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BEGINNINGS ARE HARD. GIORGIO AGAMBEN AND THE REGRESSIVE SUBJECT

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ABSTRACT
The article analyzes Giorgio Agamben's methodological tool of regression against the background of Jewish messianism. Although the term is obviously borrowed from Freudian psychoanalysis, Agamben's reading of regression has a distinct messianic spin: it means a movement toward prelinguistic existence (infancy), prior to the ontological split within the subject generated by language. This quasi-Edenic narrative might be called a 'Heideggerian moment' of Agamben's thought but I argue – with reference to Infancy and History and Signature of All Things – that it is actually deeply rooted in Jewish tradition. The aim of the article is to 1) demonstrate the cryptotheological background of regression to infancy and 2) critically analyze Agamben's idea of 'regressive' subjectivity beyond the principle of signification.

KEYWORDS
Giorgio Agamben, subject, language, regression, infancy, Jewish messianism

> We must dream backwards, toward the source, we must row back up the centuries, beyond infancy, beyond the beginning, (...) toward the living center of origin
> (Octavio Paz, The Broken Waterjar)

1. INTRODUCTION

In his widely discussed essay *Progress or Return?*, Leo Strauss contemplates two fundamental political and religious concepts – progress and return – in the context of Jewish tradition. He famously argues that the modern ideal of progress has backfired, leading us to "the brink of an abyss" (Strauss 1997: 87) and bringing about an unprecedented crisis of Western civilization. Consequently, a contemporary man needs to be 'redeemed' from progress and brought back to tradition. The application of the messianic idiom to the critique of progress might be surprising, but

Strauss's argument is that messianic idea in Judaism has been primarily associated with restoration, not progress; progressive messianism is merely a secular, political distortion of its original, restorative message.

To support his thesis, Strauss refers to the findings of Gershom Scholem, whose work was mostly devoted to the analysis of the messianic idea in Jewish kabbalah. "As I learn from Scholem" – says Strauss – "Kabbala prior to the sixteenth century concentrated upon the beginning; it was only with Isaac Luria that Kabbala began to concentrate upon the future – upon the end. Yet even here, the last age became as important as the first. It did not become more important" (Strauss 1997: 88). He then quotes Scholem's *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* where we read that "for Luria «salvation means actually nothing but restitution, reintegration of the original whole, or *tikkun*, to use the Hebrew term. (...) The path to the end of all things is also the path to the beginning»" (Strauss 1997: 88)[1]. This leads Strauss to conclude that Jewish messianism is in its essence concerned with *teshuva,* or return; the life of the Jew might be "a life of anticipation, of hope, but the hope for redemption is restoration – *restitutio in integro*" (Strauss 1997: 88).

What Strauss fails to add in his impressive apology of the origins is that the messianism of modern Jewish kabbalah is much more nuanced. Although single excerpts might indeed show Luria as a conservative spirit, Scholem repeatedly highlights "a strictly utopian impulse" (Scholem 1971: 13) of the Lurianic myth. His fundamental essay *Toward an Understanding of the Messianic Idea in Judaism* explicates that when Luria and his disciples speak of re-establishing the original perfection, they do not mean the return to any actual origins but to the potentiality which – due to fundamental cosmological ruptures[2] – failed to actualize. In Scholem's own words, the Lurianic *olam ha-ba* "does not correspond to any condition of things that has ever existed even in Paradise, but at most to a plan contained in the divine idea of Creation" (Scholem 1971: 13). Consequently, *tikkun* is "not so much a restoration of Creation (...) as its first complete fulfillment" (Scholem 1969: 117).

The dispute between Strauss and Scholem – two of the most prominent Jewish thinkers of the twentieth century – is a useful framework for the analysis of Giorgio Agamben's methodological tool of regression which I carry out in this article. Although the term is obviously borrowed from Freudian psychoanalysis, Agamben's reading of regression has a distinct messianic spin: it means a movement toward prelinguistic existence, prior to the ontological split within the subject generated by language. This quasi-Edenic narrative might be called a 'Heideggerian moment' of

[1] The original to be found in Scholem 1946: 256, 274.

[2] Lurianists invested in the mythical image of *shevirat ha-kelim* ("breaking of the vessels") - a founding catastrophe which results in a general deficiency and displacement of things in this world. In Scholem's words: "Nothing remains in its proper place. Everything is somewhere else, (...) in exile, (...) in need of being redeemed" (Scholem 1969: 112-113). More on these cosmological ruptures to be found in Fine 2003.

Agamben's thought, but I argue that it is actually deeply rooted in Jewish tradition. To demonstrate this crypto-theological background, I refer both to *Signatura rerum* [*The Signature of All Things*] – the work in which Agamben's theory of regression is elaborated – and *Infanzia e storia* [*Infancy and History*] where the concept of prelinguistic existence (infancy) is used to speculate about life inseparable from language. I propose to think of regression as a dialogue with both the restorative messianism put forward by Strauss and its dialectical variations to be found in Scholem, but also argue that Agamben's 'regressive' messianism – ingenious as it is – remains hopelessly torn between the phantasm of original perfection and the utopia of a return "to that which never was" (Agamben 1991: 97). Specifically, it is my contention that the theory of infancy contradicts the premises of regression which is supposed to set the ground for its coming, and makes Agamben's idea of regressive subject highly problematic.

Surprisingly, although the concept of regression is of primary importance for Agamben's methodology and ontology, it has been a subject of hardly any systematic research. It is usually just briefly mentioned by scholars in the context of paradigm and signature, whose theories indeed make up the core of *The Signature of All Things* (McQuillan 2010; Snoek 2010). The only elaborate analysis of regression as such is to be found in Colby Dickinson's *Agamben and Theology* (2011), where it is aptly related to the idea of infancy. However, as Dickinson's book is written from a Christian perspective, it fails to comment on the Jewish messianic background of Agamben's regression. My paper fills this serious gap and brings out the camouflaged Jewish references to demonstrate the idea of regression as an important contribution to the debate on the actuality of messianism. At the same time, it critically analyzes the relation of regression to infancy, and sheds some light on their theoretical incongruity.

2. REGRESSION

The concept of regression appears in a chapter of *The Signature of All Things* titled *Philosophical Archaeology*[3], where Foucauldian terminology is applied to redefine philosophical inquiry into the past. Agamben argues that *arché*, being the proper object of any archaeological practice, is not a factitious origin that chronologically precedes the present, nor a metaphysical principle from which all things have developed. It is rather "the point from which the phenomenon takes its source" (Agamben 2009a: 89), and the moment when dominant discourses have been constituted. As such, the archaeology both Foucault and Agamben have in

[3] The notions of archaeology and genealogy, whose Agamben fails to differentiate, are important for his later works and are to be found e.g. in the subtitles of *The Kingdom and the Glory* (Agamben 2011a) and *The Sacrament of Language* (Agamben 2011b).

mind needs history to "dispel the chimeras of the origin" (Agamben 2009a: 83)[4] and recognize fundamental tensions inherent in each historical practice.

If we realize how much Agamben's philosophy owes to Martin Heidegger, his critique of sources and tradition cannot help but evoke Heidegger's famous distinction into "history" (*Geschichte*) and "historicity/historicality" (*Geschichtlichkeit*). As we read in *Being and Time,* "historicity as a temporal mode of being (...) is prior to what is called history (...); it is the ground for the fact that something like the discipline of 'world history' is at all possible" (Heidegger 1996: 17). What any revisionist spirit might find appealing is especially Heidegger's project of revealing this ground and returning to the 'true' origins of phenomena that so far have been concealed or made inaccessible by the dominant metaphysical tradition. However, Agamben is careful to make it clear that the *arché* he thinks of is neither to be found in a distant past, nor is it metahistorical in its nature. Rather than Heidegger, then, he follows Friedrich Nietzsche in his abandonment of the term *Ursprung* ("origin") in favour of *Entstehung* ("emergence"), not in the sense of genesis, but the dynamic arising of things (Agamben 2009a: 83)[5]. He thereby demonstrates once again that philosophical archaeology is not about the nature of the past but about the emergence of the present, and, as such, it favours process of formation over an alleged essence of things.

Quite surprisingly, but perhaps in accordance with his strategy of covering tracks, Agamben fails to mention that this is precisely how origin was conceptualized by Walter Benjamin, another of his philosophical masters. Instead of rejecting the term, like Nietzsche and Foucault, Benjamin chooses its "strong misreading" (Bloom 2003) and comes up with the idea of origin *as* emergence. Although origin – he argues in the preface to the work on German tragic drama – is a historical category, it has nothing to do with the idea of genesis as the inception of some phenomena at a certain moment in time. To think of origin as the very first link in the chronological chain of causes and effects would correspond to the conception of "homogeneous and empty" time that Benjamin harshly criticized as "bourgeois" (Benjamin 2006: 396)[6]. Rather, the origin is "an eddy in the stream of becoming" (Benjamin 2003: 45), an operative force convulsing the body of history from the inside, which makes it not metahistorical, but transhistorical. As Agamben himself aptly puts it elsewhere, in a clear polemic with the Straussian idiom of restoration, "the return to the origin that is at issue here thus in no way signifies the reconstruction of something as it once was, the reintegration of something into an origin understood as a real and eternal figure of its truth" (Agamben 1999c: 152).

[4]The original to be found in Foucault 1998: 373.

[5] See also Foucault 1998.

[6] To make things a little more confusing, let us note that Benjamin rejects the notion of *Enstehung* for precisely the same reasons why Nietzsche failed to invest in *Ursprung:* he associates it with descent, not emergence.

It is exactly this idea of the origin that Agamben's messianism of regression seems modelled on. In a crucial fragment of his essay, Agamben points to a structural analogy between the philosophical archaeology he has just worked out and the psychoanalytic regression therapy[7]. In a classical Freudian approach, regression was defined as a backward movement of the subject to an earlier stage of development in response to some traumatic memories that could not be handled in a more adaptive way. The task of the analysis, sometimes called therapeutic regression, was to identify the repressed, unconscious origin of trauma in order to help the patient work through it and eventually neutralize its effect on consciousness (Heimann and Isaacs 2002: 169). Agamben follows the psychoanalytic intuition not without making a slight but meaningful adjustment to it. What he calls "archaeological regression" (Agamben 2009a: 98) is a therapy that confronts the historical 'repressed' not by exploring the unconscious but rather identifying and deconstructing the very source of the split into conscious and unconscious. In other words, instead of seeking a moment prior to binary divisions, Agamben chooses to work on the moment they have been generated. Why is that? Picturing the 'before' as a state of prelapsarian unity, he claims, means following the logic of the split: only in the world governed by the principle of divisions is the mirage of original non-division possible as its opposite. The alternative would be to think from beyond the split, where nothing like a historical origin exists, there is just spontaneous emergence or arising. What Agamben's regression then leans toward is not "to restore a previous stage, but to decompose, displace, and ultimately bypass it in order to go back not to its content but to the modalities, circumstances, and moments in which the split, by means of repression, constituted it as origin" (Agamben 2009a: 103).

We have already seen that for Agamben the idea of restoring a previous stage is nothing but a phantasm. However, what we are regressing to in the archaeological practice remains yet unclear: is it some other past or is it past at all? In other words, what is the temporal structure of such regression? Further in the essay, Agamben notes that, technically speaking, his project is more about the present than the past, or, if we insist on this word, about the past that "somehow has remained present" because it "has not been lived through" (Agamben 2009a: 102). One can easily capture here similarities to Scholem's account of the Lurianic 'return' as the restitution of potentiality, which Agamben must also have in mind when he speculates on coming back to "a present where we have never been" (Agamben 2009b: 52)[8]. However, as the liberation of history is always projected into what is going to come, the practice of regression also points to the future, and, in Agamben's view, it somehow complements the angel of history whose powerful image has been drawn by Benjamin

[7] Agamben credits an Italian philosopher Enzo Melandri with first exposing the analogies between Foucault's and Freud's methodology.

[8] That Agamben was well acquainted with the utopian-restorative idiom of the Jewish kabbalah is to be seen in Agamben 1999b: 167-168.

in his famous ninth thesis. If Benjamin's angel is driven into the future while "turned toward the past" (Benjamin 2006: 392), the 'angel' of regression moves backward with a gaze fixed on the future. When they catch a fleeting glimpse of each other, claims Agamben, it becomes clear that the "invisible goal" (Agamben 2009a: 99) of their procession in time is the present.

If the implicit allusions to the Jewish kabbalah and explicit references to Benjamin are not yet enough to speak of regression as a messianic enterprise, the ultimate argument is offered by the author himself who terms regression – perhaps a little self-ironically – an "almost soteriological" practice (Agamben 2009a: 98). The idiom of messianism is further applied in the final paragraphs of the essay when Agamben recapitulates the relation of archaeology to history. Their interdependence, he argues, corresponds to the relation between redemption and creation in the three monotheistic religions (Agamben 2009a: 107-108). While creation obviously precedes redemption in time, it is only the latter that makes creation intelligible and meaningful. As such, the work of redemption follows in chronology but precedes in rank, which is precisely how archaeology relates to history. And if Agamben might want to quote Scholem's kabbalistic reflections, he could put the relationship even more aptly: it is only redemption that for the first time brings fulfillment to creation.

3. INFANCY

Calling in the big theological guns implies that the stakes of regression are much higher than just a reconceptualization of the origin. Indeed, Agamben's methodological essay shall not be discussed alone, but rather as a chronological follower and logical antecedent of *Infancy and History*. Only read against this early work on the relation of time and language, archaeological regression fully reveals its significance. Through the concept of infancy, Agamben tries to convince us that the fracture underlying our vision of history constitutes all the condition of being-human. There is a formative split upon which our lives are founded; the split generating further divisions that we, as mankind, are hopelessly involved in. Its persistence stems from the fact that the founding split is produced by the essential property of being-human: the use of language, and can only be neutralized, Agamben contends, through an infantile experience of wordlessness. His archaeological project is thus about regressing to an infancy in order to deactivate the divisions produced by our language and think of humans as speaking beings beyond this negative grounding.

But first things first. From Humboldt and Hamann on, modern philosophy has demonstrated how language and human subjectivity are intertwined. All post-transcendental critiques of the subject accentuate that consciousness independent of language is a phantasm, and human is only constituted as the individual through the use of words. However, to argue it is the capacity of speaking which differentiates

humans from other animals is highly anachronic – modern life sciences have proved that a number of animals use advanced sound communication. What is really characteristic of human animals, Agamben points out, is rather a constitutive gap between actual speech and the symbolic system of language. Unlike other animals, who are born in language – "they are always and totally language" (Agamben 1993: 52) – humans receive it from the outside, and can only enter the kingdom of speech once they have learned to use meaningful sounds[9]. For Agamben, this distance between the semiotic (language signs) and semantic (discourse) has some serious consequences for the subject. First, we do not own our language but have to wrest it for ourselves; as such, language is not a human property as the Aristotelian tradition of *zōon logon echon* has affirmed, but an external apparatus from which we are originally alienated. Second, as already mentioned, the foundational rupture into the living self and the speaking self generates further separations, like the political opposition of the individual and the common. It is therefore the separating nature of language that Agamben makes responsible for the specious alternative of liberalism and communitarianism that determines our political spectrum (Agamben 2007: 9). Last but not least, if human discourse has to be mediated by the sign system, the price we pay for sophisticated communication based on general and abstract terms is the loss of immediacy; animals are one with their language, we are not. The entrance into language is also reductionist in the sense that the moment we actualize our linguistic capacity and start to produce words, we lose the original potentiality to say anything in any language. As Daniel Heller-Roazen puts it, "it is as if the acquisition of language were possible only through an act of oblivion, a kind of linguistic infantile amnesia" (Heller-Roazen 2005: 11).

The infantile, pre-subjective experience of language is precisely what Agamben wants to save in his messianic enterprise. Infancy[10], he argues, is not just the psychosomatic stage of human development when an individual has not yet learned to speak. It is rather the original form of language in a Benjaminian sense of the word – a fleeting experience of ineffability that not only chronologically precedes but also kairotically coexists with conventional language (Agamben 1993: 48). As such, infancy is a gap in the structure of language, "a break with the continual opposition of diachronic and synchronic, historical and structural" (Agamben 1993: 49-50), which pushes beyond its boundaries toward the pure potentiality of speech.

There is also another phrase which grasps the elusive nature of infancy: the state of exception. In Agamben's widely discussed work on this political and legal phenomenon we read that it introduces a "zone of indistinction" (Agamben 2005a: 26), in which one can no longer tell the difference between norm and anomaly.

[9] This problem is elaborated in *Language and Death* (Agamben 1991) where Agamben explicates this original distance through the idea of the Voice, being the negative metaphysical foundation of human 'being-in-language'.

[10] Or rather: in-fancy.

Analogically, the experience of original wordlessness makes it impossible to distinguish the inside of language from its outside, and the crucial split into the living and speaking being is – at least momentarily – deactivated. In other words, when infancy is incorporated to our linguistic nature as a formative exception, a chance opens for the human animal to coincide with his language while still being separated. And if we remember that man is only subjectified by the discontinuity between discourse and language, it is then perfectly right to call infancy "both remnant of the animal and potential for the post-human" (Watkin 2010: 13)[11].

4. CONCLUSIONS

Read against infancy, regression is no longer a humble methodological tool, but a fundamental metaphysical concept which challenges the divisions that have so far determined Western ontology, the linguistic split within the subject being of supreme importance. However, at times Agamben's theories of regression and infancy look antinomic rather than complementary, and these are precisely some discrepancies that I would like to bring out now. The first one concerns the status of origin *vis-à-vis* the unconscious. As already noted, Agamben conceives of infancy as the unchronological origin to be sought *in* and not before language. At the same time, the elusive nature of infancy reminds him of Freud's concept of the unconscious: whereas the latter "occupies the submerged part of psychic territory" (Agamben 1993: 48), the former is latent on the margins of language. As if anticipating objections, Agamben is quick to stipulate that the unconscious he means is not precedent of consciousness but rather originally coexistent with it in the form of "interior monologue" (Agamben 1993: 48). In other words, it is the unchronological origin of consciousness just like infancy is the unchronological origin of language. However, even if we take Agamben's 'kairotical' theory of the unconscious at face value and weave it into his reading of the origin, it is still fundamentally inconsistent with the premises of regression. As we remember, his main objection to psychoanalysis formulated in *Philosophical Archaeology* was that by investing in the unconscious, it reinforces the psychic division into the Ego and the Id instead of trying to deactivate it. Archaeological regression, on the contrary, shall not be about exploring the unconscious but about questioning the dualistic nature of the self. How does this relate, one could ask, to the discussion of infancy as the unconscious of language? It looks like the reproduction of the psychological split (conscious/unconscious) is the price Agamben has decided to pay for the deactivation of the linguistic one (language/discourse). But if we recall there are no mental states beyond language and human psyche is always 'linguistic', is there any split made inoperative at all?

[11] More on infancy as a chance to deactivate the anthropological machine in Agamben 2004.

Second, and more importantly, there is the problem of deactivation which motivates both regression and infancy. According to Agamben's major thesis, the separation introduced to our creaturely lives by the apparatus of language is that into the living being and the speaking being. Unlike other animals, whom Karl Marx describes as "immediately one with [their] life activity" (Marx 2010: 276), the human animal has no direct relation to language, and it is thanks to this gap between life and speech that the experience of infancy is possible. Without it, Agamben admits, man would be fully united with his nature, there would be no "historicity of language" (Agamben 1993: 52) and no history at all. However, it is crucial to notice a significant paradox inscribed in infancy: while it seems to reassure the anthropological difference between human and other animals, it is also tested by Agamben as a means to deconstruct the difference by deactivating the mechanisms that separate humans from the system of language. In other words – indeed a trademark of Agamben's messianism – what generates divisions is also supposed to make them inoperative. To do this, as we have seen, infancy establishes a zone of indistinction in the likeness of the state of exception, which results in the original split being not erased but neutralized, likewise the alienation of human subjects from their own animality. It is precisely this parallel to the state of exception, I argue, that seems the most problematic here. In a fragment of *Homo Sacer* devoted to the analysis of exception, Agamben makes it clear that on the threshold of indistinction between law and life the latter is absorbed by the former, much more powerful as governed by the principle of sovereignty (Agamben 1998: 53). He also claims that law is not the sole domain of sovereignty, whose attribute is the "unlimited power" (Schmitt 2005: 10) over life; another one is language. The question must be asked, then, if the indistinction that infancy generates between man and language does not result in the human subject being fully *subjected* to the linguistic apparatus? Obviously, Agamben specifies that it is only the sovereign state of exception where language wholly "coincides with reality itself" (Agamben 2005b: 105)[12]; the messianic state of exception produced by infancy would be that of "immediate mediation" (Agamben 1999a), where humans coincide with language while still being separated from it. But are there any safety measures to secure the minimum of separation once it has been blurred by Agamben's *experimentum linguae*? Is the "tiny displacement" (Agamben 2007: 53) of sovereignty and messianism not just too tiny this time?

This problem returns in the important essay *The Idea of Language*, where Agamben meditates on the religious concept of revelation to conclude that it is not so much the truth of being that is revealed in the word of God but the truth of language. The truth, he argues, is that "humans can reveal beings through language but cannot reveal language itself" (Agamben 1999a: 40). Why is that? As we learn

[12] Although this remark is on law and not language, Agamben famously argues that both these apparatuses are structurally analogous and governed by the logic of sovereign exception (Agamben 1998: 20-21; Agamben 2005a: 36-37).

from the Lurianic kabbalah, the power of words, being the original domain of divinity, is too great for finite creatures to absorb; it is only through fractures and separations that this power might be diminished and words used to communicate. It means that – as Scholem puts it – "only that which is fragmentary makes language expressible" (Biale 1985: 87); any direct, unmediated access to language has been barred and had it not, words would be "unmerciful" to human subjectivity (Scholem 2003: 216)[13]. Although expressed in religious terms, these kabbalistic intuitions offer a significant critique of language which fails to be convincingly confronted by Agamben's profane messianism. As a result, how to neutralize the linguistic split within the human subject without exposing him to the "unmerciful" power of language remains unclear. What is clear, though, is another discrepancy between regression and infancy: whereas the first was meant to redefine subjectivity by deactivating its negative grounding, the latter risks reinforcing this negativity by empowering the linguistic sovereign. It seems like at a crucial point these two messianic concepts hopelessly miss each other; they resemble the angels of history who just exchange glances while moving in two different directions.

As we have seen throughout the discussion, the regression to infancy is about 'restoring' the full potentiality of our linguistic origins. As such, it backs up Scholem's kairotical idea of return against Strauss's longing for the actual beginnings. Paradoxically, though, the idiom of "immediate mediation" brings Agamben much closer to the Straussian way of thinking, where separations and discontinuities are considered obstruction rather than safeguard. While these inconsistencies of his crypto-theological project might be considered a flaw, they are actually symptomatic of all Jewish messianism, with the idea of return to the origins hopelessly stretched between restoration and utopia. One could thus say that as long as Agamben's thinking lives on antitheses, it remains faithful to its crypto-theological background; but would it not be itself a paradoxical conclusion to the philosophy which makes for deactivation of opposites?

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[13] The comment on the "unmerciful light of revelation" originally appears in Scholem's letter to Benjamin from 1 August 1931 a propos Franz Kafka's prose.

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