In the very spirit of unsettled phrasing, I'm aware that this first subheading, on the routine presumption of a proper-noun modifier, may sound like the title of a course bibliography. So be it: a selective one from text to text, bringing to the seminar table many a typically shelved volume of Agamben's writing on

language and poetry. But with the same title in its other grammar, I also mean to catch the philosopher within the radius of his reading lamp, one or more stanzas opened—and under illumination—before him. Reading Agamben reading, and especially if over his shoulder, isn't necessarily to invade the full literate privacy of his investigations into the meter, lineation, and lexicon of Italian verse. We don't need to see each and every word (even in translation) on his desktop—I'll come back to this point—in order to sense what is being educed there from the fact of language within literature, which is to say, the act of literature as language. And we can certainly press further in similar directions, led by his tenets if not his specific attentions. For what he finds in literary writing, as suggested by his title *The End of the Poem*, is at once a linguistic destiny and an epistemological foreclosure. Poetry is given in words alone; what it ends up giving (or giving upon) is language, which it prevents—a major ambition of philosophy—from "remaining unsaid in what is said."[4] By an ontological rigor that animates his every reading of Italian verse, Agamben backs anything resembling the formalist "languageness" of literary expression all the way down to the languaged being of the human animal.

Despite the depth of his investment in literary signification, it is perhaps of little surprise these days that the work of this former-legal-scholar-turned-philosopher finding keenest circulation among literary and cultural critics concerns his views on violence and politics, not on poetics—even though the writing on literary language and linguistics precedes and orients, even by some counts outnumbers, his works on posthumanism and community. And it's not just that we've seen it happen before.

Foucault's initial book on modernist literary language (the arcane homophonic punning of Raymond Roussel), so crucial to the later metalinguistic investigations in his *The Order of Things*, got little play in literary departments.[5] Reasons since, in the case of Agamben, for teachers and critics of literature being more interested in a philosopher's political work than in books with titles like *Language and Death* ([1982] 1991), *Idea of Prose* ([1985] 1995), *Stanzas* ([1977] 1993), and *The End of the Poem* ([1996] 1999), to say nothing of the linchpin essay "Philosophy and Linguistics" from the collection *Potentialities* (1999), are obvious enough. For Agamben's essays on literature are so far from thematically political as to be concerned exclusively with what has for a long time appeared least interesting to Departments of English, Comparative, or World Literatures: that is to say, the language, whether the phrasing or even the tongue, in which literature is written. The lone surprise here, then, is the one that would await exactly those readers of Agamben who pass over both his poetics and his linguistics. For it is only, one comes to find, his specific preoccupations with the etymological and grammatical densities of shaped language, and then only as performed into view by poetry, that can genuinely delimit and clarify the full ethical weight, and even political tenor, of his more familiar and influential recent writing.

In *Language and Death*, Agamben takes as his starting point Heidegger's version of Hegel's sense that only the human, not the animal, has the "faculty" for language and (hence) for death, the latter a condition that needs a name in order to be uttered (or thought) in advance of its arrival.[6] When the death cry of the animal brings its "voice" into the field of immanent meaning, an

indicator without abstraction, its achieved sign of annihilation leaves behind a corpse. Language, human speech, operates analogously. Concerning "death" or any other vocabulary of existence, whenever the human voice leaves its bodily sound behind for manifestation as signifier, sound passes into sense precisely at the expense of animal (bodily) presence. Such is the sacrifice—within vocal speech—of animality to disembodied abstraction. The "faculty" mobilized by the human being, over against the animal, in any such semantic act—let alone in *signifying its own mortality*—is thus a kind of organic negation in itself: the forfeit of somatic to semiotic determination.

Meaning is thus born only from the evisceration of material sound as such. Nor can language ever reattach to the embodied world by referential efforts. Here, in sum, is the casting out by speech of noise, by sema of soma, by meaning of sound, by verbal sense of mere voice. Yet, for Agamben, a resurgent *sense of voice* in language is what poetry writes into recognition—not voice as or at some lingual foundation, but rather voice as a latency in reading, tacitly communal. Communal because species-deep: the very cause and effect at once of the human. Put otherwise, in a point never made in these terms by Agamben, the philosophical "sense-certainty" absent in the end-stopped feints of language as demonstration (what he stresses, we are to see, as the empty pointing of "deixis" in the "this" or "that" of a supposed gesture achieved by language) returns in part from within its own silently shaped sounds in reading.

In related terms, recovering the resonances of human speech both from text and from the paradoxes of its silent sounding—and building on the work of French philosopher Michel Serres in

his investigations into the five senses—Steven Connor has developed the notion of "white voice" in his study of Samuel Beckett's "material imagination,"[7] playing in the process off a more familiar concept like the slant-rhymed "white noise." Under this rubric, Connor ponders how one might "turn up" the "garrulous dumb show" of a "stonily mute" script (102) in order to make good, after all, on the point in Georges Bataille from which, understood as a statement about writing, he initially demurs: that "*the word silence is still a sound*" (102). Connor finds Beckett's prose uniquely attuned, as it were, to the "inner sonority" of silent reading, adding (in a particularly Beckett-like scrupulousness), "if inside is exactly where it is, if sonorous is exactly what it is" (106). For Connor, in coming to aptly punning grips with this "inner hearsay" (107), the term "subvocalization" (106) doesn't quite cover the case, with its overtones, to his ear, of a "vestigial" enunciation (107). He prefers the term "virtual" for this "auditorium" (107), this "arena of internal articulations" that is "not really inside anything or anywhere inside" (108). Its contours define what he calls the "white architecture of vocality" (111), though without this topological figuration denying the time-based nature of its potential effects, including its (paracinematic) "cross-fades" (109)—by which I like to think he means to invoke the sort of "lap dissolves" I find in the counterplay of ambiguously fused lexical juncture.

For Connor, Beckett's "phonic ghosts" (112) succeed, as his chapter title puts it, in "writing the white voice," whose register, containing "all possible frequencies," amounts—in a manner that further recalls the idea of potentiation in Agamben—to a writing of "vocality itself" (113). "Literature does not silence sound,"

Connor summarizes, no doubt intending the double grammar banked in his own potential and corrective verb/noun inversion in the sounding of silence; literature, he says instead, "auditises the field of the visual" (113), where it makes good on all the senses (both senses of that substantive) that "swell together in the word 'volume'" (110). Though Connor might also find the term "secondary vocality" too "vestigial" in its inference, our approaches are nevertheless, as idiom would have it, on the same volatilized literary page, where—or whereabouts—sound, varying his subtitle, is imaginatively *materialized*. To mold Connor's emphasis more closely to Agamben's template in returning to the latter's demonstrations, one might say that "white voice" is what keeps speech from going unheard in what its written form articulates.

Following on from Ferdinand de Saussure, Roman Jakobson, and Émile Benveniste, Agamben looks to the phoneme and the deictic (the pulse of speech and its pointing function): each, strictly speaking, disabled in the space of a linguistic act that suppresses the one (as voice) and virtualizes the other (as absent referent), leaving enunciation adrift between its loss of self-indexical voice and its failure to index or indicate the world. But poetry is always the beginning again of sound's gradual passage to sense, where, in entirely nonmetaphysical terms, we *find ourselves in language*. As if from a nowhere that need not seem withering, poetry rehearses the very thought of language as it comes to one, comes to be by taking place in one. From the phonemes ghosting its speech through the referential phantoms shadowing its tropes, poetry operates this way (as Agamben shows when reading it) within the twin registers of music and deictic deferral, meter

and the self-enclosedness of language, together performing—an always collaborative venture with the reader—the rhythm of thought in words. In a variant of Agamben's emphasis, we may say that language does not probe and disclose being, even its own; it *realizes* being by making it operative in communicative exchange. And realizes the being of language in the process—or, in the related terms proposed by Geoffrey Hartman from the years of deconstructive ferment leading up to *Language and Death* (1982), taps in this way the "working dark of aural experience": a realm of the prior and primal "*phoné*" to which all literary words are "antiphonal," calling to mind (in close parallel to Agamben's later stress) a "voice or sound before a local shape or human source can be ascribed."[8]