, comparable, on Agamben's terms, to a complete destruction of the dimension of the archive (Agamben 1999b). Hägglund is aware of the horror of such a scenario (Hägglund 2008, 139–141), yet I hold that his

argument cannot avoid it: Hägglund cannot eliminate the phantasm and keep the spectre.

Hägglund states that Derrida embraces survival in spite of a spectre. But I would like to stress that Derrida might not be afraid of producing spectres; indeed, on the contrary, he is worried about the possibility of eliminating them. Derrida's reticence before the possibility of intervening in the history of philosophy seems incredible: he will not further his own vision in the stead of another (Derrida and Ferraris 2001, 65: "Why write? I always have the feeling [...] that I have nothing to say"). So nothing is further from Derrida's mind than to implement any improvements on the tradition of philosophy as it could be characterized as metaphysics of presence or as logo-centric: it would be to definitively eliminate those signs, and those spirits on behalf of whom exclusively such an operation would be intelligible in the first place, the supplement first among them. The logic of survival, which always implies the work of mourning, resists such interventions in every respect.

While Hägglund sees and appreciates how, for Derrida, the messianic is involved in a logic of survival that excludes the desirability and even the sense of immortality (for immortality implies the abandonment of the dead), he also wants Derrida's work to implement lasting corrections on the philosophical tradition – the only monument for the spectre. The latter, however, would mean to arbitrarily choose those signs and spirits that are to be *resurrected*, and therefore to be exterminated beyond death. This is exactly what Hägglund warns against, but I think it results from his own premises, most importantly his ontological deployment of *différance*, which I reject for this reason.

3.1.2 Religion in *Radical Atheism*

Above I have set out my disagreement with Hägglund's understanding and positioning of *différance*. I have also referred to Hägglund's claim that the atheism implied in Derrida's thought is radical: it does not only deny the existence of God, as either a being or a non-being; it goes so far as to claim that the desire for God is an impossible one – given what desire can be understood to be conceptually capable of.

In this sense, radical atheism claims religion itself is impossible: "All religious conceptions of the highest good (whether it is called God or something else) hold out such an absolute immunity, since the highest good must be safe from the corruption of evil. Derrida's argument is, on the contrary, that nothing can be unscathed" (Hägglund 2008, 8–9; see Derrida 1998a, 2). I will now give the same response to Hägglund's rejection of religion from Derrida's thought as I gave to his reliance on *différance*: Derrida's move is never to dismiss, but rather to bring out the paradoxical existence of his object, indeed, its *survival*. If the object's existence would not be compromised by autoimmunity, immortality would be its destiny – as it is compromised, its fate is survival. Yet in Hägglund's account, the autoimmune process has always already killed off whatever self-entity suffered from it.

This analysis of the autoimmune existence of religion is deepened in the context of Derrida's demonstration of the double core of the French greeting "salut" (Derrida 1998a, 2; Derrida 2005b, xv, 112–114). Michael Naas sums up its divisions: "Derrida distinguishes a *salut* of sovereignty and ipseity, a *salut* that affirms and sustains identity, that protects or indemnifies identity, that is a *salut* that offers either salvation or health, redemption or indemnity, from the *salut* of an unconditional welcoming that, as we will see, compromises every identity and opens it up in an autoimmune fashion to what is beyond or outside it" (Naas 2012, 51; Derrida has famously made the same argument with regards to the concepts of the gift and hospitality, see Derrida 1995c; Derrida 2000). As is clear, the side of the safe and sound is doubled into salvation or health, redemption or indemnity, which already undermines it: if I can wish bodily or spiritual integrity or wholeness to someone else, I violate that integrity. However, the main division is with the dimension of *salut* as unconditional welcoming, which repeats the same disintegration with regards to the entire dimension of the unscathed.

On the first level, *salut* means either salvation or safety: salvation is there for those in peril, while safety describes the condition of those who are safe and sound and do not require salvation. This layer of meaning coincides with the religious object, which we in religious experience intend to receive. Then, there is a second layer of

meaning, at which *salut* means "hello," a greeting and welcoming. Perhaps it is the ambiguity between the first two meanings that allows *salut* to also perform its third function: to wish upon anyone for safety to persist or, to the contrary, for them to be saved from whatever peril they find themselves in, might be as generally applicable as to serve as a generic greeting. Yet the discord between the first two meanings taken together and the third one is significant: *salut* as a substantive denotes an immunity that *salut* as performative undermines (Naas 2012, 51). Hägglund too comments on this distinction, as he pushes the argument that the *salut* is untenable: "To be granted *salut* as salvation would be to become wholly immune to evil, safe from any possible harm. To address the greeting *salut* is, on the contrary, to open oneself to an other who can always cause harm or do evil and in any case opens the possibility of loss that compromises any salvation" (Hägglund 2008, 128). For Hägglund, the *salut* is always succumbing to its autoimmunity, rather than surviving it, thriving on it. In embracing exclusively the salvation of *salut*, we would then find "the impossible" – what Naas calls a radical evil – we encountered in *Specters of Marx* as letting the dead bury the dead.

Hägglund observes how Derrida's logic would ultimately refuse the bid for immortal salvation: while it triggers an autoimmune reaction, it renders the religious *salut* unstable, causing its disintegration. Hägglund, then, concluded on a Derridean position that is coherent: "[...] radical atheism locates an internal contradiction in the desire for salvation and enables us to read the religious idea of salvation against itself" (Hägglund 2008, 130). Hägglund's strategy is to grant absolute right of way to one side of the division, namely the side that represents the autoimmune exposure, the question remaining as to what is exposed, what is deconstructed.

So radical atheism means not only that nothing can be unscathed; it also means that the concept of the unscathed is a contradiction – as it does not claim merely the inexistence of God, but furthermore that the desire for God is contradictory. For Hägglund the very idea of the unscathed and the indemnified makes no sense. However, it is this same idea that is operative in Derrida's understanding of religion, the autoimmune survival of which makes it so difficult to assess. Hägglund forgets

that Derrida is trying to explain – in a classical deconstructive sense – how religion survives, despite and in virtue of its own contradictions.[71]

3.1.3 The messianic in *Radical Atheism*

"Messianic hope is for Derrida a hope for temporal survival [...]" (Hägglund 2008, 11). Hägglund defines the messianic in Derrida as a fear for the *eschaton* and I have called it a *katechon*. When Hägglund addresses the notion of the messianic, he takes his cue from Derrida's distinction between *messianic* and *messianism*: "In Derrida's vocabulary the messianic is another name for the relation to the undecidable future, which opens the chance for what is desired but at the same time threatens it from within, since it is constituted by temporal finitude. In contrast, messianism is the religious or political faith in a future that will come and put an end to time, replacing it with a perpetual peace that nothing can come to disrupt" (Hägglund 2008, 132).

For Hägglund, autoimmunity is at the centre of Derrida's messianic, while messianism means a state of being removed from autoimmunity, and removed from *différance*. This is indeed the case in *Spectres of Marx* where Derrida arrived at this notion. The messianic, as Derrida assumes its concept, is the name irreducibly connected to an undecidable future: "[...] what remains irreducible to any deconstruction, what remains undeconstructible as the possibility of deconstruction itself is, perhaps, a certain experience of the emancipatory promise; it is perhaps even the formality of a structural messianism, a messianism without a religion, even a messianic without messianism, an idea of justice – which we distinguish from law or right and even from human rights – and an idea of democracy – which we distinguish from its current concept and from its determined

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[71] The narrator in Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* at one point rhetorically asks: "Can one tell – that is to say, narrate – time, time itself, as such, for its own sake? That would surely be an absurd undertaking." The reason for this is that "[...] narration resembles music in this, that it *fills up* the time. It 'fills it in' and 'breaks it up,' so that 'there's something to it', 'something going on' [...]" (Mann 1961, 541). Hägglund brings out the Derridean themes of repetition, difference, and autoimmunity at the expense of the presence, sameness, and sanctity that they make intelligible. Hägglund shows only the exposure, not the exposed.

predicates today" (Derrida 1994, 59).[72] For Derrida the messianic is conceived as being separate from messianism.

The messianic, as Derrida thinks it, pertains to a temporal structure in which there can be no anticipation. It is that dimension of temporality that means we are exposed before an uncertain future, and furthermore, it is the movement of that future towards us, its *à-venir*. When Hägglund speaks of a hope for temporal survival, he loses both aspects: temporal survival, mine for instance, means the extension of my existence for an uncertain if finite length of time. As the object of messianic hope, it is evident what it anticipates: a little more time. Also, it implies that the messianic is seized as it is supposed to bring us that little more time. Both these things are beside the point as far as Derrida's messianic is concerned. As we saw earlier, Hägglund thinks the alterity, repetition, and difference as effects of death, collateral to the time of survival. What he oversees is the play by which alterity, repetition, and difference constitute whatever survives.

3.1.4   Messianism and the messianic in *Miracle and Machine*

In the discussion of Hägglund's influential book I have expressed my disagreement and the reasons for it. Let me now turn to another prominent recent work of Derrida-scholarship to which I have already referred: Michael Naas's *Miracle and Machine: Jacques Derrida and the Two Sources of Religion, Science, and the Media*. This book, contrary to Hägglund's even if it does not directly contradict it, takes as its vantage point Derrida's consistent interest in matters of faith, religion, and theology. Also contrary to Hägglund, who claims the entire trajectory of Derrida's

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[72] See also: "To put the old names to work, or even just leave them in circulation, will always, of course, involve some risk: the risk of settling down or of regressing into the system that has been, or is in the process of being, deconstructed. To deny this risk would be to confirm it: it would be to see the signifier – in this case the name – as a merely circumstantial, conventional occurrence of the concept or as a concession without any specific effect" (Derrida 1981a, 5). Richard Kearney separates himself from Derrida as he believes Derrida *loses* the particularity of the messianic (Kearney 2015, 205). I hold that what is particular about the messianic is not the hermeneutics of its redemptive content, but its formal structure – which is exactly what Derrida keeps. Kearney's insistence on a stronger messianic, and its potential, resembles Agamben's, with the distinction that Kearney's position is Derridean or pre-Derridean, and Agamben's, I hold, is post-Derridean.

works for his theory, Naas presents a close reading of one of Derrida's essays: "Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of 'Religion' at the Limits of Reason Alone" – an essay of paradigmatic power that "[…] condenses a great deal of Derrida's prior work and anticipates much of his work in the decade to follow," and Naas explicitly states his ambitions beyond explaining Derrida's text of 1994/1995 (Naas 2012, 1– 2).[73]

Naas addresses the two sources of religion as follows. Religion, for Derrida, draws from two sources: the experience of *sacrality* or immunity, the unscathed on the one hand (which Hägglund says Derrida's work means to reject), and the experience of the promise of that sacrality on the other, which is bound up with *faith*: "the sacrosanct, the safe and sound on the one side, *and* faith, trustworthiness [*fiabilité*] or credit on the other" (Derrida 1998a, 24; Naas 2012, 67). It appears from the text, however, that this double source is not a stable opposition, but rather its two poles – faith and the holy – are mutually implicated and find their substitutes in other terms, such as faith and knowledge, the messianic and *khōra*, and *religare* and *relegere* (Vedder and Van der Heiden 2014, 238). As Naas explains, these two are in conflict: "While the first source is thus an appeal to a certain presence that must remain unscathed, intact, indemnified, the second source is an appeal to a certain blindness or absence beyond presence" (Naas 2012, 67; see also Vedder and Van der Heiden 2014, 439–440). Indeed, to receive the sacred, immune object of the promise ("the very matter – the thing itself – of religion" §27 of Derrida's essay), one must open oneself before what promises, allowing for a contamination between oneself and the sacred ("the milieu of the religious if not religion itself" §34). This impossibility of receiving the religious object of sacrality or immunity – impossibility as it presumes a prior exposure and vulnerability, so: the impossibility of a *return* – I have already brought out and will return to in the context of Rousseau's work.

Contrary to Hägglund, Naas highlights how the paradoxical moment of autoimmunity in Derrida's works is the moment of explanation, not of rejection.

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[73] Presented in Capri, Italy, and concluded in Laguna, USA, the essay itself has two sources.

Religion in Derrida's analysis, Christianity first and foremost, lives off or survives its mutually exclusive sources. The lingering presence of the spectre – the spectre of religion, the spectre of philosophy – is of interest to Derrida.

3.2   Derrida and Agamben

I have introduced Agamben along the lines of a *logocentric* theme of infancy: Agamben precludes the particularity of language. As Kevin Attell notes: "not the (illusory) fully present word, before its supplementation by writing and the trace, but rather what is 'alluded to' by the paradoxical splitting itself, the barrier that permits and resists signification, which, in *Stanzas*, he will also call the human" – yet this logocentrism, and here I concur with Attell, is not pre-Derridean (Attell 2009, 839; Attell 2014, 38). Derrida is the philosopher most sensitive to the particularity of discourse, of language itself (see Hart 1989, 49; Bennington in Bennington and Derrida 1993; and Naas on the irreducibility of terms like *khōra* and the messianic; Naas 2012, 161–182). Indeed, the project of this philosophy of impossibility is closely connected with the restrictions of particular language: "there is no outside-text" (Derrida 1976, 158). This awareness is manifest also from Derrida's insistence of never beginning at the beginning (for which he faults Agamben), but always in *media res*, as deconstruction finds itself "[…] taken by surprise, overtaken by the *tout autre*, the wholly other […]" (Caputo 1997, 3) – in awe with its secret. From Caputo's characterization, the ethical dimension of deconstruction comes to the fore, its exigency of responsibility. Derrida's interest with the date, place, and signature of his essays testifies to this exigency. Of the first commentators to argue for the ethical aspect of Derrida's thought were Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley, the latter of whom took these themes of the particularity of language, being always already engaged with the material, as well as its otherness (in juxtaposition to the theme of the closure of metaphysics) to inform the ethics of deconstruction (Critchley 1999, 32). When Derrida engages in re-establishing the value of writing vis-à-vis the spoken word, this particularity to Derrida also implies its materiality, its fallenness. As Geoffrey Bennington explains: "Much more than the spoken signifier, writing thus seems to accentuate the risk of the detour via the sensible world implied in every signifier. Of course, speech goes out from me into the world, but scarcely so,

and when I speak to myself it appears not to leave me at all: but writing *remains* in a monumentality which we shall soon see linked to death" (Bennington and Derrida 1993, 45). So while Agamben, the philosopher of infancy, reads in the signature the suspended paradigm of communicability, of language, pure significance – in opposition to the way in which the metaphysical tradition conceives of language as the always yet operable, the actual potentiality – Derrida, the philosopher of secrecy, reads in the written mark a content without presence, a content removed, without significance. In what follows I will develop this juxtaposition in two ways. First, I will compare Agamben and Derrida's positions with a view to the messianic time of politics – a question that hangs crucially on the issue of the givenness of language in the form of either a potentiality or a secret. Second, I will elaborate on the themes of theology and the secret as they inform Derrida's stance as regards life as survival. This occurs via the Greek term *khōra* – a term by which Derrida introduces a philosophical element, the element of philosophy, into his rapport with theology – by which I will continue this chapter in its third section.

3.2.1 Derrida and Agamben on the messianic time of politics

Introducing the question of how Derrida and Agamben's work relate, I pointed at Agamben's critique of a certain tendency in contemporary European philosophy: "Our time thus registers the demand for a community without presuppositions; yet without realizing it, it simultaneously maintains the empty form of presupposition beyond all foundations – presupposition of nothing, pure destination" (Agamben 1999a, 113; see also 1999a, 56). The philosophical presupposition of the existence of language appears too, then, in the structure of the contemporary debate on the concept of community. I will now explain the rapport between Derrida and Agamben against the background of this situation.

Adam Thurschwell gives a highly informative account of the rapport between Derrida and Agamben. "Specters of Nietzsche: Potential Futures for the Concept of the Political in Agamben and Derrida" (2003) is admirable particularly for anticipating by six years Agamben's treatise on method, *The Signature of All Things*.

Specifically, Thurschwell is able to anticipate, by underlining Nietzsche's influence on his thought, what Agamben will call philosophical archaeology: "It is the traditional philosophical interpretation of 'return' as re-appropriation of the negative that Agamben seeks to contest [in *Language and Death*] [...] not an appropriation of the negativity of the originary scission, but a return to the 'before,' so to speak, of that originary scission: a return that 'returns' to that which never was and to that which it never left" – here it is obvious how Agamben struggles with a Nietzschean spectre, as from these words emerges the genealogical idea as well as an inverted eternal recurrence (Thurschwell 2003, 1213). I will have more to say on Agamben's interest in the return in section 3.3 when I discuss Derrida's contemplation on the Greek work *khōra*.[74]

Thurschwell's argument takes place in the context of the debate within contemporary continental thought on the notion of "community". Continental thought in the twentieth century, particularly on the Left, was presented with a major problem after the disasters of Nazism and communism. "Specters of Nietzsche" enters this debate on community already by way of its title: "Specters of Nietzsche" echoes Derrida's book *Specters of Marx*, wherein exactly the difficult ghostly presence of communism is considered. Many thinkers on the Left – among whom are the already mentioned Blanchot, as well as Bataille and Nancy, and, most reluctantly, Derrida – have attempted to re-think the concept of community and correct for its tendency towards perversion and authoritarianism. In this context Thurschwell considers the relationship between Derrida and Agamben. For both Derrida and Agamben employ a political messianism in their work to avoid the perversions of communism: Derrida thinks of a messianic that means the incessant

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[74] At other times, however, his privation to Agamben's recent works is apparent: "Against received notions of legality, sovereignty and the statist politics that accompanies them, which he understands exclusively in terms of the power of death over what he calls 'bare life,' Agamben opposes a life that is 'absolutely immanent,' a 'social praxis that, in the end, becomes transparent to itself,' 'a wholly profane mystery in which human beings, liberating themselves from all sacredness, communicate to each other their lack of secrets as their most proper gesture'" (Thurschwell 2003, 1205; Agamben 1999a, 220, 137, 85). Here it shows that Thurschwell is prohibited from Agamben's work on economic theology and governmentality, in *The Kingdom and the Glory* (2011), and probably as a result of this insists on the exclusive reign of the law's non-application, rather than to correct for that exclusiveness by way of the force of government.

deferral of the eschatological moment, and Agamben an ethical dwelling in the eschatological moment, which causes an immanent undoing of the law – according to Thurschwell.

In the present section, I critically assess Thurschwell's interpretation of the relation between Agamben and Derrida. Thurschwell argues that the messianic in Agamben means a seizure of the eschatological moment – indicating both that Agamben, in totalitarian fashion, seizes the destiny of justice (to Derrida the greatest terror), as well as, to the contrary, that Agamben defers the redemption until the *eschaton* (which is Mills and Whyte's objection to Agamben). The first objection, namely that Agamben seizes the *eschaton*, is both correct and incorrect. It is correct insofar as Agamben seizes the paradigm, the position that in being excluded from a metaphysical or logical construct becomes available for a new thought. Yet it is incorrect in saying that Agamben here seizes the *eschaton*. What Agamben takes as a paradigm lies never at the *telos*, but instead is retrieved from the end.

For the debate with Derrida, this (in my view, incorrect) interpretation about deferring to the *eschaton* represents a vital stake. Furthermore, it issues a re-inscription of the problem that messianic thought attempts to address in the first place, as I will demonstrate in what follows. Thurschwell rightly insists on the difference between Agamben's ontological ethics and the Levinasian and Derridean ethics of infinite responsibility. He is also correct to insist on Agamben's main philosophical project: the *experimentum linguae*. Yet he never explains Agamben's rejection of Derridean ethics of responsibility by way of that fundamental project. Indeed, the *experimentum linguae*, its ethics and politics, cannot presuppose the givenness of language, and for this reason Agamben's ethics cannot be one of responsibility.[75] I will deal with both problems in turn.

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[75] Sarah Hansen presents a similar objection to Agamben. Because infantile potentiality is really infantile *in*dependence, Agamben has yet to reckon with the dimension of intersubjectivity (Hansen 2011). But this ignores the fact that to Agamben, the subject only comes about through language in the first place: the infant is pre-subjective – has yet to posit the "I."

Early on in the paper, Thurschwell gives an astute summary of the messianic in Agamben: "Agamben's 'coming community' is not 'coming' in the sense of Derrida's *démocratie á venir*, then, not even as the 'here and now' of a messianic promise, but is in a real sense available as such today – indeed, in sharp contrast to Derrida's account, it is only available as a certain form of immediate linguistic and ontological transparency inherent in the notion of the 'being such' of entities as their 'being called' in language" (Thurschwell 2003, 1209). Yet on three other occasions, Thurschwell interprets Agamben's messianic as a seizure of the eschatological moment. The *eschaton* means the ultimate. With a view to history, it means the final moment and summation of historical time: the Day of Judgment. What this implies is a justification of history itself. The moment of judgment is a historical moment – justice is a function of history. In this sense the *eschaton* is the counterpart to the *katechon*. While the *katechon* means the force that restrains the Antichrist during historical time, the *eschaton* means history's final victory over the problem of evil – and between these poles history is excused for its injustice. Absolute evil is restrained within history, and historical evil is judged upon at the end of history. *Katechon* and *eschaton* both play a part in the theodicy.

Now that we have an idea of the term eschatology, let me present Thurschwell's three claims that the messianic in Agamben is eschatological. First, Thurschwell says: "In essence, Agamben's political-philosophical project combines a messianic-political eschatology – 'thinking the end of the State and the end of history together and mobilizing the one against the other,' as he puts it – with an ontology of human life-as-potential derived primarily from Heidegger" (Thurschwell 2003, 1205; Agamben 1998, 60). This ties in with a subsequent problematic comment on Agamben's resolve to "*kill off*, rather than attend to, the specter" (Thurschwell 2003, 1206) – Agamben's supposed eschatology is conceived here along the lines of Badiou's thought of the event, a thought that radically dismisses tradition, and cannot reconcile itself with the spectre.

Further on, when considering Agamben's objective of a messianic politics beyond sovereignty, Thurschwell in passing makes the following equation: "[...] the result

of that (messianic, eschatological) overcoming will be a revision of the ontological categories of potentiality and actuality [...]" (Thurschwell 2003: 1230). The terms "messianic" and "eschatological" are used as synonyms or at least as comparable in Thurschwell's citation – this is far from self-evident.

Further down, in an elaborate comparison of the messianic between Derrida and Agamben, Thurschwell says:

> Where Agamben's analysis issues in a call for a future task aimed at a future result (the task of the coming philosophy, as Agamben frequently repeats, a task that has not been undertaken "[f]or all the forty millennia of *Homo sapiens*") – a massive task, indeed a messianic task in the eschatological sense – Derrida's issues in an identification of an *existing* crack or rupture in the edifice in question (here, the Schmittian doctrine of the sovereign decision), a flaw that represents, one might say, not a messianic future task so much as an opportunity for thought and for politics in the here-and-now (an opportunity that Derrida acts on in *Politics of Friendship* by demonstrating how Schmitt's categories of "friend" and "enemy" turn in on themselves) (Thurschwell 2003: 1234).

In this passage, there appears to be some space between the messianic and the eschatological, as Thurschwell speaks of "a messianic task in the eschatological sense," implying that the messianic might allow for other meanings as well. From this space between the messianic and the eschatological, Thurschwell draws contradictory or at least ambiguous conclusions. On the one hand, as I have said, he maintains that Agamben's position means a claim to the eschatological moment. Yet on the other hand, this passage clearly states that Agamben speaks of a "coming philosophy," for which certain tasks are reserved. I hold that Thurschwell here projects an incorrect distinction between Agamben's messianic project and the tasks that he assigns to a "coming community" or a "coming philosophy" – the division I alluded to before. To the contrary, I hold that Agamben's project is that coming philosophy. The temporal modality of messianic thought must be that of a coming philosophy. Agamben's philosophy operates in two distinct temporal dimensions: first, there is the historical time in which he analyses particular historical phenomena or paradigms (where we see the eclectic thinker at work), but second – by the same gesture, but not at the same time, for it is not the same time – there is the threshold: a critical time, the time of *kairos*, in which the *experimentum linguae* is conducted (wherein the same thinker insists on having only one, sole

concern) and wherein the paradigms taken from history come to speak on behalf of something much grander. The efforts spent in the first dimension of time can be dated, but the efforts spent in the service of the *experimentum linguae* cannot. This coincides with my objection against Thurschwell's account of Agamben's failure to respond to Derrida's ethics of responsibility: if Derrida's works often responded to a particular occasion, and are for that reason occasioned, dated, and signed in a profound sense, Agamben, in the attempt at *experimentum linguae*, cannot accept a particular date – as he cheerfully presents in 1978 his written and unwritten works under the same rubric *Etica, ovvero della voce* (Agamben 2007a, 3; Derrida and Ferraris 2001, 62).

For this reason, Agamben's work incorporates both the theoretical anticipation of and preparation for a philosophy to come, as well as a body of messianic thought. And this twofold temporal identity or indistinction is necessitated as the *experimentum linguae* involves to bring the potentiality of language to actual wording – the indistinction between potentiality and actuality to which Agamben's work aspires is reflected in its treating of two temporal registers as indistinct; I have dwelled on this extraordinary feature of Agamben's writing in the first chapter. In Agamben's work, potentiality and actuality are to become indistinguishable – this is the *experimentum linguae* – and for this reason the chronological register of history keeps appearing in the stead of the futural, and the other way around – all in an effort of conflating the two. Agamben has described this process as generative of remaining time in *Remnants of Auschwitz*: "[...] at their center lies an irreducible disjunction in which each term, stepping forth in the place of a remnant, can bear witness" (Agamben 1999b, 159). This is what is actually messianic in Agamben's work, and what I read as its messianic motif: in its preparations for a redeemed thought, in charting our itinerary to reach a state in which sovereign state power is overturned and happiness might be possible, we find our own sudden arrival in this zone of freedom. To insist on dividing these aspects between Agamben's fundamental philosophy and his messianic politics, between his written and unwritten works, or in Derrida's words between the levels of description and declaration, is from the outset to have co-opted into Derrida's messianic schema,

and to ignore the pertinence of the *experimentum linguae*. This is what it means, in sum, to reinscribe the experience of time that Agamben calls messianic within historical time, as a function of historical time – the *eschaton* – and thus to repeat the fundamental mistake that Agamben is trying to intervene in. [76] Instead, Agamben's concern with attaining immanence, which would be the only possible site for his "politics and ontology beyond relation", and his examination of paradigms and his conception of messianic time all pertain to this indistinction between potentiality and actuality, between his written and unwritten works, and between the coming philosophy and Agamben's oeuvre itself.[77]

Even their most perceptive readers misrepresent the relationship between Derrida and Agamben to the latter's disadvantage. This occurs when the messianic in Agamben's work is construed as eschatological, making Agamben look naïve or esoteric, or by implicitly or explicitly taking the Levinasian-Derridean concept of

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[76] This confusion plagues other accounts of the messianic in Agamben as well. Jessica Whyte's recent *Catastrophe and Redemption: The Political Thought of Giorgio Agamben* (2013) blames Agamben for relying blindly on the Hölderlinian principle that salvation comes in the moment of grave danger: "[...] the real weakness of his political thought: that is, its tendency to see the intensification of the catastrophe of the present as the path to redemption" (Whyte 2013, 3). Whyte's narrative is indebted to Antonio Negri's influential review of Agamben, where this distinction is introduced: "It seems that there are two Agambens" (Negri in Calarco and DeCaroli 2007, 117). Another advocate of this interpretation is Agata Bielik-Robson: "Instead of building one constellation, Agamben tells two parallel stories: the tragic narrative of *nuda vita*, with the paradigmatic case of *homo sacer*, and the messianic counter-narrative of *il resto*, which draws on an emphatically non-tragic tradition of Jewish thinking. Agamben does not offer any convincing synthesis of these two narratives, and these two stories, taken in conjunction, result in a mutually neutralizing collapse: a peculiarly anti-climactic eschatological vision that I would call a *post-tragic apocalypse*" – I hold that rather than working the synthesis, Agamben means to unearth their indifference (Bielik-Robson 2010, 108). Catherine Mills too thinks that redemption in Agamben's thought is divorced from his actual political analysis: "Agamben offers a redemptive hope that is external to the problems of biopolitics", and she repeats: "[...] rather than contributing to genuinely radical political theory, his apparent radicalism passes into a kind of anti-political quietism" (Mills 2004, 50; Mills 2008, 137). This is the same referral or deferral of Agamben's messianic to an eschatological moment. To the contrary, Agamben is not prepared to wait for redemption at all – this is exactly his objection to Derrida's messianic and deconstruction in general (for a more positive and practical Agamben, see Snoek 2012, 6; and Abbott 2014, 2).

[77] There is actually one instance in Agamben's work where it appears to issue a "call for a future task aimed at a future result." The essay "Theory of Signature" concludes on a note of wonder with regard to the possibility of a philosophical enquiry after the *archē* of knowledge itself – which entails salvaging an *archē* older than knowledge: "Whether a philosophical enquiry is possible that reaches beyond signatures toward the Non-marked that, according to Paracelsus, coincides with the paradisiacal state and final perfection is, as they say, another story, for others to write" (Agamben 2009, 80). Even if there is a task reserved here for future thinkers, it is not a messianic one, but is instead one that goes even further. However, the question as to whether Agamben's own position is implicated in this question is legitimate, the analogy with the travelling rabbis Aher and Akiba in the essay "Pardes" clearly applies to Derrida and Agamben.

ethics for granted, and not fully accounting for the link between the messianic task of thinking the existence of language and an ontological ethics.

3.2.2 Derrida and Agamben on theology and philosophy

Let me now bring out the *différance* and the indifference of the onto-theology of language. In the first chapter, I dwelled on a striking feature of Agamben's work, one that I have described as a turn towards the pre-discursive. First of all, I brought out this feature in the way in which Agamben reads statements with a view to their lingual facticity: what matters is not *what* they say, but *that* they say. Agamben wants to revive a certain Platonic mode of philosophy that does not presuppose, and the pre-discursive turn is a part of that ambition. It is this aspect, which is connected to the theological concept of revelation – the appearance of language as such – that has brought Agamben so close to theology: the discovery of the fundamental presupposition of the *logos*. So while Derrida studies the sign in its *différance* of *logos*, Agamben seizes it as the *indifference* of language, or communicability – the moment in which meaning is not removed but indifferent, whatever (see Watkin 2014). Agamben holds that Derrida's work treats "signatures as pure writing beyond every concept, which thus guarantees the inexhaustibility – the infinite deferral – of signification" (Agamben 2009, 78; Watkin 2014, 23–24). Although Derrida's work here stands under the sign of inexhaustibility, of absolute excess, it is the vitality and excess of a signature that remains idle – that remains at the zero degree. Indeed, it is this aspect of Agamben's thought, as it is interested in reading the signatures within signs, and thus in "a signature that, in the absence of a signified, continues to operate as the exigency of an infinite signification that cannot be exhausted by any signified" that has provided me with the logic of saturation – Agamben and Benjamin "steeped in theology" – that I will continue in the final chapter. Kevin Hart brings out an elusive play of this logic of saturation in Derrida's work, and cites Derrida's statement that "no meaning can be determined out of context, but no context permits saturation", while he also claims "Key words – *parergon*, *hymen*, *pharmakon* – are not so much used *for* analysis as they are *used up* in the analysis" (Hart 1989, 12, 23; Derrida quoted in Bloom 1979, 81). The

signature in Derrida is force without signification – it is a dwelling in theological banishment. I have explained how, for Agamben, this means to continue the structure of presupposition: that the sign is inexhaustible by its signified means that this signified is always abandoned by the sign – the logic from Nancy's essay. We can read the following sentence accordingly: "If a speech could be purely present, unveiled, naked, offered up in person its truth, without the detours of a signified foreign to it, if at the limit an undeferred *logos* were possible, it would not seduce anyone" (Derrida 1981a, 71). On the contrary, writing *is* seductive, is a *pharmakon*, because its meaning is not sanctioned by such a *logos*. Indeed, its meaning – its *vouloir-dire*, *that* it says – is generated by an irreducible separation from *logos*. In more familiar wording and underlining the traditional philosophical distrust of writing, this argument holds that the writing of a letter communicates only because its delivery cannot be guaranteed, while its circulation in the absence of the author is itself immediate: "A writing that is not structurally readable – iterable – beyond the death of the addressee would not be writing" (Derrida 1989b, 7; see also Derrida 1987, 444). Indeed, Derrida has put it succinctly in his first publication: "[…] writing creates a kind of autonomous transcendental field from which every present subject can be absent" (Derrida 1989a, 88). *Différance* is older than Being (Derrida 1982, 26). To Derrida the signature means the undecidability on meaning – *différance* between the fact and content of transmission. This means that Derrida reads the signature as the separation from the signified – the fact of communication is always understood as the delayed content of communication. Yet this is another way of bringing out the structure of presupposition: the fact that ultimately no particular *logos* is given does not change the fact that some *logos* is still presupposed – even if it moves perennially beyond our grasp. This structure is what Derrida has identified by the term *différance*. For Agamben, on the contrary, this separation from meaningful content is a trivial aspect of the signature, not an essential one: "Philosophy concerns itself with what is at issue not in this or that meaningful statement but in the very fact that human beings speak, that there is language and opening to sense, beyond, before or, rather *in* every determinate event of signification" (Agamben 1999a, 104). The signature is not the announcement of a *logos* that is spatially or temporally removed, but is simply the announcement of

language or communicability itself. So while for Derrida the signature means the absence of *logos*, for Agamben it means the advent of language – in spite of any spatial or temporal discord with the *logos*. For Derrida the signature is the mark of writing, for Agamben it is that of communicability. Let me now explain this structural difference with regards to the assumption of language with a view to the role of theology.

Like Agamben's work, Derrida's work is intimately connected to the notion of the Fall, as I have already suggested by underlining the materiality of writing. Kevin Hart lists the sources that indicate that for Derrida (and Hegel) philosophy commences with the Fall: "*In historiam*, it is the fall of thought into philosophy which gets history under way" (Derrida 1978, 27; for similar examples, see Derrida 1981b, 53; and Derrida 1982, 64). In *Of Grammatology*, the theme of the Fall is entirely dominant, either in the form of Saussure's complicity with the sign or Rousseau's narrative on the loss of sexual innocence and the descent of languages. Derrida, then, like Agamben, conceives of metaphysics as constitutionally connected to theology: "The epoch of the *logos* thus debases writing considered as mediation of mediation and as a fall into the exteriority of meaning" (Derrida 1976, 12–13). Yet the messianic for Derrida is separable from religious messianism, as is evident when he discusses "the formality of a structural messianism, a messianism without religion, even a messianic without messianism" (Derrida 1994, 159; John D. Caputo's book is dedicated to this theme of "religion without religion", see Caputo 1997) – for Derrida the messianic does not necessarily respond to a certain theological thesis, as it does for Agamben. The reason for this, in short, is that while a *messianism* is concerned with holiness, the messianic has to do with the dimension of faith. Holiness, as Derrida understands it, conveys a sense of "wholeness" that is derivative of alterity and repetition (Derrida 1998a, 47), as is apparent already from *Speech and Phenomena* (Derrida 1973, 54; Vedder and Van der Heiden 2014, 441). I have examined this reduction above, with help from Hägglund and Naas' works. Instead, the messianic is what he calls a universalizable – a term that can signify beyond any context that Derrida can oversee. The *names* messianic and *khōra* prompt *traces* that reach far beyond any particular content ascribed to them. As a consequence of the

separation between the messianic and messianisms, the vision of redemption differs for Derrida. For Derrida it is the paradisiacal notion of perfect presence that is troublesome, philosophically and ethically, as it denies the representations, repetitions and alterities that structurally precede it. In this sense Derrida can be said to embrace banishment from Paradise in the dissemination of representations.

Evincing the proximity between deconstruction and theology, Kevin Hart asks "Is it possible to read the deconstruction of theology as a *theological* process?" – as the discourses of theology and of deconstruction take place in the ban of Eden, with neither the possibility nor the ambition of return (Hart 1989, 21). Jean-Luc Nancy holds a similar position, claiming that "Christianity *as such*, is surpassed, because it is itself, and by itself, in a state of being surpassed." And this is because "*the Christian faith is itself the experience of its history*" – Christianity is its own passage through historical diaspora (Nancy 2008, 141, 146).[78] Agamben has tried to reinscribe this passage back onto to the heart of Christianity, quoting from Clement's *Letter to the Corinthians*: "The Church of our Lord sojourning in Rome to the Church of our Lord sojourning in Corinth" (Agamben 2012, 1). For indeed, as we have seen, this abandonment is just what theology describes – this is what theology already *knows*, what makes it a *discipline* – and it is in this sense that Derrida has not pierced the spell of onto-theology, but has instead accepted its banishment.[79] This is Agamben's objection to deconstruction. For Agamben, on the contrary, pure paradisiacal presence as presence-that-is-absent – potentiality – was always the first metaphysical motif (Agamben 1991, 37), and it is problematic because it keeps philosophy reliant on certain presuppositions and precludes it from thinking the absolution of these presuppositions, from thinking the absolute. The evangelical feature of Christianity, its deconstruction, is what attracts Agamben and also Nancy: Christianity *is* the steady process of revealing its secret, of the dying God exhausting his potential, and this to Agamben means that it harbours the resources for a free

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[78] In this sense, Christianity – for Derrida the religion *par excellence* – exists in the same tension as does language in Rousseau's account: its existence *is* its history and descent.

[79] De Vries writes: "[...] the theological [...] has no existence, no life, independent of the ('total') movement of the trace taken now as a radical finitizing drift that is, ultimately, infinite, nothing less" (De Vries 2015, 26).

form-of-life, as he explains in *The Highest Poverty*. Yet for Derrida, that Christianity is always on the brink of exhausting the Gospel makes it a religion in the proper sense – and it marks also the separation between Christianity and his own thought: Derrida's thought is one that circumscribes and confesses to the secret, but that does not share it. Derrida holds Christianity is also the denial of its very own mediatisation: it always reproduces its representations as present, "live": "Television always involves a protest against television; television pretends to efface itself, to deny television" (Derrida 2001a, 62). This is exactly what deconstruction means to expose, in putting emphasis on the mediation involved in any conceptual presentation – and this indicates that to Derrida, Christianity is deconstructible. This stance on the tacit tele-mediation of religion is already implied by the logic of auto-immunity that Derrida establishes as early as *Speech and Phenomena* (Derrida 1973, 54; Naas 2012, 126). At stake in this logic of auto-immunity is a notion of temporality (Derrida 1973, 63; Marrati 2005, 178–179), the same understanding of time that is at play in the statement "*Ti esti* is already charged with history" (Derrida and Ferraris 2001, 66), and that begets history by way of the Fall (Derrida 1978, 26).

Let me provide another aspect – that I just alluded to – of how Derrida, to Agamben's mind, would continue the structure of presupposition: his respect for the secret: "We testify [*témoignons*] to a secret that is without content, without a content separable from its performative experience, from its performative tracing" (Derrida 1995: 24). In the essay "Passions: An Oblique Offering", Derrida gives evidence of his unconditional respect for the secret, which can be understood as a respect for the law.[80] While Agamben seeks to expose secrets, Derrida cherishes them, and indeed, they are for him the trace of the messianic – a world without secrets, a world without *différance*, has no future (see Caputo 1997, 101–102). For another example of this attitude towards the secret, in the interview "The Almost Nothing of the

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[80] Agamben's most comprehensive exposure of Derrida's respect before the law is set out in *Homo Sacer*, with a view to the way in which Derrida reads Kafka's parable *Before the Law*, and in the essay "The Messiah and the Sovereign: The Problem of Law in Walter Benjamin" (Agamben 1998, 48–53; Agamben 1999a, 160–176).

Unpresentable," asked after the heritage of Plato and Hegel, Derrida says: "[...] I always have the feeling that, despite centuries of reading, these texts remain untouched, withdrawn into a reserve" (Derrida 1995b, 82). For another example, *The Gift of Death*, the book on Kierkegaard, demonstrates this respect for the secret (Derrida 1995c, 92). Furthermore, Derrida's taste for the secret is evident from the title of a book he published together with Maurizio Ferraris (Derrida and Ferraris 2001). John D. Caputo clarifies that the secret Derrida is enamoured by is not something simply not disclosed to him, but rather a "non-knowing": "Writing in the passion of non-knowing, rather than the secret" (Derrida 1991, 75; Caputo 1997, 102). This is a part of what *différance* suggests: a *deference* before the absent *logos*, before the absent and impenetrable law*.* This means also respect for the sovereign ban. This secret ties in with the way in which Derrida thinks language works: if any communicated content would be unambiguously and completely comprehensible, communication itself would not be possible – as appears from "Plato's Pharmacy." Consider the following lines from an essay on structuralist literary criticism, with the pertinent title "Force and Signification": "A city no longer inhabited, not simply left behind, but haunted by meaning and culture. This state of being haunted, which keeps the city from returning to nature, is perhaps the general mode of the presence or absence of the thing itself in pure language" (Derrida 1978). It is clear that the inhabitants of this city are banned, they have not "simply left [it] behind" – indeed, they cannot. Furthermore, they cannot return, because the city remains haunted and cannot be reclaimed by nature. The thing itself of pure language – the thing of language in Agamben's terms – remains in a sovereign state of exception. As Van der Heiden explains:

> The sovereign is the one who within the order of law can decide on the state of exception. What does this state of exception mean? When the *nomos* [law] is interrupted, we seem to end up with the *phusis* [nature]. But the sovereign is a political notion and thus inseparably connected with the *nomos*, albeit via interruption and deferral. This is what makes of the state of exception a zone where *nomos* and *phusis* are indistinguishable (my translation; Van der Heiden 2012, 260).

The city that was abandoned cannot return to nature (*phusis*) or to the state of law (*nomos*). While all of Agamben's work is geared towards overturning this status quo

by fully articulating its *archē*, Derrida's means to do justice to the point of view of the exile.[81]

As an illuminating way of bringing out the difference between Derrida and Agamben, let us consider the following. I have explained how much of Agamben's work seizes its momentum by first 'setting aside' particular metaphysical constructs or laws of logic. This we have seen with regards to the principle of non-contradiction and the principle of sufficient reason, two of the strongest logical and metaphysical principles. These principles are based on an assumption that becomes the remnant of their application. It we consider the remnant, we find that the principle applies by not applying – it operates in suspension. Indeed, for Agamben the example is of the oath that is suspended from its bindingness in its very exemplarity (Agamben 2011b, 17). For Agamben, what is set aside is seized as a paradigm, and in its suspense it offers intelligibility beyond presupposition. For Derrida, on the other hand, any discourse on the promise is always already situated within the promise (Derrida 2007b, 153). Derrida too maintains a difficult relationship to the tradition of metaphysics and the laws of logic. There are many examples wherein Derrida exposes the metaphysical conditions that make a particular phenomenon possible, yet at the same time make it impossible – for it would be essential for the phenomenon to be unconditional. Examples are the gift, hospitality, democracy, Levinas' unassuming ethical regard for the Other, and, as I have briefly indicated, the name, the *salut*, religion. I defended this feature of deconstruction against Hägglund. What Derrida does with these phenomena is to describe the logico-metaphysical conditions of their (im)possibility, their miracle, yet in keeping with their entire edifice.[82] So while Derrida deconstructs metaphysical theses, he only undermines them to the extent that he shows how they operate and falter in the same instant. He decidedly does *not* 'set them aside' – on the contrary, they remain absolutely

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[81] This point of view betrays an inconsistency in structuralism. The discovery of the structure as an object for study means an immediate threat. In fact, the city or the structure only appears in full for the first time on the eve of its destruction (Derrida 1978). And this means that the method of structuralism cannot be content with its rewards, for what it returns either renders its achievement untrue, or destroys the very thing it has successfully explained.

[82] This has been my objection to Hägglund.

pertinent with regards to the phenomenon they explain/obscure. Deconstructions occur in absolute proximity to their host – particular metaphysical and literary texts – which they cannot set aside: "Our discourse irreducibly belongs to the system of metaphysical oppositions. The break with this structure of belonging can be announced only through a *certain* organization, a certain *strategic* arrangement which, within the field of metaphysical opposition, uses the strengths of the field to turn its own stratagems against it, producing a force of dislocation that spreads itself throughout the entire system, fissuring it in every direction and thoroughly *delimiting* it" – the closure of metaphysics is only possible from within its discourse (Derrida 1978, 20; See also Derrida 1976, 19; and Critchley 1999, 22: "[...] Derrida's readings are parasitic, because they are close readings that draw their sustenance from within the flesh of the host"). In fact, what this means to Agamben is that deconstruction merely demonstrates the inevitability of the structure of the presupposition. For Derrida the remnant never becomes *available* – it cannot be read paradigmatically; instead, it is the undeconstructible, it is the secret. The remnant can only be *circumfessed* – it can be admitted, it cannot be communicated (Bennington and Derrida 1993, 207–208).[83] All communication is abandoned by a secret.

So the separation between Derrida and Agamben is reducible to this point: deconstruction does not set aside the laws that it critiques; rather it keeps these laws by showing their insufficiency. This stance means, for Agamben, to continue the structure of presupposition and potentiality, and furthermore to reinforce it: not only are we contingently abandoned by a sovereign potential – a contingency that would allow for the euporetic seizure of its *haecceity* – but this abandonment is conceived as necessary and permanent. *Différance* is potentiality going by another name; in fact, it is potentiality going by no name whatsoever – and this means the immunity of potentiality.

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[83] I will return to the significance of the remnant for Derrida in section 3.4.

I have demonstrated that Agamben's gravest concern with Derrida is that the latter's thought leaves the structure of presupposition intact – in Derrida's work there is always a prior word, an older trace, to which philosophy is occasioned to respond. To conclude this section and to introduce the next, let me test Derrida's thought of presupposition in the moment when Derrida asks a rather Agambenian question: "a duty before the first word, is this possible?" (Derrida 2007b, 143). This question is asked in Jerusalem, 1986, and Derrida reveals he has deferred this question and theme for years, to address it precisely there and then. Indeed, *place* is a vital concept for Derrida when explaining his rapport with theology that I will develop shortly.

"How to avoid speaking?" *Comment ne pas dire…*? This is the title of Derrida's address. However, as Derrida explains, this question is a double one.[84] The question "how to avoid speaking?" implies to Derrida two related questions: (1) How to remain *silent*, when being repeatedly asked, as Derrida was, to speak on the topic of negative theology that he, in this particular speech, may or may not be addressing? (2) *How* shouldn't one speak? In *what way* should one not speak (of God for instance)? The first question implies the second (which Agamben would deny), which in turn leads immediately to the question of how to speak (Derrida 2007b, 153–154). To accommodate both senses of his question, Derrida suspends: he admits having put off the subject of negative theology, by virtue of and despite his promise to tackle it one day, and even during his speech he appears to procrastinate – making both his delivery as well as the years of silence on the matter a topical performance of "how to avoid speaking about negative theology." "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials" is informed entirely by an ethics of responsibility – Derrida's contemplation of an obligation *before* the first word comes in the form of a *response*.[85]

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84 Double at least. For other connotations of the title "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials", see Gersh 2010, 108.

85 What is promised is at the same time kept in reserve, what is reserved is already pledged – Derrida is often on the brink of exposing the structure of potentiality, or writes exactly *of* this exposing moment without continuing its revealing movement, as if he is afraid that his narrative would have to take the form of something in turn to be revealed. Likewise in "Ousia and Grammē": "[…] it already

Derrida's deferral before negative theology addresses the notions of secrecy and of place. Both are important for this thesis, as Agamben's archaeology of potentiality means an attack on secrecy, and his conception of ethics in connection with his work with paradigms means a "taking place", a *taking* of the place, extinguishing the secret. I shall now continue the question of place, *khōra* and how Agamben's work finds an exceptional justification in Derrida's use of this term – a paradigmatic justification in the excluded presupposition of the principle of sufficient reason, in the *ou mallon*, the "no more than".

3.3   *Khōra* and contingency[86]

In this section I will continue the analysis of the structure of presupposition in Derrida's work, from Agamben's perspective. Here I will see to the cosmogonical repercussions of that structure. I established in the previous chapter that Agamben takes Bartleby to descend the Tartarus in the occasion of God's second Creation – here that manoeuvre will be attributed to Derrida's immanent analysis of *khōra*, from which, by a Neoplatonic gesture, Agamben's narrative emanates.

I elaborate on the significance for Derrida of this Greek work *khōra* because his treatment of it covers many of the concerns Agamben dealt with in the Bartleby essay, notably *creatio ex nihilo* and the evasion of the logic of non-contradiction by way of a third genre. To match Agamben's ontology of redeemed contingency in Derridean terminology, *khōra* is indispensable. Richard Kearney asks rhetorically: "Perhaps khora could thus be reinterpreted as the aboriginal matrix that God would need to become flesh?" – giving a clue to the messianic connotation of *khōra* (Kearney 2015, 210). Kevin Attell notes that it is Agamben's essay "Pardes" that responds first and foremost to "Khōra*".* Indeed, "Pardes" engages openly with *khōra*, and takes it as the most important Derridean motif (Attell 2014, 108).[87] Yet I want

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promises the second volume of *Being and Time*, but that it does so, we might say, by *reserving* the second volume" (Derrida 1982, 35).

[86] For consistency I spell *khōra* throughout.

[87] *Sauf le Nom* appeared in 1993 with Editions Galilée, three years after "Pardes". "Khōra", however, appeared in 1987 in *Poikilia: Etudes offertes à Jean-Pierre Vernant* (Lévi-Strauss 1987).

to bring out the connection between Derrida and Agamben's forays into cosmology. William Watkin stresses that it is crucial to understand Agamben's rapport to the *khōretic* element in Derrida's thought: "Content no longer with explaining Agamben's critique of Derrida or presenting a critique of this critique, we rather come up against the true intention of Agamben's work, which pertains to an explanation of indifference through the attempted appropriation of Derrida's work to the cause" (Watkin 2014, 123).

Between Derrida and Agamben, *khōra* is contested in the following way. The "third genre" of *khōra* is, for Agamben, not already implied in and thus undermining of metaphysical conceptuality – as it is for Derrida – but rather it is the *place* wherein that conceptuality is taken up and redeemed of its presuppositions: aporia turns into euporia (Watkin continues his analysis along such lines). In setting up this confrontation between Agamben and Derrida's texts, we have to bear in mind that they draw from different sources – the source of *khōra*, *khōra* as source is exactly what is disputed. Agamben's philosophical archaeology on potentiality performs the *archē* of an *Aristotelian* concept – as appears from the essay "The Thing Itself", it is with Aristotle that Agamben holds that the absolute withdraws behind the *gramma*, withdraws into potentiality. Derrida, on the contrary, precludes or means to preclude the Aristotelian tradition in his address of the word *khōra* in Plato's *Timaeus*. As Michael Naas explains, for Derrida *khōra* is a universalizable, a desert within the desert – not to be equated with any particular philosophical or religious programme (Naas 2012, 173).[88] So Derrida explores *Plato* instead, and then again *Socrates in* Plato: the *mise en abyme* of infinite ironies in Plato's writings, never reducible to a thetical position.

I argue that it is a messianic repetition or return in which *khōra* is redeemed from its aporias, as it is seized as a paradigm in the shape of Agamben's archaeology of potentiality: the saturation of *khōra* as contingent matter taking place. So in this section I *revisit* the myth of *creatio ex nihilo* – the symbol of philosophy's alliance with theology – under another philosophical guise, Platonic rather than Aristotelian,

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[88] "A desert within the desert"; I take this to convey the desert *of* monotheism, *deserted*.

led by a strangely withdrawn Socrates instead of Bartleby. Furthermore, I address the Derridean account of a resistance to the logic of non-contradiction by way of their third genre (their remnant) to finally understand an ontological modality that is wrested – secularized or profaned – from Creation. I address Derrida's text on the *Timaeus* as a way, furthermore, of resisting Agamben's vision of his work wherein Derrida is associated with an Aristotelian science of the *gramma*, and divorced from Platonic thought free of presupposition – a way of resisting Agamben's seizure of *khōra* as "taking place". A more vulnerable Derrida can be found in his explicit engagement with Aristotle's thought "*Ousia* and *Grammē*: Note on a Note from *Being and Time*" – in some ways a counterpart to "*Khōra*" – where grammatology means the prohibition of thinking the thing of the trace itself (Derrida 1982, 66). Indeed, Plato's *Timaeus* is an exemplary text with regards to the project of the absolution of presuppositions. As John Sallis explains, the distinction between the eternal and the transient at the beginning of Timaeus' speech is at one and the same time a presupposition on the basis of which the discourse is held, and an hypothesis for the discourse to argue: "Rather than simply asserting an established distinction, the *Timaeus* reopens the *question* of the distinction" (Sallis 1999, 49). Sallis' theme is that of the new beginning, as *khōra* also indicates, for the *Timaeus*, a new foray into cosmogony. Accordingly, *khōra* denotes repetition and alterity. Paul Allen Miller too draws attention to this aspect of the *Timaeus*: "The *Timaeus* is, in fact, an unfinalizable dialogue in which each moment of positing is also a moment of irony and interrogation, of simultaneous acceptance and active separation" (Miller 2010, 326).

What *khōra* allows, perhaps first of all, is the notion of a return – an original return, a return to the origin: *creatio ex nihilo*. It revisits a place abandoned, a desert within the desert. As I said, for a philosophy of the Fall – Derrida's, Agamben's – the notion of place is crucial: where do we fall? In this sense, *khōra,* to Agamben, as a way of exposing the principle of sufficient ground, indicates the Nietzschean concept of the eternal return of the same: "Thus what the vicious circle of eternal return brings back eternally is not a *vitium*, a defect or lack, but a *virtus*, a *dynamis* and infinite potency: a *potentia* which, devoid of both subject and object works upon itself, tends

toward itself, and thus unites in itself both meanings of the Aristotelian *dynamis*: *potentia passiva*, passivity, receptivity, and *potentia activa*, tension toward action, spontaneity" (Agamben 1986, 14–15). Yet this *dynamis* is only achieved in Melville's copyist who ends the work of writing, and brings the eternal recurrence to its immobile zenith (Agamben 1999a, 268; Agamben 2004b, 614). Hence the justification of my discussion, which will now follow.

For Derrida, as monotheist religious thought is undercut by the *temporality* of the messianic, which is a universalizable that does not properly belong to the order of the holy and the indemnified – the properly religious content – so it is suspended over an abyss that marks its *spatiality* but does not properly belong to it: *khōra*. In Modern Greek *khōra*, written χώρα, means "country", "land", "chief town" or "village" or "region", and interestingly enough for us it has a verbal form too: χώραν or λαμβάνω, "to take place" (Oxford Dictionary of Modern Greek, Greek–English 1965, 216; English–Greek 1982, 237). Plato's character Timaeus calls it a "receptacle" and compares it to a nurse (Plato, 48e). What it does is to provide a "home for all created things" and it is "apprehended, when all sense is absent, by a kind of spurious reason" (52b1–2). However, as a philosophical term it is extremely difficult to define – not because no definition is adequate but rather because it receives and accommodates all of them. Derrida notes that *khōra* has been the topic of extensive commentary throughout the history of thought, yet establishes the ahistorical void around which that history is written: "The *khōra* is anachronistic; it 'is' the anachrony within being, or better: the anachrony of being" (Derrida 1995a, 94).[89] Is *khōra*, then, also the *anarchy* of being, its lack of principle?

I have referred to two key motifs of Derrida's thought: the name and the trace. Let me now rehearse the opening sentences of "*Khōra*": "*Khōra* reaches us, and as the name. And when a name comes, it immediately says more than the name: the other of the name and quite simply the other, whose irruption the name announces" (Derrida 1995a, 89). Derrida's reading of the *Timaeus* is going to take place between

[89] Joanna Hodge describes *khōra* under the rubric of a "topolitology of the secret" (Hodge 2007, 156). Michael Naas describes *khōra* as the "nocturnal source of light" (Naas 2012, 173; Agamben understands light in a similar way, see Agamben 1995, 119).

these poles: a name arrives, revealing nothing of itself – *khōra* does not disclose any content – but rather it declares a trace. However, this trace, an effect of the name, is not the trace of *khōra*. The trace conditions legibility, but not of *khōra*. *Khōra*, its name, cannot be read – the reading of it means to negotiate between name and trace. For this reading also cannot content itself with interpreting the trace and nothing else, for that would be merely to read *with* the positive cosmology that Timaeus presents on the back of *khōra*, to read *with* its history of interpretations (to which Derrida does not object, however his interest lies elsewhere), and finally, to read *khōra* as part of a history of being. On the contrary, to Derrida *khōra* indicates the *anachrony* of being (Derrida 1995a, 94). *Khōra*, it appears, refers to ontology's failure to meet Being – it is what ontology, for structural reasons, cannot say of Being: its contingency, or, in Meillassoux's terms, its principled unreason – this is the present claim. Derrida's term "the anachrony of Being" exposes this feature – that Being cannot be satisfied within a history of Being, not even by its *eschaton* – while it also refers to the myth of *creatio ex nihilo*. As it refers to the question of the origin of the universe, of Being itself, *khōra* names without identifying Being's withdrawal behind its history – which is not the same thing as naming a transcendent Being removed from history.

Agamben's Bartleby essay begins by explaining the image that was at one time attributed to Aristotle: "Aristotle was the scribe of nature who dipped his pen in thought." The relation between the writing and the paper, or indeed, the wax-slate, is fundamental in his essay, as it is the relation to which others, between the mind and its thoughts and between God and Creation, are reducible – as I demonstrated in Chapter 2. Derrida too, in "*Khōra*" and elsewhere (Derrida 1978, 196–231), addresses the rapport between the pen and the wax. However, for Derrida, this image is not absolutely caught up with Aristotle's, or any, philosophy, as its question of *writing* is supposed to exceed all that is programmatic about philosophy. Indeed, for Derrida, this image – the image of *khōra* – is still, is always, to be decided upon, is the *différance* of that hermeneutic decision. Which is to say that Derrida is not engaging, on an explicit level, with the archaeology of potentiality but is instead still writing a philosophy of potentiality – continuing its presuppositions while at the

same time commencing their exposure. This distinction reflects on the level of Agamben and Derrida's explicit positions regarding the messianic: for Derrida it is the dimension of what is always still to come – *à-venir* – while for Agamben it is the dimension of the reappropriation of the present by a depletion of its potential. Indeed, as I have consistently held throughout this thesis, the messianic is something that reverberates deeper than merely the level of the politico-religious rapport to the future (this has been the purpose of my idiosyncratic address of its motif): it appears in the very essence of fundamental philosophy.

Unlike Agamben, Derrida allows for a *space* between revelation and monotheism. I have already brought out the *différance* between messianeity and the messianism. In the essay "Faith and Knowledge", Derrida seeks a universalizable principle of revealability, and, as is his wont, this is to be traced by its historico-religious, particular idiom: the messianic and *khōra*.[90] It is by way of these terms that Derrida means to find a secular faith, one that can account for what takes place in philosophical discourse: "*The chance of this desert in the desert (as of that which* resembles to a fault*, but without reducing itself to, that* via negativa *which makes its way from a Graeco-Judaeo-Christian tradition) is that in uprooting the tradition that bears it, in atheologizing it, this abstraction, without denying faith, liberates a universal rationality and the political democracy that cannot be dissociated from it*" (Derrida 1998a, 19).[91] The separation that Derrida does not allow here is the one between universal rationality and political democracy, but I think there is also an indelible connection between both of them and the Graeco-Judaeo-Christian tradition – so that Derrida's is a secular logic, not a profane one. The liberation, the *a*theology here is only relative: its structure remains that of faith, of potentiality, of responding, of writing.

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[90] I have set out the juxtaposition between Agamben and Derrida in terms of language and its respective infancy and particularity in sections 1.2 and 3.2.

[91] The philosophical ramifications of this secular faith are articulated as follows: "*Yes* can be implied without the word being said or written" (Derrida 1992b, 296); and "[...] a *yes* no longer suffers any metalanguage; it engages the 'performative' of an originary affirmation and remains thus presupposed by every utterance *on the subject* of *yes*" (Derrida 2007a, 232), as well as the address of negative theology in "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials."

Khōra, sited at the anarchical and anachronic moment of *creatio ex nihilo*, then, partakes in the principle of non-contradiction and the principle of reason – the two fundamental laws of logic and metaphysics, whose suspension by the paradigmatic remnant I described in the previous chapter. Indeed, Derrida consistently follows, along with the political issue (of an *authoritative* discourse, coming from a *proper* position – one that is, however, only warranted through its surrender by one who improperly held it, Socrates – like the *proper* history of the Hellenes only becomes available through its adoptive scholars, the Egyptian priests), these two themes: that of Being (metaphysical or ontological) and that of the *logos* (logical) in their relationship of abandonment with *khōra* – where the principles of reason and non-contradiction are kept in limbo. However, in Derrida's analysis, *khōra* still partakes in both of them, or rather: they partake in *khōra*. *Khōra* is not simply prior to the logic of non-contradiction; it is not simply and straightforwardly its excluded third term – for it is not a third term that accepts abandonment by the non-contradiction principle – rather, it is the place of that third term, singular each time (Derrida 1995a, 89, 91, 107). With regards to the principle of reason – the principle of sufficient ground – *khōra* refers not to an absent support or an absence as support, but merely to the absence of support (Derrida 1995a, 99). It is neither the preclusive denial nor a modification of these principles. As Derrida indicates, it is neither *logos* nor *mythos*, but a "bastard *logos*". *Khōra* is not, indeed, properly a third genre. It speaks no discourse of its own; instead, it hears now the vernacular of myth, then that of reason. It is exposed, as many commentators agree, in the effort of marking a new beginning, or by taking a step back (Sallis 1999; Derrida 1995a; Miller 2010). This step back is, however, also the movement by which, for Agamben, the paradigmatic remnant becomes available – yet Derrida insists from the start (the very beginning) that *khōra* seems "alien to the order of the paradigm" (Derrida 1995a, 90; Van der Heiden 2014, 280). Only by a return to *khōra*, which is a return to the return and its singularity, can it be set aside for thought.

However, for Derrida *khōra* accords with his own thought of responsibility and hospitality: how does language receive logic? How does writing receive thought? This is what deconstruction exposes *and* guards. The step back, to Derrida, does not

presume to *take khōra*, to seize it, for the gesture of that seizure would only betray the seized. To Agamben, on the other hand, what is encountered in the step back is the paradigm – immediately intelligible. So while Derrida observes great restraint before *khōra*, because it cannot be appropriated into metaphysical conceptuality, for Agamben for this very reason through his reconception as *'taking* place' it is the pre-eminent vessel for thought. This becomes evident at the end of the first section, where Derrida sets up *khōra* as the exile of Timaeus' cosmogony: "What it would thus cover over, closing the gaping mouth of the quasi-banned discourse on *khōra*, would perhaps not only be the abyss between the sensible and the intelligible, between being and nothingness, between being and the lesser being, nor even perhaps between being and the existent, nor yet between *logos* and *muthos*, but between all these couples and another which would not even be *their* other" (Derrida 1995a, 104).

As this thesis consistently highlights Derrida's vocation as a keeper of memory, a guard of tradition, let me indicate here that Derrida does not object to the canon of interpretations of *khōra* (Derrida 1995b, 149; Derrida 1995a, 99). As said, *khōra* is the receiving *of* all these definitions, as evinced by Socrates' display of modesty in the *Timaeus*: "I see that I shall receive in my turn a perfect and splendid feast of reason" (Plato 1961, 1161 – 27b; Derrida 1995a, 110).[92] Notwithstanding anything that Timaeus will have to say on the role of *khōra*, or each time that his cosmogony has resource to *khōra* – "And there is a third nature, which is space and is eternal, and admits not of destruction and provides a home for all created things, and is apprehended, when all sense is absent, by a kind of spurious reason, and is hardly real" – this needs still, then, to *be received* by Socrates standing in the place of the third genus, between sophists and poets (Plato 1961, 1179, 52b; Derrida 1995a, 107, 110). There is still another moment or place for *khōra*. Indeed, Derrida says that Timeaus presents his positive claims, his ontologico-encyclopedic conclusion, in the *ban* of a discourse on *khōra* (Derrida 1995a, 104). In this sense, Derrida's

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[92] Earlier on there is another formulation of Socrates' passive role in the dialogue: "You conferred together and agreed to entertain me today, as I had entertained you, with a feast of discourse. Here I am in festive array, and no man can be more ready for the promised banquet" (Plato 1961, 1155, 20c). However, the line quoted in the main text is the one that prompts Timaeus's monologue.

khōra approaches Nancy's abandoned being: a way of forestalling the principle of sufficient ground, *khōra* indeed brings out the anarchy of being, its being in the ban of its principle. And as we saw, it is Agamben's ambition to deplete this ban: "[...] *here Being is nothing other than the being's being abandoned and remitted to itself*; here Being is nothing other than the ban of the being" (Agamben 1998, 60). This is the task of a philosophy rid of presupposition, and the chance to complete it lies in *khōra*, as Agamben recalls with a view to the life's work of the last diadoch of the Academy of Athens, Damascius, *Aporias and Solutions Concerning First Principles*: "And so it was that as he was writing one night the image suddenly sprang to mind that would guide him – so he thought – through to the conclusion of his work. It was not, however, an image, but something like the perfectly empty space in which only image, breath, or word might eventually take place" (Agamben 1995, 33). However, the word he gives to this space is not *khōra*, χώρα, but ἅλως – *halo*. The analysis of halo must await the next chapter.

Indeed, Derrida uses the logic of abandonment that Agamben develops from Nancy. However, Derrida appears unaware of the paradox of sovereignty that it implies – it is not just *khōra* who is banned, but also a cosmos conceived as the exile of *khōra*. It is not anarchy, but precisely sovereignty. And this unawareness on Derrida's part means that the *khōretic* element in his thought remains idle – it remains foreign to the order of the paradigm. Indeed, what Derrida stresses is the absolute passivity of the receiving element (consistent with his thought on hospitality, the other, and other privileged Derridean themes) – *khōra* allowing the cosmogony in her place. To Agamben – as we have seen for instance in *Homo Sacer*: "l'essere *a bandono* dell'ente" (Agamben 2005a, 69; Agamben 1998, 60) – the relation of abandonment always works in two ways: it carries the potential to liberate and activate its pole of passivity – to end its own relation in the indifference between action and passion. This I have demonstrated in Chapter 2: potentiality fosters its own messianic undoing. Yet for Derrida, the foreigner or placeholder of impropriety – Socrates in this case – by her characteristic of being "other" has always already given the cue, is always prior while at the same time absolutely passive. The other as other has not acted *yet*, but this is true *always*. The other as other remains a potentiality, and in

occasioning his thought in response to the other, Derrida's remains a philosophy of potentiality. The main point that this thesis has set out to make is how the messianic marks Agamben's post-Derridean position by mustering the messianic resources within Derrida's text: in its incapacity for activating the exile, in its insistence of always only and exactly *keeping* her in her passivity (of protecting the secret of the name, of reading – violently, inevitably – the trace), Derrida's thought presents the paradigm of abandonment to Agamben. Derrida's deconstruction of the *Timaeus*, and his circumfession of *khōra* all but perform Agamben's archaeology of potentiality for him – all but returning to *khōra*. All but returning to the return. All but taking *khōra* up as a piece of found art, as intelligible matter, or addressing it as one addresses Odradek – I use Kafka's figure Odradek as shorthand for Agamben's conception of a redeemed entity. Which would have been impossible for Derrida, as it is only after the essay "*Khōra*" that *khōra* can be encountered as such, for what it is: the place of contingency, the place of a cosmos that is probable, possible, but never necessary. I have claimed that "*Khōra*"'s companion piece is "*Ousia* and *Grammē*": "There is produced in the thought of the impossibility of the otherwise, in this *not otherwise*, a certain difference, a certain trembling, a certain decentering that is not the position of an other center" (Derrida 1982, 38). *Khōra* is the place of this tremor, the place of the contingency of philosophy. Derrida's address of *khōra*, with unique care and deference, performs the messianic displacement of this term, absolves it of its presuppositions, and brings it into a redeemed world wherein Agamben is the first thinker (Agamben, who writes in the critical and paradigmatic time of *kairos*, is both of this redeemed world as well as of the world that is to be saved).

For Agamben, following the Aristotelian interpretation that Derrida dismisses or precludes, what Derrida analyses under the term "khōra" is *hylè* – pure matter. From a brief essay "The Idea of Matter" appears Agamben's concern with a "woody substance of language, which the ancients called *silva* (milkwood)" – *hylè* too means wood (Agamben 1995, 37). That said, Derrida points out, against this Aristotelian interpretation, that Plato never uses *hylè* (wood/matter) to qualify *khōra* – this is Derrida's insistence on the utterly ironic understanding of *khōra*, never identifiable

with a particular programme (Derrida 1995a, 127). Yet in an essay entirely devoted to Derrida's thought, Agamben takes the following position on the motif of the trace:

> [...] the trace is the passion of thought and matter; far from being the inert substratum of a form, it is, on the contrary, the result of a process of materialization | In the *Timaeus*, Plato gives us the model of such an experience of matter. *Khōra*, place (or rather nonplace), which is the name he gives to matter, is situated between what cannot be perceived (the Idea, the *anaisthēton*) and what can be perceived (the sensible, perceptible as *aisthēsis*). Neither perceptible nor imperceptible, matter is perceptible *met' anaisthēsias* (a paradoxical formulation that must be translated as "*with* the absence of perception"). *Khōra* is thus the perception of an imperception, the sensation of an *anaisthēsis*, a pure taking-place (in which truly nothing takes place other than place). (Agamben 1999a, 218).[93]

This "pure taking place" Agamben calls God (Agamben 1993b, 15). So from Agamben's perspective, *khōra* is the decisive motif of Derrida's writing. The important clause to add is that *khōra* is not substance, neither for Derrida nor for Agamben: "*Khōra* is not, is above all not, is anything but a support or a subject which would *give* place by receiving it or conceiving it, or indeed by letting itself be conceived" – although Derrida denies the role of a receiving here, it immediately re-enters the discussion to be examined further (Derrida 1995a, 95). For Agamben, *khōra* as pure matter *is* Bartleby's descent into the Tartarus. "Derrida's trace, 'neither perceptible nor imperceptible,' the 're-marked place of a mark,' pure taking-place, is therefore truly something like the experience of an intelligible matter" – the trace is the *archē* of its own absence (Agamben 1999a, 218; see Derrida 1982, 66: "presence [...] is the trace of the trace, the trace of the erasure of the trace").

Khōra for Derrida, then, this "*place of absolute exteriority*," "*the desert within the desert*," is for Agamben the *innermost* exteriority – exteriority without relation – the taking place of entities, their paradigmatic *haecceity*, their immediate surrender to thought (Derrida 1998a, 19; Agamben 1993b, 14: "The transcendent, therefore, is not a supreme entity above all things; rather, the pure transcendent is the taking-place of every thing"; Agamben 2004a, 87; see also Gasché 2014, 224). However, this equation comes with a twist, as repetition or return. *Khōra*, as I pointed out, allows for all repetition, is duplicity itself – as is the theme of John Sallis' book, *khōra*

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[93] Jenny Doussan too makes the same connection between the figures of Bartleby and Derrida, for Agamben (Doussan 2013, 103).

indicates a new beginning, a return to the beginning, a suspension of presupposition. If Derrida says that *khōra* is alien to the order of the paradigm, it is because it is not (yet) seized as such (Derrida 1995a, 90). I have already explained how *différance* means a respect for the secret, a deference toward potentiality and sovereignty – Derrida's analysis of *khōra* too is expressive of such respect. For Derrida, there is no thetical content, theological or monotheistic, to which *khōra* is committed – instead it comes to us as a name and we can only begin to receive it. However, it is also the signature left upon philosophy by the paradox of the thesis of *creatio ex nihilo*, as is clear from the *Timaeus* (48e).

In Derrida's essay, *khōra* itself takes place, fulfills its own *archē* – as it returns and while it is return itself – and is set aside as a paradigm for Agamben to find. Agamben literally follows the trace of Derrida, in his footsteps, and saturates the absence to which this trace refers – and this is what I call messianic: in exactly the same way in which Agamben elicited Aristotle's potentiality in the Bartleby essay. The bud of such a messianic gesture can already be found in Derrida's double readings – readings that respond to philosophy's original fall from grace – wherein two mutually exclusive readings point at the phenomenon's *archē*-trace, without ever truly delivering this *archē* locked between its *potentia passiva* and *potentia activa* – never truly delivering it because the trace *is* this *archē*.[94] Whether this inevitable movement is expressed through a "chain of supplements" or by the sequence "Signature Event Context," what this "total movement of the trace" describes by repeating and undermining it is the unity of the One God (De Vries 2015, 21–22). Derrida's *khōra* (as well as Nietzsche's eternal return of the same) is always one tiny step removed from the euporia indicated, to Agamben, by Bartleby's formula, and this is because this analysis does not amount to an effective archaeology, a taking place and a dwelling in place, of the condition of fallenness, of exile, of the force of

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[94] John P. Leavey makes a suggestive observation concerning the relationship between *Speech and Phenomena* and the earlier *Introduction to Husserl's Origin of Geometry*, which Derrida claimed was the other side of the former. Leavey appears to suggest that there is a double reading of Husserl caught between these essays (Leavey in Derrida 1989a, 7–8).

law without significance – a tiny step that is only the return to *khōra*, by which *khōra* itself returns.

I conclude that *khōra* finds its *archē* in Agamben's archaeology of potentiality. So Agamben's turn from *khōra* to "taking place" means to expose and deplete the tacit Aristotelian element in Derrida's Plato. What for Derrida is irreconcilable to the order of the paradigm becomes paradigmatic for Agamben, as for Agamben the register of impossibility and of the miracle is exhausted in Derrida. Bartleby descends not in *khōra*, but in a void that is received by *khōra*, and *khōra takes place*. *Khōra* indicates first, as place, a return to the beginning – the eternal return itself – and second, it *returns* as "taking place".[95] As Agamben writes: "What Nietzsche tried to do in the concept of eternal return is to conceive the final identity of the two *potentiae*, the will to power as a pure passion affecting itself" (Agamben 1986, 17). Ultimately: "There is sky and there is grass. And the creature knows perfectly well 'where it is'" (Agamben 1999a, 271; it is not obvious what Agamben cites in the last sentence of his essay. Melville's character, near the end of the story, says: "I know where I am"; Melville 1984, 669). Rendering *khōra* in Derrida's thought a "taking place" means to expose the grammatological elimination of the Thing Itself, and thus to deliver from it its *archē*: the Thing Itself is its taking place in "*its own knowability and truth*" (Agamben 1999a, 27, 32).

3.4 Derrida and Agamben on the life of philosophy

To have a name means to be mortal – God's name is not to be uttered by mortals. This insight is present in the works of both Agamben and Derrida (Agamben 1991, 45; Derrida 2008, 9).

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[95] Paul Allen Miller gives an acute example of how *khōra* takes place, from reading the *Apology*: "Socrates' statement at *Apology* 29a2-4 can be taken neither in a strictly literal, referential sense – it is not a proposition about the world – nor can it be understood as ironic in the common Greek sense of 'shamming, meaning one thing and saying another'. It is both and therefore opens a space – a *khōra* – that can be fully assimilated to neither one of these positions, a space in which language does not merely reproduce the world of the given – be it facts or norms – but somehow radically precedes and exceeds both the given and its simple negation" (Miller 2010, 340). This theme of the undecidable life of the letter between literal and metaphorical or ironical I continue in the next chapter, with a view to the *court* in Kafka's *The Trial*.

Michael Naas presents the thesis of religion as a constant process of self-disintegration in Derrida's work (Naas 2012). The concern with death is tantamount in Derrida's work, from *Speech and Phenomena* ("The relationship with *my death* [...]"; Derrida 1973, 54) to a statement recorded in his last interview: "the question of survival or deferral [which] has always haunted me, literally, every moment of my life, tangibly, unrelentingly [...]" (Derrida 2011, 5). Here, I will connect what we have learned from Derrida's logic of auto-immunity and the way in which it involves his notion of life as survival with certain remarks that indicate the possibility of an afterlife that is redeemed of death. To Derrida, survival means that life takes place in the wake of death, and in that sense it is already an afterlife.

The discussion on *khōra* has in fact led us here. Concluding his section on the *khōra* controversy between Derrida and Agamben, highlighting Agamben's deliberate, violent strategy of reading *khōra* as matter, as the undecidable and indifferent between the intelligible and the perceptible, between the potential and the actual – a pure taking place – Watkin says: "[...] this presence is not solid and foundational in the manner of a stone tablet per se but the very indifference of immediate mediation whose purpose is to suspend the difference between matter and form and in doing so to literally suspend the physicality of the tablet itself and make it hand, as if weightless, in the space to the side of ease, or hover just above the head like one's halo tends to do" (Watkin 2014, 126). Halo is the image for a suspended ground, for the *a*theology and profanation of *creatio ex nihilo* – the mark of contingency. Halo is *khōra* taking place, the beatitude of matter – life.

I have brought out Derrida's understanding of life as survival. Not an eternal presence of mind, life to Derrida is marked by the interruption of alterity, difference, and repetition, and as such it is always intimate with death. Hägglund demonstrated how deeply the condition of mortality informs Derrida's understanding of time and writing. In Agamben's work, however, there are many fascinating indications of a redeemed life, beyond the stretches of guilt and justice that I have brought out by way of the Bartleby essay. Eric L. Santner indicates a dimension of creaturely existence involved here that his own analysis excludes: "I take Agamben to be

claiming that Walser's figures have in some sense passed beyond the condition of creatureliness [the creature that always admits of a sovereign, hence its political acuteness] I have been elaborating, that their life is no longer 'excited' by sovereign authority (and its state of exception), even and especially when it has been disseminated into the social body as a whole" (Santner 2006, 103 n9). It is in this context that Agamben appeals to figures from Robert Walser and also Kafka's fictions, like Odradek in *The Cares of a Family Man*, the convict in *The Penal Colony*, and Joseph K.'s shame continuing after his ignominious execution (Agamben 1993b, 6–7; Kafka 1993, 129–160, 183–184; Agamben 2015, 51). Can life for Derrida be reconciled with the afterlife or *Nachleben* of Agamben's characters, to a remnant (Agamben 2013a, 19)? To conclude the present chapter and to introduce the final one, I must now capture this messianic return and repetition of life – a life that is survival and afterlife by the same gesture.

As I have explained, Agamben unearths a particular mode of contingency that is not of a state of being that could have been otherwise – due to its contingency being returned to necessity and possibility – but that is, on the contrary, absolutely consigned to its being-thus, its *haeccity*. This contingency is found in the remnant. The remnant is first of all a messianic concept that Agamben develops in his book on Auschwitz and in his commentary on the *Letter to the Romans*. It is also the remnant of a presupposition – whether the presupposition of the principle of non-contradiction or the principle of sufficient ground, or the Nazi doctrine that bare life might be separable from testimony (Agamben 1999b, 157). In both senses, it presents the image of a sharpest blade, or the thinnest painted line: the division of division itself. So Agamben does not, as Derrida, upset particular metaphysical distinctions and logical laws by mustering the subordinated element against the superior one, to accordingly point out the irreducible differential character of the meaning they claim independently. Instead, he takes the suspended remnant of a thesis or logical law, in which this thesis or law is reflected in its inoperative state. To better understand the ontological status of these remains with a view to the notion of life is the purpose of the present section.

So here we have a figure that remains beyond the bind between writer and work, or between sovereign and law. This is, as we saw, the threshold that Bartleby, at one and the same time, does and does not cross; in *Homo Sacer* Agamben states that his is the strongest objection against the principle of sovereignty – "but still do not completely free themselves from its ban" (Agamben 1998, 48) – while in the essay on contingency he says how: "in the end, the walled courtyard is not a sad place. There is sky and there is grass. And the creature knows perfectly well 'where it is'" (Agamben 1999a, 271). Indeed, Bartleby is the figure of pure potentiality, the figure that saves, as I argued in the previous chapter: the messianic in Agamben's work is intrinsic to potentiality itself. Bartleby, therefore, is not the subject of salvation. Instead, it is "the new creature" that is redeemed. This "new creature" is a remaining creature. It is saved because it has abandoned the dialectic of redemption and fall.

The term that Agamben consistently uses to denote a life beyond sovereign power – so a life that is not creaturely – is form-of-life (Agamben 2000a; Agamben 2013b). In *The Highest Poverty,* Agamben examines the history and literature of medieval monastic orders, the Franciscan brotherhood in particular. In this work, he follows the same trajectory as in *Homo Sacer*, tracing how life struggles in abandonment. Agamben makes a startling observation when reading the *Expositio quatuor magistrorum*, the oldest commentary on the Franciscan rule. For the Franciscans, the state of emergency or necessity is not, as it is for modern people, the zone of complete immersion into the law – so it does not mean their total submission – but rather for these monks it means their *only* reference to the law: "*Calciari vero dispensationis est regulae in necessitate, non calciari est forma vitae* ('Wearing shoes depends on a dispensation from the rule in case of necessity; not wearing shoes is the form of life' […]). The principle, enunciated in such a lapidary form, opposes the sphere of the rule (with respect to which the state of necessity implies an exception to the norm) and that of the form of life like two planes that are tangential to each other, but do not anywhere coincide" (Agamben 2013b, 107–108). The Franciscans recognize the law only insofar as they are in a state of necessity – which is always, due to their poverty, but always only trivially so. Only trivially so, because their life, on the contrary, coincides not with the law's emergency, but with its own form.

Irrevocably, though, it is through this sole point of contact with the law that the order is pulled back into the legal world – while it leaves the idea of form-of-life and its use behind.

Derrida on the other hand thinks life as survival. This appears as survival in respect of a law, of abandonment. In exile, as a refugee, one can survive (we should keep in mind that Agamben ties the condition of banishment, via Arendt, to form-of-life, see Agamben 2000a). Are there any indications in Derrida's work of a life beyond the condition of banishment, or beyond the condition of sovereignty? Is there no life to writing beyond such conditions? Writing can always be erased – erasure is implied in Derrida's concept of writing. Yet as *pharmakon*, in Derrida's analysis, it already begins to resist the sovereign authority of the father – writing is patricidal – *it resists sovereignty* (Derrida 1981a, 77). It is the *logos* that always admits of a father, and that remains for that reason a *zōon*, a living being. This is the same kind of life that is implied, according to Derrida, in Husserl's theory of signs (Derrida 1973, 10). The God of writing, on the other hand, is also the God of death (Derrida 1981a, 91). This implies that Hägglund's insistence on the structure of the trace and its implications of comprehensive mortality is indeed to the point, and I have not disputed this aspect of his reading in itself (on the contrary, I contested it for being the *only* aspect of his reading).

I have above set out the difference between Agamben and Derrida in relation to the role of the remnant. While for Agamben the remnant is the remainder of a metaphysical thesis or a logical law, and thus is the immediate, paradigmatic cue for his *experimentum linguae*, for Derrida the remnant is, as such, the undeconstructible. The remnant is secret: "And near the end, at the bottom of the page it was though you had signed with these words: 'Cinders there are.' I read, reread them; it was so simple, and yet I knew that I was not there; without waiting for me the phrase withdrew into its secret" (Derrida 1991, 31). The essay "Cinders" is the satellite of the remnant: "We literally unveil nothing of her, nothing that in the final account does not leave her intact, virginal (that's the only thing he loves), undecipherable, impassively tacit, in a word, sheltered from the cinder that there is and that she is"

(Derrida 1991, 41).[96] Like *khōra*, to Derrida *la cendre* maintains an unreliable yet unmistakable connection to femininity, and his analysis from the orbit of a cinder, furthermore, keeps underlining it as a "pure place," also feminine: *là*.

The way writing resists sovereignty is in part to do with influence of the mother, the *khōretic* element that I have brought out above and that, furthermore, focuses this discussion on the signature of life. Yet the motif of this resistance is not a Franciscan indifference to sovereignty, but its undecidability with a view to the father's *logos*. In the next chapter I will continue this discussion with a view to the third term of the messianic that this thesis addresses after law and life: writing/scripture.

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[96] Marder thinks that the cinder might dwell in yet another way in Derrida's work: "In addition to soliciting deconstructive concern, the remains permit 'post-deconstructive realism' anachronistically to inhabit deconstruction" (Marder 2009, 138). This possibility will become pertinent in the next chapter.

Chapter 4

The Messianic Registry

> [...] here the bottom of the well which is human history displays its whole, its immeasurable depth, or rather its bottomlessness, to which neither the conception of depth nor of darkness is any longer applicable, and we must introduce the conflicting idea of light and height; of those bright heights, that is, down from which the Fall could take place, the story of which is indissolubly bound up with our soul-memories of the garden of happiness.
>
> Thomas Mann, *Joseph and his Brothers*

Introduction

In *Agamben and Theology*, a book from which this thesis benefited a great deal, Colby Dickinson takes contingency, in the sense explored by the Bartleby essay, as a foundation for Agamben's contemplation on potentiality: "The preceding reflections on potentiality were grounded in a recognition of the contingency of our existence, a contingency that many would like to forget exists as such [...] If we could only embrace the contingency of our world, instead of trying to overcome it, we might find a peace which apparently often eludes our 'species'" (Dickinson 2011a, 50, 51). On the contrary, I hold that this kind of contingency is never a ground in Agamben's work, but instead is the suspension of ground. Consequently, I argue that contingency cannot be understood by stopping and turning – by looking back – but instead is achieved only by the messianic vanquishing of potentiality. In fact, I brought out this tension in my introduction between the desire for a return in Rousseau and its radical overturning by Kleist. Contingency, then, awaits not behind, but ahead. This is evinced by Agamben's insistence that contingency to him means not simply that things could have been different – the awareness that Dickinson maintains we frightfully avoid – but that things at one and the same time are and are not. For Agamben, then, contingency is not the modality of uncertainty, but that of the highest certainty – the certainty of the belonging between a singularity and its being-thus (Agamben refers to Spinoza's *Ethics* III, def. XIV and XV: "[...] wherefrom

all cause of doubt has been removed"; Agamben 1993b, 90).[97] This contingency is accessed not by merely suspending our prejudice or existential anxiety, but by the collaborative works of deconstruction and philosophical archaeology. Contingency means a metaphysical modality *redeemed of* potentiality. And this process of uncovering contingency – this archaeology that coincides with the thought of the thing itself, and the undoing of its potentiality – is what I have examined in the previous three chapters. I will now devote the fourth and final chapter of this thesis to an analysis of contingency itself – to the way in which contingent entities appear on the messianic registry. These (for philosophy) contingent entities, however, depend on the immanent development and critique of theology – on philosophical archaeology: they are post-theological creatures. An essential line from Agamben's work, already cited, runs thus: "The Idea of language is language that no longer presupposes any other language; it is the language that, having eliminated all of its presuppositions and names and no longer having anything to say, now simply speaks" (Agamben 1999a, 60). What sort of content might be ascribed to this simple speech?

While in Derrida life is always the moment of survival – surviving the friend, surviving life's autoimmune mortal threat – for Agamben it is what has already survived, and in a sense what has already died: the Franciscan monk who reciprocates the abandonment of law, and lives the form of his life, or Bartleby who outlives his vocation – this is the outcome of the last chapter. Where for Derrida, there is only conditional survival within an intimate bond with death, for Agamben survival can be, if not infinite, definitive (Agamben 1993a, 6–7; Agamben 2005a, 64). As Kishik explains in the context of Walter Benjamin's philosophy of constellations, but which pertains equally to Agamben: "By finding a new use within his own work for these *disjecta membra*, he seems to breathe into them a new life, or an afterlife. But what is much less apparent, though much more important, about Benjamin's method is that the condition of survival – which should be understood in its

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[97] For Naas, instead, "as a reader of Derrida," what remains is best served by some measure of ambiguity (Naas 2003, 94).

etymological sense of outliving, overliving, hyperliving, or posthumous life – pertains to the philosopher himself before it applies to the elements of his philosophy" (Kishik 2012, 54–55). Indeed, Agamben has suggested his position survives his discourse: "Whoever experiences this ethics and, in the end, finds this matter can then dwell – without being imprisoned – in the paradoxes of self-reference, being capable of not not-writing. Thanks to Aher's obstinate dwelling in the exile of the Shechinah, Rabbi Akiba can enter the Paradise of language and leave unharmed" – Agamben refers to Derrida and to himself (Agamben 1999a, 219; Agamben's question of a paradisiacal science of signatures becomes pertinent in this regard, see Agamben 2009, 80). The philosopher in this sense assumes an afterlife, to return a citizen to the landscape in which she was formerly a legal subject.

In pursuit of a suggestion from *The Coming Community* of a redeemed mankind enjoying the dawn of the *novissima dies* of judgment, and of another made in *State of Exception*, to wit: "One day humanity will play with law just as children play with disused objects", in this chapter I will explore the sense of contingency that is wrought between Derrida's deconstructions of the metaphysics of presence, and Agamben's philosophical archaeology of potentiality – between a law that insists on its own absence and potentiality, and a life capable of this potentiality (Agamben 1993b, 6–7; Agamben 2005b, 64). Agamben's commentators speak of an afterlife for the philosopher (Kishik 2012, 54–55), a step back to engage with the contingency of the remainder in the comportment of *theoria* (Van der Heiden 2014, 280), and of "a 'now' composed as the 'after'" (Watkin 2014, 35). I follow these cues in rejecting Dickinson's outline wherein contingency is the starting point. Agamben the philosopher dwells in the remnant, then – in Venice, as Kishik points out – and it is the contingency of this remnant to which I devote an immanent description in this chapter.[98] This means examining the messianic registry that marks Agamben's position as so decidedly post-Derridean: Agamben as the deconstructionist deposit.

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[98] Agamben even insists that in Hobbes' *Leviathan*, the multitude remains after the covenant inaugurates the Commonwealth: "[...] the multitude not only pre-exists before the sovereign, but, in the form of the *dispersed* multitude, continues to exist after it" (Agamben 2014, 32). It is this dispersed multitude that eventually witnesses the epic battle between Leviathan and Behemoth, and then feasts on their remains – the citizens of the coming politics.

This means Agamben *at* the threshold of deconstruction – in opposition to Attell's title *Giorgio Agamben:* Beyond *the Threshold of Deconstruction*. Spatially, the messianic does not operate beyond the state of exception, which is "not a limit between an inside and an outside of the law, but rather forms *on* the limit, on the threshold where the two cannot be distinguished" (Zartaloudis 2010, 134). Yet in the second messianic tableau, I want to explore the potential of Derrida's writings on Rousseau to match Agamben.

I will expand on two messianic tableaux, connected to the themes of life and writing, each addressed through one section devoted to Agamben's thought and one devoted to Derrida's. The first is that of a creature that no longer admits of a sovereign. The second will be of the supplement of halo – the way in which a suspended ground attends to a singularity. Finally, I will address the question of the writing/scripture of the creature and the halo.

Let it be clear from the outset that this section takes the form of a further application of Agamben's understanding of deconstruction, back onto Derrida's own and favoured texts in order to bring out the messianic operation therein. These tableaux do not exhaust the messianic registry of Agamben's work. We could add, for example, the way in which, in *The Kingdom and the Glory, oikonomia* is the messianic residue of Agamben's politics. Indeed, another name for halo is glory, as it figures prominently in *The Kingdom and the Glory*: "Glory is the place where theology attempts to think the difficult conciliation between immanent trinity and economic trinity, *theologia* and *oikonomia*, being and praxis, God in himself and God for us" (Agamben 2011a, 208; Agamben 1993a, 92). What it does here is to bring out the marginal and indeed suspended grounding role of the sovereign God with regards to his administration of providence: "The empty throne is not, therefore, a symbol of regality but of glory" (Agamben 2011a, 245). However, this is not the place for an exhaustive account of the messianic operation in Agamben's work. On the contrary, because I argue that the messianic plays as a motif deeply imbedded in Agamben's thought, I am committed to the impossibility of such exhaustiveness.

As part of this chapter's closing sections, I will explain the relationship between the Derridean motif of writing and Agamben's project of absolving philosophy of its presuppositions, of thinking the absolute. The particular difficulty I confront in this chapter is not that the messianic registry is the archive of the unmarked or unblemished, not a paradisiacal zoology – of which Agamben asks whether it is altogether possible to conceive – but that it documents entries to limbo, a zoology of what remains. While Derrida has remarked that all writing always maintains the capacity of being effaced, here I am after the writing of suspense itself – not suspense in the sense of uncertain, on the contrary: the suspense from ground, the suspense of the thing itself in knowledge.

4.1   The creature on the threshold of sovereignty: the Open

This messianic tableau expands on the notion of creaturely life – in part as to follow up to one of the essential motivations behind this thesis, namely Heinrich von Kleist's Puppet Theater essay. As I have argued in my discussion of Thurschwell's Nietzsche paper, and as the cue I take from Watkin indicates, Agamben's temporal operation is no longer decidable in terms of "now" or "after": it plays in both temporal zones. Spatially, we get the same kind of indistinction, for instance when Agamben explains his notion of whatever being: "Whatever being has no identity, it is not determinate with respect to a concept, but neither is it simply indeterminate; rather it is determined only through its relation to an *idea*, that is, to the totality of its possibilities" (Agamben 1993b, 67). This means that whatever being is not complete, cannot be completed, although it does belong and by this belonging hovers at its threshold: it belongs to possibility as such. Whatever being is determined – as whatever – not by its properties, but by an absolutely formal and empty belonging. Whatever being experiences its exteriority at its own threshold, not beyond it. This is crucial for understanding not only Agamben's attitude towards the history of metaphysics, but also his politics and his conception of contingency. Agamben's critique of metaphysics does not point towards a realm beyond metaphysics, just as his political thought (which is coincidental with the metaphysical critique) does not point to a way of being beyond the distinction between the inside and outside of the law. Instead, the critique dwells on the

threshold of its target. Contingent is what has consumed all of its potential, and what is thus redeemed from the theologico-philosophical reduction to ground and non-contradiction. But this redemption does not transport us to another world; instead, it merely occasions a tiny displacement within the present one: it takes us to the threshold.

From this perspective, Agamben's considerations on the realm of the open are readily intelligible. I have given ample reference to the argument that Agamben stages with Derrida at the conclusion of the first part of *Homo Sacer*. Here, Agamben approvingly cites Massimo Cacciari:

> How can we hope to "open" if the door is already open? How can we hope to enter-the-open [*entrare-l'aperto*]? In the open, there is, things are there, one does not enter there. . . . We can enter only there where we can open. The already-open [*il già-aperto*] immobilizes. The man from the country cannot enter, because entering into what is already open is ontologically impossible (Cacciari in Agamben 1998, 49).

The Open is ontologically impenetrable, but only because ontology reduces the ontic to a ground, to a law – the impassability of the Open results from ontology, not from the Open itself. Let me now refer to the intuition of Rainer Maria Rilke's *Eighth Duineser Elegy*: "All eyes, the creatures of the World look out into the open. But our human eyes, as if turned right around and glaring in, encircle them; prohibiting their passing" – here the Open becomes a possibility, but not for human beings (Rilke 1989, 65). In this section I will examine the creaturely figure that remains beyond sovereignty – a figure beyond Bartleby's, then, redeemed by his impotentiality of writing. This is a vital question for this thesis: what remains at the threshold of deconstruction?

In the recent work of Eric L. Santner it has been Rilke's animal or creature that has provided the best clues for thinking the relationship between life and sovereignty (Santner 2006; Santner 2011). Agamben has remarked that even though Heidegger understands the animal to be poor-in-world, he also stresses that the animal's life "is a domain which possesses a wealth of openness, with which the human world may have nothing to compare" (Heidegger 1995b, 255; Agamben 2004a, 60). Derrida in turn has exposed the contradictions within Heidegger's assessment of the

animal's being poor-in-world as well as absolutely lacking in spirit, presenting the following provisional compromise: "[…] the animal, it has access to entities but, and this is what distinguishes it from man, it has no access to entities *as such*" (Derrida 1989c, 51). Santner too is keen to redeem the creature or animal from Heidegger's ostensible charge of being poor-in-world, and to reintroduce it into the politico-theological debate (Santner 2006, 10). Santner mobilizes an undercurrent of modern thought that he calls "German-Jewish", consisting of, among others, Kafka, Benjamin, and Freud. For writers like these, creaturely life does not designate the abstract philosophical difference between human beings and animals but: "[man's] exposure to a traumatic dimension of political power and social bonds whose structures have undergone radical transformations in modernity" (Santner 2006, 12). This radical transformation is the biopolitical revolution: the human being has become a political subject qua living being, not qua speaking being. Creaturely life, as Santner understands it, is implied in the logic of sovereignty – it is life lived in abandonment (Santner 2006, 22). It is creaturely because of its vulnerability, and its constitutive relation to a creator, the sovereign – Santner thinks the creature within the sovereign relation of abandonment.

Crucially, Santner connects creaturely life to Benjamin's interest in "natural history." Natural history means the twofold oscillation between history and nature. First, it means the history that human objects acquire independently of their design or purpose (Santner 2006, 16). Second, it means the process of dehistoricization of cultural artefacts (Hanssen 1998, 51). The creature is the subject of natural history, as it is constantly in the process of acquiring *and* losing its natural being. Natural history, then, is what narrates the existence of what Agamben calls "force beyond significance." Indeed, the idea of natural history appears to coincide with Agamben's theory of signatures. Agamben's work could be described as the natural history of philosophical terminology, telling the story of technical terms beyond their proper teleology. Natural history can account for the conditions of possibility of what Agamben calls "play", the deactivation or *désoeuvrement* that releases objects from their conventional restraints. It is for this reason that I have attributed a special sense of survival to Agamben's thought in the previous chapter: if human life

exceeds language, if life exceeds significance, history in a traditional sense is insufficient. Furthermore, natural history is a critical discipline, not a philosophical one in the classical sense – this will become evident in the second part of this section when I will look at Derrida's treatise on animal life.

Natural history, as Santner uses it, is also connected to the notion of the Open. This appears from Benjamin's description of life, in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama,* as an "irremediable exposure to the violence of natural historical temporality" represented by allegory (Santner 2006, 18; see Benjamin 1998b, 166). Another image that comes to mind is that of the opening pages of Benjamin's essay "The Storyteller": "A generation that had gone to school on a horse-drawn streetcar now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged but the clouds, and beneath these clouds, in a field of force of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile human body" (Benjamin 1999, 84).[99]

Now that I have explained the terms creature and natural history, and connected them to the dimension of the Open – that is, the dimension that is precluded by the law – let me explain how this creature, which is co-original with the sovereign, is in Agamben's thought capable of surviving its Creator. This would make of the creature a redemptive figure, similar to the concept of potentiality bearing its "critic" within.

Natural history describes the existence of a force without significance. In a footnote Santner states that Agamben follows the creature further than his own analysis does: beyond the ban of sovereignty (Santner 2006, 103 n9).[100] Indeed, this is what Agamben takes from Benjamin in his correspondence with Gershom Scholem on Kafka – a correspondence that anticipates Agamben's debate with Derrida, as Simon Morgan Wortham has shown (Wortham 2007, 99). Agamben embraces Benjamin's

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[99] Nancy echoes Benjamin, precisely regarding his concept of abandonment: "If from now on being *is* not, if it has begun to be only its own abandonment, it is because this speaking in multiple ways is abandoned, is in abandonment, and it is abandon (which is also to say *openness*)" (Nancy 1993, 36–37).

[100] Dickinson too notes how appropriately the term "creature" signifies the post-human existence that emerges in Agamben's work (see Dickinson 2011, 38).

side in this debate: "[…] the state of exception turned into rule signals law's fulfillment and its becoming indistinguishable from the life over which it ought to rule" (Agamben 1998, 53). Indeed, to Benjamin, at the core of Kafka's allegories lies in "an attempt to transform life into Scripture" (Benjamin quoted in Agamben 1998, 54). I have given a formal account of this reversal, the return to *khōra*, in the previous chapter, and there it appeared that the return leaves the return paradigmatic. The creature remains beyond the sovereign power that created it – natural history is to testify to that. The dimension of the Open is effectively entered here: "[…] if man can open a world and free a possibile only because, in the experience of boredom, he is able to suspend and deactivate the animal relationship with the disinhibitor, if at the center of the open lies the undisconcealedness of the animal, then at this point we must ask: what becomes of this relationship?" (Agamben 2004a, 91).

Indeed, in *Homo Sacer* the operative concept of sovereignty, potentiality, is critically examined as a paradox: "The relation between constituting power and constituted power is just as complicated as the relation Aristotle establishes between potentiality and act, *dynamis* and *energeia*; and, in the last analysis, the relation between constituting and constituted power (perhaps like every authentic understanding of the problem of sovereignty) depends on how one thinks the existence and autonomy of potentiality" (Agamben 1998, 44). Politics in the West depends on the paradox of sovereignty, as the mechanism that arranges the dichotomy between political and naked life: "One of the essential characteristics of modern biopolitics (which will continue to increase in our century) is its constant need to redefine the threshold in life that distinguishes and separates what is inside from what is outside […] Once *zoē* is politicized by declarations of rights, the distinctions and thresholds that make it possible to isolate a sacred life must be newly defined" (Agamben 1998, 131). Indeed, naked life is what must be constantly expelled, and in that perpetual exclusion it becomes the political subject par excellence – this what Agamben describes in *The Open* as the operation of an anthropological machine (Agamben 2004a, 37, 91). The machine is organized

around a black box in which it keeps the indistinction between man and animal as the fiction of bare life.

In Chapter 2, I presented two examples, two paradigms in Agamben's thought. Bartleby's mastery of potentiality evinces both the suspended principle of ground and the suspended principle of non-contradiction. Here is a third paradigm, also found in Bartleby in his final moments: the *homo sacer*. The *homo sacer* comes about as the remnant of the presupposition that organizes political thought in the West. Or, as Mathew Abbott writes: "[...] bare life is the figure of the return of a repressed metaphysical problem" (Abbott 2012, 28; Abbott 2014, 21). Bare life, *vida nuda*, is not a paradigm, but the result of a metaphysical problem. As metaphysics, in Heidegger's assessment, had always already forgotten about Being, so politics, in Agamben's analysis, had always already forgotten about life, or, as Agamben writes: "The isolation of the sphere of pure Being, which constitutes the fundamental activity of Western metaphysics, is not without analogies with the isolation of bare life in the realm of Western politics" (Agamben 1998, 182). It is a remnant because the dichotomy, in presupposing it, excludes it – it is what remains of the Western political vantage point.

The remnant, as I have said before, is not only that which absolves and redeems thought of its presuppositions, but is also itself redeemed. For the remnant is free of the presupposed. Indeed, Derrida, in his own way, is adamant not to make assumptions on behalf of the remnant.

This paradigmatic manoeuvre allows Agamben to think a politics of singularity that keeps a sense of community. What this means is a politics in which we do not inhabit a world that is simply and extraterrestrially *beyond* sovereignty, but one in which a creature experiences the limit, the threshold, of its Creator. The ground suspended from beneath the creature's feet returns to it as an added emptiness – the creature is placed in a relationship to its own exteriority, it acquires a face, an idea (Agamben 1993b, 68). This means that the creature is not reducible to a political, theological or zoological concept or theory, but that it belongs (that it has a name, that it dwells

in language) to the *archē*, the phenomenological fulfillment, of its own idea. This is the vital premise of philosophical archaeology: "the idea of a thing is the thing *itself*" (Agamben 1993b, 76). Only the name itself remains unnamed – there is no word for language as such, and thus Agamben deals with the structure of presupposition. This structure, as I have shown, is also the structure of potentiality and sovereignty.

I opened this section with a reflection on the dimension of the Open. The Open is not a foreign land or transformed world completely other than our own. Rather, it is our world by only a tiny displacement. The Open is the threshold of our world; it is the face of our world.

4.2   *L'animot* before the Fall

In this section I will explain how Derrida's treatise on animal life constitutes another response to the paradisiacal magnetism that Agamben means to deplete – as I have pointed out before, Derrida's writing embraces its theological abandonment (and as we saw, some say deconstruction shares this feature with theology, see Hart 1989; Nancy 2008) and means to expose and depose the illusion of Adamic language, a language that is exercised through the act of naming. This means I will bring out Derrida's refusal to think *with* the Fall as well as his insistence to instead *question* the Fall and the whole paradigm involving the human being as opposed to the animal that comes with it. This is not to say that Derrida rejects the notion of a Fall, quite the contrary; what he does reject, however, is the idea that with the Fall philosophy arrives in an undesirable situation – I have in my introduction already outlined Derrida's position in comparison to the pathos of Adorno (see also Derrida 1989c, 25–29).

I will explain that this means a trajectory of the creature that is entirely different from Agamben's. Like Agamben, however, Derrida in *The Animal that Therefore I Am (Following)* gives an example of a "now" conceived as an "after", a sense of being reconfigured as being-after: "What does 'to be after' mean?" (Derrida 2008, 55). If this being-after can be read not only as a pursuing and tracing – within the logic of abandonment – but also as a pure remaining, a remnant beyond relation, then

something in Derrida's thought has escaped the logic of survival and the narrative of mourning that, in Hägglund's reading, was insurmountable. So via their respective attitudes towards theology – Derrida allowing for the space, *khōra*, *between* philosophy (philosophy on principle)[101] and theology, and Agamben insisting on the partaking of philosophy (philosophy historically, since Aristotle) *in* theology (and this difference is on account of the concept of potentiality, as I have explained) – Derrida and Agamben think the creature differently: for Derrida the creature must again be superimposed as the inaudible undecidable between the singular animal and the plural *les animaux*, as *l'animot* on a tradition that knows only the Fall, while for Agamben the creature *is* the theological subject, the only subject that can be redeemed. While for Derrida the animal's subordination must be rejected – for the same reasons that philosophy's obsession with being present must be questioned – for Agamben it must be *developed*. And this difference, then, results from the distinct ways in which the messianic operates in their oeuvres: for Derrida as the only to be circumscribed yet highly prolific open wound of thought, for Agamben as the immanent critic of Western onto-theology. Let me observe that, crucially, Derrida's *l'animot* remains the undecidable of a certain tradition – within a certain context that cannot cogently make up its mind about it. Agamben's resolve, on the other hand, is to have a certain post-human creature stand at the threshold of that tradition. So while *l'animot* is undecidable and endlessly frustrating given the parameters and foundations of Western philosophy, it also continues that tradition by its very indecision. The creature as it embarks onto the Open in Agamben's thought means a singular existence marked only by a halo – not reducible to a ground. The question to answer next is how "being after", in Derrida's sense of the word, compares with a view to these two different conceptions of "animal life" – a term that, for the purposes of this section, I would like to reserve as neutral in all relevant respects to signify all non-human animated life on earth.

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[101] Derrida puts certain constraints on the scope of philosophy, precisely as far as animal life is concerned: "certain philosophers might well have called the singular limit between the animal and the human into question, they would not have done so *as philosophers* but rather as poets, thinkers, or writers – anything but philosophers" (Naas 2010, 227).

Derrida's stance with a view to the tradition of the Fall is apparent from his reasons for not following Walter Benjamin in his essay "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man":

> [...] because his meditation lays out this whole scene of a grieving aphasia within the time frame of redemption, that is to say, after the fall and after original sin (*nach dem Sündenfall*). It would thus take place *since the time* of the fall [...] Still, I have been wanting to bring myself back to my nudity before the cat, since so long ago, since a previous time, in the Genesis tale, since the time when Adam, alias Ish, called out the animals' names *before* the fall, still naked but before being ashamed of his nudity [...] Before evil [*le mal*] and before all ills [*les maux*] (Derrida 2008, 20–21; Benjamin 1996, 72–73).

Derrida asks after the time in which the non-human animal is the absolute other to the human being, and calls this time into question – this time would be the time of the Fall. Has this animal *Nur-lebenden*, life and nothing more – bare life – time? Derrida has grave suspicions about the concept of bare life, *das bloße Leben* in Benjamin, *vida nuda* in Agamben: "I can understand it on the surface, in terms of what it would like to mean, but at the same time I understand nothing. I'll always be wondering whether this fiction, this simulacrum, this myth, this legend, this phantasm, which is offered as a pure concept (life in its pure state – Benjamin also has confidence in what can probably be no more than a pseudo-concept), is not precisely pure philosophy become a symptom of the history that concerns us here" (Derrida 2008, 22). The suspicion is that this concept would be symptomatic of the history of the Fall, epiphenomenal to a certain conception of time – Derrida has already turned the problem upside down: not the time of the (posited) bare life, but the bare life of a particular conception of time is at stake. The concept of bare life, Derrida suggests, simply derives from the theological notion of the Fall: nudity is a consequence of the human being's fall from grace (see Agamben 2010, 57). Beings in possession of grace, animals, little children, puppets or dancers, cannot be naked. Presumably Agamben would not disagree, and would admit that the concept he works with in *Homo Sacer* is a phantom – like those I have called upon from Naas' critique of Hägglund in section 3.1.1: bare life, like eternal life – a phantom or phantasm, a force without significance. To support this claim I referred to Abbott's work: Agamben does not believe life could ever be bare, even if it is incarnated as such in the *homo sacer*, the *Muselmann* (Abbott 2012, 27; Abbott 2014, 20). Derrida's

objection coincides with his explicit critique of Agamben presented in the seminars on *The Beast and the Sovereign* – which share the motif of following with the animal essay – where he ridicules Agamben's naivety and presumption of an exclusive claim to certain philosophical origins (Derrida 2009, 92).[102] Agamben indeed intervenes in a linear history of philosophy, without contesting its linearity – yet this does not imply that Agamben conceives of this history as necessary. Instead, he turns its linearity against it.[103] While Derrida would question the idea of time that generates concepts like bare life, Agamben finds a paradigm for that bare life, *homo sacer*, and thus has it demonstrate a fault line within metaphysical thought. So while Derrida circumscribes the metaphysical invention's conditions of impossibility, Agamben thinks *with* the invention, the unwarranted abstraction, which, as the metaphysically excluded, contains the material for a coming philosophy. It is this *thinking with* that concerns us here, as something that Derrida was always reluctant to do. "Je ne suis pas de la famille" – do not presume my partnership, Derrida warns (Derrida and Ferraris 2001, 27; Derrida refers to the slightly stronger wording from Gide 1933, 116: "Familles, je vous hais!"). This attitude of Derrida's is well documented – it lies at the source of many misgivings about this work as it became notable but before it was canonized – and often *Specters of Marx* is cited as the moment whereon the political promise of his work finally materialized. With respect to Agamben's naivety and presumption, it is precisely the claim of this thesis that Agamben draws a certain justification for this naivety from Derrida's intricate work – a philosophy of infancy indeed. So while Derrida manages the highest care in his reading of the philosophical tradition, which is also the highest level of responsibility for the discourse he uses, Agamben observes how from this care and responsibility the thing itself emerges – the object of absolute thought, the highest philosophical naivety.

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[102] David Farrell Krell follows Derrida in this critique, and brings out better how it fails. For Agamben does not claim to "be[ing] the first in your neighborhood" (Krell 2012, 277), but claims to witness the moment of arising, the moment of *archē*.

[103] "Just as two lines intersecting at a point after they have passed through infinity will suddenly come together again on the other side [...]" (Kleist 1997, 416).

Let me connect this to what was discussed before. Derrida reiterates the same structural distinction between revealability and revelation, the messianic and messianism, justice and law, and, in this text, between autobiography and confession ("And knowing *himself* would mean knowing himself to be ashamed", 5, Derrida questions this implication, see 21–22.): there remains a dimension or horizon within thought, represented by a given word, which cannot be comprehended by philosophical discourse. Philosophy can only more or less truthfully and more or less ethically respond to this word. The slight interval between autobiography and confession, of a writing of oneself that is not yet an avowal, is significant. In the case of animal life, the distinction is between the abstract term "the animal," which conveys and continues an obscured ideology of industrial exploitation, and a neologism that brings that brings that hidden content to the fore: *l'animot*. Yet a neologism also to expose the artificiality of the more familiar "animal," and brings it to the fore precisely by highlighting its lingual coinage: ani-*mot*, the *word* for animals. As Naas explains: "Derrida invents a word that draws attention to the fact that 'the animal' is not some natural category that has been simply picked out by human perception and language but is, precisely, an age-old neologism and an invention of man [...] Fashioned out of two different words, the plural of animal and the word for word, *mot*, it is not unlike those composite animals found in mythology that philosophers are so fond of invoking or inventing in their meditations or thought experiments" (Naas 2010, 227). As with the other distinctions, Derrida reclaims a particular dimension by way of a deconstructive introduction: there is givenness irreducible to any given content; there is a dimension to hope irreducible to religious dogma; there is a dimension to justice irreducible to law; there is truth about oneself that is not yet owed – there is an address of animal life prior to the myth of the serpent's seduction of the human being and her consequent exile from Paradise. So, as we saw, Derrida at each point claims a space – *khōra* – from theology (*khōra* is not philosophical, but it is *for* philosophy, before it is for theology) a space that for Agamben cannot be assumed prior to the archaeology of potentiality – as to Agamben, *khōra* is already claimed by Aristotelian *hylè*.

Not *since* the time of the Fall, then, but *before* the fall: "[...] *before original sin*" (Derrida 2008, 18). Derrida's cue in this address is his experience of being seen naked by a cat, and then cast into an abyssal shame – a shame with no ground, a shame of being ashamed (Derrida 2008, 4; Segerdahl calls this vertigo, see Segerdahl 2014, 132). As was the case with the *khōra* essay, Derrida's text is abandoned to the very problem that Agamben means to have done with. And with a view to Agamben and his use of the topographical indicator of a threshold, Derrida's treatise on animal life, in turn, makes a theme out of the limit – which is "in Kantian terms" the opposite of the threshold (Agamben 1993b, 67; Derrida 2008, 29). Again and again, Derrida appears to give an immanent and sincere analysis to what in Agamben's hands turns into parody – parody following immediately upon the exhaustion of sincerity, not on a transcendent level but as a halo: "[...] unlike fiction, parody does not call into question the reality of its object; indeed, this object is so intolerably real for parody that it becomes necessary to keep it at a distance. To fiction's 'as if,' parody opposes its drastic 'this is too much' (or 'as if not')" (Agamben 2007b, 48).

By following this cue, Derrida questions the time of the Fall, but this implies holding a discourse that precludes the Fall and then appears to restage it – by way of the cat's singularity, a cat that is never named in the text, a cat over which Derrida suspends his Adamic entitlement. I have consistently argued that Derrida's writing is marked through and through by the fall from grace, and that his work presents an attempt at coming to terms with the human condition in that theological sense – banishment. Yet while Derrida's thought is very much of the Fall, it declines to think *with* the Fall. So what Derrida means to question is not the Fall, but the entire paradisiacal myth and its force in philosophical thought: Adam's naming of the animals as a paradigm of language. As Hart puts it: "[...] natural unity is disturbed from *within* rather than from without [...] this is the condition of possibility for philosophy", and "Derrida takes the thought of the fall from the primordial to the derivative to be philosophy's original sin" – philosophy's original sin only comes after the Fall (Hart 1989, 8, 18).

Implied here is that Derrida is not engaging in natural history, as natural history is indissolubly bound up with the notion of the fall. As I have said before, natural history is a critical discipline – it criticizes the injustice of a dominant discourse (for example the injustice of what was over what was not). Derrida's writing, instead and unlike Agamben's, has never been engaged in the way of critical theory as it cannot assume the outcome of a present justice, a just presence (Derrida 1994; Derrida 2002b) – the carefulness that forbids such engagement is a part of the question of this thesis. Indeed, in his book on Marx's spectres Derrida equates the ghosts of the deceased with the ghosts that never were with a view to the affirmation of survival. To even test the magnetism of Paradise – to feel its power – as Agamben does, is, for Derrida, to grant a false legitimacy to Adam's authority over the animals. The very word "animal" too is involved in this justification – like the (pseudo-)concept of bare life, it is part and parcel of a theory of time that assumes the Fall as its *archē* – and for this reason Derrida comes to suggest its substitute: *l'animot*. As the animal is the subject of the Fall and of natural history, so *l'animot* is the subject of the history of industry.

For Derrida the animal remains merely a symptom of that particular concept of time that takes the Fall for granted: ever since being abandoned from the garden, the human being lives in simple opposition to its existential antipode, the animal. Instead, Derrida offers *l'animot* – a chimerical creature. Like the creature from Santner's books, *l'animot* always admits of an evil doctor maker – it admits of a genius like Descartes rather than of a divine Creator. *L'animot* is the industrial animal, the biopolitical animal. As Derrida keenly points out, when writers of the Western canon (Homer and Descartes) do address the chimera, they omit its serpent element, suggesting that our tradition has a vital stake in leaving the animal's potential monstrosity an anomaly, insisting on the pacified natural animal, insisting on the continuity from Adam's mastery over the animals until our own (Derrida 2008, 46). Only in the chimera and in Derrida's *l'animot* do both the Fall and the subsequent industrial exploitation of animal life come to the fore. Ultimately, Derrida seems to make the following assessment: what philosophy does in its apparent claim of reserving reason for the human being, is actually to reserve the

human being for itself. As Derrida points out, philosophy is not in any position to adjudicate between the human being and non-human animals, as it has from the outset excluded animal life from its domain.

Even though for Derrida philosophy is inextricably bound up with the Fall – or better: precisely for this reason – animal life must be addressed as prior to it. And this is because the animal is the perennially excluded from philosophy, as absolute other. And this is philosophy taking the heritage of the Fall for granted – rather than, as Derrida does, trying to conceive its constitutive state of fallenness. For Derrida, thinking about animal life means first of all to go back to the scene of the Fall (Shakespeare 2009, 7; Naas 2010, 229). For this reason, Derrida introduces his chimerical beast: *l'animot*. *L'animot* is a biopolitical and historico-industrial animal. While the animal remains symptomatic of and epiphenomenal to the heritage of the Fall, *l'animot* is imbedded in this history and co-authors it on its own body. Yet again, we should take note that for Derrida the deconstruction of, in this case, the exploitation of animal life begins and ends with its exposure. *L'animot* is still identifiable, is no less vulnerable for being evidently put to suffer at its sovereign manipulator's hands. Derrida is absolutely wedded to the notion of critique, as Naas points out: "His aim is always to rethink the line between the animal and the human, to take up the animal within the human, and to do so for the sake of both the animal and the human animal" (Naas 2010, 242). He cannot, then, also divide this line from within to deliver its remnant. Derridean "being-after," then, is not a remnant beyond relation. The reason for this is that Derrida rejects the discourse of the Fall, unwilling to buy into its premises, but accordingly also prohibited from its messianic undoing: the creature at the threshold of sovereignty. This messianic undoing is only attainable if one follows a natural history of the animal, if one thinks *with* the Fall.

4.3   The supplement of halo

In the Open the principle of ground no longer suffices. The human being is not commended to a sense of ground, but is exposed beneath the open sky. The image of a halo refers to a suspended ground that attends to an entity in its state of being-whatever. Kishik implicitly connects this halo with Agamben's writing: "In Agamben

[...] the rubble in which the philosopher wanders tends to lose its weight, which usually enables him to shrug off the burden of its heavy past. This allows his prose not exactly to soar but, in a sense to levitate slightly above the wasteland of tradition" (Kishik 2012, 55). Agamben actually calls the halo a "supplement added to perfection" and a "supplemental possibility" (Agamben 1993a, 55–56).

Over the next two sections I will present a comparative analysis of Derrida's notion of the supplement and Agamben's use of the image of halo. As in the preceding two sections on creaturely and animal life, I take Agamben to articulate a form of being-after that upsets conventional readings of Derrida. In the present two sections, then, I will examine Derrida's thought with a view to the final supplement: a supplement not immersed in a chain of supplements, but one that appears at the end of the chain.

For Derrida, the work of the supplement is to support an essential meaning that in return obscures it – the supplement implies and destroys the completeness of the work it accompanies. In *Of Grammatology* Derrida reads Rousseau's *Confessions*, the "Essay on the Origin of Languages," and the *Reveries* in order to show how supplements for Jean-Jacques' mother (madame Françoise-Louise de Warens, wet-nurses), for the sexual act (masturbation), and for living speech (writing) tacitly allow for the cogency of these more originary values (Derrida 1974, 152–156). To cite a later work of Derrida, writing is the "prosthesis of origin." This means that the supplement cannot be conceived within the role the claim to which its deconstruction could support; we cannot think the thing itself of the supplement (Derrida 1973, 52; Derrida 1974, 145; Derrida 1982, 66). The contingent in Agamben, however, constitutes exactly an attempt to think the thing itself: the absolute – what Derrida's thought forbids as the cinder, the morsel, the secret, the name, and whose taboo Derrida violates by the trace, by writing. Agamben uses the image of the halo to bring out the significance of the thing itself, as for him to think the thing of thought itself means to rid philosophy of its presuppositions – to absolve it of the ontology of language in the form of the principle of reason, which means to absolve it of its theological heritage. Agamben highlights the visibility of the halo, its

presence, to bring out the sense of depletion with regards to the potentiality of ground and reason: the halo marks the fulfillment and *archē* of potentiality.

Indeed, for the thing itself, there can be no reason or ground, as that would be to reduce the thing itself to the principle of reason, and not to properly think it. Instead, the presupposition of ground or reason is suspended. The thing itself is included in its paradigm. And its suspended ground, finally, attends to it like a halo. The supplement in this scenario is merely added.

The halo in Agamben's thought is a supplement that is removed from the essence: "The halo is not a quid, a property or an essence that is added to beatitude: It is an absolutely inessential supplement" (Agamben 1993a, 55). Whereas for Derrida the supplement is never merely added, but always also appears in the stead of a deferred essence, for Agamben the supplement attains its radical force by what was to Derrida its innocuous function – to declare an absolutely inessential supplement at all is to challenge Derrida. Rather than determining what is essential from within or beneath, the supplement here takes its leave from essence. What are the Rousseauist-Derridean resources that first begin to make this possible? How does the discovery of the undecidable, and accordingly its *archē* in grammatology, help inaugurate such a decisive and abrupt contingency? How is it that a supplement, something added, becomes the mark of *haecceity*? Note that this contingency is nothing other than what Agamben in *Homo Sacer* indicates as a political fact beyond relation – a relation that was exceeded by the creature's entry to limbo in the previous section (Agamben 1998, 48). This question will be answered by analyzing the way in which philosophy for Derrida was inaugurated by the Fall – the way in which it immediately assumes the theological connection – and furthermore how the supplement means a response to that inaugural descent. However, it should be understood that this means to read Derrida's supplement not as decidable in itself, but as somehow having reached a decision, having "consumed all of its possibilities" (Agamben 1993a, 56). The halo marks the limits of an entity that has fulfilled its potentiality and that cannot be otherwise – a contingency. This supplemental decision is to be sought not on the essential level of the meaningful content of which

it means the perennial *différance* – for we still need to decide, each time, what *pharmakon* and *khōra* want to say in a given context. Instead, it has to be sought on the existential level of their signature: *khōra* "takes place," the supplement *is* added. We do not need to decide *that* it wants to say, in fact: "that it wants to say" is coincidental with the phenomenon of *différance* – I have already referred to Derrida's account in which the correspondence of a letter makes sense only by virtue of its insecurity (Derrida 1989a, 7; Derrida 1987, 444).

Indeed, "the word supplement seems to account for the strange unity of these two gestures" that keep juxtaposed Rousseau's experience and his theory of writing: writing is condemned as an increasingly degenerate substitute for living speech, and at the same time writing is employed, by Rousseau, as that substitute, as the only hope for reappropriating the self-presence of nature (Derrida 1974, 144). Writing is the symptom of and the remedy for an interrupted natural state, and the remedy, added hastily, will only aggravate the condition. Writing is, then, first of all a response to the Fall, while in turn the very scene of the Fall – Paradise – involves writing, scripture, to begin it: Derrida is the philosopher most fortified against the magnetism of Adamic language: "There is always, absent from every garden, a dried flower in a book" (Derrida 1982, 271; Marder 2014, 198).

At the end of *Stanzas,* Agamben engages with Derrida for the first time, as he contemplates the conditions of possibility of signification: "The foundation of this ambiguity of signifying resides in the original fracture of presence that is inseparable from the Western experience of being […] Only because presence is divided and unglued is something like 'signifying' possible; and only because there is at the origin not plenitude but deferral […] is there the need to philosophize" (Agamben 1993a, 136). This is Agamben's cue, and it is Derrida's cue too, as we saw when reading with Kevin Hart on the shared motivations between deconstruction and theology. Yet their respective ways of responding to this cue – the disintegrity within being or presence, which has connotations to the Fall – are vastly different. For Derrida it was always the philosophical mistake par excellence to require the undivided presence of being – and yet Derrida's work presents also an exercise in

demonstrating how that mistake is the inevitable result of the condition it regrets, of how philosophy itself is inseparable from it. Instead, then, of rejecting this tradition, Derrida explores the space between the philosophical ideal of undivided presence and its own incessant perfunctory betrayal of it: how that space is always written into the philosophical injunction of undivided presence. For Agamben, however, this lack of being *is* a problem, yet it is not the same problem as in its classical understanding. The ontological problem is not a lack of presence, actuality, but is instead a privation of potentiality. Attell too notes how Agamben reinstates the *logos* to its central position, not as a present undivided significance, but by developing the distinction between actuality and potentiality onto its remainder, or, by developing the distinction between the sign and the signified onto the infant human being (Agamben 1993a, 156; Attell 2014, 38). In the previous sections I have described how from this procedure a contingent being emerges. If the classical understanding of the problem means to reduce the faltering being back to its ground, Agamben's resolve is to take the opposite route, and to exhaust the ground of the singular entity and suspend it above as a halo, casting it irrevocably at the threshold of abandonment. It is this suspended lingering of ground to which the present two sections are dedicated: how does it register?

It is important to note that Agamben does not reject Derrida's assessment of the relation between the signifier and the signified ("that presence be always already caught in a signification: this is precisely the origin of Western metaphysics"; Agamben 1993b, 156; see also Agamben 1991, 39: "[...] *in truth* [Derrida] *merely brought to light the fundamental problem of metaphysics*"), but that the way in which he assumes it involves a displacement. What has to be appreciated is the extent of this displacement: how what was presented according to the deconstruction as the hidden inner workings of a particular philosopheme, now according to the philosophical archaeology becomes its face, its threshold: "By restoring the originary character of the signifier, the grammatological project effects a salutary critique of the metaphysical inheritance that has crystallized in the notion of sign, but this does not mean that it has really succeeded in accomplishing that 'step-backward-beyond' metaphysics" (Agamben 1993b, 156). This threshold is the

messianic tableau on which the halo is written. Another way of putting this would be that onto what for Derrida remains undecidable – does the supplement appear in the stead of x, or is it added onto x? – Agamben enforces a decision.

The question after the success of Agamben's displacement is indeed a question after the supplement. The supplement, like the *pharmakon* and *khōra*, is a critical term with respect to Derrida's stance inside or outside the tradition of metaphysics. Agamben argues that Derrida has supplemented the value of writing in place of the value of speech, has substituted the illusion of pure and undivided presence by pure and abstract representation. And in a way this is indeed what Derrida performed. Yet it is only true that Derrida's intervention amounts to such a substitution because the supplement, in the context where Derrida seizes it – metaphysics – is an undecidable concept. It always appears as part of a sequence with a principal value but also in its stead. So it makes sense to state that Derrida supplemented the value of speech with the value of writing only given his analysis of how that substitution actually takes place – as an incalculable and undecidable, involuntary and volatile procedure. Agamben, then, *decides* that this grammatological intervention means the devaluation of speech and presence to a secondary position, and that writing, representation, and the trace are reinscribed as the origin of experience. In terms of *Speech and Phenomena*: "One then sees quickly that the presence of the perceived present can appear as such only inasmuch as it is *continuously compounded* with a nonpresence and nonperception, with primary memory and expectation [...] These nonperceptions are neither added to, nor do they *occasionally* accompany, the actually perceived now; they are essentially and indispensably involved in its possibility" (Derrida 1973, 64). In the terms of *Of Grammatology*: "[...] Saussure opens the field of a general grammatology. Which would no longer be excluded from general linguistics, but would dominate it and contain it within itself" (Derrida 1976, 43–44). This is the strong, grammatological claim, which is, however, always supplemented by a weak, deconstructive one that says that the *deconstructing* term or value cannot conceivably be ever fully reinstated to its "original" status – because that would defeat the purpose, because that would amount to an arbitrary displacement beyond any of the term's, or value's, proper context. In fact, Agamben

says: "*The concept 'trace' is not a concept* (just as 'the name "*différance*" is not a name'): this is the paradoxical thesis that is already implicit in the grammatological project and that defines the proper status of Derrida's terminology. Grammatology was forced to become deconstruction in order to avoid this paradox (or, more precisely, to seek to dwell in it correctly)" (Agamben 1999a, 213). I take this to mean that the grammatological and deconstructive projects continue to supplement each other: that the weak claim of deconstruction, which rattles the very idea of metaphysics before leaving it operative, relies on the strong, grammatological claim that the trace appears in the stead of an origin, and the other way around – and that this mutual injunction is deconstruction. In fact, this is how Derrida's work can perform what Agamben says of Bartleby. To descend the Tartarus, to explore *khōra*, to recall the scene of the Fall is to impose the trace on the origin, and then to efface the trace; this is *arche-writing*.

This mutual implication of the grammatological and the deconstructive claim shows how Derrida's writing can amount to embracing a "force without significance" – as Agamben says. Naturally, all of this implies that there is no proper context, but there is the always oblique or otherwise hazy occasioned entry to the term, and this is what Derrida, as I have pointed out repeatedly, religiously respects. Furthermore, this is why the messianic dimension cannot be assumed – à la Badiou – simply and straightforwardly as a secularizable, mathematizable and universalizable possibility (Badiou 2003; Kaufman 2008, 50–52), and why the space between the messianic and the messianism must always be carefully explored. For Agamben, however – and this is what this thesis above all seeks to establish – the messianic is not addressed as a more or less secular principle, but instead as the motif of philosophical profanation, of the disenchantment and disillusionment of the theological principle of potentiality within philosophy. So not something theological of which we might find a (more or less) secular version to *then* employ philosophically, but instead the very motif of the undoing of the theological itself. Throughout this thesis I have consistently tried to bring out this distinction between a philosophy that always evinces the highest sensitivity to the particularity of language and a philosophy of infancy, a philosophy that seizes an exceptional

justification for naivety; between a philosophy of the margins and a philosophy of the remnant; between the heresy of thwarting the theological form and the profanation of its content; or in Watkin's terms: to bring out how an epoch of thinking difference culminates in the thought of indifference.

There is, then, an indifference deposited – the remnant marked by a halo. How does this occur? This question guides my reading of Derrida's supplement as a prototype for the halo. The halo is the formal identification of the remnant or the irreparable – terms that indicate the contingency at the depleted end of potentiality. I have brought out the way in which Derrida's thought is structurally irreconcilable to the remnant and its philosophical exploitation, as in Agamben's thought of the paradigm. This is the cause for the great separation between Derrida and Agamben that I have covered in this thesis by following a messianic motif. And even when discussing Derrida's treatise on "being (following)" – on Derridean *being after* – I have brought out the way in which the controversy between Derrida and Agamben regarding certain theological premises – notably the notion of the Fall, inextricably bound to the principle of potentiality and its abandonment – keeps dividing them, and that Derridean *being after* maintains its reliance on a separation between philosophy and theology. A separation that, from Agamben's perspective, is just another guise of potentiality. Yet now I consider the theme of writing – Derrida's garden or backyard – and it may be that Derrida's writing proves more flexible there. However, Derrida's stated position is that the supplement remains buried deeply within the structure of potentiality: "We speak its reserve" (Derrida 1976, 149).

So while I have explained how grammatology and deconstruction, and I think by way of the umbilical cord between them, always defer to what is potential, to an *à-venir*, and how because of this they circumvent and circumscribe the theological principle of ground within philosophy, I want to here, at the conclusion of this thesis, pause and contemplate the undecidable operation of the supplement in Derrida's thought as a possible prototype for the halo. In fact, Agamben calls the halo a supplement "added to perfection" (Agamben 1993, 55). How is it, ultimately, that for Agamben the experience of language of Derrida's writing "[...] marks the decisive event of

matter, and in doing so it opens onto an ethics. Whoever experiences this ethics and, in the end, finds his matter can then dwell – without being imprisoned – in the paradoxes of self-reference, being capable of not not-writing"? (Agamben 1999a, 219). The self-passivity and -capacity of writing, as Agamben argues in his texts on Nietzsche and Bartleby, hold the key to the undoing of the political theology of potentiality and sovereignty.

As in the previous sections on animal life in *Of Grammatology* Derrida recalls the scene of the Fall, now with respect to writing: "Thus incensed, Saussure's vehement argumentation aims at more than a theoretical error, more than a moral fault: at a sort of stain and primarily at a sin […] writing, the letter, the sensible inscription, has always been considered by Western tradition as the body and matter external to the spirit, to breath, to speech, and to the logos" (Derrida 1976, 34–35). Writing – because it constitutes its bodily dimension – is to language the historicizing factor, of which Saussure wants to both claim language's independence and liberate it. Indeed, writing is the historicizing factor *tout court*. Writing is what draws language into a trajectory of contingent development, and from the perspective of Saussure this is disgraceful, as he wants to analyze the essence of language. Saussurean linguistics, then, is the work of restoring the paradisiacal bond between sense and sound, and redeeming them of the interference of writing, and Derrida has exposed the same exigency for Plato, Husserl, and Rousseau. Derrida's work, in turn, goes to show how profoundly writing, representation, and the trace are caught up in what is essential – the domain of metaphysics. So even if metaphysics and linguistics make their claims by way of reducing writing, writing is inextricably involved in their field and in their respective objects.

Agamben displaces Derrida's supplement: from an undecidable that meddles with a hermeneutical content it becomes the face, the signature, the threshold of language itself: the supplement becomes the halo of language, acknowledged by a "salutary critique" in grammatology. Yet this salute allows itself to be blinded, as Agamben writes:

> Special being communicates nothing but its own communicability. But this communicability becomes separated from itself and is constituted in an autonomous sphere. The special is transformed into spectacle. The spectacle is the separation of generic being, that is, the impossibility of love and the triumph of jealousy (Agamben 2007, 60).

This transformation Agamben describes elsewhere as the "cutting of the branches" (Agamben 1999a, 206). In fact, from the point of view of philosophical archaeology, the undecidable supplement reaches its *archē* in grammatalogy and displaces itself to the threshold. This is how a philosophy of difference appears to a philosophy of infancy.

4.4   Reverie of abandonment

Over the course of this thesis I have explained Derrida's work as a constant mediation between two motifs, the name and the trace. In the previous chapter I made my argument against Hägglund's reading of Derrida: Hägglund admits only the realm of *différance* in which there is only survival and inevitable violent interpretation. Now I will make the opposite case against the way in which Alexander García Düttmann, with regard to the reading of Kafka, posits a life of the letter beyond the reader's claim. On this reading, the Derridean apparatus is limited to the protection of and the respect for the secret. Yet the circumscription of the secret is always already a violation of it, as the world of survival and violent interpretation supposes a sacrosanct core. The euporia between these two poles in Derrida-scholarship will bring to the fore a final supplement – a supplement that corresponds to the creaturely being beyond abandonment. The resources for this position are drawn from Michael Marder's essay on Derrida, and Rousseau's *Reveries*. Furthermore, I will continue the theme of the *khōra* from section 3.3 as it is heard in Kafka's *court*, a chamber of limbo that receives and releases whatever.

For an idea of how the "taking place" of a word or a letter can be understood I turn to Düttmann's essay "Kafka and the Life of the Letter": "The life of the letter in Kafka's texts must then be sought in the revelation of a content that belongs so much to life itself, that permeates it so thoroughly, that we are incapable of separating and objectifying it" (Düttmann 2011, 68). In Düttmann's analysis of Kafka's novel, it

hosts an *experimentum linguae* like Agamben's: "In *The Trial*, the letter is brought to life, rather than persisting as the immemorial presupposition of its law, and the question of meaning arises in the interstices that now separate life from itself" (Düttmann 2011, 69). However, for Düttmann the life of the letter also represents an impassable law: "The life of the letter, the letter's sense of familiarity, haunts the reader who can be part of this life only if he acknowledges the law, the irreducibility of the text's literal meaning. Inasmuch as this is the reader's position, the position of a preoccupation with the law, and inasmuch as literature could be said to remind the reader of his position by suggesting that the literal meaning, in order to be understood, calls for a different meaning, a figurative meaning or the meaning of a concept, *The Trial* is a novel that uncovers the hyperbolic dynamism that undermines the reader's position and transforms it into an unstable one" (Düttmann 2011, 70). In fact, Düttmann refers to Derrida's analysis of *The Trial*, "Before the Law" – the essay that Agamben quarrels with in *Homo Sacer* – but not to Agamben's objections. Instead, Düttmann mentions Agamben's essay "K", and warns against its claim to a definitive key to the novel (yet Agamben does not take Kafka's work to refer to an external, philosophical meaning, but instead suspends its presupposition and prepares it as a paradigm by placing the central accusation of the story within the dichotomy between potentiality and actuality, see Agamben 1995, 137; Agamben 2010, 20). So Düttmann, following Derrida, respects the secret; in accord with Nancy, he respects the ban. What it means to have a "literal cast of mind" is to take the letter ultimately as an impenetrable cypher, the Aristotelian final interpreter that Agamben brought out in his essay on the thing itself (Düttmann 2011, 72; Agamben 1999, 37). The life of the letter can be experienced, then, only from the point of view of the law's doorkeeper, not for the man from the country – this is Agamben's worry, which Düttmann does not address: "What threatens thinking here is the possibility that thinking might find itself condemned to infinite negotiations with the doorkeeper or, even worse, that it might end by itself assuming the role of the doorkeeper who, without really blocking the entry, shelters the Nothing onto which the door opens" (Agamben 1998, 54).

For Düttmann, then, there is no domain redeemed of potentiality because it would mean to take leave of the inexhaustible secret of the letter: to betray literary writing in favour of philosophical meaning – the classical manoeuvre that Derrida exposed: the impenetrable letter and the *différance* by which it is posited betrayed in favour of a particular meaningful present content. Another essay demonstrates the strength of Düttmann's reservations with Agamben and his claim to the secret, the life of the letter, the remnant: "To speak of Auschwitz as a remainder means neither to attribute to it the uniqueness of a never-before nor to identify it with the ubiquity of an always-already […] Perhaps a denial of the holocaust is inscribed in any possible *relation* to it" (Düttmann 2001, 3). For Hägglund, as we have seen in section 3.1, there is no domain redeemed of potentiality because this would be a domain beyond the becoming and passing of time, to which everything thinkable must be subjected – the process of autoimmunity that constantly undermines the alleged departure from the letter. Düttmann thinks the Gnosticism of the letter, Hägglund conceives the omnipresence of interpretation, while Derrida, as Naas explains, is interested in the autoimmunity of the religious experience particular to Christianity, in precisely the tension between the universal and the particular. Between Derrida's two key motifs – the name and the trace – potentiality cannot be thought through, only glimpsed. Düttmann stresses the secret, an "egg of stone" (or, perhaps, a "gigantic iron shell"), while Hägglund underlines that there can be no secret, no sacrosanct, no indemnified. Furthermore, both Düttmann and Hägglund look to Derrida for support. It looks as if the content Agamben brings to the modality of contingency would perplex them both – though not necessarily Derrida, nor the Derrida from Marder's essay:

> *Conversely, for Derrida, the thing is what remains after the deconstruction of the human, the animal, and the metaphysical belief in the thing itself, in its oneness and self-identity. The thing understood as the remains stands on the side of what has been called 'the undeconstructable' within deconstruction itself, of what both animates and outlives the deconstructive goings-through, experiences, or sufferings.* One cannot afford to 'go through' deconstruction and avoid paying close attention to the threshold, which at the last stage for the closure of metaphysics, the thing guards and leaves open, guards in leaving open (Marder 2009, 138).

Marder reaches this position by way of a contemplation of the reader's position before Kafka's parable, which commences by denoting the same rapport as is found

in Düttmann's analysis, but with a twist: "[...] any text taken as an object – however ideal or idealized – will remain obscure, illegible and undecipherable, because its objectification will inevitably lose sight of the inversion of intentionality, whereby we become the objects, the objectives, or the targets of the textual things themselves as soon as we commit ourselves to the act of reading" (Marder 2009, 59–60). Interpretation is never guaranteed, not because the letter is secluded, but instead because it always already involves the reader. Derrida supports neither the sovereign position of the letter from Düttmann's analysis, nor Hägglund's anarchical melee, but stands for the unaccountable hermeneutical procedure between them.

For Marder, Derrida ultimately steps into the threshold of an open door. The remainder of the metaphysical system that becomes available by that step becomes the element of a post-deconstructive realism. There is a discourse of that element – the element Hägglund thinks impossible, and the discourse of which Düttmann rules out. Derrida approaches Agamben closely here, in preparing the remnant for philosophy. But the door to the law is, for Derrida, never shut. So even if Agamben's paradigmatic remainder is something to be found also in Derrida, for the latter it is engaged in arche-writing, not archaeology. The *archē* for Derrida remains effaced by its own trace, is not sublated and absolved in its very presence.

Messianic contingency is the existence, *the remaining* of that which has depleted its capacity for not-being. Bartleby the scrivener is capable of not not-writing – and by having exhausted his capacity for not-writing, Bartleby furthermore issues the collapse of God's capacity of Creation and the mind's capacity for thoughts, as the theological dogma and the philosophical thesis tacitly rely on the *passion of writing*. This last implication of Bartleby's formula is precisely a Derridean feature.

Agamben's contingency, as it survives life, stands in the doorway to the law – it occupies the threshold; as does Derrida, but with a gaze otherwise directed. Agamben's reflection on signification via the encounter between Oedipus and the Sphinx does not side with Oedipus, to follow signification and see for its hidden signified; instead, it adopts the perspective of the Sphinx itself (Agamben 1993a,

139). In the same way, Agamben's short study on Hobbes does not look at the sovereign; it looks at the city from the Leviathan's perspective (Agamben 2014, 18). In both cases, Agamben's discourse occupies the threshold instead of falling for its smokescreen of potentiality. Contingency suspends law – it carries the law as well as the philosophical value of ground as a halo above. This is exactly what Düttmann objects to in the case of Orson Welles' adaptation: "Virtuosity makes light of the letter, respects it only to exploit it relentlessly and elevate the artist into a sphere of weightlessness in which nothing remains beyond his reach" (Düttmann 2011, 68). For Düttmann, the life of the letter remains caught in a relationship, in abandonment: "In *The Trial*, the letter is brought to life [...] [T]o put it differently, K. is summoned before the law, whether he is asked to attend a preliminary hearing or feels irresistibly drawn to the women he considers his helpers" (Düttmann 2011, 69). The living letter: that is K. before a court hearing, K. attracted to women – K. in a relation of abandonment: "[The law] binds them as it abandons them, allowing them to come and go as they please" (Düttmann 2011, 70). Düttmann reduces the life of the letter to the law that protects and forbids its singularity. Yet if Düttmann is right and the letter has a life of its own – for instance the life of a letter that spells Odradek, the letter of Odradek's life – then this life is *its own law*, is not prohibited by a law that separates life from letter. Where, following Marder's indication, in Derrida's work can we accommodate this life of Odradek?

The introduction to this thesis opens on the subject of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. I understand this work, of the writer who was most tormented by writing, to seek, in the reported "return to silence," a situation in which language would be purely excessive, redundant, in its relation to the world (Starobinski 1988). This means a *remnant* of language, a poetry that will not share in the fall of the world, a trace beyond destruction – unthinkable for Derrida for whom *écriture* and *rature*, writing and erasure, go hand in hand (Derrida 1982, 24). Such a messianic writing or scripture would be engraved beyond sovereignty, would have reciprocated its ban – a writing, then, beyond the potentiality of language. Furthermore, and equally offensive to Derrida, such a writing would register beyond the space of unimpeded circulation.

The best candidate in this respect is Rousseau's last work *Reveries of a Solitary Walker* – the book that records the botanist spell that Sebald pauses over and that he himself understood, all but calling it such, as the appendix, the supplement, to his *Confessions* (Rousseau 1979, 33). I look to the *Reveries* here as presenting the narrative of the irreparable that Agamben finds in Robert Walser's fictions (as well as his walks), but more importantly I look to *Rousseau* – in some ways Derrida's darling. I take Rousseau's *Reveries* and the efforts in botany they describe as a paradigm for writing; in this I make a different use of botany from Marder's recent works on the significance of plantlife for philosophy. I argue that the supplement within the tradition, and the work from which Derrida obtains it, is not only undecidable, but that as a signature it is also decided.

As said, Derrida's analysis of the supplement as it works in the *Confessions*, the *Essay on the Origin of Language*, and the *Reveries* takes a seminal place in his work. Rousseau's narrative exposes a wariness of writing that depends on writing in equal measure. In this paradox, the supplement is the critical factor; it is what makes, by way of a chain of supplements, his texts undecidable and uncontainable (within the laws of genre, for instance). In Derrida's analysis, there is no ultimate value to be had; we can only understand the differential play that conjures up these values together with their claim to priority. Yet if a final supplement could be identified in the *Reveries* then we will finally gain a sense of the contingent in Agamben's work. Furthermore, it would mean the evidence by which the Derridean discourse finally arranges a *rendez-vous* with Agamben's, between the logic of contamination with the discourse of the irreparable. Indeed, if Hägglund rightly insists that within Derrida's thought no value can be attributed a *sacred* status – and if he accordingly wrongly concludes that therefore in deconstruction all supposedly sacred values are emasculated – the question raised here is of the possibility within Derrida's thought of attributing a *profane* status to a particular paradigm of writing: can writing separate itself from the play of *différance* – from the metaphysical game – altogether, and instead occupy its role at the threshold of its being absolutely consigned to its *thus* – its being written? Can a supplement decide between indicating the "*fullest*

measure of presence," and the emptiness of which it takes the place (Derrida 1976, 144–145)?

In particular the second walk is pertinent here, one that Agamben glosses in *Infancy and History* (Agamben 1993c, 39–41), wherein Rousseau gives an account of the genre of reverie. The book deals with Rousseau's most haunting problem – that of the relationship between life and writing: what does it mean to be an author. Rousseau admits that he arrives at his reveries too late: "Already less lively, my imagination no longer bursts into flame the way it used to in contemplating the object which stimulates it. I delight less in the delirium of reverie" (Rousseau 1992, 12). However, this belated arrival is also the condition under which the writing of the reverie becomes possible: Rousseau is at that moment, as he explains in the first walk, finally alone (cast from social life, though still in the company of his wife and his friends), and he has lost his sense of self-preservation. Furthermore, Rousseau heads his third walk with an epigraph from Solon: "I continue to learn while growing old" – Rousseau shares his tragic insight that the learning of life comes after the fact (Rousseau 1972, 27). Between these limitations, the diminished force of his imagination married to the liberation from social life, memory becomes the domain of reverie. Were his imagination more powerful, the reverie could be fantastic, but as things stand it takes life as its material, and becomes indistinct from it. Were Rousseau still a part of society, the reverie would invade the domain of practical philosophy, or the other genres that Rousseau exercised; literature, pedagogy, but as it happens all these interests are suspended for the reverie, which is pursued entirely for its own sake.

Indeed, at the end of his life Rousseau had become a pariah, banned from France and his native Geneva. In Michael Davis' reading, the liberating hopelessness of Rousseau's situation described in the first walk as redemptive becomes aporetic in the second (Davis 1999, 115). Yet what it actually arrives at is indifference, as Davis too indicates. In Davis' reading, Rousseau tacitly refers to the *eschaton*: it is held that Rousseau actually bids for ultimate justice. Davis, then, deconstructs Rousseau's reveries, by exposing how, at one and the same time, they forego and commission

an apology for Jean-Jacques. In other, also deconstructive, terms – reverie is not pure: "[...] memory of experience is no more neutral than experience" (Davis 1999, 115). It is exactly on this point that Agamben, philosopher of infancy, seizes Rousseau's reverie as mediating a slow sequence from Montaigne to Freud, deposing the speaking subject as the foundation of experience and knowledge:

> [...] a twilight unconscious state becomes the matrix of a specific experience [...] rather an experience of birth [...] and simultaneously the key to an incomparable pleasure | [...] to experience necessarily means to re-accede to infancy as history's transcendental place of origin. The enigma which infancy ushered in for man can be dissolved only in history, just as experience, being infancy and human place of origin, is something he is always in the act of falling from, into language and into speech (Agamben 2007a, 46, 60).

To Agamben, the reverie is the pure narrative of infant experience, even more than Montaigne's precedent that is geared towards an experience of death rather than birth (Agamben 1993c, 38). The indifference that Rousseau describes or *writes* as reverie, then, is not between life and death, but between life and writing: "In wanting to recall so many sweet reveries, instead of describing them, I fell back into them" (Rousseau 1992, 13). Davis sees this too: "[...] experience and reflection are alike. Reverie somehow unifies them" (Davis 1999, 118). The activities of both walking and thinking are both reduced to writing. And this writing always traces a history of the Fall, as Rousseau evinces by way of his encounter with a Great Dane.

In Davis' reading, Rousseau somehow manages the impossible: "learning something in time" (Davis 1999, 133). More impressive than it sounds, this accomplishment in my understanding amounts to attaining immortality, or as Agamben says in a different context, but equally pertaining to the vanquishing of potentiality and the remainder deposited after this struggle: "to make room [...] for something that, for now, we can only evoke with the name *zoē aiōnios*, eternal life" (Agamben 2011a, xiii; see also Agamben 2001, 120: "eternal child"). Indeed, "learning something in time" means to cheat death, to conquer the most fundamental existential condition of the human being.

The messianic residue from Rousseau is his work in botany. Botany substitutes reverie: "Another pastime takes its place" (Rousseau 1992, 89). Reverie is the self-

receptivity of thought, the mind thinking itself, what to Aristotle means the highest and most divine. Yet what Rousseau captures by recording his work in botany is that this highest thought occasioned a remainder. In this sense, Rousseau performs an archaeology on potentiality. Botany is the writing of life that compares to the future legal comportment for Agamben: "One day humanity will play with law just as children play with disused objects, not in order to restore them to their canonical use but to free them from it for good" (Agamben 2005, 64).[104]

4.5   Botany: Writing and the Garden

Summary

The image of the pen and the paper, as well as its indifferent manifestations in potentiality and in the trace, is fundamental to Agamben's philosophy: God's capacity to create *ex nihilo* as well as the Aristotelian theory of mind presuppose the passion of writing. It is by this imagery that Western thought occasioned a double eclipse of its absolute object – the thing itself: first it is eclipsed behind Aristotelian hermeneutics, and then this hermeneutics is eclipsed behind Derridean grammatology/deconstruction. Furthermore, this double eclipse is the nearly impenetrable shell game that philosophy plays with theology. Philosophical archaeology – prompted by the second eclipse, the eclipse of the eclipse, the "cutting of the branches", as Agamben calls it by a Talmudic reference – is the work of undoing both, or better: of rendering their mechanism inoperative. This *désoeuvrement* of the double eclipse, as well as of the alliance with theology, employs the theme of indistinction (singularity, the paradigm, the example, indifference), and for that it follows the motif of the messianic – the moment of indistinction between the sacred and the profane, between philosophy and theology, between lawfulness and anomie.

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[104] Marder's *The Philosopher's Plant* presents an image of what such a writing would look like: "[*The Philosopher's Plant*] is not a monumental contribution to the history of thought à la Bertrand Russell's widely read tome, precisely because it refuses to force thought, whether past or present, into rigid, inorganic, stonelike molds. Rather than cast a panoramic gaze over this history, I have *selected*, *arranged*, and *displayed* some of its most prominent representatives" (Marder 2014, xvi).

This thesis has sought to articulate the place of something absolutely free and fallen – disenchanted – something absolutely contingent, within philosophy, and yet still to understand how this disenchanted modality is nevertheless conditioned in some way. I have exposed the laws that condition this contingency by following the trace of the messianic from Agamben's thought on potentiality back to Derrida's early exercises in deconstruction: the deconstruction of the notion of origin involves an irrevocable and irretrievable excess. It is this excess by which we gain access to the tradition of metaphysics as a historical edifice, a living thing, a force of survival, one that is itself the betrayal of and the departure from its own central value: the origin that is present. Philosophy means to defend Eden, but it can only do so from the outside, and by leaving it – by assuming its knowledge – it destroys it. Yet the messianic appears when something of that knowledge is once again transformed into life: the excess of metaphysical thought that deconstruction liberates in its investigations of survival rather than presence: the supplement, the trace, *différance*, and also the remnant.

Contribution

In Chapter 1, I illuminated what I call Agamben's philosophy of infancy, in order to present Agamben's messianic against the background of his *experimentum linguae*, and as part of the undoing – the archaeology – of an obstinate structural feature of philosophy: the concept of potentiality. Furthermore, this chapter provided me the occasion to explain Agamben's method. Although a great deal of helpful scholarship has been done in this area, the connection between Agamben's use of the paradigm (which Watkin explains and connects to Agamben's other areas of interest), and his intervention on the principles of ground and non-contradiction (of which Van der Heiden gives an admirable account) still required an explanation.

In Chapter 2, I exposed the proper operation of the messianic intrinsic to the potentiality-concept that Agamben takes from Aristotle. This chapter, devoted to a close reading of Agamben's Bartleby essay, brings out how Agamben's archaeology

of potentiality actually proceeds, and how it is immediately a messianic operation: the confrontation with potentiality implies philosophy's connection to theology, and renders it inoperative. The fruits of the messianic are philosophically contingent beings, theologically profane creatures.

In Chapter 3, I uncovered the *khōra* underneath the "taking place" of potentiality in the previous chapter. I began to engage with Derrida through an Agambenian understanding of his work, on the theme of the life of philosophy. I consistently interpret Derrida in keeping with his ambition to work as a "guardian of memory" – a philosopher who does not destruct, but who preserves.

In Chapter 4, I compared Derrida's thought on animal life with Agamben's interest in the theological creature. I also compared Derrida's key term of the supplement with Agamben's use of the image, the halo. By making these comparisons I prepare Derrida's thought to meet Agamben's challenges. In this context, I discuss Hägglund's and Düttmann's interpretations that fail to keep Derrida on a par with Agamben, and juxtapose them with Marder's, which succeed in doing so – to conclude on the paradigm of writing of botany.

I have exposed the formal workings of the messianic and the way it pertains to philosophical thought: for Agamben the tiny adjustment of the messianic moment lies in the setting aside of a suspended law or tradition. The moment of this suspense is anticipated in the works of Derrida that put significance of the tradition in suspense, leaving its force.

I have discussed Derrida and Agamben's treatises on the Greek figure *khōra* – in a sense, this discussion presents the main argument of my thesis. The discussion between Derrida and Agamben is focused on the question of *matter*. Derrida denies that Plato's word *khōra* can be exhausted by the Aristotelian notion of *hylè*. Yet Agamben's invocation of the Aristotelian term means not a position as opposed to "form", and does not understand it within the framework that divides the intelligible from the esthetical, but instead places it between these divisions (Attell 2014, 119).

My comparison between Derridean and Agambenian *khōra* allowed for the approximation of Derrida with a submerged messianic force, a figure like Bartleby, *katechonic*.

In the previous four sections, I have demonstrated how the threshold is broached not into an altogether strange philosophical *terra incognita*, but that the threshold is itself the Open. There is no absolute exteriority, but there is radical exteriority as the experience of the limit. At the threshold, in its passage to an idea, the thing itself is supplemented with a halo. The paradigm, the remnant, the signature, philosophical archaeology; all Agamben's technical terms point toward this position at the threshold.

Conclusion

In what sense does Agamben's thought constitute the messianic threshold of Derrida's? Adam Thurschwell, in "Cutting the Branches for Akiba: Agamben's critique of Derrida", as in his essay on Nietzsche's spectres, argues against Agamben from the Levinasian-Derridean position that takes its cue from the other, from a given, prior *logos*. This later essay repeats the same misunderstanding that Agamben's rejection of such an ethics of responsibility means a failure to recognize them as a critique of ontology (Thurschwell 2005, 185–186) – while in fact, Agamben's reason for rejecting Levinasian-Derridean ethics is that they presuppose an ontology of potentiality. Thurschwell begins, however, by stating the apparent identity of the positions dedicated to Derrida and Agamben's own (Thurschwell 2005, 177). So whereas Agamben's critical remarks toward Derrida so far have seen to the way in which *différance* or the trace imply and decree the suspense of the *eschaton*, and thus amount to a katechonic mechanism, Thurschwell observes how in "Pardes" the Derridean motif of writing is identified with Agamben's own concern with potentiality.

In Chapter 2, we saw how Agamben reduces the dogma of *creatio ex nihilo* and the philosopheme of the mind's capacity for thoughts to the image of the pen and the

white paper in order to bring out the role of the paradox of potentiality. The distinction between potentiality and actuality collapses in Derridean writing/scripture and the trace. By stressing the *différance* of a present significance by the trace, Derrida writes, effectively, the indistinction or indifference between potentiality and actuality – writes not *of* it, but *writes* it. It is this distinction that grants the Aristotelian paradigm of potentiality – paradigmatic because it obscures potentiality itself – its force. We already found this distinction faltering in the face of Bartleby's remarkable stance; here we have the philosophical counterpart to Melville's obstinate clerk.

In "Pardes", Agamben approaches the indistinction between potentiality and actuality by way of the question of signification – a major question in Derrida's work: how does a sign refer to an object? And second: how can a sign refer to a signification? (Agamben 1999a, 211). A signification as such can only be referred to insofar as it signifies, but not with regards to what it intends – only the signature of signification can be signified, not *its* signified (212). "There is no name for the name", Agamben summarizes, and this is a problem very familiar to twentieth century philosophy. In this same way, as I explained in sections 1.2 and 1.3.2, Agamben here is reading Derrida's as a science of the signature, presenting writing as a particular *experimentum linguae*: "The trace, writing 'without presence or absence, without history, without cause, without *arkhē*, without *telos*,' is not a form, nor is it the passage from potentiality to actuality; rather, it is a potentiality that is *capable* and that experiences itself, a writing tablet that suffers not the impression of a form but the imprint of its own passivity, its own formlessness" (Agamben 1999a, 216; Derrida quoted from Derrida 1982, 67). In Agamben's reading, instead of avoiding the paradox of potentiality, by ever postponing it for another type, another signification, writing/scripture reconciles it by collapsing it to its indistinction with actuality.

The trace, Agamben says, names a self-affection that is channelled between an experience of something and an experience of nothing. In encountering the trace we have an experience not of something – for the trace is not present as an object, the

trace is not phenomenal – nor of nothing – for part of the experience is a positive impression of an absence. The trace is the possibility of writing and the writing of potentiality. The paradox of signification – of the signification of a signifier – dissolves in the trace: "instead, it is the materialization of a potentiality, the materialization of its own possibility" (Agamben 1999a, 218). This matter has consumed all of its possibilities. It is not a potentiality that was enacted – that was translated into act – but one that has received all of its impotential (the trace is fully informed by the *différance* of present meaning – it knows its impossibilities, it is that knowledge) and thus manifests the materialization of it: the writing of potentiality. And this matter, then, Agamben calls *khōra* – accommodates it to an Aristotelian interpretation in order to outdo that tradition. I think that this strategic move is the endgame of Agamben's messianic undoing of the Aristotelian concept of potentiality. It is not that Agamben makes Plato's *Timaeus* an accessory to Aristotle; on the contrary, Aristotle's potentiality collapses with a view to the matter of *khōra*, wherein finally it finds itself exerted.

Derrida's writing is here set aside, seized as a paradigm, with the immediate intelligibility that Agamben attributes to it: the paradigm constitutes the intelligibility of a phenomenon, its thing itself, its *archē* (Agamben 1999a; Agamben 2009). This intelligibility is manifest at the threshold, when it is put in a passage to its idea. What this means is that the whole of Derrida's discourse is displaced onto the threshold, it is absolved of its presuppositions and transformed into the articulation of them. Agamben takes Derrida's contemplations on origins and foundations and places them in the Open. Rather than a theory and demonstration of the impossibility of present meaning, of origin and foundation, deconstruction becomes an experience of language itself, the thing of language – and the supplement, as I explained, becomes its halo.

As was the case with Bartleby, in Derridean writing the distinction between potentiality and actuality collapses. The nexus between God and Creation, between the sovereign and the law, and between the mind and consciousness, is reducible to the image of the pen and the white sheet. The potentiality of that image is

foregrounded in Bartleby's formula, as well as in Derrida's thought of the trace. The trace is the writing of potentiality, the writing that delivers potentiality to contingency, redeems it of its presuppositions by taking these assumptions up in contemplation – by manifesting the self-potentiality as well as the self-passivity (auto-affection) that unites potentiality and actuality once again.

How does Agamben seize a post-Derridean vantage point, and what does that vantage point see? This is the question that began this thesis. The contingent being without reason or ground can be philosophically understood by the halo that is suspended over it, the halo that is the mark of the depletion of potentiality at the end of a rule that is theological. Contingency is indicated, then, by the motif of the messianic. However, this being is not the philosophically posited being of Being – the existent – but instead is the theological creature that rebels by way of philosophy, that suffers the combined power of philosophy and theology to become their remainder.

Rousseau's reverie strikes a chord with Van der Heiden's conclusion on the thought of contingency in the comportment of *theoria* (Rousseau 1992, 98; Davis 1999, 220; Van der Heiden 2014, 279–280). Botany is, to Rousseau, the writing of the reverie. He argues the leisure of its exercise in contrast to mineralogy and zoology – the return to silence appears achieved, in a way (Rousseau 1992, 96–97). *Plato's Pharmacy* and Rousseau's botany: two visions or paradigms of writing. While pharmacology cannot decide between cure and poison, and Plato's Socrates has to decide between life and truth, Rousseau's botany is indifferent. In fact, Rousseau says that the obstacle that prevents the botanical vision of nature as a wonderful indifference is pharmacology (Rousseau 1992, 92–93). In fact, Derrida recalls: "That botany becomes the supplement of society is more than a catastrophe. It is the catastrophe of the catastrophe" (Derrida 1976, 148). Yet what does this mean? Derrida suggests that the supplementation of nature for society is the catastrophe of catastrophe because Mother Nature is here attributed a supplementary role. While society is the supplement for nature, nature is forced into another travesty by being placed in the place of society. But perhaps this return of nature in the form of

botany conveys a more hopeful message. Perhaps the catastrophe of the catastrophe is like Agamben's division of the division; disastrous with regard to the catastrophe. If catastrophe is one of the concepts from the prophet's vocabulary, its disaster takes that catastrophe to the end, renders its archaeology. The catastrophe of the catastrophe – which is the supplement of the supplement – like the division of the division, leaves the catastrophe innocent and powerless.

While pharmacology examines plants with a view to their medical properties, the meandering botanical art of the description of plants goes from singular to singular specimen to happily declare each time "here is yet another plant" (Rousseau 1992, 90). So while pharmacology writes in the place of an absent beneficial or detrimental effect, and thus records the injunction of and the deference to a potentiality, botany is the writing of potentiality itself. But botany is also a pharmacology redeemed of its presuppositions; in fact, Rousseau's own work in botany related in the Seventh Walk, done in Paris, is a *return* to botany – from his overjoyed days on the Lac de Bienne, as told in the Fifth Walk. It is the habit of a pharmacology that survives its passions; it is the capacity for pharmacology in excess of its will, as if Bartleby and General Kutuzov – having learned something in time – retire to take the places of Bouvard and Pécuchet in the country.

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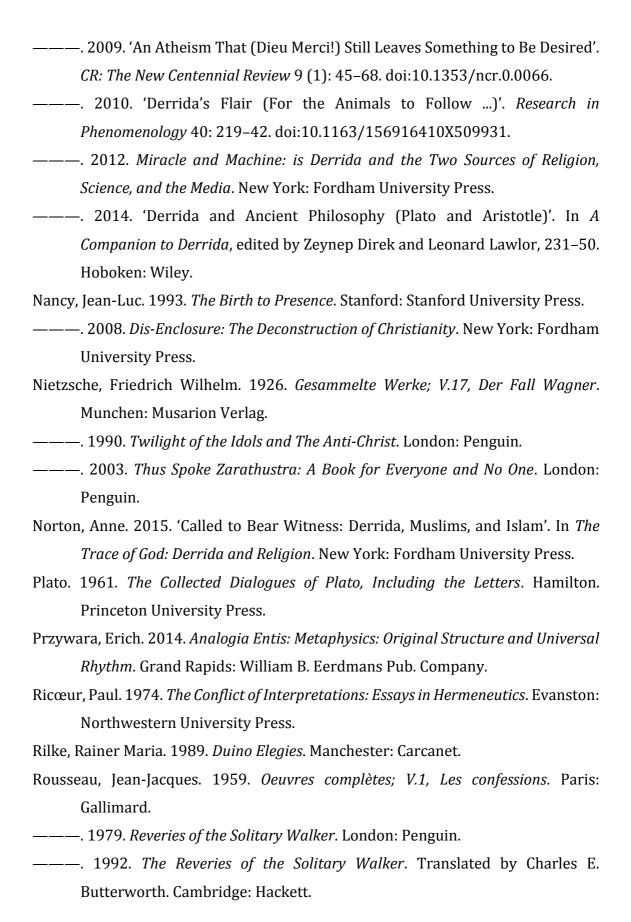
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