

*The Work of Giorgio Agamben: Law,
Literature, Life*, Edited by Justin Clemens,
Nicholas Heron and Alex Murray

Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008. (ISBN:
9780748634620). 214 pp.

Matt Rodda (The Glasgow School of Art)

The collection of essays brought together here on the work of the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben focus on his earlier works concerning language, aesthetics and literature. The volume includes 12 essays including one by Agamben himself, titled 'K'. The other 11 essays are provided by a gathering of emerging and established scholars from a variety of disciplines including philosophy, English, literature, legal theory, and cultural and media studies. From the start I should state that this volume is aimed at scholars already familiar with the work of Agamben and that each contributor draws on Agamben's texts in depth, concisely and with rigour, assuming a certain level of knowledge in the reader.

Correctly, the editors begin by placing Agamben in the context of his contemporaries, Alain Badiou, Antonio Negri, Jacques Rancière, and Slavoj Žižek, although it is notable that many of the essays in fact neglect to mention these thinkers and instead focus on the relationship between Agamben and his preceding generation, namely Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida and Michael Foucault, and also extensively to Walter Benjamin. Nevertheless, what is highlighted by the context of the field, and also by the scope of contributors, is that the editors have understood that in order to unify Agamben's work, here identified as a 'conviction of the necessity to undo the divisive powers of language' (p.2), it is necessary for them to cast their net very

wide, which, considering the constraints of the book's 214 pages and the scope of Agamben's output, they have managed admirably. The main claim of this text, then, is that extant critical literature on Agamben's thought has misunderstood him, or, more precisely, missed the mark by focusing predominantly on his *Homo Sacer* series and notions of sovereign and the state of exception, those explicitly political matters which have to date been considered 'in isolation from his work on poetics' (p.3). It is this balance that the editors aim to redress.

The Work of Giorgio Agamben begins aptly by presenting an essay by Agamben. 'K' is a clear and essential example of how Agamben's writing and thought deals with not only the key issues of law and exception in relation to sovereign and power, but also with a poetics of language and life. Here, focused on an analysis of Kafka's novels *The Trial* and *The Castle*, 'K' is intended to exemplify one of the editor's fundamental claims 'that Agamben's "political" work can be misunderstood if its essential relation to literature is missed' (p.4). Agamben's link with Kafka is reiterated in Jessica Whyte's essay 'Its Silent Working was a Delusion' (chapter 4), which deals with a reading of Kafka's *In the Penal Settlement*, placed in relation to Agamben's *Idea of Prose*. The placement of this essay in relation to that of Justin Clemens, in the previous chapter (chapter 3), 'The Role of the Shifter and the Problem of Reference in Giorgio Agamben', also allows for a consistency of references to be established – here to Agamben's obsession with the role of the 'shifter' – which demonstrates an editorial overview of the volume as a whole book and not just collected individual essays.

Of the essays dealing with Agamben's *Idea of Prose*, Justin Clemens' contribution stands out for its detailed analysis of the communicable nature of voice; posed as a question of voice that

highlights Agamben's own 'practice of politics-thought-prose, all at once.' (p.52) Also worthy of note is his concluding summary of a problematic in Agamben's methodology; namely his fidelity to a prioritising of 'natural languages' which, Clemens posits, acts as a limit on his breadth of thinking specifically with regard to the exclusion of mathematics. Similarly, Alexander Garcia Düttmann's 'Integral Actuality: On Giorgio Agamben's *Idea of Prose*' (Chapter 2), focuses on Agamben's notion of prose as a train of thought through a consideration of Benjamin, Heidegger and Adorno, which circles around the impossible integration of communicability and communication, language and thought, into an integral actuality. Furthermore, Düttmann's handling of the term *medio*, as a middle-term or in-between, sets the scene for following essays to introduce a consideration of the in-between-ness that forms the connection between the different strands of Agamben's thought.

Chapters 5 and 6 bring the work of Walter Benjamin to the forefront of discussion. 'Politics and Poetics of Divine Violence; On a Figure in Giorgio Agamben and Walter Benjamin' by Arne de Boever aims to provide a re-reading of the concept of divine violence in Agamben and how, following Benjamin's essay 'Critique of Violence', one should understand his constitution of the divine of violence as a proposition for a break in the circular dialectic between the *preservation* and *foundation* (positing) of the law of violence. Chapter 6, 'Idea of Poetry, Idea of Prose' by Nicholas Heron, however, seeks to locate the 'epicentre' of Benjamin's work from his early doctoral dissertation through to his late works by situating it along 'a path that leads from the "idea of poetry" to the "idea of prose"'; a reading that Heron finds confirmed in Agamben insofar as, he argues, 'the idea of prose is poetry' (p.107).

Chapters 7, 8 and 9 each pursue other key and specific methodological relationships between Agamben and Foucault, Gilbert Simondon and Jean-Luc Nancy, and Heidegger, respectively. In particular Chapter 7, 'The Fading Memory of Homo non Sacer' by Anton Schütz, stands out as marking a specific critique of Agamben's methodology and thought through a comparative study of the relationship and divergence between Agamben's thinking and Foucault's by taking into account the political differences of the very situations within which each has worked. Thanos Zartaloudis' 'Soulblind, or On Profanation' aims at a reading of happiness in Agamben, while Julian Wolfreys' 'Face to Face with Agamben; or, the Other in Love' foregrounds the role of love, in particular with relation to the absence of the 'Other' in Agamben's writing. Wolfreys interestingly proposes that Agamben's texts are in fact 'in love', insofar as his text is haunted by a being *in love* that seeks a face-to-face encounter with the Other, but achieves only a séance; here posited as a missed encounter between Agamben and Heidegger.

The final three chapters are connected through Agamben's work on film. Guy Debord connects Alex Murray's 'Beyond Spectacle and the Image: the Poetics of Guy Debord and Agamben' with Barbara Formis' 'Dismantling Theatricality: Aesthetics of Bare Life', which, subsequently, is linked to the final essay by Deborah Levitt, 'Notes on Media and Biopolitics' through a reading of Agamben's essay 'Notes on Gesture'. Murray's essay is of particular interest for its reading of Debord's films as a poetics that acts as rupture or as an 'art of the in-between' (p.173). This interrupting and repeating of the spectacle of poetics is also what Murray sees constituted in Agamben's broader critical practice as a poetics of language. Yet it is Formis' essay that is particularly engaging here for its concise reading of Anna Halprin's *Parades and Changes* – a theatrical performance that was

censored in the United States for twenty years – in the context of Agamben’s state of exception. In particular she makes a number of interesting propositions about the state of exception in theatre, suggesting, in one instance, that it undoes the exception in the practices of ‘bad theatre’ and produces a state of un-exception that realigns theatre with life. Here the pure praxis of a bare life is put forward as a ‘bare aesthetics’ that is responsible for the dismantling ‘both of theatre (or art in general) and of life (or political action in particular)’ (p.190). Levitt continues this discussion by demonstrating how our loss of gesture, our *camp* in bare life, is traceable historically through a development of the biopoliticisation of life in cinematography and the mechanical registration of the human character of movement.

On the whole this volume provides a collection of essays that are an insightful adaptation of Agamben’s work to a re-structured field of thought. Thankfully, the editors have also avoided any excessive overlapping of content, although admittedly some exists around Benjamin’s essay ‘The Storyteller’ (Chapters 5 & 6). The true value of this collection of analysis and criticism, however, is to be found in the significance not of each essay but in its collective contribution to decoding what the editors allude to as the ‘enigma of Agamben’ and his process of reconstructing concepts. Wolfreys’ essay ‘Face to Face with Agamben’ makes a poignant statement in concluding that it ‘all takes place between, or there is nothing’ (p.156). Indeed if the reader is to truly utilise the value of this analysis one must take note of the in-between-ness highlighted not only *in* Agamben’s work, but also between these essays *on* his work.