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Tragedy and comedy
in the ethical thinking of Giorgio Agamben

Abstract: Starting with Agamben'sstatement that the tragic paradigm can no longer be used in contemporary ethics, the authors investigate the works of Agamben to analyse the relationship of the Homo Sacer with Pulcinella and to attempt to uncover between comedy and tragedy the foundation of contemporary ethics. To that end, it was necessary to examine the thought of the Italian philosopher regarding time, history, tradition, and transmission and, as a result, to examine Agamben's thinking with respect topolitical philosophy. The issue of paradigm gains relevance in the structure of the article until we reach the conclusion that Pulcinella, an Italian comedy character, achieves a balance with Homo Sacer, a tragic figure of Roman law, to conclude that Pulcinella is theparadigmatic figure of a very paradigmatic function.

Keywords: homo sacer, Pulcinella, ethics, paradigm, comedy, tragedy

> L´eroe greco si è congedatoda noi per sempre, non può più in alcun caso testimoniare per noi; non è possibile, dopo Auschwitz, utilizzare in etica un paradigama trágico[1] (Agamben 1998, 91-92)
>
> Il segreto di Pulcinella è che, nella commedia della vita, non vi è um segreto, ma solo, in ogni instante, un via d'uscita.[2] (Agamben 2015, 130)

In this article, we problematise the categorical statement of Giorgio Agamben in *Quel che resta di Auschwitz* regarding the impossibility of using the tragic paradigm in contemporary ethics. To do so, we have selected dialogue from certain passages – specifically, passages in which tragedy appears as a

witness to an ethical experiment in language – in one of his most recent works: *Pulcinella ovvero divertimento per il ragazzi*. In this text, published in 2015, the tragic experience acquires in comedy its uniqueness, its signature (*signatura*), in a movement of tension with the universal, "*poetry*".

A first point to be affirmed regarding Pulcinella is that his figure constitutes an operation of exclusive inclusion with the figure of the Homo Sacer. Pulcinella is coherent with a paradigmatic method that consists in, given the etymological literality of the term para-digm, the act of putting aside, and responds to, as a distinction which is irreducible to seriation, the emerging issues of the other paradigm that he borders, the Homo Sacer:

> Alla fine di Homo Sacer I, dopo aver evocato uma serie di brevi biografie – Il *Flamen Dialis, l'Homo sacer*, Il Führer nel Terzo Reich, Il Musulmano a Auschwitz, l'oltrecomatoso nella câmera di rianimazione – in cui *zoe* e *bios*, corpo biológico e corpo político, esistenza privata Ed esistenza pubblica sembrano tragicamente indeterminarsi, avevo provato a definire la forma-di-vita come um *bios* che è soltanto la sua *zoe*. Ma che cosa puó significare "vivere la própria zoe", che cosa può essere un modo di vita che ha per oggetto soltanto la vita corpórea, che la nostra tradizione política há sempre già separato in nuda vita? Che cos' è, in questa propettiva, la forma-di-vita di Pulcinella?[3] (Agamben 2015, 133)

There is a second point to be affirmed regarding Pulcinella: if, with the Homo Sacer paradigm, the issues of politics in the relationship with art and poetry, present in Agamben's early career as a critic, were subsumed within the new focus on the relationship between language, politics and law, with Pulcinella, what was thus subsumed acquires strength to be reasserted retrospectively.

Therefore, the figure of the Homo Sacer, which had been highlighted in an exemplary manner from the linguistic and legal perspective and which was of concern to Agamben in the Homo Sacer series, is now the background of Agamben's figure-project in the first movement of his work. This project's motto could be identified as an attempt to unify a word that enjoys a close relationship with knowledge but that remains removed from its subject, philosophy, with another that detains the object without, however, knowing it, poetry. In the words of Agamben, what he seeks with critique is to uncover the unit of the word itself shattered in a scission that divides it "fra una parola inconsapevole e come caduta dal cielo, che gode dell'oggetto della conoscenza rappresentandolo nella forma bela"[4] (Agamben 1977, XIII) – poetry – "e una parola che ha per sé tutta la serietà e tutta la coscienza, ma che non gode del suo oggetto perché non lo sa rappresentare"[5] (Agamben 1977, XIII) – philosophy.

Hence, the poetic word in the form of comedy appears, in the first few pages of Pulcinella, already confused with philosophy, but distinct from tragedy:

> (...) Al di là di ogni dubbio non soltanto che la commedia è piú ântica e profonda della tragédia (...) ma anche che essa è piú vicina di quella allá filosofia – cosi vicina che, in ultimo, pare quasi confondersi con questa⁶ (Agamben 2015, 10).

Tragedy will, in the last pages of the book, verbalise the indistinction between *zoe* and *bios* until then theorised by Agambenbased on the *Homo Sacer* paradigm. (We quoted this section above: – [...] in cui zoe e bios, corpo biológico e corpo político, esistenza privata ed esistenza pubblica sembrano *tragicamente* indeterminarsi...).

The tragic distinguished from the comic. In fact, in Pulcinella, the indication of the difference between comedy and tragedy is essential. The movement of the book revolves entirely around this distinction. Why? Why the distinction if, in texts appearing before the *Homo Sacer* series, poetry was not detached from itself into divisions like tragic and comic, or Dadaist and ironic, but was universalised under the name of "poetic word" and the distinction itself was what appeared to be the problem? In "*Programma per una rivista*", we read:

> Il compito, che la situazione impone alla rivista, non può perciò essere definito semplecimente come una, pur necessaria, ´distuizone´della tradizione, ma, piuttosto, come uma ´distruzione della distruzione`, in cui la distruzione della trasmissibilità, che costituice il carattere originale della mostra cultura, venga portata dialetticamente alla coscienza. Ed è solo in uma tale `distruzione` che, como in una casa in fiamme il progetto architettonico fondamentale, potranno diventare visibile le strutture categoriche della cultura italiana. *La scelta della commedia e il rifiuto della tragedia* (...) la preminenza del Diritto insieme a uma concezione creaturale dell´innocenza umana (...) sono solo alcune delle categorie sulla *cui tensione antinomica si sostiene il fenomeno italiano*⁷ (Agamben 1978, 145-6) (Emphasis added).

Why, after "*Programma per una rivista*", in which Agamben indicated the need to seek in the debris of tradition the meaning, in Italy, of comedy's surpassing tragedy, is there a choice in *Pulcinella*, as has already occurred in *Categorias Italianas*, of a distinction via the *materials* of tragedy and comedy and not so much historic or contingent between these two orders of the poetic? Finally, does that which is designated in *Quel che resta di Auschwitz* as the decline from the tragic paradigm to contemporary ethics stem from tragedy's *material* dimension?

> Da Hegel in poi, il colpevole-innocente è la figura in cui la cultura moderna ha interpretato la tragedia greca e, com questa, i propri dissidi più segreti (...) Il conflito di cui Hegel parla non há, però, comunque la forma di um caso de coscienza, che opponga semplicemente un´innocenza soggetiva a una colpa

oggetiva; trágica è, al contrario, l´assunzione incondizionata di una colpa oggettiva da parte di um soggeto che ci appare innocente (...) Nulla di più lontano da Auschwitz di questo modello. Poiché qui il deportato vede crescere a tal punto l´abisso tra innocenza soggetiva e colpa oggettiva, fra ciò che egli ha fatto e ciò di cui può sentirsi responsabile, che non riesce ad assumere alcuno dei suoi atti. Com un´inversione che rasenta la parodia, egli si sente innocente exatamente per ciò di cui l' eroe trágico si sente colpevole e colpevole là dove questi si sente innocente (...) Ma a diffidare dell´adequatezza del modello tragico a dar ragione di Auschwitz, induce soprattutto la facilità com cui esso è evocato dai carnefici (...) essi lo invocano non tanto per sfuggire alla condanna (...) quando per presentare ai loro stessi occhi la propria situazione nei termini-evidentemente più accettabili – di un conflito tragico. 'Il mio cliente si sente colpevole dinazi a Dio, non dinanzi alla legge'[8] (Agamben 1998, 89-90).

Thus far, the succession of cited excerpts indicates that understanding the place of tragedy in the thought of Agamben will be tortuous for the reader. In fact, in *Quel che resta di Auschwitz,* the aspect of the tragic experience that, in the "*Programma per una rivista*", Agamben attempted to bring into contemporary times by way of a "destruction of the destruction" of the non-transferability of a past not accessible by tradition does not appear.

On the contrary, when the exhaustion of the tragic paradigm is affirmed, there remains no trace of the anachronistic temporality, previously held as method of this double destruction, in this text that denies the paradigmaticity of tragedy by what the interpretations of the tragic in the works of Hegel or of Nietzsche's eternal return could bequeath to the present from a modern understanding of ancient tragedy.

At this point, the assimilation between source and tradition is confusing for the reader. Because the historical data determines the disappearance of tragedy through the birth of philosophy, as in the dating proposed by Vernant and Vidal-Naquet (2005), in which the tragic phenomenon arises and fades in less than a century, the index of decline is the rise of a philosophical discourse already unable to understand it.[9] In contrast, we have the absolutely relevant discussion, even in latter moments of Agamben's work, of the destruction of tradition to access the hitherto inapprehensible history of sources. In *Signatura Rerum* (2008), the agonistic relationship of the researcher with tradition and its transmission function is what allows him to glimpse something of the archaeological emergence of sources. In this case, archaeology is a practice that "non può misurarsi con la tradizione, senza descostruire i paradigmi, le tecniche e le pratiche attraverso cui essa regola le forme del tramandamento, condiziona l'accesso alle fonti e determina, in ultima analisi, lo stesso statuto del soggetto conoscente"[10] (Agamben 2008, 90).

This "very statute of the knowing subject" can be termed in Agamben – as has been named by the philosophical tradition when observing the limits of knowledge – as critical.

In Stanzas, Agamben (1977, XIII) directs his critique to a point before or beyond the division between philosophy and poetry, to a point where this scission reaches its extreme and uncovers the unit of the broken word itself. This process is for the Italian author the process of an ironic self-denial, against a "negatività assoluta e senza riscatto, la quale tuttavia non rinuncia per questo alla conoscenza". It is the point at which criticism differs from the dialectical form of reading irony's negativity, considered by the author as provisory: "quella provvisoria della dialettica, che la bacchetta magica dell' *Aufhebung* è sempre già in atto di transformare in positivo"[11] (Agamben 1977, XII).

In *Signatura Rerum*, the affirmation of this absolute negativity locates its historical cause. Founded on the thresholdof the separation between philosophy and poetry, critique could not manage without the effect of breaking the word in order to, before or beyond division, aim at a unit that would be nothing more than mythical – "the unit of the broken word itself". Therefore, our hypothesis is that the quotation of the tragic in Agamben's work, supported by the radical negativity of his paradigmatic archaeology, attempts to adopt different appearances in different temporal dimensions: sometimes showing us, his contemporaries, something of its phenomenon not yet transmitted by tradition, and sometimes pointing to a total non-transmissibility, as in the face of post-Auschwitz historical positivity that marks the impossibility of the tragic paradigm for contemporary ethics.

If we are correct, Agaben's description of tragedy can be understood in coherence with the problematic constellation of archaeology, critical, and historical time as condensed into a notion that Agamben himself conceives as an oxymoron: a past that never occurred. It is the figuration of an impossible unit that appears to us essential to understanding the function of the paradigmatic method.

Comprehending the logic of the movement of tragedy's negation by the paradigm function in the context of a past that never occurred is, therefore, our goal. We continue to consider the issue of differentiation between tragedy and comedy through the approach delineated in this introduction as defined in the works of Agamben: the distinction by material and by historical incidence.

1. The material of comedy and the material of tragedy

It is now time to return to a text on which Agamben was working when he met with Italo Calvino and Claudio Rugafiori to formulate a project to

discuss Italian categories. This project was not completed, but it generated independent texts from each of the three authors. In the case of Agamben, remnants of this project were published at the end of *Infanzia and Storia*, with the title "*Programma per una rivista*", while the text he was writing at the same time, titled "*Comedy*", was published in 1978 in *Paragone 347*. The two texts were subsequently reunited in the collection "*Categorie Italiane*" in Italy and "*End of the Poem*" in the US.

Thus, "*Comedy*" was written between 1974 and 1976 with the purpose of discussing, in an essay, why Dante, despite being an admirer of Virgil, abandons tragedy to write a work in the vulgar style of comedy. It was an act that, according to Agamben, influenced all of Italian literature.

In this text, the philosopher establishes differences between the tragic and the comic, and he lists several differences that appear immediately in the comparison between these two poetic forms. These differences had already been discussed by ancient and modern commentators and consisted of a comparative analysis between the form and the content of tragedy and comedy: while tragedy starts peacefully and ends tumultuously, comedy starts full of rumours and discord and ends in peace and calm, or, comedy represents a break with the past, while tragedy represents continuity of the past into the present, or yet another, tragedy refers to issues of public order, while comedy concerns the private sphere.

However, subsequently, Agamben doubts that differences in content or form are, in fact, relevant to differentiating between the two. Instead, he proposes a distinction between the *material* of comedy and the *material* of tragedy to properly understand what distinguishes them. From this, the theme of man's guilt as subject and in the face of the merit or demerit of his free will emerges. New oppositions are highlighted: between man's salvation and damnation and between the subject with free will or subject to divine justice.

This move from form to material interests us, as it makes evident the relationship between ethics and guilt. This theme is absolutely relevant to *Quel che resta di Auschwitz*. We continue to comment on "*Comedy*".

According to Agamben (1999), the Aristotelian interpretation of tragedy includes the misfortune of the righteous man, a misfortune that would lead to a conflict between objective guilt and subjective innocence with regard to what Aristotle terms *Hamartia,* sometimes translated in Latin as sin. Man, wrenched from his prosperity, is thrown into misfortune due to a sin, i.e., it is the innocent man in front of divine justice.

Considering this same *Hamartia* in respect to comedy is different because in comedy, given free will, man is guilty of his own misfortune in search of prosperity.

Referencing Christian mythology, Agamben sustains a balance between the fall of Adam, the original sin, and tragic thought, on one side, and

Christ's passion, on the other. Comic thought would be close to Christ's passion in relation to guilt.

The fall of Adam, for Agamben, refers to the moment when he becomes mortal, or more precisely, when all mankind, through him, becomes mortal. Adam is a prosperous man who disrespects a divine rule and is thrown into misfortune and mortality to remedy his guilt. That is when original sin is established.

In Adam's sin, personal guilt is not present. On the contrary, if it is "human nature itself" that sins with him, this guilt "falls to every man through his own origin" (Agamben 1999, 10). Thus, in original sin there is a division between nature and person, which creates the dichotomy between natural guilt and personal guilt. This guilt transmitted regardless of individual responsibility, in Agamben's analysis, possesses the characteristics of a tragic fault.

The penalty imposed on Adam for his sin, which spreads to all humans, is shame with regard to his nudity.

However, according to Agamben, with respect to Christ's passion, in Christian mythology an inversion takes place from tragic guilt into comic guilt, as there is a reversal between natural guilt and personal guilt.

Christ's passion arises to satisfy the guilt that man cannot atone for, the original sin. Christ alone, facing natural guilt, exerts personal atonement, transforming the "irreconcilable objective conflict into a personal matter" (Agamben 1999, 12), making comedy possible and freeing man of tragedy.

Thus, from the fall of Adam to the passion of Christ, the passage from personal innocence articulated as natural guilt – which, due to this aspect, is a tragic guilt – to a natural innocence articulated as personal guilt is concluded.

In this sense, in tragedy, for Agamben, it would be impossible for the tragic character to confess his guilt. Personally innocent before natural guilt, the tragic hero would not take shame upon himself. As for the comic character, for in this case the guilt is personal, he would purify guilt by living his shame until the end, accepting the fracture between nature and persona.

Personas are the masks used in Greek tragedy. In "*Comedy*" (1999), Agamben describes the Stoic criticism of indistinction between the tragic actor and his mask: because mask and actor are confused, the emergence of an actor's subjectivity is prevented due to the emphasis given only to the personality of the character in an indistinction, then, between nature and persona.

In comedy, however, there would be a division between actor and persona, a division that Agamben interprets as separation between innocent human nature and guilty persona or as existing duality between the historic

individual and man in general. This duality would indicate the division between a natural innocence and personal responsibility.

Here, returning to the affirmation of Agamben in *Quel che resta di Auschwitz* that the tragic paradigm can no longer be used in ethics, we can assume that the ethical and aesthetic support of natural guilt articulated into personal innocence is no longer relevant today, and thus a new way of examining ethics is required. "The ethical problem has changed radically", Agamben asserts in *Quel che resta di Auschwitz*, "Al di là del bene e del male non sta l'innocenza del divenire, ma una vergogna non solo senza colpa, ma, per cosi dire, senza più tempo"[12] (Agamben 1998, 95).

Given that statement and returning to the questions we raised in the introduction of this article with the support of a critical differentiation between *material* and historical incidence, it appears possible to affirm that the evocation of meaning given to Agamben's utterance regarding the depletion of the *material* of tragedy is partial. Hence, we believe it is relevant to also consider the temporality implied in what the Italian philosopher determines as "without time".

2. Time and History

In his first book, *L'uomo senza contenuto*, 1970, Agamben already raises the question of the difference between poetry and philosophy, in this case, between art and aesthetics. If in art a poetic work is *produced* – and here we have highlighted the term produced – in the second case, aesthetics, the act that asserts it is rhetorical.

The use of the term production is not arbitrary. In his genealogy, Agamben seeks in the Greek term *Poiesis* the contemporary translation for the act of the artist producing a work that, other than for the spectator, to whom belongs the field of aesthetics, denies art by speaking about it. The activity of the spectator, who is more interested in non-art to assert what art is, is bound not so much to *poiesis* but to *techné*.

By approaching the work of Walter Benjamin, more specifically Benjamin's theories regarding technical reproducibility, Agamben (1970/1994) brings to his contemporaries a discussion initiated by the Greeks. As the term technique became restricted to the act of doing and poetic became restricted to aesthetic thought, the question of originality must be brought to the work of art.

Therefore, there is a fundamental difference between the artist and the craftsman. If the craftsman reproduces his product through technique, the artist seeks originality in the work of art.

However, a short circuit was formed on the threshold of contemporary art when Duchamp raised a product of the cultural industry to the category

of artwork. *Pop art* reproduces a work so many times that its original character is reduced. An oscillation between artistic production and the aesthetics rhetoric begins to take place.

At this point Agamben comments on the process that leads to the nothingness of the work of art, specifically stating that it is from its nihilist aspect that the artwork is affirmed in its time. The contemporary crisis, as Agamben understands it, is not a crisis of art but of the poetic substance of man: "Qual è, allora, il carattere dell' opera in cui siconcreta l'attivitá pro-duttíva dell'uomo?"[13](Agamben 1970/1994, 96), he asks himself.

The difference, then, is between *poiesis* and *praxis*. In the first case, to pro-duce would be to bring the non-being into being, to impart existence to what is not – this would be the task of the artist. In the second case, it would be simple human production, connected to work, in the sense of doing in pursuance of biologic subsistence.

The balance continues to swing when Agamben (1970/1994) refers to Nietzsche to assert the impossibility of an aesthetic rhetoric. From Nietzsche's dialogue with Kant, Agamben asserts that everything that arises as philosophical question is thought of as art because for him, thinking of art as does Nietzsche is to rest one's feet on the truth.

Thus, to think of art is already to think of man, in the sense that man produces himself, and there would thus be no sense in sustaining a thought as the thought of someone who sees from the outside, a rhetorical aesthetic thinking.

That said, let us return to the question of tragedy. Agamben (*L'uomo senza contenuto*, 1970/1994) always comprehends that when the traditional mystical system begins to decline, it is art that comes to occupy the space of tragedy to reconcile the conflict between the old and the new. The dialogue with Kafka becomes relevant then. As it is impossible for contemporary man to grasp his historical time, it is Kafka who turns this impossibility into grounds for man to discover himself again. Kafka places man in the face of judgement day. Man is deluded that this day is yet to come when, in fact, it is in front of him (Agamben 1970/1994, 169).

From the issue of art proceeds the issue of time, as art, for Agamben, is the last thread linking man with his past. It is the last because, in a traditional system, culture exists only from its transmission.

When culture weakens the means of transmission of the past, the past accumulates on man's back, while the future, which he does not yet possess, cannot provide him any light. Rupture with tradition breaks the link between old and new.

It is from reading Benjamin regarding citations that Agamben arrives at this diagnosis of rupture with the past in our time. Citation is destruction. It is the removal of something from its original context with the consequent loss of a witness function in favour of the revelation of a potential for

strangeness. Thus, for Agamben, it is possible to affirm with Benjamin that quoting is an act similar to collecting. The collector removes the object from its context, whether spatial or of usage, and places it in a context of authenticity, giving it another use that only holds meaning within a collection. That is, the collector "cites" the object out of its context, which results in releasing the object of its obligation to be useful.

Outside of the relationship of utility, the collection of cited objects already indicates for Agamben the impossibility of transmission. If no transmission is possible without a tradition, then citation, or collection, is the destruction of tradition. Objects collected for their aesthetic beauty alone become representative of the impossibility of transmission. We must recall that in *Quel che resta di Auschwitz* tragedy no longer offers an ethical testimony to contemporary man.

In Kafka, Agamben retrieves the possibility of restoring to art the role of transmitting the transmission. Art abolishes the difference between the thing to be transmitted and the act of transmitting. The traditional mystical system, in which there is identity between these two facets of transmission, is approached.

We can now, in the light of *L'uomo senza contenuto*, consider Agamben's statement in *Quel che resta di Auschwitz* that the tragic hero does not provide testimony to the ethics of our time. If, in the text from 1970, the tragic hero is still perceived as "che esprime in tutta la sua grandezza e in tutta la sua miséria il senso precário dell' azione umana nell' intervalo storico fra ciò che non è piú e ciò che non è ancora"[14] (Agamben 1970/1994, 169), one might think that, contrary to what Agamben states, it is precisely the contemporary ethical man who would be tragic, as for him "la rottura della tradizione, che è per noi oggi um fatto compiuto, apre infatti un' epoca in cui fra vecchio e nuovo non c'è piú alcun legame possibile"[15] (Agamben 1970/1994, 163).

Hence, the ethical rupture of Auschwitz appears to have raised new issues for Agamben. They are so new that his theoretical gesture will be to propose another figure who becomes heroic in relation with time: Pulcinella, who is a comic character, instead of tragic.

To think of this character, we will use dialogue with another text of Agamben's aesthetic period, *Il linguaggio e la morte* (1985). This text has the peculiarity of being the first to address the figure that will represent the great paradigm of Agamben's political work, the Homo Sacer. For that reason, the Homo Sacer appears to have the power to render visible a transitional field of problems between *L'uomo senza contenuto* with his praise of the tragic hero, the subsequent project of understanding Italian categories, comprising the text we analyse, "*Comedy*", in which the need for distinction via material between tragedy and comedy is already present, the affirmation of the death of the tragic testimony in *Quel che resta di Auschwitz*, and finally, Pulcinella.

3. Pulcinella

> Il problema etico ha qui mutato radicalmente (...). Al di là del bene e del male non sta l'inocenza del devenire, ma una vergogna non solo senza colpa, ma, per cosi dire, senza più tempo[16] (Agamben 1998, 94-95)

Without time and without guilt. In the theorised ethics of *Quel che resta di Auschwitz*, we note a double claim by Agamben: the claim of a temporality that contests a temporal order that would conceive the continuation of the tragic testimony by an alleged transmissibility via tradition; and the attempt to dissolve the matter of guilt as the traditional coupling that ties tragedy to philosophy.

In this book, in fact, the ethics considered by Agamben as testimony of a de-subjectivation – which in that context is called shame – is the archaeology of the metaphysical operation with language, which the author has recognised as a development of the tragic experience since his 1985 seminar on negativity, published under the title *Il linguaggio e la morte*. In *Quel che resta di Auschwitz*, we notice that the spelling of the term voice with an uppercase V (Voice) recalls the distinction set forth by Agamben in 1985 between voice and Voice to contemplate the non-articulation between nature and language. Already in the 1980's, this distinction was intended to remove from the anthropogenic reflection the need for a negative foundation for man, which is repeated in this book of the Homo Sacer series:

> Sia la vecchia definizione filosófica dell' uomo come *zõon logon echon*, il vivente che ha il linguaggio (...) questa articulazione sia stata cercata, in generale, in direzione di um Io o di uma Voce – voce silenziosa della coscienza che si fa presente a se stessa nel discorso interiore da uma parte, e, dall'altra, você articolata, *phone énarthros,* in cui la língua si connette al vivente iscrivendosi nella sua stessa você. Resta che, ogni volta, questa Voce risulta essere, in ultima istanza, um mitologema (...) Ma proprio questa impossibilità di congiungere insieme il vivente e il linguaggio, la *phoné* e il *logos,* il non-umano e l'umano (...) è ciò che permette la testimonianza (...) *La testimonianza ha luogo nel non-luogo dell'articolazione.*(...) E proprio perché la relazione (o, piuttosto, la non relazione) fra il vivente e el parlante há la forma della vergogna, dell'essere rediprocamente consegnati a un inassumibile, l'*ethos* di questo scarto non può che essere una testimonianza – cioè qualcosa d'inassegnabile a um soggetto, che costituisce, tuttavia, l'única demora, l'única possibile consistenza di um soggeto[17] (Agamben 1998, 120-121).

In *Il linguaggio e la morte*, the philosophical need for a voice articulated as Voice meets tragedy in a stroke of "development and overcoming". Philosophy, according to Agamben, seizes the silent experience of the tragic

hero and universalises it as being the foundation of what is more properly human: the separation from the animal voice.

In this philosophical development and overcoming of tragedy, it is the enchainment between a silent voice – which Agamben observes is already operating in the tragedians as an articulator of the theme of *con-science*, as the "knowing with oneself" – and guilt that is transmitted as foundation to philosophy: "È questa muta e angosciata coscienza, questa *sigetica* che si apre fra l'essere nato dell'uomo e il suo essere parlante, che la filosofia, raccogliendo cosí l' esigenza piú profonda dello spettacolo tragico, pone come fondamento tanto della logica che dell'etica"[18] (Agamben 1982, 114).

Furthermore, if the division that organises the conscience sustained in the Voice is the same as that on which Agamben will conduct all his work as if written on "the mystery that divided it" – the division between living being and language, it is not by chance that Pulcinella is presented, at the end of the homonymous book, next to the Homo Sacer paradigm with a specific methodological function: the deactivation of the bipolar device between *zoe* and *bios*. Agamben theorises that philosophy and tragedy are originally bound by the conflict that both addressed, which he claims to be an "irreconcilable" conflict in both, between the logical being of man and his natural being. However, with Pulcinella the indistinction between these two forms of being is presumed and, even more so, the impossibility, coming from the indistinction, of keeping the intelligibility that guaranteed over time the conceptualisation of its forms.

> Si tratterà, pertanto, di mettere in questione e neutralizzare lo stesso dispositivo bipolare *bios*/*zoe*, per investigare non tanto l'articolazione che li tiene uniti, quanto la divisione che li ha separati. Ocorrerà chiedersi, cioè, in che modo e secondo quali strategie essa potrebbe essere neutralizzata [...] Non vi è, in Pulcinella, una vita vegetativa separata dalla forma di vita, una *zoe* che possa essere distinta e separata dal *bios*. Egli non è, in verità, né l'una né l'altro[19] (Agamben 2015, 133-135).

Previously, in *Il linguaggio e la morte*, Agamben had been attempting to discover this way of disabling in a reading of *Oedipus at Colonus* conducted retroactively to the attempt of disassembly performed by Nietzsche of the articulation between philosophy and tragedy. After commenting that Nietzsche's attempt, although relevant, failed in its function of disarticulation, as he kept thoughtless the mythologeme of Voice, Agamben reviews *Sophocles*:

> Alla fine dell'*Edipo a Colono*, quando è giunto per l'eroe, ormai completamente rasserenato, il momento di morire, egli fa giurare a Teseo, che l'accompagna in quegli ultimi istanti, che nessun mortale 'proferirà voce' sulla sua tomba (...). Se Teseo rispeterà questo voto, egli avrà 'un paese per sempre senza dolore' (...). *Spezzando il legame fra linguaggio e morte, Edipo – 'L'ultimo degli uomini de dolore' – pone*

> *fine alla catena della colpa tragica che si trasmette interminabilmente nel nesso fra le due moire dell'uomo*[20] (Agamben 1982, 121) (Emphasis added).

If this disabling is the final project of *Il linguaggio e la morte*, furthermore, if it is in this text that the figure of the Homo Sacer is referenced for the first time in Agamben's work, we may hypothesise that this new reversal of the issue, in the tension between tragedy and comedy, is required by the methodological development that arises later in the Homo Sacer series with *Signatura Rerum*. The assumption appears consistent to us because it aligns the search of an ethics without guilt to a historical temporality without time.

As guilt would not acquire the cathartic, but the historical, theoretical and critical means to its atonement in this reversal operated by Agamben with *Oedipus at Colonus*, we believe that it is the issue of the paradigmatic method that arises requiring yet another critical movement.

In this respect, it must be stressed that the method of destruction of the destruction of non-transferability was fully covered in the section of the seminar we were analysing: the archaeology of the origin of philosophical tradition in tragedy; the identification of an "unspeakable transmission" bequeathed as heritage to contemporaries through philosophical tradition; the disassembly of the articulation between living being and language through the critics of the ethical mythologeme of a voice of conscience understood as the negative foundation of man (which is the focus of the seminar) and, with it, of the access to the tragic through the articulation between knowing with oneself and guilt; and, finally, the return to the tragic with the apparatus not of tradition (with Aristoteles or Plato or Hegel), nor of the critique of tradition (with Nietzsche and his Oedipus as the last philosopher), but by directly quoting their writings. It is worth noting that in this excerpt from *Language and Death* Agamben quotes the tragic texts directly, preserving in his writing the ancient Greek alphabet.

However, even after this trajectory, Pulcinella is necessary. Our hypothesis is that if, in the archaeology of the division that separated poetry and politics, Agamben uncovers the tragic, at a point before philosophical discourse, the use of the concentration camps and the figure of Auschwitz as a paradigm has generated a problem that was perhaps glimpsed, but not completely theorised, before the paradigmatic proposition of the Homo Sacer: the division between *bios* and *zoe,* which is juxtaposed, without clearly establishing the passage from one to another, between living being and language:

> La domanda: 'in che modo il vivente ha il linguaggio?' corrisponde esattamente a quella: 'in che modo la nuda vita abita a polis?' Il vivente ha il logos togliendo e conservando in esso la propria você, cosí come esso abita la polis lasciando eccpire in essa la propria nuda vita. La politica si presenta allora come la struttura in senso proprio fondamentale della metafisica occidentale, in quanto

occupa la soglia in cui si compie l'articolazione fra il vivente e il logos. La 'policizzazione' nella nuda vita è il compito metafisico per eccellenza, in cui si decide dell'umanità del vivente uomo (...)[21](Agamben 1995, 11).

This question has always been articulated in Agamben as a utopian topology in which it is necessary to rethink, on every occasion, time and space. That is because ethics is to the author the very political dwelling of man. Hence, we understand that the question raised with Pulcinella, in parallel to the subject of guilt, is a question regarding time and, more specifically, regarding the temporality of paradigmatic thinking as past that never occurred, without time: "Che, nell'economia dela fine dei tempi, tutte le cose si recapitolino in Pulcinella, implica per lui uma nuova, diversa sperienza della storia, dela vita e del tempo, che vale la pena di provare a comprendere"[22] (Agamben 2015, 18).

It is exactly from this indication of the specific temporality of the figure of Pulcinella that Agamben describes the experience of this figure of Italian comedy who stares at the past and death, finitude and survival, with eyes that see only gnocchi and pasta.

From Pulcinella arises an experience of the limit of language closer to laughter and tears than to archive and conscience, that is, distant from a Voice that is the negative foundation of man.

From Pulcinella arises an experience specific to the fall of personality and phantasm as ideals of reference for the I and historical development:

> Il non-vissuto ha due forme: il carattere e il fantasma. Il carattere è il guardiano della soglia che veglia a che il non-vissuto rimanga per sempre tale, imprimendone sul volto l'inconfondible traccia [...]; il fantasma è il tentativo di vivere ciò che è rimasto non vissuto: esso manca ogni volta il suo scopo, perché il non-vissuto viene compulsivamente evocato próprio e soltanto in quanto inaccessibile. Pulcinella sfugge a entrambi: al carattere, perché renuncia al volto per uma maschera; al fantasma, perché si affida soltanto alla sua infantile smemoratezza[23] (Agamben 2015, 113).

From Pulcinella arises the experience of a life in which mythical and historical time interplay in a poultry genealogy, crossing the semi-divine, the semi-feral and the below human in an archaeology of the non-human source of theatre in order to consider a subject of philosophy as non-I, an archaeology, therefore, of the past that never occurred, of a philosophy founded on the indistinction between man and animal.

Pulcinella is, hence, a hybrid figure whose name, derived from "chick", recalls his birth from an egg (Agamben 2015, 47). In this animalistic form, Pulcinella is a figure placed next to a philosophical archaeology that will identify, in Plato's Socratic dialogue, the also hybrid character of a Socrates that is less a man than a satyr or Silenos – "Nella Republica [...] I dialoghi socrati sono um quarto genere, il cui protagonista non è um uomo, ma um sátiro"[24] (Agamben 2015, 42), a non-human figure who finally

achieves tragedy when it discovers, in Aristotle's Poetics, the annotation of a satirical source on the developments of tragic action and hero (Agamben 2015, 43).

Finally, from Pulcinella arises a critical experience of an ethics formed historically from the subjectivation by guilt and conforming of docile bodies to a disciplining and judicialisingbiopower. While his body is deformed by art, his gesture "è la liberazione del carattere empririco da ogni riferimento a um carattere intellegibile e del carattere inteligibile da ogni funzione di imputazione giuridica o morale"[25] (Agamben 2015, 121).

At the same time, it is in comedy that Agamben discovers an escape route to understanding tragic theatre as the representation of the action staged in the technology of speech. Pulcinella is not only an escape route from theatrical tradition for Agamben. He is specifically the character who demands new politics, away both from its reference to action and from the reference to the word as support for the legally responsible subject: "l`azione che, secondo un'antica e venerable tradizione, è il luogo della politica, qui non há piú luogo, há perso il suo soggetto e la sua consistenza"[26] (Agamben 2015, 71). Thus, Pulcinella is evidence to Agamben of a questioning of praxis that renders it possible to reflect upon politics when the impossibility of action is reached, "Ma Pulcinella non è, per questo, semplicemente impolítico, egli anuncia ed esige un'altra politica, che non ha piú luogo nell'azione, ma mostra che cosa può um corpo quando ogni azione è diventata impossibile"[27] (Agamben 2015, 71).

Accordingly, Pulcinella can be considered a figure of a point-to-point experience, important to Agamben. Nonetheless, it is an experience whose ability to grasp part of the positivity of that past that never occurred, that has not been lived, only arises at the junction with the paradigmatic method described in the *Signatura Rerum*. More specifically, it arises in the work of erosion of the phantasm still required after the archaeological regression via the dismantling of tradition and its emergence as a paradigm.

We understand that this phantasmal emergence of the paradigm is what impels an archaeological method deployed beyond the dismantling of tradition. In *Signatura Rerum*, Agamben establishes an analogy with the format of the psychoanalytic regression to consider, simultaneously, contemporaneity between a past that has not been lived and the present, as it is exactly because of its characterisation as not realised that the past that has not been lived, accessed through such regressions, is best defined as the present. In the words of Agamben, this is "un passato che non è stato vissuto e che non può quindi definirsi tecnicamente 'passato', ma è rimasto, in qualque modo, presente"[28] (Agamben 2008, 103).

It is again the condition of not-lived that requires a methodological operation such as the evocation of the phantasm. For Agamben, it is the

phantasmal form that offers this curious historical object the edges of contact and separation between conscious and unconscious, remembered and forgotten, lived and not-lived.

Finally, after evoking the phantasm, it is a matter of wearing it out until "fargli perdere il suo rango originário[29]" (Agamben 2008, 103). This original condition does not concern as much the phantasmal content as the possibilities, modalities, conditions and logical operations of separation involved in their emergence and definition and that establish it as the source of a particular historical fact.

The necessity of this development for Agamben is such that he claims the archaeological erosion of the phantasm to be the only access road to the present: "solo a questo punto il passato non vissuto si rivela per ciò che era: contemporaneo al presente, e diventa in questo modo per la prima volta accessibile, la con-presenza 'fonte'"[30] (Agamben 2008, 103).

Hence, if we are correct, Pulcinella would not only be the character of different politics but the paradigmatic figure of the very paradigm function in Agamben; the witness of a new ethic but also of another theoretical action to be exercised after Auschwitz: without time, without guilt and with a form of life that inhabits the not-lived;a form of political dwelling beyond the division between active and contemplative life that, supported in the distinction between *zoe* and *bios*, traditionally has excluded from politics the hybrid beings of the poet and the philosopher.

Finally, therefore, Pulcinella can be understood as a tortuous way (this is after all the requirement for traversing the phantasm) of making possible the heretofore mythical "unity of the broken word itself" pursued by Agamben since his inaugural works. The answer to an issue already envisioned in the "*Programma per una rivista*" that we quoted in our introduction: "il problema non è tanto se la poesia sai o meno rilevante rispetto alla politica, ma se la politica sia ancora all'altezza della sua coesione originaria com la poesia"[31] (Agamben 1978, 149).

Does tragedy no longer witness? Maybe not before the methodological operation of denying it as a paradigm via the route of Pulcinella. However, following that, in the traces of what had already been rehearsed with *Oedipus at Colonus*, what will be discovered is the dissolution of the separation between comic and tragic, not in a tragicomic unit but in an alterity to the very logic that made them separate. Responding to the Italian journalist Alessandro Leogrande (2015) in an interview on Pulcinella, Agamben offers the following statement to the question of whether Italy's true national character is tragicomic: "Ma più que tragicomédia, preferisco parlare, comè piaceva a Manganelli, di 'ilarotragedia'. Pulcinella fa saltare i confini chi separano i duo genere, e lo spazio che si apre fra di essi, che non è più né trágico né comico, ma nemmeno tragicômico, è quello che m'interessa."[32]

Notes

[1] The Greek hero has left us forever; he can no longer bear witness for us in any way. After Auschwitz, it is not possible to use a tragic paradigm in ethics.

[2] Pulcinella's secret: the comedy of life has no secrets, but only, at all times, a way out.

[3] At the end of Homo Sacer I, after having evoked a series of brief biographies – the FlamenDialis, the homo sacer, the Führer in the Third Reich, the Muslim in Auschwitz, the person in a state beyond coma in the resuscitation camera – in which zoe and bios, biological body and political body, private existence and public existence seem tragically undetermined, I have tried to define the form-of-life as a bios, which is solely its zoe. But what does it mean ´to live one's own zoe´, what can be a form of life that has for object solely the corporeal life, which in our political tradition has always been separated as bare life? In this perspective, what is Pulcinella's form-of-life?

[4] In an unconscious word, and as if fallen from the sky, which enjoys the object of knowledge representing it in graceful form.

[5] And a word which possesses all seriousness and all consciousness, but which does not enjoy its object, as it is not able to represent it.

[6] (...) Beyond any doubt, not only is comedy older and deeper than tragedy (...) but comedy is also closer to philosophy than tragedy – so close that, ultimately, it appears to be almost confused with philosophy.

[7] The task that the situation imposes on the journal cannot therefore be defined simply as "destruction" of tradition, even though it is necessary, but rather as "destruction of destruction", in which the destruction of transferability, the unique character of our culture, is brought dialectically to consciousness. And it is only in such "destruction" that, just like the architectural design of a house on fire, the categorical structures of Italian culture may become visible. The choice of comedy and the resignation of tragedy (...) the pre-eminence of Law attached to a creatural conception of human innocence (...), these are just some of the categories in whose antinomic tension the Italian phenomenon is sustained.

[8] Beginning with Hegel, the guilty-innocent person is the figure through which modern culture interprets Greek tragedy and, with it, its own secret discords. [...] The conflict, of which Hegel speaks, however, is not merely a matter of consciousness, in which subjective innocence is simply opposed to objective guilt. What is tragic is, on the contrary, to unconditionally assume an objective guilt in place of an apparently innocent subject. [...] Nothing is further from this model than Auschwitz. Here the deportee sees such a widening of the abyss between subjective innocence and objective guilt, between what he did do and what he could feel responsible for, that he cannot assume responsibility for any of his actions. [...] With an inversion that borders on parody, he feels he is innocent precisely for that which the tragic hero feels he is guilty; and guilty exactly for that which the tragic hero feels he is innocent. [...] But it is, above all, the ease with which this is remembered by the executioners [...] that leads us to suspect the tragic model as suitable to understand Auschwitz [...] they invoke it not so much to escape condemnation [...] as, rather, to make their situation appear to their own eyes in clearly more acceptable terms – those of a tragic conflict. "My client feels guilty before God, not before the law".

[9] "Tragedy emerges in Greece at the end of the 6th century. Even before one hundred years have passed, the tragic essence had already been exhausted, and when Aristotle, in Poetics, in the 4th century, seeks to establish its theory, he no longer understands the tragic man whom, so to speak, has become strange to him. Succeeding epopee and lyric poetry, and fading when philosophy triumphs, tragedy, as a literary genre, appears as the expression of a particular type of human experience, linked to certain social and psychological conditions". (Vernant and Vidal-Naquet 2005, 8).

[10] Cannot confront tradition without deconstructing the paradigms, techniques, and practices through which tradition regulates the forms of transmission, conditions access to sources, and ultimately determines the very status of the knowing subject.

[11] That of provisory dialectics, which the magic wand of the Aufhebung would always be turning into something positive (...) but an absolute negativity and without redemption, that nonetheless does not, for this reason, resign to knowledge.

[12] Beyond good and evil is not the innocence of becoming, but a shame not only without guilt, but, so to speak, without time.

[13] What is, then, the character of the work, in which the pro-ductive activity of man takes place?

[14] The one who expresses in all its greatness, and in all its misery, the precarious sense of human action in the historical interval between that which no longer is and that which is not yet.

[15] The rupture of tradition, which is today an accomplished fact, actually starts an era in which between the old and the new there is no longer any possible connection.

[16] The ethical problem has changed radically (...). Beyond good and evil lies not the innocence of becoming but, rather, a shame that is not only without guilt but, so to speak, even without time.

[17] One must consider the old philosophical definition of man as zoon logon echon, the living being who has language [...] such articulation has been generally sought in the perspective of an I or a Voice – as a silent voice of conscience that appears to itself in inner discourse, on the one hand, and on the other, as an articulated voice, phone enarthros, in which language is tightly bound to the living being, inscribed in its very voice. Still stands the fact that, ultimately, this Voice is a mythologeme [...]. However, it is precisely this impossibility of uniting the living being and language, phoné and logos, the non-human and human [...] is what allows for testimony. [...] Testimony takes place in the non-place of articulation. (...) Precisely because the relationship (or, rather, non-relationship) between the living being and the speaking being encloses the form of shame, because we are reciprocally consigned to something that cannot be assumed by a subject, that the ethos of this separation can only be testimony, that is, something that cannot be assigned to a subject but that nevertheless constitutes the subject's only dwelling place, its only possible consistency.

[18] It is this mute and anguished conscience, this sigetics opened between the being-born of man and his speaking being, which philosophy, embracing the most profound demand of the tragic spectacle, proposes as the foundation for both logic and ethics.

[19] Hence, the procedure will be to question and neutralise the same bipolar device bios/zoe, to investigate less the articulation that keeps them together than the division that separated them. One must ask, therefore, how or with what strategies this division can be neutralised (...) In Puccinella there is no vegetative life separate from form of life, a zoe which may be distinct and separate from bios. In fact, he is neither one nor the other.

[20] At the end of *Oedipus at Colonus*, when the now-serene hero reaches the hour of death, he begs Theseus, who has accompanied him in those final instants, that no mortal should "utter a voice" at his tomb. [...] If Theseus respects this vow, he will have "a country forever without pain". [...] By breaking the link between language and death, Oedipus – "the last man of pain" – puts an end to the chain of tragic guilt that is interminably transmitted in the nexus between the two moiras of man.

[21] The question "In what way does the living being have language?" corresponds exactly to the question "In what way does bare life dwell in the polis?" The living being has logos by taking away and conserving its own voice in it, even as it dwells in the polis by letting its own bare life be excluded, as an exception, within it. Politics therefore appear as the truly fundamental structure of Western metaphysics insofar as they occupy the threshold on which the relation between the living being and the logos is realised. In the "politicisation" of bare life – the metaphysical task par excellence – the humanity of living man is decided (…).

[22] That in the economy of the end of time, all things are summed up in Pulcinella, implies for him a new, a different experience of history, of life, and of time which is worth trying to understand.

[23] The non-living has two forms: character and phantasm. Character is the guardian of the threshold, who veils so that the non-living shall remain that way forever, printing on the void an unmistakable trait (what marks our void is not what we saw, but what remained unseen); the phantasm is an attempt at living what was not lived: every time its objective is lacking because the unlived is compulsively evoked as inaccessible. Pulcinella escapes from both: the character because he renounces the void with a mask; the phantasm because he relies only on childish oblivion.

[24] In the *Republic* (...) the Socratic dialogues are a fourth genre, in which the protagonist is not a man but a satyr.

[25] Is the release of the empirical character from any reference to an intelligible character and of the intelligible character from any function of legal or moral imputation?

[26] Action, which, according to an ancient and venerable tradition, is the sphere of politics, has no room here, as it lost its subject and conscience.

[27] However, Pulcinella is not for that reason simply apolitical, he announces and requires different politics, which no longer take place in action, but he shows what a body can accomplish when every action becomes impossible.

[28] A past that has not been lived, and therefore that technically cannot be defined as "past", but that somehow has remained present.

[29] It loses its original condition.

[30] Only at this point the past that has not been lived reveals itself as what it was: a contemporary of

the present, and thus, it becomes accessible for the first time, introducing itself as a 'source'".

[31] The question is not as much whether poetry would be relevant or not with respect to politics as whether politics would still be at the height of its originating cohesion with poetry.

[32] But beyond tragicomedy, I'd rather say, like it pleased Manganelli, the 'ilarotragedia'. Pulcinella blasts the frontiers that separate both genres, and the space that opens up between them, which is no longer tragic, or comical, or even tragicomic, is what interests me.

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