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Thoughts on Agamben's *Remnants of Auschwitz*:  
(A Talk at the University of Minnesota, April 13, 2011)

The subject that brings us together, Holocaust denial or “revisionism,” as it used to be called, strikes me as very much a chapter of French intellectual life of the 1980s, and one which it might have been thought (or hoped) had been put to rest (or exhausted) a generation ago. But the motif of “alternative narratives,” with its suggestion that the *bête immonde* of revisionism has perhaps been sophisticated back into existence, is intriguing, and it is that prospect, as it encroaches on the work of a prominent European intellectual, Giorgio Agamben, who is certainly *not* a Holocaust denier, that I will be talking about today. Specifically, I’ll be talking about what some have called his “most daring” book, but also perhaps “his most flawed” book, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, *Quel che resta di Auschwitz* (What Remains of Auschwitz) in the original Italian, which is significant since the book, which appeared in 1998, was followed in short order by an important reading of the Apostle Paul’s Letter to the Corinthians entitled *Il tempo che resta*, *The Time That Remains*.<sup>1</sup> The question of the relation between the remnants or remainders of Auschwitz and the time that remains (until the messianic end) is one that will occupy us later (if sufficient time remains). In any event, although it is hard not to be extremely critical of Agamben’s little book, I will attempt, in the thought that you didn’t

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<sup>1</sup> Leland de la Durantaye, *Giorgio Agamben: A Critical Introduction* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), p. 248.

invite me here to tell you that a book you may not have read is not worth reading, to salvage a rather striking remnant from the book for you. I would not be averse to calling these remarks “What remains of ‘*What remains of Auschwitz*.’”

Let me begin by offering some sort of context for the subject. Many of you will have a rough idea of Agamben’s career less as a philosopher than as a particularly brilliant... speculative philologist in the tradition of Aby Warburg.<sup>2</sup> You may know of the awakening of his vocation as one of a very small contingent participating in Heidegger’s seminar in the Provençal village of Le Thor in 1966. And you may be aware of the crucial role that Walter Benjamin, whom Agamben characterized as an “antidote” to Heidegger, has had for his thought.<sup>3</sup>

But the context I would offer at this point for understanding Agamben’s book is less that of his multifaceted career—as literary critic, political theorist, religious thinker, and speculative philologist—than that of the subject of Holocaust denial or “revisionism” in French thought twenty years—i.e., a full generation—before he turned to the subject since it too impinges on his book. Not that I would offer an overview of the subject. I am, in fact, happy *not* to be an expert on Holocaust denial, and would probably distrust anyone who laid claim to such expertise. But I was involved in the debates over Holocaust revisionism in the 1980s and have a personal perspective that may prove useful.

Let me then divide the subject into two parts: a first instance that might be called transcendental revisionism; and a second instance that might be categorized as empiricist revisionism. The empiricist phase had to do with a diabolically clever and somewhat

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. XVIII.

<sup>3</sup> “Agamben, le chercheur d’homme,” *Libération* (Paris), April 1, 1999, pp. II-III.

compulsive debunker of popular pieties, a Professor of French literature named Robert Faurisson. It happened that I translated and prefaced the major French response to Faurisson, *Assassins of Memory* by the distinguished French classicist and almost archetypal intellectual Pierre Vidal-Naquet.<sup>4</sup> The transcendental phase is more complicated and to the extent that it was amenable to some sort of revisionism it was certainly in spite of itself. I sometimes think of the conundrum at its core in terms of the paradoxical collision of an irresistible force and an unmovable object. The unmovable object will have been the genocide of the Jews, which was certainly the central moral reference for my generation. The irresistible force was the most potent discourse available to my generation, a discourse notoriously corrosive of the categories of *reference* and *centrality*. What happened at their intersection will be our focus in a moment.

But let us turn first to Vidal-Naquet's *Assassins of Memory* and what I have called the empiricist instance. On December 29, 1978, Robert Faurisson, a literature professor who had first come to popular attention with an effort to demystify the reputation of Lautréamont, adopted the tone of the skeptical anti-Nazi, in an article in *Le Monde* entitled "The Problem of the Gas Chambers or the Rumor of Auschwitz." "The Rumor of Auschwitz" was a reference to a notorious anti-Semitic rumor known as the Rumor of Orléans.<sup>5</sup> Faurisson's point was that the Jews had been slandered in Orléans and now the Germans were being slandered worldwide. The gas chambers were a technical impossibility, he claimed; those operating them would have killed themselves in

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<sup>4</sup> Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Assassins of Memory: Essays on the Denial of the Holocaust*, translated and with a foreword by Jeffrey Mehlman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992).

<sup>5</sup> See Edgar Morin, *La Rumeur d'Orléans* (Paris: Seuil, 1969).

the process; the deaths at Auschwitz were numerous, but caused by typhus; if the place was known as *anus mundi*, it was because of the diarrhea. The war was over; happily Hitler had lost; it was time now to do away with the propagandistic lie of a genocide, based as it was on the technical impossibility of the installations at Auschwitz having served as gas chambers.

Vidal-Naquet, outraged, ended up publishing an entire book against Faurisson and his supporters, many of whom were on the left, based on the principle that one does not stoop to debate with someone so sadistically perverse as to deny the Nazi genocide of the Jews. Which is to say that the book itself, despite being well received on the cover of the New York Times Book Review when it appeared, was a disappointment.<sup>6</sup> At least such is my perception. Were a demonstration needed I would simply say that the concluding two pages consisted of the lyrics of the cynical Argentine tango *Cambalache*: the world had indeed become a junk shop (*Cambalache*), Vidal-Naquet seemed to be saying, if a professor could get away with purveying the kind of nonsense that Faurisson was spewing suavely forth...

The foreword I wrote to the volume was marked by its melancholy. *Révisioniste* had been the word used for the champions of Dreyfus during the eponymous Affair. The Vidal-Naquet clan had been a great *révisionniste* family. Now here was their scion refusing to debate, defending what his adversary, given that refusal to debate, had no trouble characterizing as a dogma. Vidal-Naquet was even doing battle with Noam Chomsky, who had chimed in with a defense of free speech that ended up being used as a

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<sup>6</sup> Walter Reich, "Erasing the Holocaust" in the New York Times, July 11, 1993.

preface to a Faurisson publication.<sup>7</sup> “Truth on the March,” Zola’s celebrated slogan during the Affair, was adopted by Faurisson. Small wonder that Vidal-Naquet could find no better words with which to conclude his book than the cynical lyrics of a tango.

Finally, Vidal-Naquet appealed to the scholarship of his friend the Princeton historian, Arno Mayer, whose history of the genocide, once it appeared, he suggested, would definitively reduce the revisionist camp to silence. Or so he hoped. Mayer’s controversial book, when it appeared, insisted that “sources for the study of the gas chambers are at once rare and unreliable.”<sup>8</sup> Faurisson was jubilant and Vidal-Naquet, I assume, depressed...

Now the one valuable result of the Faurisson affair, and one that will bear on our understanding of Agamben, concerns the support Faurisson received from the far left (and in particular the group, “La Vieille Taupe”). Alain Finkielkraut convincingly argued that at issue was doing away with any possibility of distinguishing between capitalist regimes of greater and lesser evil.<sup>9</sup> If the gas chambers did not exist, the Americans, from the point of view of partisans of the class struggle, were no better than the Germans. And so it became possible to wish—or spuriously argue—they out of existence...

Let me turn now to what I have called the transcendental wing of the revisionist question. If deconstruction was hell-bent on dismantling the very categories of reference

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<sup>7</sup> Noam Chomsky, “Some Elementary Comments on the Rights of Freedom of Expression,” reproduced as a preface to R. Faurisson, *Mémoire en defense contre ceux qui m’accusent de falsifier l’histoire* (Paris: La Vieille Taupe, 1980).

<sup>8</sup> Arno J. Mayer, *Why Did the Heavens Not Darken: The “Final Solution” in History* (New York: Pantheon, 1988), p. XVIII.

<sup>9</sup> Alain Finkielkraut, *L’Avenir d’une negation: Réflexion sur la question du genocide* (Paris: Seuil, 1982), pp. 15-58.

and centrality, what might it have to say about the central moral reference of an entire generation? For a long time, the answer appeared to be nothing. Derrida, who was, of course, not a revisionist, for a long time preferred to go no where near the genocide of the Jews. Blanchot's anti-Jewish writings of the 1930s, about which he knew, he never mentioned.<sup>10</sup> Paul de Man's notorious anti-Semitic article during the war in *Le Soir* posed a real problem, but Derrida finessed it by interpreting de Man's phrase "vulgar anti-Semitism" rather unconvincingly not as a vulgar trend within anti-Semitism but as anti-Semitism being inherently and essentially vulgar in itself.<sup>11</sup>

The closest Derrida came, I believe, to the Holocaust during the 1980s, was his rather brilliant little book on the category of Mind (or *Geist*), *De l'esprit*, in Heidegger.<sup>12</sup> The argument is that Heidegger, in 1927, consolidates his discovery (of an authentic interrogation of the being of *Dasein*) by relegating Mind, *Geist*, to the category of those all too Cartesian words that he would have us use only in quotation marks. Whereupon Heidegger becomes a Nazi and drops the quotation marks—i.e., he becomes a humanist of sorts, with a real investment in *Geist* or Mind. Finally, in 1953, in pages on the poet Georg Trakl, the repressed returns in the form of a *Geist* derivative not from Plato (and *geistig*) but from old-Germanic *geistlich*, indicating a metaphorical fire. Derrida lets us know that the old-Germanic is part of a "brutal foreclosure" of the Hebrew *ruach*, *spirit*, *wind*...<sup>13</sup> Moreover he goes to special lengths to translate the German *entsetzt* in the Trakl poem not as *déplace*, but as *déporte*. Put it all together—Nazism, fire, exclusion

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Derrida, *Parages* (Paris: Galilée, 1986).

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Derrida, "Like the Sound of the Sea Deep Within a Shell: Paul de Man's War" in *Critical Inquiry*, Spring 1988.

<sup>12</sup> Derrida, *De l'esprit: Heidegger et la question* (Paris: Galilée, 1987).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 165.

of the Hebrew, deportation, all of them metaphorical—and one has the metaphorical matrix of the Holocaust, with an implicit warning not to take it literally (Heidegger’s error in 1934, when he dropped the quotation marks). This is as close to a deconstruction of the Holocaust as Derrida, I submit, ever came.<sup>14</sup>

Having evoked both the empirical wing and the transcendental wing (in spite of itself) of 1980s revisionism, it is time to move a generation ahead to Agamben’s *Remnants of Auschwitz*. The circumstances around the text are particularly auspicious. It is translated into French by Pierre Alféri, who happens to be Derrida’s son.<sup>15</sup> In English the translator is the brilliant Daniel Heller-Roazen of Princeton, son of the eminent historian of psychoanalysis, Paul Roazen.<sup>16</sup> The book is the object of a full length polemic by Philippe Mesnard, the author of a polemical work targeting Blanchot’s right-wing journalism in the 1930s.<sup>17</sup> Plainly, it occurred to me, here was a text I was slated to attend to—which is what I will do now.

Agamben’s point of departure, already prepared for in the series that began with *Homo Sacer*, a series of which the Auschwitz volume is the third, is the notion that the camp, the concentration camp is the paradigmatic institution of modern times, or in the author’s words: “the hidden paradigm of the political space of modernity.”<sup>18</sup> The reader

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<sup>14</sup> See “Perspectives: On Paul de Man and *Le Soir* in J. Mehlman, *Genealogies of the Text: Literature, Psychoanalysis, and Politics in Modern France* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 125-128.

<sup>15</sup> *Ce qui reste d’Auschwitz*, trans. P. Alféri (Paris: Rivages, 2003).

<sup>16</sup> *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. D. Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 2002).

<sup>17</sup> Philippe Mesnard and Claudine Kahan, *Giorgio Agamben à l’épreuve d’Auschwitz* (Paris: Kimé, 2001). On Blanchot, cf. Philippe Mesnard, *Maurice Blanchot, le sujet de l’engagement* (Paris: l’Harmattan, 1996).

<sup>18</sup> Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. D. Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 123.

will immediately recognize Michel Foucault's notion of the prison, the architectural arrangement of Bentham's all-seeing *Panopticon*, as the exemplary modern institution.<sup>19</sup> And Agamben, in fact, suggests that his work is in fact a prolongation of Foucault's—from prison to camp. For those who may have found the exclusionary realm of the prison already too *exceptional* or marginal a space to be promoted to centrality in our normalized world, who may, for instance, have preferred the school (as in Ivan Illich's *Deschooling Society*, which was roughly contemporary with Foucault's book) as paradigm, the choice of the camp for such exemplarity comes as a shock indeed.<sup>20</sup> (One would need all the parodic and lyrical wit of the authors of the musical *Urinetown*, that neo-Weillian masterpiece for post-revolutionary times, to pull it off, and even then only half-seriously. Recall the exchange. Young Jimmy, about to be thrown off a roof: "You mean Urinetown is death. To which Mr. Gladwell, warden of the camp, replies: Well, that's one interpretation...")<sup>21</sup> The choice of exacerbating, in all seriousness, Foucault's prison into a concentration camp, of course, may even strike us as sensationalistic. As though the vanguard thought of the 1970s—Foucault, in this case--were in need of a new emotional rush in order to command the attention of a new and slightly jaded generation of readers.

Or perhaps, in search of the motivation behind Agamben's construct, one should above all recall the imperative of a (long deferred) rendez-vous implicit in every discourse pretending to pre-eminence—again, Foucault, in this case—with what all were

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. M. Foucault, *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975).

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971).

<sup>21</sup> Mark Hollman & Greg Kotis, *Urinetown* (London: Faber & Faber, 2003). The dystopian conceit of the musical is that at a time of severe drought, all those who fail to pay a fee "for the privilege to pee" are carted off to an ill-defined "urinetown."

prepared to treat as the pre-eminent event of the twentieth century—the genocide of the Jews, in this case. We won’t know the ultimate value of a discourse, as it were, until we hear what it has to say about the Holocaust...

To this mix, we should add mention of the tutelary role of Carl Schmitt in Agamben’s thought, the notion that the rule or norm was best understood as a function—or even as an after-effect—of the exception.<sup>22</sup> Thus for Derrida speech, the linguistic norm, was said to be a mirage generated by an exacerbation of a skewed version of writing, the exception. Even as, for Foucault, as already suggested, the exclusionary space of the Panopticon would be said to lie at the center of our institutions. Translate into the idiom of Agamben’s *Remnants of Auschwitz*, “the extreme [or exceptional] situation becomes the very paradigm of modern life.”<sup>23</sup>

Let us consider a version of this omnipresence of Auschwitz. Agamben quotes Primo Levi (who himself is drawing on the writing of Mikos Nyszli a Hungarian-Jewish physician assigned to the *Sonderkommando*, the accursed crew—of Jews--whose task was to assist in the killing). During a period of respite from their grueling work, a soccer match is improvised between the SS and members of the *Sonderkommando*. Levi comments: “Other members of the SS and the rest of the squad are present at the game; they take sides, bet, applaud, urge the players on as if, rather than at the gates of hell, the game were taking place on the village green.”<sup>24</sup> Agamben characterizes that moment of apparent normalcy as “the true horror of the camp. ... For that match is never over; it

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<sup>22</sup> See in particular Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), pp. 3-31.

<sup>23</sup> *Remnants of Auschwitz*, p. 49.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p.25.

continues as if interrupted. It is the perfect and eternal cipher of the ‘gray zone,’ which knows no time and is in every place.”<sup>25</sup>

That soccer match, as evoked by Agamben (via Levi) provokes several thoughts:

1. In this passage, as in much of his book, Agamben comes across as a latter-day Dante whose Virgil, through the twentieth century hell of Auschwitz, is Primo Levi. And one thinks: How odd that the vanguard discourse of France in the 1970s—Foucault, but much more than Foucault, as we shall soon see—should by the end of the century be recast as part of a scenario that sees two Italians acting out the *Inferno* of Dante...
2. The soccer match in the death camp functions as a restricted economy, almost a mirage, within the general economy of the extermination. But consider the terms in which Agamben evokes it: it “knows no time and is in every place.” “[The match] repeats itself in every match in our stadiums, in every television broadcast, in the normalcy of everyday life.”<sup>26</sup> One could readily imagine such a perception as the symptom of a survivor who projects the terms of his trauma everywhere. But this is not Levi the survivor but Agamben the theorist who is speaking and his statement seems part mystical vision, part polemic against historical research, reduced to its most positivistic and banal. “The aporia of Auschwitz is, indeed, the very aporia of historical knowledge: a non-coincidence between facts and truth, between verification and comprehension.”<sup>27</sup>
3. Note, moreover, that once Auschwitz is said to be everywhere (“every match in our stadiums, every television broadcast”), its uniqueness—its extraordinariness--has been

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

decisively eroded. Once it is there in the “normalcy of our everyday life” has it not been reduced to something almost normal?

4. We may already intuit the arc of Agamben’s argument. Heidegger the sometime Nazi was to be counteracted by the messianic Benjamin, said to be his “antidote”—an agent of *euphoria* (or hope) to counter the *aporia* encountered in Heidegger. But all transpires as though what lay await in Benjamin for Agamben was above all the presence of Carl Schmitt, theorist of the state-of-exception (that gave us camps in the first place) and crown jurist of the Third Reich. We know that Benjamin had mentioned Schmitt in a *curriculum vita* as a principal inspiration of his work on the *Trauerspiel*. And in December 1930, he wrote to Schmitt that he hoped to do for the philosophy of art what Schmitt, in his book on dictatorship, had done for the philosophy of the State.<sup>28</sup> There is a component of Benjamin’s thought, that is, which could lead a reader (*du côté de chez Carl Schmitt*) still deeper into the nightmare of the twentieth century and such appears to be the case of Agamben in his book on Auschwitz.

Now the condition of Agamben’s generalization of Auschwitz to “paradigmatic” status is a relegation of the gas chambers to secondary importance. We have already seen how such denial of the gas chambers figured as part of the ideological arsenal of a fragment of the far-left in the 1980s: no gas chambers meant no *essential* difference between the two capitalist regimes—Germany and the United States—locked in conflict in a Second World War. Agamben, who is in no way a Holocaust denier, is nonetheless sufficiently of the far-left to want to demote the gas chambers, the principal vehicle of the

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<sup>28</sup> Cited in Jacob Taubes, *En divergent accord: A propos de Carl Schmitt*, trans. Philippe Ivernel (Paris: Rivages, 2003), p. 52.

genocide, to secondary status, and he does so through the crucial maneuver of promoting the figure of the *Muselman* to central importance.

The *Muselman*, we know, was a dreaded figure of near autistic apathy, physically and mentally wasted, a kind of “staggering corpse,” one of the living dead,” a person who inspired no sympathy in his fellow inmates since he had lost all dignity and no longer offered any resistance to the brutality around him. In Levi’s terms, he was one of the “drowned,” someone who had “touched bottom.” When Bruno Bettelheim founded his Orthogenic School in Chicago to treat autistic children, it was conceived of as a kind of counter-camp in which children demonstrating many of the symptoms of *Muselmänner* were to be rehabilitated.<sup>29</sup>

There is debate about the origin of the term. The principal consensus is that the name was used for the particularly wretched denizens of the camp because Moslems were thought to “submit unconditionally” to the will of God.<sup>30</sup> That state of utter submissiveness, a complete loss of dignity or independence was said to characterize the camp’s “Moslems.” It has also been suggested that because they were autistically closed in on themselves, they were “like mussel-men.”<sup>31</sup>

What is most significant is that theirs was an experience of near-collapse as a result of starvation and disease. At one level, it made no sense to kill them since they were virtually dead already. The horror they inspired, that is, was quite different from that associated with the shock of wealthy bourgeois who were suddenly “selected” for the gas chamber upon arrival at the camp. But if the *Muselmänner*, the camp zombies, were

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<sup>29</sup> *Remnants of Auschwitz*, p. 46.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

<sup>31</sup> Mesnard and Kahan, p. 43.

to replace the gas chambers at the center of our iconography—and thus of our understanding--of the camps, Agamben, who was anything but a “revisionist” or “denier,” would have taken a crucial step in the direction of those far-left advocates of Holocaust denial. He would, after all, eventually be capable of comparing the (no doubt) listless detainees of Guantanamo to “the Jews in the Nazi *Lager*,” a move that could only be justified (*et encore!*) if one decided to bracket the gas chambers or reduce them to subsidiary importance.<sup>32</sup>

Now there is a central paradox, according to Agamben, affecting the situation of the *Muselmann*. On the one hand, he is the person who has experienced the camp at its worst—and is thus the “complete witness.”<sup>33</sup> On the other, his state of near autistic degradation, that state of “no return” into which, according to Bettelheim, he had descended, made him the least trustworthy of speakers. He is essentially speechless. But if such be the case, then the only witness is disqualified, through a kind of epistemological hitch, on logical grounds. In Agamben’s words: “Let us, indeed posit Auschwitz, that to which it is not possible to bear witness; and let us also posit the *Muselmann* as the absolute impossibility of bearing witness...”<sup>34</sup> Has a memorialist of the genocide ever come closer to the position of a Holocaust denier.

Agamben’s paradox calls for several comments:

1. First, and quite empirically, it is not the case that the *Muselmänner* did not bear witness. At the very end of his book, Agamben, out of intellectual honesty (or perhaps love of paradox) offers a small anthology of statements by former *Muselmänner*. From

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<sup>32</sup> Agamben, *State of Exception*, p. 4.

<sup>33</sup> *Remnants of Auschwitz*, p. 47.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 164.

which I select a single example, the words of Feliksa Piekarska: “I was a *Muselmann* for a short while. I remember that after the move to the barrack, I completely collapsed as far as my psychological life was concerned. The collapse took the following form: I was overcome by a general apathy; nothing interested me; I no longer reacted to either external or internal stimuli; I stopped washing, even when there was water; I no longer even felt hungry...”<sup>35</sup> Such was the extreme depression of those who were said to wander through the camp “like stray dogs.”<sup>36</sup>(167)

2. Secondly, removing the focus from the gas chambers and those who manned them curiously deflects attention from those who may have been the principal archivists of the camp, the *Sonderkommando*. The point has been well registered by Philippe Mesnard and Claudine Kahan. The members of the *Sonderkommando* led the strangest of embittered lives. On the one hand, manning the gas chambers and crematoria, they were engaged in the most grueling and dehumanizing of jobs. On the other, because they were in almost immediate contact with those arriving at the camp from outside, and who would be immediately exterminated, they had greater access than any other category of deportee to goods arriving from outside the camp: alcohol, cigarettes, underwear, etc. Theirs was an existence split, maddeningly, between toil amidst the corpses, and what comparatively passed for a measure of luxury among those in the camp. This resulted in incredible bitterness, but also in sufficient vigor to sustain a burning desire to bear witness. The result was, among other testimony, the scrolls of the *Sonderkommando* that were buried near the crematoria and the burial ditches and were known as the Meguilès Auschwitz.

The authors include Haim Herman, Lejb Langfus, Zalman Gradowski, and Marcel

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 166.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 167.

Nadsari, among others.<sup>37</sup> Their purpose, as the issue of YIVO Bleter that gathered a number of their texts at the end of the war, claimed, was “to create a tableau of how life was “lived”—as opposed to terminated—at Auschwitz. What a normal day there was like [...] Our writing should not be weighed on a literary scale. But we have much to tell, even if literarily, we stammer. We will relate things as we can, in our language.”<sup>38</sup> But these texts, central testimony on Auschwitz, are overlooked by Agamben, fascinated as he is with the *Muselmann* and the essential “lacuna” affecting the testimony he might be expected to offer.

Here then is an empiricist disqualification of evidence of life—and death—in Auschwitz. The *Meguiles Auschwitz*, the testimony of members of the *Sonderkommando*, are largely overlooked by Agamben and the “complete witness,” the *Muselmann*, is shown, on logical grounds, to be essentially flawed. But, as in the revisionism of the 1980s, Agamben’s considerations of Auschwitz also bear a transcendental burden, to which we now shall turn. For Agamben, from the outset, appears to have been concerned as much with the future of vanguard French thought as with the truth of Auschwitz.

The challenge for him lay in finding a theoretical coefficient to articulate with the paradox inherent in the discursive situation of the *Muselmann*, what I have called the “hitch” in the “complete” witness’s voice. Agamben finds this coefficient in the linguistics (or discourse analysis) of Emile Benveniste, and specifically in what he imagines to be their transition to the kind of political history of speech acts associated with Michel Foucault. Benveniste’s celebrated analysis deals with the fact that subjectivity is a function of the entirely performative role of interlocutory pronouns—and

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<sup>37</sup> Mesnard and Kahan, pp. 19-20.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 21.

other so-called “shifters”--and the toll they take on the presumed constative function of linguistic signs. Ego exists because ego, in conversation, says “I,” but “I” (in conversation) will change its (constative) meaning, the person to whom it refers, depending on which party to the conversation is uttering it. It all proceeds as though the categories of *énonciation*, the performative instance, and *énoncé*, the constative, formed a zero-sum game. The more valid the *énonciation*, the anchoring of the subject in discourse, the less valid, Agamben seems to be speculating, the *énoncé*. Pressed to the limit, the analysis yields the following conclusion, italicized by Agamben: “*The subject of enunciation is composed of discourse and exists in discourse alone. But, for this very reason, once the subject is in discourse, he can say nothing; he cannot speak.*”<sup>39</sup>

Agamben would appear to be weaving a complex metaphor or analogy between a historical reality (the debilitating hitch in the “impossible” testimony of the “complete witness,” the *Muselmann*), on the one hand, and the theory of subjectivity in language of Benveniste, on the other (the price that the constative, reference, appears to be required to pay for every achievement of the performative). What the one has to do with the other is a problem of considerable dimensions that Agamben comes no where close to solving. One attempt on his part consists in assigning the emotion of shame, frequently said to be the specific sentiment of survivors of the genocide, to the tension (between performative and constative) that Agamben has unearthed as a linguistic universal in Benveniste. “Shame,” he ends up saying with a certain vagueness, “is truly something like the hidden structure of all subjectivity and consciousness.”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> *Remnants of Auschwitz*, p. 117.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 128.

If that doesn't convince you, Agamben offers up one last attempt to join the two terms of the complex metaphor, to turn them into something more than a vague analogy. "One evening in 1969," we are told, "Emile Benveniste [...] suffered a stroke on a street in Paris. Without identification papers, he was not recognized. By the time he was identified, he had already suffered a complete and incurable aphasia that lasted until his death in 1972."<sup>41</sup> Benveniste, Agamben tells us, was on the verge of making a major advance, "a metasemantics built on a semantics of enunciation," when his career was brutally cut short. It was left to Michel Foucault to "perfectly realize" the discipline that Benveniste had glimpsed before his collapse.<sup>42</sup> In sum, it is as though Benveniste, having intuited the (Foucaultian) core of Agamben's theory of—or metaphor for—Auschwitz, was turned into a *Muselmann*, rendered tragically mute for the rest of his days. And French thought seemed to show up at its most eminent in order to bemoan or celebrate the event: Foucault, in his theory of the archive: "the dark margin encircling and limiting every act of speech," was there to pick up the slack and pursue the project Benveniste had only glimpsed.<sup>43</sup> And Derrida was even summoned to attend, if only to be put in his place. In Agamben's words: "The intimacy that betrays our non-coincidence with ourselves is the place of testimony. *Testimony takes place in the non-place of articulation*. In the non-place of the Voice stands not writing, but the witness"—i.e., the impossible witness, the *Muselmann*.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 137.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 139.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 144.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 130.

It is time to save a remnant from the *Remnants of Auschwitz*, a book, it will be seen, whose arbitrariness is in many ways staggering. As I said, I did not come to Minnesota to urge you not to read a book many of you will not have read. Consider then the following passage:

The space of the camp [...] can even be represented as a series of concentric circles that, like waves, incessantly wash up against a central non-place, where the *Muselmann* lives. [...] The entire population of the camp is, indeed, nothing other than an immense whirlpool obsessively spinning around a faceless center. But like the mystical rose of Dante's *Paradiso*, this anonymous vortex is "painted in our image" (*pinta della nostra effigie*); it bears the true likeness of man.<sup>45</sup>

Here then is the *Muselmann* at the center of a mystical vision. We had earlier talked of the strangeness of French vanguard thought staging what may be regarded as a last hurrah under the auspices of two Italians acting out Dante: Primo Levi as Virgil, Giorgio Agamben as Dante, making their way through the Hell of Auschwitz. Here though we have been removed to *Paradiso*, a presumed salvation, although one centered on the arch-melancholic, almost Satanic figure of the *Muselmann*. Earlier we had also quoted Agamben on the shape of his career: from Heidegger to the presumed "antidote," Walter Benjamin, Agamben's presumed ticket from *aporia* to *euporia*, indeed the euphoria of salvation. And we had noted the cruel irony that saw Agamben encounter in Benjamin above all the work of Carl Schmitt, theorist of the "state of exception" and crown jurist of the Third Reich. Auschwitz, he would have us believe, was everywhere.

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., pp. 51-52.

There is, however, a very different inspiration in Benjamin, very much in opposition to Schmitt, namely that of Gershom Scholem. Surely, the reference to the remnant as an inherently “theologico-messianic concept” at the end of *Remnants of Auschwitz* justifies a glance *du côté de chez Scholem*, so to speak.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, the fact that Agamben would dedicate his subsequent book—on the Apostle Paul—to another thinker, another would-be heir to Benjamin, whose allegiances seemed similarly divided between Scholem and Schmitt, namely Jacob Taubes, offers us further encouragement.<sup>47</sup> What follows is a masque or a *Trauerspiel* of sorts, the staging of an effort to redeem Agamben’s book and to fight the good fight against Scholem’s apparent adversary, Schmitt, in the struggle for Benjamin’s soul. The backdrop, elaborately designed in the manner of the baroque masque, offers a view of Agamben’s Hell, Auschwitz, at the center of whose “concentric circles” we find an almost allegorical figure of Satanic melancholy, the *Muselmann*, mystically transformed in Agamben’s telling into a salvific figure of hope, Dante’s *rosa mystica*. Foucault, Benveniste (in a state of paralysis), and Derrida are in attendance. The curtain is about to rise.

The action is largely in the form of a conversation that actually occurred at the Café du Dôme in Montparnasse, 1927.<sup>48</sup> Scholem imparts to Benjamin, in a febrile state, the thrust of the discovery he has just made in Oxford, the existence of a full-blown antonimian theology within Judaism. Everything begins with Sabbatai Zevi, the legendary false Messiah, a seemingly familiar story. In 1665, stricken with migraine

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 162.

<sup>47</sup> On the Taubes-Benjamin relation (by way of the Scholem-Schmitt tension), see J. Mehlman, “De la pédagogie abusive: malaise dans la transmission” in *Avec George Steiner: Les chemins de la culture* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2010), pp. 87-100.

<sup>48</sup> Gershom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1981), p. 136.

headaches, Sabbatai Zevi, a mediocrity living in Smyrna, Turkey, heads off to the Holy Land to consult with Nathan of Gaza, an illuminate, in search of a cure. Nathan takes one look at him and announces that the previous night he had dreamt the coming of the Messiah and he had Sabbatai Zevi's face. Whereupon he tells Sabbatai Zevi that he is not ill; he is the messiah. In short order, a decision is taken to bring the good news to the rest of Jewry, which meant taking the fledgling messiah on the road. The Jews of Europe, in their suffering, were prepared for a messiah and welcomed him enthusiastically.

And then the collapse came. The Ottoman Sultan, vexed by the power accruing to the "King of the Jews," summoned him to Istanbul and confronted him with a rather austere choice: conversion to Islam or death. Sabbatai Zevi opted for conversion and the official story came to a close.

At this point Gershom Scholem intervenes to demonstrate that a considerable number of Jews never, in fact, abandoned their apostate messiah. Instead, a new subterranean theology emerged based on the proposition that at this point in the redemptive process, the messiah was obliged to enter into evil in order to defeat it from within. And his disciples were ordered to follow suit. The Law was to be fulfilled by violating it. Antinomianism was to be the order of the day.<sup>49</sup>

Eventually, according to Scholem, after generations of violating the Law, the mystical-heretical reasons for doing so were quite simply forgotten. A new justification for not obeying the law was invented. It was called Enlightenment, which was thus, in Scholem's inspired reading, no more than the precipitate of a decrepit mystical heresy no longer aware of its own existence.

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<sup>49</sup> Gershom Scholem, "Redemption Through Sin" in *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (New York: Schocken, 1971), pp. 78-141.

But what is the relation of all this to Agamben's book about Auschwitz, the action of our Trauerspiel-masque to its backdrop? Quite simply that Agamben's vision, centered as it is, on a Dante-inspired image of salvation (*Paradiso*) embodied by the *Muselmann* messiah seems almost a rebus of Scholem's argument. It is almost as though Agamben, in his desire to repeat the existence of Benjamin, had substituted an icon of Sabbatai Zevi, the pathologically gloomy Muslim messiah of the Jews, a man of Satanic disposition, for Benjamin's talismanic Angel (Angelus Novus) as painted by Klee. For it should not be forgotten that Benjamin's secret name, Agesilaus Santander, as Scholem explained, was an anagram of Der Angelus Satanas, the angel Satan—seated at the center of Hell.<sup>50</sup> It was that melancholic Angel, as painted by Paul Klee, now become the “angel of history,” who would show up at the outset of the Second World War, taking in the “one single catastrophe that keeps piling wreckage on wreckage,” in the Ninth Thesis on the Philosophy of History.

Or perhaps we should see the *Muselmann* messiah at the center of Agamben's vision of Auschwitz, in its relation to the conversation in Paris about the apostate (and thus) Muslim messiah, Sabbatai Zevi, in terms of what Benjamin called a “dialectical image”: a kind of “picture puzzle” or constellation that brings the dialectic of history to a standstill and shocks or rips its way out of what seemed to be a continuum.<sup>51</sup> The emergent “now-time” as Benjamin calls it, or the *kairos*, to use Agamben's term, is charged with “splinters of the messianic,” according to Benjamin. In Agamben's book on Auschwitz, those splinters are the fragments of Rilke and Keats on shame that Agamben

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<sup>50</sup> See Scholem, “Walter Benjamin and His Angel” in Scholem, *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis*, ed. W. Dannhauser (New York: Schocken, 1976), pp. 198-236.

<sup>51</sup> Richard Wolin, *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 125.

would have bear witness to the horror of events they, of course, never witnessed. One is tempted to match up the passages from Rilke and Keats in Agamben with others from Baudelaire in Benjamin. The match is perfect and the function the same.<sup>52</sup> One could continue constructing the Benjamin-Agamben constellation, within the space opened by our two “Muslim—or *Muselmann*--messiahs”: Agamben’s insistence that our ethical categories are fundamentally “contaminated” by legal categories and Paul’s polemic against the Law in Agamben’s *The Time That Remains*; the insistence of Jacob Taubes, Agamben’s dedicatee for that book, that the best guide to understanding the Apostle Paul is the chapter of Scholem’s *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, a book dedicated to Benjamin, whose focus is Sabbatianism...

At bottom, then, Agamben’s book on Auschwitz takes him farther and farther from Auschwitz and deeper and deeper into Benjamin and the battle for his soul between Scholem and Schmitt that we have attempted to stage. It would be tempting to elaborate this, but, as our would-be messiahs have been known to put it, “the time that remains,” *il tempo che resta*, is scant.

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<sup>52</sup> Compare, for instance, the outcast-beggars Agamben cites from Rilke’s *Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, “husks of men that fate has spewed out” (p. 61), and Baudelaire’s “vieux saltimbanque” in *Le Spleen de Paris*. Rilke: “They know that I am one of them.” Baudelaire: “I have just seen the image of the old man of letters who has survived the generation whose brilliant entertainer he once was.”

