



To that which was never before, we cannot relate, just as we cannot relate to that which has always already been.¹ The moment we relate to that which was never before, we have transformed it into something recognizable, as if it had always already been. The moment we relate to that which has always already been, we have transformed it into something new, as if it had not been before. Hence, to say of something that it was never before or that it has always already been, amounts to saying that it cannot be said, that it precedes all saying and that, from its sudden or endlessly repeated beginning, it constitutes a remainder. At the same time, however, we can only relate to a remainder, to that which must remain unrelated. For if that to which we relate did not remain unrelated, we would no longer relate to it but, in a sense, coincide with it.

Insofar as a remainder remains unrelated in our relating to it, it proves to be absolutely unique *and* absolutely divided. A remainder is relational within itself because each time we try to grasp that which constitutes a remainder, it keeps relating to that which it is not; and because, as it renders the relation impossible, it challenges us to relate to it, giving itself away and keeping to itself at once. This paradoxical logic of the category of relation is the logic of deconstruction. For what the deconstructionist calls iterability, the relationship between a repetition without an origin and an alteration without an original, corresponds to the very idea of an undecidable, both possible and impossible, relationship between that which has always already been and that which was never before. It is hardly surprising, then, that deconstructionists tend to think in terms of the proposition “only non-X is, or allows for, or can be X”: only the impossible is possible, only the undecidable allows for decisions, only the unforgivable can be forgiven, etc.

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**NEVER BEFORE,
ALWAYS ALREADY**
*notes on agamben and
the category of relation*

In relating to something we engage in iterability, effecting a repetition and an alteration. Thus, the remainder, the impossibility of a relation, does not simply precede the relation it makes possible on the uncertain grounds of its own impossibility. It also results from this relation.

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. It simply means to relate to it, to prevent it from becoming “unsayable,”² and thereby to exceed identification and attribution. Or, given the difficulties inherent in all attempts to identify the relation itself, it means not *not* to relate to Auschwitz. To the extent that Auschwitz cannot precede the relation, it is created, or brought about, by this relation. A testimony must come after Auschwitz, and yet it also comes before Auschwitz. Perhaps a denial of the holocaust is inscribed in any possible *relation* to it.

At first glance, Giorgio Agamben's book *The Remnants of Auschwitz* appears to endorse the logic of deconstruction. In the first chapter, the possibility of a testimony is related to its own impossibility, to that which does not belong to language, or to the one who does not have a language. On the one hand, Agamben maintains that, in order for language to be a testimony, it must touch the limit of meaning. But to the extent that language originates in "non-language," in the "pure undecidability of letters" (*The Remnants of Auschwitz* 39), language is always already a testimony which, in testifying, relates to something which does not testify and which therefore calls for testimony. On the other hand, Agamben claims that, if language is actually to be regarded as testimony, it is not enough for it to have the structure of a testifying relation and to touch the limit of meaning. The meaning-less noise of language is not to be confused with a "voice," since the reasons why language cannot testify and the reasons why a "voice" cannot do so are "altogether different [*tutt'altre*]." ³ In other words, the gap in the structure of language not only opens language to "non-language," it also conceals a deeper gap, as it were, a gap marked by the one who has no language, by the *historical* figure, or non-figure, of the *Muselmann*. Thus, it would seem that the always-already of testimony requires a never-before if testimony is truly to become testimony. Is it not this double impossibility, the impossibility of relating to an always-already without relating to a never-before, and the impossibility of relating to a never-before without relating to an always-already, that makes Agamben refer to his book as "a kind of perpetual commentary on testimony"? ⁴ What remains of Auschwitz is neither the *Muselmann*, to which the survivor testifies, nor the testifying survivor himself, nor language as testimony, but testimony as that which consists of an always-already and a never-before, and which is but a call for testimony.

In *Homo Sacer*, an analysis of "sovereign power and bare life" which provides the book on the remnants of Auschwitz with the background of a political ontology, Agamben focuses on the category of relation. It is in this context that he criticizes deconstruction for perpetuating the

relation of sovereignty and the state of emergency, or exception, which the sovereign relation creates. Agamben uses an expression from Sholem and defines sovereignty as *Geltung ohne Bedeutung*, as "being in force without significance." ⁵ Such "being in force without significance" is a *pure* relation which includes that to which it relates by way of abandoning and excluding it. Deconstruction, then, reinforces sovereignty in that it interprets being as a relation of undecidability to which a being must and yet cannot relate. ⁶ But insofar as a relation leaves that to which it relates unrelated, the question arises as to whether there can be any relation that would not produce and reproduce the sovereign relation. Must a radical critique of sovereignty not direct itself against the very category of relation and its ontological, or quasi-ontological, justification – a justification which obtains its most extreme expression in deconstruction? Agamben suggests the necessity of such a critique when, at the beginning of *Homo Sacer* and in a passage which draws to a close the programmatic section on the "logic of sovereignty," he affirms that the "politico-social *factum*" should no longer be conceived in terms of a "relation," and that "the being together of a being and Being itself does not have a relational form." ⁷ But how can a "being together" not be a relation? And what distinguishes testimony from the state of emergency, from the inclusive relation of exclusion which, according to Agamben, leads to the institution of the camps, ⁸ if in both cases it is still the same category of relation and hence the same "logic of sovereignty" that is at work? Does not Agamben himself describe testimony as an "undecidable middle or medium"? ⁹ Can the discussion of the notion of a remainder, or a remnant, which we find at the end of the book on Auschwitz and which is continued in *Il tempo che resta* [The Remaining Time], the author's latest work, provide us with a hint here?

The notion of a remainder as introduced by Agamben indicates the impossibility for a whole or for a particular part of the whole to posit itself as unified and selfsame, as being one and at one with itself. The remainder is an irreducible and therefore originary being-not-one, a "not-all" or "not-a-whole" [*non tutto*] ¹⁰ which cannot be

expressed by a simple affirmation or a simple negation, and which adopts the form of a double negation that does not result in a synthesizing unity. In this sense, that which constitutes a remainder is relational because it is nothing but an openness through which something relates to something which it is not, ceasing to be what it is without turning into what it is not. The notion of a remainder in Agamben designates the relating of the relation, the fact *that* the relation relates. Here, it is not a matter of relating to something, but of *being* a relation, of entering the relation and touching its factuality, its *that-it-relates*. Only from such a perspective can a remainder reveal itself to be a “being together” which no longer appears to have a “relational form.” In order not to relate, and to break with the “logic of sovereignty” as well as with the bad infinity of iterability, of a perpetual, always renewed and always frustrated relating, one must maintain oneself in the relating of the relation. As a consequence, to speak of Auschwitz as a remainder does not just mean to relate to it through testimony. It means to become testimony and to stop testifying to something – to Auschwitz.

At this point, however, the proper name seems to disappear. For once the notion of a remainder has provided an insight into the difference between a relation and a “being together” without a “relational form,” speaking of that which remains of *Auschwitz* is philosophically indifferent. If proof of such indifference were required, it would suffice to point to the fact that Agamben unfolds his notion of a remainder in *Il tempo che resta*, that is in the context of an exegesis of St Paul’s Epistle to the Romans, in which he dispenses with any specific reference to the remnants of Auschwitz. The last chapter of *The Remnants of Auschwitz* is hardly more than a sketch, a first draft which announces the unfolding of the argument. What the philosophical indifference to the proper name brings to light is that any insight, whether it is formulated in philosophical terms or not, must effect an abstraction and an idealization which is incompatible with the idea of a *constitutive* link, or relation, between a cognitive act and a proper name. For this reason, the project of a

philosophy, or an ethics, “after Auschwitz” is either misleading or else it merely denotes that, for there to be an insight, an insight, for instance, into the implications of relating to what was never before, a pretext or an opportunity is needed. *The dependence on a pretext or an opportunity may not be contingent, but the identification of the pretext or the opportunity with a proper name surely is.* Insofar as any discussion of the remnants of Auschwitz moves within a conceptual element, an element of abstraction and idealization, what is at stake in this kind of discussion is not so much the establishing of what was never before, but of what has always already been, even if the discussion centres on the dialectics of relating to a never-before and an always-already. In other words, a discussion of the remnants of Auschwitz concerns the ways in which the concept operates an erasure of the proper name. It would be tempting to conclude that philosophy, in an important sense, never comes after Auschwitz, and that, after Auschwitz, there can be only poetry, or literature. But this claim cannot be made, since it would be its own disclaimer.

da capo (I cannot relate)

- But can I not relate to something and repeat it without transforming it into something new?
- If I repeat something without transforming it into something new, into something which cannot be entirely re-cognized, then I have not repeated anything. 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. Is there something more creative and more revolutionary than a repetition or than a relation which must leave the other untouched? Repetition and relation, elusive in nature, call for idiosyncratic and allusive conceptualizations. Is the one who acknowledges the denial inherent in a relation – a denial which results from the impossibility of a repetition, a confirmation, a ratification ever simply coinciding

agamben and relation

with their object – more responsible or more irresponsible than the one who denies such denial?

- But why is the possibility of a relation also its impossibility?
- Because a possible relation, a relation which does not *experience* a certain resistance, irreducible and never just preliminary, erases itself. Just as it erases itself if it proves to be nothing but impossible. A possible relation amounts to a coincidence of the relating terms or agents. An impossible relation amounts to an indifference which leaves these terms or these agents in complete isolation. Such coincidence and such indifference coincide in turn. In deconstruction, iterability designates both repetition and alteration, or rather it designates repetition as alteration, alteration as repetition. If, faced with a particular instance or act of iteration, I were capable of distinguishing the amount of alteration from the amount of repetition, then alteration would be subordinated to repetition, and repetition would abolish itself. Repetition would no longer entail alteration. In a sense, iterability designates the tension between the always-already of concepts and the never-before of names, a tension which traverses and divides the concept and the name, a tension which makes them into relations.



notes

1 This text was written for a discussion with Giorgio Agamben which took place at Princeton University in September 2000. It is dedicated to the students from NYU without whom it would not have been written. I would also like to acknowledge *Angelaki's* reviewers.

2 Giorgio Agamben, *The Remnants of Auschwitz*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone, 2000) 32. For a more sustained discussion of this book, see Alexander García Düttmann, "Zweideutigkeit der Ethik" [Ambivalence of Ethics], published under the title "Jenseits von Leben und Tod" [Beyond Life and Death] in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* 19 Apr. 1999.

3 *The Remnants of Auschwitz* 39 – translation modified.

4 *The Remnants of Auschwitz* 13.

5 Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998) 51.

6 *Homo Sacer* 54.

7 *Homo Sacer* 60 – translation modified.

8 *Homo Sacer* 168–69.

9 *The Remnants of Auschwitz* 161. On the relevance of the concept of a "middle," or of a "medium" [*medio*], to Agamben's thought, see Alexander García Düttmann, "Integral Actuality," preface to: Giorgio Agamben, *Idea of Prose*, trans. Michael Sullivan and Sam Whitsitt (Albany: State U of New York P, 1995).

10 Giorgio Agamben, *Il tempo che resta* (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2000) 53.

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