

**The Crime of Indistinction?
The Undead and the Politics of Redemption
from an Agambenian Perspective***

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Abstract

The undead is a *crime* against the religious and the sacred; it always troubles our received topologies and distinctions between body and soul, life and death, culture and nature, the human and the nonhuman, animate and inanimate, organic and inorganic, etc. It has always been preoccupying, or haunting, writers and thinkers in the fields of philosophy, ethics, theology, and literature. Especially in contemporary biopolitical discourse, where the conditions and essence of life are fervently debated, problematized, and rethought, the undead comes to the fore and calls for our critical attention. This paper begins with a brief critical review of Hannah Arendt's contribution to biopolitical discourse. By way of some psychoanalytic perspectives, I explicate how the "strange logic of the undead" works in such signature Agambenian categories as the "threshold" and "zone of indistinction," and in the context of the saturation of life in the political field. Then, I turn to the *homo sacer* and the *Muselmann* who, as figures of the undead, inhabit the threshold of political life and bare life, and embody the zero degree of humanity as beings that have been deprived of human communitarian and identitarian registers, while opening a site where new ethical material might appear. The last part of this paper carries the logic of the undead a step further in order to address Agamben's intervention in contemporary theological theories, and his contribution to the politics of emancipation and redemption through his revitalization of Paul and messianic thinking.

Keywords

Bartleby, biopolitics, *homo sacer*, messianism, *Muselmann*, theology, the undead

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Hannah Arendt's significance to contemporary biopolitical discourse mainly lies in her insightful observations of totalitarian regimes' fundamental disruptions of our thinking activities, political-moral judgments, social and international relationships, and, still more fundamentally, of human existence or life itself. Her characterization of totalitarian biopolitics as "total domination" is more than a mere tautological gesture. As she sharply notes, those experiments in laboratories and concentration camps, recruiting science and medicine in the cause of totalitarian domination and carrying to the extreme the principles of forced labor and mass production emptied of all utilitarian considerations, reduce human beings to a never-changing series of identical reactions and to mere biological existence that has lost all human markers (i.e., freedom, spontaneity, individuality, solidarity) and can be exchanged and disposed of at any time (Arendt, *Origins* 438). Arendt terms this the superfluity of humans.

Such unlimited totalitarian power dominates every aspect of human existence, penetrates into its essence and leaves nothing intact. Of the conditions and strategies that make such fundamental transformations possible, the extermination camp stands out as an exemplar with its full, horrible realization of ideological indoctrination. Isolated from the outside world and enshrouded in total, absolute terror or in an "atmosphere of madness and unreality" and "perverse, malignant fantasies" (Arendt, *Origins* 445), concentration camps become a world where unimaginable crimes can be perpetrated, where not only is life destroyed on a large scale but corpses are systematically disposed of without any record, trace or memory. Death is thus denied its usual social, cultural, and religious meanings; it is now even impossible to die one's own death, to claim being-towards-death as one's own singular experience. Thus the survivors will distrust even *their own* stories and their own sense of oblivion to human existence; the impossibility of bearing witness haunts such conventional political and moral categories as validity, responsibility, legality and illegality, guilt and innocence, shame and dignity, and accordingly haunts all political and moral judgments and actions. Arendt goes so far as to suggest that only "the fearful imagination of those who have been aroused by such reports but have not actually been smitten in their own flesh, of those who are consequently free from the bestial, desperate terror which, when confronted by real, present horror, inexorably paralyzes everything that is not mere reaction, can afford to keep thinking about horrors" (*Origins* 441).

Distancing herself from the post-Holocaust superstition or moral illusion that some good might result from absolute evil, Arendt appeals to just a "fearful imagination." This resonates with her dissatisfaction with Eichmann's trial which,

she feels, wrongly focuses on the surviving victims' testimonies while very few of these testimonies are able to achieve narrative simplicity and clarity.¹ The fearful imagination at issue, however, reflects Arendt's insistence on the need to acquire knowledge, the need for testimony to transmit knowledge rather than traumatized affect and memory. Therefore, Arendt would not admit the truth value of what Marianne Hirsh and Leo Spitzer call "the testimony from the inside" in their "The Witness in the Archive."²

The impossibility of bearing witness in question, as well as all the consequent dilemmas, receives more sophisticated formulations in Giorgio Agamben. Like Arendt, Agamben is concerned with the collapse of the political in totalitarian regimes and looks closely at the extreme situation of camps with respect to, for example, the "inarticulate babble," "non-language," "dark and maimed language" of survivors' testimonies (*Remnants* 37), the confusion of ethical and juridical categories, lawfulness and lawlessness, the oppressor and the oppressed (18, 20-21). Nevertheless, Agamben takes more pains to conceptualize "thresholds" or "zones of indistinction" than Arendt, who seems to posit a "terrible abyss that separates the

¹ For more on this, see Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*.

² Miranne Hirsh and Leo Spitzer's views of the *Muselmänn* do not contradict Arendt's in a general sense: "With the luminal figure of the mute, desubjectified witness who can only testify outside language, we reach not only the limit of the human but also the limit of the historical and legal archive. Mute testimony, deep embodied memory, is not verifiable. It exceeds the boundaries of documents, records, and other conventional forms of evidence" (398). But this for Hirsh concerns not so much an epistemological problem as the ethics of the affectively embodied, albeit desubjectified and "mute," testimony. Drawing on such scholars as Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub, and Donald Spence, Hirsh and Spitzer exemplify a recent trend in testimony as well as trauma studies that argues for a deeper understanding of affective transmission, of embodied truthfulness beyond historico-scientific objectivity and (fetishistic) objectification. Scholars of this trend, to which we may add Dominick LaCapra, have in view the working-through of compulsively repetitive traumatized affects and the transformation of the victim, rather than the unmediated identification with him or her, into the survivor and agent (LaCapra, *Writing History* 101-02). A survey on how Giorgio Agamben fits into this "affective turn," albeit worthwhile, exceeds the scope of this paper. At this point, it will suffice to keep in mind that Agamben, as well as Arendt, remains detached from the possibility that his agendas can be fruitfully broached from the standpoint of a psychoanalytically-informed discourse of trauma, for example. LaCapra's view that "the witness to trauma bears witness to the impossibility or breakdown of witnessing" (*History and Its Limits* 64) brings to light this failed encounter. Therefore, it comes to us as no surprise that Agamben's intervention in contemporary debates on giving testimony and bearing witness has no "working-through" in view. Not even shame, for example, as the fundamental affect he formulates in *The Remnants of Auschwitz*, is open to emotional identification. All in all, however, how Agamben's theological project—more specifically, ambiguous messianism as I will explicate below—sheds light on psychoanalysis as a theoretical discourse and clinical practice is another story that is worth narrating or inventing.

world of the living from that of the living dead” (441), or our world and that of the *Muselmann*.

All this revolves around the figure of “the undead,” and this is what this essay seeks to elucidate. The undead can represent all forms of *crime* against the religious and the sacred; it always troubles our received topologies and our distinctions between body and soul, life and death, culture and nature, the human and the nonhuman, the animate and the inanimate, the organic and the inorganic, etc. The undead has often preoccupied, or haunted, writers and thinkers in the fields of philosophy, ethics, theology, not to mention Gothic fiction and horror films. “The undead” confronts us with a logical antinomy, with epistemological uncertainty and ontological liminality. Especially in contemporary biopolitical discourse, where the conditions and the essence of life are fervently debated, problematized, and rethought, the problem of the undead continues to re-emerge and to call for our critical attention.

In what follows, through psychoanalytic lenses, I will first discuss the working of the “strange logic of the undead” in such Agambenian signature categories as the “threshold” and “zone of indistinction” and in the political saturation of life. Then I will turn to *homo sacer* and the *Muselmann* who, as figures of the undead, inhabit the threshold between political life and bare life and embody the zero degree of humanity: these are beings that have been deprived of a human identity in the conventional social and political sense, and which thereby open up a site where new ethical material might appear. The last part of this paper carries the logic of the undead a step further in order to address Agamben’s intervention in contemporary theology, and his contribution to the politics of emancipation and redemption through his revitalization of Paul and of messianic thinking.³

³ In doing this research project, I am aware that fruitful work has already been done by such scholars as John D. Caputo and Mark Lewis Taylor, who, albeit working with different terminologies, turn to deconstruction theory, especially Jacques Derrida’s, in order to “spectralize” or “undeaden” the theological field. Caputo draws on “spectral hermeneutics” to formulate his “weak theology,” which is focused on the irreducibility and hauntingness of the event, even the event of repressed, dangerous memories (*Death* 55). Similarly, Taylor formulates a spectral theory of the theological centered around the concept of haunting and in relation to poststructuralist theory, particularly that of Derrida and Jean-Luc Nancy. For Taylor, the theological as a discourse is developed by philosophers and political theorists rather than by theologians: it critically discerns and reflects upon the motions of power in the agonistic dimension of political thought and practice (9-10); more particularly and crucially, “it traces and theorizes the ways that persons and groups rendered subordinate and vulnerable by agonistic politics and its systemic imposed social suffering nevertheless haunt, unsettle, and perhaps dissolve the structures of those systems” (9). Taylor’s spectral theory of the theological, summarily put, makes theology unable to be with itself and challenges it with contextual

The Strange Logic of the Undead

Nietzsche's motto in *The Gay Science* that "[t]he living is merely a type of what is dead, and a very rare type" (168) cautions us against conceiving of death as opposed to life and points to the heavy, *humic* elements of human life. Those who specialize in the field of the cultural history of death may agree with the thesis of Robert Pogue Harrison's *The Dominion of the Dead* that "[o]nly the dead can grant us legitimacy" (x), or may like Benjamin Noys in the *Culture of Death* think together our exposure to death and to power. Indeed, many have spoken of the complication of life by or with death, or of the liminal nature of human existence. My essay goes one step further to explore how a sacrilegious, illicit category like that of "the undead" could constitute the limit of experience, a limit essential to our rethinking of the ethical and the political beyond biopolitical domination.

Reflecting on Kant's revolution in Western philosophy, Slavoj Žižek relates indefinite judgments to *Gedankending*, namely, objects which we can possess no knowledge of but have to refer to because of "the irreducible finitude of our experience" (*Tarrying* 111). In contrast to negative judgments, by means of which a predicate is directly negated (i.e., "He is not mortal"), indefinite judgments affirm a non-predicate (i.e., "He is not-mortal"). For example, the indefinite judgment "the vampire is undead" states that the vampire is not like a dead person who remains the same, even though he has lost all the predicates of the living; the vampire is undead precisely in the sense that it retains all the predicates of a living person without being one. As Žižek succinctly puts it, we resort to indefinite judgments "when we endeavor to comprehend those borderline phenomena which undermine established differences, such as those between living and being dead" (113). Following this strange logic, we will not fail to see the undead nature of our contemporary cyborgian or posthuman conditions, as here again the boundaries between human and machine, nature and culture, the organic and the artificial, the human and the non-human have allegedly been undermined.

On the other hand, we only need to take a cursory look at psychoanalysis to find various avatars of the undead: the uncanny, anxiety, *objet a*, drive, and enjoyment, all involving the subject's ambivalent relation to its object cause of desire, the Other, and the primordial physical and psychical states. From a Žižekian

singularities regarding language, sexuality, gender, and race. My project distinguishes itself from Caputo's and Taylor's substantial contributions through its detailed readings of Agamben's texts and concrete presentations of undead figures, and through its more pervasive concern with the ontological conditions of (in)human existence under biopolitical domination.

perspective, the manifestations of the undead become more conspicuous when fantasies, however perverse, are publicly staged, when the law functions less by prohibitions than by permissions, and when the subject becomes more attached to the Thing. Accordingly, “the grimace of the Real,” as one of the central motifs of Žižek’s *Enjoy Your Symptom*, does not narrowly pertain to the horror genre but serves to characterize our contemporary society of enjoyment, or postmodern culture in general (140). We seem to be witnessing more and more literary and other cultural productions of incongruity, discrepancy, distortion, deformation, and so on, hooked up to a kind of pre-symbolic, pre-ontological life substance. To put it in Žižek’s philosophical terms, “The place of the ‘living dead’ is not ‘somewhere between the dead and the living’ precisely because it is in a way ‘more alive than life itself,’ having access to the life substance prior to its symbolic mortification” (116). Such an undead and uncanny excess of life or “disturbing surplus animation” (Santner, *Psychotheology* 18; *Creaturely Life* 105-06) is correlative to the encounter with the Other’s enigmatic desire—hence, the enigma of “*Che vuoi?*”—and functions as the supplement to the Law. It belongs to no definite form of life; it can never be fully assumed by the subject and, thus, constitutes the anxieties and uncertainties that “plague identity in a universe of symbolic values” (Santner, *Psychotheology* 51), especially when the subject comes so close to it as to lose its fantasmatic defenses. The undead life substance formulated in psychoanalytic terms as above is ambiguous in nature: on the one hand, it is symptomatic of the intrusion of the Law or biopolitical domination; on the other hand, it has the absolutely singular potential for authentic political and ethical action. Eric L. Santner insightfully explicates the horizon which Rosenzweig and Freud open up: “The very dynamic that attaches us to an ideological formation is . . . the site where the possibility of genuinely new possibilities can emerge” (*Psychotheology* 81).

The above psychoanalytic formulations of the undead life substance also pertain, to a great extent, to Agambenian bare life. Nevertheless, Agamben stands out among contemporary thinkers in the way that he fleshes out the undead with more concrete biopolitical realities. More precisely, the undead as formulated above has sonorous echoes in Agamben’s pivotal concept of the “threshold” in *Homo Sacer*. The Agambenian threshold is clearly a borderline concept that straddles affirmation-negation, a form of the undead. And influenced by both ancient and modern thinkers, Agamben places politics at the threshold between the living being and the logos; this is part of his attempt to problematize the distinction, common to Western political philosophy since Aristotle, between bare life and political life. For Agamben, however, the tension between them can never be reconciled; politics

constantly needs to negotiate its relation with bare life (*Homo Sacer* 8). Such a tension is exactly what Agamben finds lurking but not fully articulated, for example, in Foucault. For Agamben, Foucault's problems lie in not seeing the camp as the exemplary site of modern biopolitics and in remaining unclear about how macropolitical, totalizing "political techniques" work together with "technologies of the self," where the latter concern the processes of individualization and subjectification and bind the subject to its own body, to its natural, biological existence (5-6). And *Homo Sacer* as a whole is an inquiry into the "hidden point of intersection between the juridico-institutional and the biopolitical models of power" (6).

Agamben's *Homo Sacer*, however, takes as its objective more than merely filling Foucault's or any other's lack. Rather, it traces the continuity of the double bind of power and bare life from ancient regimes to the modern political world. In other words, Agamben aims at a genealogy of biopolitics, instead of seeing it as a modern invention. If the strange logic of inclusive exclusion (of bare life in the political life) already characterizes the "double bind" at issue in Western politics, we see in modern politics an "undead" threshold or zone of indistinction between *bios* and *zoē*, inclusion and exclusion, inside and outside, sovereignty and bare life: the modern subject's acquisition of sovereign rights converges on the inclusive exclusion of its bare life. In modern democracy, to be more specific, the subject's political rights extend to those of its body, its sexuality, health, and other basic units of life, and this subject affirms its natural, biological life (as a central biopolitical issue) as well as its subjection to more totalizing but microscopic political techniques.

When bare life coincides with the modern political realm in this way, it no longer remains in the margin of the *polis* but stands in the center. It is from this perspective that Agamben critically assesses the aporia of modern democracy, the "inner solidarity between democracy and totalitarianism" (10), one of the central motifs of *Homo Sacer*. And it is in the Nazi death camps that this hidden link, this inner solidarity becomes more pronounced and horrendous, since the camp is "the most absolute space ever to have been realized, in which power confronts nothing but pure life, without any mediation"; it is indeed "the very paradigm of political space at the point at which politics becomes biopolitics and *homo sacer* is virtually confused with the citizen" (171). What is the obverse side to the solidarity in question, if not the indistinction between biopolitics and thanatopolitics, when biological-scientific principles have become merged with political order, resulting in the biologization of politics, a situation in which decisions on (bare) life become

decisions on death (122-23)? In response to such an “undeading” politics of our time, Agamben calls for an urgent reconceptualization and restructuring of our separate disciplines, be they politics, ethics or philosophy. Our failure to do so, Agamben warns at the close of *Homo Sacer*, will lead to “an unprecedented biopolitical catastrophe” (188).

Undead Life at the Threshold: *Homo Sacer* and the *Muselmann*

As we have seen, then, biopolitics, the law, and, in more psychoanalytically-inflected terms, the Other’s desire all have undeading effects on life itself. Such a recognition paves the way for a rethinking of the political and the ethical. Therefore, we need to explore the bodies, figures, and lives that inhabit the threshold or zone of indistinction, and in particular those of the *homo sacer* and the *Muselmann*. With the aforementioned convergence of bare life and the political realm in mind, we will not find it surprising that the first book of *Homo Sacer*, which addresses “the paradox of sovereignty,” is actually a critical dialogue with Carl Schmitt’s political theology. The sovereign’s position both outside and inside the law—namely, his “legal power to suspend the validity of the law” (*Homo Sacer* 15) and his absolute power to explain and define the general and normal (16)—manifests the state of lawlessness as the kernel of the law, the law’s threshold with the nonlegal (Norris 9), its power to go beyond itself or its undead life in excess over itself; it is the sovereign who gives “body” to such undeadness. The structure of exception involved here departs from a simple negation or negative judgment. Rather, it is more about infinite judgment (i.e., “The sovereign exception is non-legal or unlawful,” rather than simply “not legal”), a kind of affirmation of the law’s rule by way of negation: namely, inclusive exclusion, or non-relational relation (Agamben, *Homo Sacer* 17-18).

A limit-figure like the sovereign works as a metonym for the life that is implicated in the law or political realm through a logic more subtle than “conjunction,” “passage” or the Aristotelian concept of organic development. This paradoxical logic, in other words, defies teleological directionality and spatiality. Accordingly, we should resist the temptation to moralize or allegorize a life undeaded by the structure of exception and inclusive exclusion, nor should we attempt to impose any crude ethical models on Agamben. Nevertheless, when he explicitly relates Auschwitz to our disastrous attempt to localize the threshold or de-limit the limit, we cannot help musing on the messianic undertones, however

weak, of Agamben's apocalyptic message: "One of the theses of the present inquiry is that in our age, the state of exception comes more and more to the foreground as the fundamental political structure and ultimately begins to become the rule. When our age tried to grant the unlocalizable a permanent and visible localization, the result was the concentration camp" (*Homo Sacer* 20). This should not be taken as merely a warning against a Faustian lust for total or totalitarian knowing and, hence, as a glorification of obscurantism. Rather, it will be more feasible to explore how life at the threshold, that is, how the undead, sheds light on our authentic political-ethical thinking and action.

Agamben formulates the paradox of sovereignty in the first book of *Homo Sacer* based on a genealogical and etymological survey of various avatars of *homo sacer*, both ancient and modern. In Roman texts we find records of the undead nature of *homo sacer*, in particular "the unpunishability of his killing and the ban on his sacrifice" (73). It is through such a double exception/exclusion from human and divine law that *homo sacer* is implicated in the political realm and bare life becomes the object of sovereign decisions without any mediation.⁴ For Agamben, Western politics never ceases to produce "life that cannot be sacrificed but may be killed" (10). The inquiry of *Homo Sacer*, however, aims not so much at historical facts as at biopolitical paradigms at their limit. In addition to tracing back to the origin of the concept of "sacred life" and tracing the trajectory of its subsequent dispersions in Western civilization, societies, and politics, *Homo Sacer* uncovers the originary function of sovereignty in the constant need to abandon, cast away some categories and identify a new "living dead man" in order to redemarcate inside and outside. Agamben's book also points to the state as the fundamental horizon of all forms of communal life, a horizon that is much occluded in our time. As Agamben says, "The sacredness of life, which is invoked today as an absolutely fundamental right in opposition to sovereign power, in fact originally expresses precisely both life's subjection to a power over death and life's irreparable exposure in the relation of abandonment" (83). The figures of *homo sacer* that Agamben examines in the book—devotees, wolf-men, refugees, human guinea pigs, and comatose people—all confront us with the constitutive violent, exceptional decision of the sovereign power, where this violence is the grounding principle of communal life as such. Agamben sees this as the obverse of Western human rights politics, which "maintain a secret solidarity with the very powers they sought to fight" (133).

⁴ Alluding to Kafka's *The Trial*, Santner names the life at issue here "creaturely life," life which is abandoned, life which has entered into the state of exception, where the legal and the nonlegal become indistinct, a state subject to sovereign jouissance (*Creaturely Life* 15, 22).

Nevertheless, it is the *Muselmann* in *Remnants of Auschwitz* that stands as the undead *par excellence*, the arch-figure of *homo sacer*, the ultimate witness of the “crime against humanity” beyond whom there is nothing but the gas chamber. Based on a rich variety of sources from the death camps, Agamben’s depictions of the *Muselmann* start with the changes in his bodily appearance due to malnutrition, constant torture, forced labor, scabies, and edemas on various body parts. In addition, we have the *Muselmann*’s cloudy gaze and his indifferent, mechanical, sad facial expressions; he appears to be losing his will and conscience and, even worse, all sense of relationship to his environment; ultimately, he becomes a member of the living dead, a walking corpse (*Remnants* 42-45). Even though the figure of the *Muselmann* is ostensibly a historically specific product of Auschwitz, he is allegorically read by Agamben as epitomizing suffering as such; he embodies “the ‘unrepresentable singularity’ of bare life” (Vogt 84). Surviving inhuman suffering and cruelty and deprived of all recognizable, distinctive human markers, the undead *Muselmann* “inhabits” a zone of absolute indistinction; he is the ultimate form of testimony to the implications of “excessive” life in the political realm, the final biopolitical “substance” (Buch 194).

The *Muselmann* is undead also in the sense that whatever he witnesses and embodies is passed on to other survivors of the camp. Among the latter will be mere pseudo-witnesses, mere supplements of the *Muselmann* as true and original witness and thus as ultimate and impossible witness of the Holocaust. However, it is impossible for them to “witness” the *Muselmann*’s inarticulate babble, his dark and maimed non-language (*Remnants* 37): hence, the double impossibility of bearing witness. Such an impossibility fundamentally signals the limits of the historical, political, moral, and ontological fields. No longer bound to its original legal contexts, “testimony” now has nothing to do with facts. As Erik Vogt puts it, the witness’s testimony is irreducibly singular in the way that it “resists the assimilation and abstraction constitutive of . . . the historian’s discourse. [It] cannot be reduced to the language of facts and documents; it is an event in its own right that ultimately cannot be sundered from the events it recounts” (81). In other words, the testimony of the *Muselmann*, the camp’s true witness, is an undead remainder to or of linguistic and historical representations. If the witnessing or “seeing” of this ultimate threshold figure—that is, his own act of witnessing or seeing—is in some sense impossible, then it is impossible in another sense for others to “see” him, almost as if they were looking at the Gorgon’s head. For the *Muselman*’s undeadness does not merely pertain to the threshold between life and death but also to that between the human and the inhuman. As “threshold” and “limit” in Agamben

have less to do with the “passage” than with the non-localizable zone of indistinction, we cannot “see” in the *Muselmann* any metamorphosis into an inhuman condition. The impossibility of bearing witness, rather, concerns the inhuman in the human, the nonidentity of the human and the inhuman, of living being and speaking being (Vogt 84, 87-89). The experience of being a (witnessing) subject in this case, then, is the experience of desubjectification.

With the above arguments in mind, we should not misconstrue the limit embodied by the camp and the *Muselmann*, the arch-figure of *homo sacer*, as the nullification of all political and moral thinking and judgment; that is to say, we should not misconstrue the gas chamber as the absolute biopolitical domination of human beings (Agamben, *Remnants* 48, 85). For the limit at issue here in effect confronts us with an impossibility that is nevertheless the grounding condition, the zero degree, of possibility. The *Muselmann* marks the failure of traditional ethics through his nullification or confusion of absolute values; he heralds the loss of opposition between tragedy and comedy, dignity and derision, the sublime and the ridiculous (Vogt 86). But such a “failure” concerns more than the indeterminacy of moral values or passions. In the case of both deportees and executioners, Agamben sees “a widening of the abyss between subjective innocence and objective guilt” (*Remnants* 97), between action and responsibility, between what one has done and what one feels guilty about. Since they cannot master their own actions, they tend to seek shelter “behind the prestigious mask of innocent guilt” (97). Executioners like Eichmann, as well as the survivors who are watchers or accomplices of other inmates’ suffering and deaths, even appeal to their moral conscience and sense of responsibility to mask their guilt and avoid legal consequences (23-24, 97).⁵

⁵ These moral and juridical difficulties have their echoes in Arendt’s work. Murdering the moral person in man as one of the three steps to total domination (the other two include killing the juridical person in man and his individuality) is particularly relevant here. In the camp, according to Arendt in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (451-53), not only is martyrdom out of the question since all forms of human solidarity have been corrupted, but death, with all those biopolitical means of wiping out its traces, also completely loses its ontological meanings for the subject, who is thus deprived of its “being-toward-death.” Meanwhile, the camp inmates as well as totalitarian subjects in general are forced to betray or murder their friends, children, wives, and husbands; they are knowingly or unknowingly recruited, made complicit with the regime. Therefore, the distinction between oppressors and victims no longer holds. Their appeal to conscience and the consequent sense of guilt (even being guilty because they have survived), as in Eichmann’s case, only means their enslavement by the superegoic voice or their petrification, instrumentalization by the Other’s discourse. For an elaborate discussion of this issue, see Huang.

Bartleby, Potentiality, and the Remnant: Agamben's Messianism

Faced with the failures of such ethical and juridical categories as dignity, obligation, respect, innocence, guilt, responsibility, action, consequence, conscience, and so on, we are tempted to question, if not deny, the possibility of redemption. This doubt *may* be resolved by a closer look at Agamben's truly radical assertion with regard to the figure of the *Muselmann*: that is, no categories, attributes, and distinctions *ever* hold for life substance in its inhuman excess. This is the human (non-)subject at its purest.⁶ This also returns us to Agamben's conception of man as the vanishing ground of citizenship and sovereign rights (*Homo Sacer* 128), the indistinction between the coming-into-being of the sovereign subject and the production of bare life, *homo sacer*, and the *Muselmann*, between the birth and death of Man. For Agamben sees the *Muselmann* as "the guard on the threshold of a new ethics of a form of life that begins where dignity ends" (*Remnants* 69). This "new ethics" is the ethics of the undead that survives the destruction of the human, the reduction to the inhuman. Accordingly, we cannot exactly equate the human with the inhuman; rather, the human being, as divided in itself, "exists in the fracture between . . . the inhuman and the human" (134), and always survives beyond itself. This perspective sheds a new light on our understanding of why the *Muselmann* is universally avoided: we are afraid to recognize *ourselves* in his emaciated, disfigured figure (52), in his "human-all-too-humanness" which traverses all inhuman horrors and cannot be "subsumed under and included into some progressivist and continuist conception of the historical evolution of humanity" (Vogt 90). It is the human itself that constitutes the undead, indivisible remainder of symbolization and historicization as well as that of ineradicable inhuman crimes, sins, horrors, and evils.

Before further exploring the claim that Agamben's messianism is grounded in

⁶ LaCapra's critique of Agamben's unawareness of the *Muselmann* as a term of distancing and denigration, and the deficit in his understanding of its political and historical specificities (*History* 158, 168), to a large degree makes sense from the enunciative standpoint in the field of history. Agamben's biopolitical inquiry, however, aims beyond this field. His take on the *Muselmann* is not so much myopic or distorted as all-too-focused. Besides, Agamben's ethics is not, as LaCapra says, "dissociated from law and voided of all forms of normativity"; nor does it "eventuate in an empty utopianism and a form of political romanticism" (180), since life in Agamben—as well as in psychoanalysis—is essentially biopolitical. Biopolitical life always stands as the ground of Agamben's messianism, which is never voided of "all forms of normativity." See the further discussions of this.

a certain conception of the undead, I will briefly look at the “theological turn” in contemporary theory in order to more properly position Agamben’s theological works. In spite of their divergent persuasions, several contemporary theorists have tended to rethink and revive messianism. According to Creston Davis, since the late 1980s the politics of resistance and emancipation have faced a crisis due to the impact of the collapse of communist regimes and the expansion of global capitalism. Such historico-political realities gave rise to a movement in contemporary theory away from capitalist immanentist worldviews toward “a properly transcendent but nevertheless revolutionary, material politics” (4). The theological turn in question is substantially restructuring literature, psychoanalysis, critical theories, and so on, and brings to the fore the questions of agency, temporality, and history. John Milbank explicitly points to the alignment between Christianity and materialism: “[S]ocialist universalism requires Christian universalism, and not, by contrast, postmodern pluralism or new age gnosis” (“Materialism” 403-04). On the other hand, many Western scholars in the theological field turn to Agamben, Alain Badiou, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, Nancy, Jacques Rancière, Žižek, to name only a few, for theories of radical democracy; they may find in Christ—His crucifixion or resurrection—the Event that bridges transcendence and immanence and asserts Christian universality in material conditions (Bond 445; Davis and Riches 23, 28). Religious principles such as metanoia, fidelity, faith, hope, love, and grace, for example, are brought to bear on the political projects that envision real, material transformations. Such researchers as Clayton Crockett, Jeffrey W. Robbins, and Mark Lewis Taylor are part of this emergent discursive formation that aims to radicalize political theology; briefly put, they argue about authentic political and social praxis and transformation.

Messianic hope is scattered as fragments or remnants throughout Agamben’s works which, for some, take on a pessimistic outlook because of their truthful representations of the biopolitical production of bare life. In certain passages, however, Agamben does quite explicitly, and provocatively, point to the political and ethical potentiality of the undead, of the recalcitrant indiscernibility and indivisibility at issue here. Agamben wants to persuade us of the politico-ethical potentiality of passivity and attempts to reconceptualize potentiality or what it means “to be able.” He sees the *Muselmann* as a figure who moves in the zone of absolute indistinction, “a silent form of resistance” that might suddenly attack the guard and threaten the living law (*lex animata*) of the camp (*Homo Sacer* 185). Such silent, passive resistance has its echoes in another Agambenian figure,

Bartleby. As early as in *The Coming Community*, Agamben set out to formulate potentiality as the “not-be” and the “not-think,” that which “has as its object potentiality itself” (36). Here again we have the strange logic of the undead, according to which nothing can be posited or negated. It is also in this context that Agamben associates Bartleby with the image of an angel that is characterized by its “unfathomable potentiality,” and “that writes nothing but its potentiality to not-write” (37). Bartleby’s undead potentiality is formulated in a more sophisticated way in “Bartleby, or on Contingency” in *Potentialities*. Following the Cabalist and mystic tradition, Agamben figures God the Creator as a scribe who writes nothing or becomes the writing tablet himself.⁷ This nothing is not the nihilist nothing but divine, pure potentiality. Here, we witness the short-circuit of potentiality and impotentiality, as well as the “profanation” of a transcendent sovereign deity, wherein “God as an immanent weak force [is] moving throughout all matter” (Dickinson 168).⁸ This “nothing”—or what we may call “creative nothing”—is God himself, or a kind of undead matter from which divine creation emerges.

Agamben says: “The act of creation is God’s descent into an abyss that is simply his own potentiality and impotentiality, his capacity to and capacity not to. . . . Only when we succeed in sinking into this Tartarus and experiencing our own impotentiality do we become capable of creating, truly becoming poets” (*Potentialities* 253). Such potentiality *qua* impotentiality of God the Scribe, that is, the ability to suspend His own possibility, finds its profane analogue in Bartleby. Bartleby’s usual formula “I would prefer not to,” a perfect illustration of the undead Kantian “infinite judgment” as explicated from Žižek’s perspective at the beginning of this essay, opens up a zone of indistinction between affirmation and negation, acceptance and refusal, the preferable and non-preferable (254-55); it calls into question and exceeds the supremacy of the will that destroys the ambiguity of potentiality and stands as “the perpetual illusion of morality” (254). Bartleby’s

⁷ In Herman Melville’s “Bartleby, the Scrivener” (1853), Bartleby is a clerk who does nothing but make handwritten copies of legal (perhaps metaphorically also “sacred”) documents every day, until one day he decides to stop copying anything anymore, saying “I would prefer not to.”

⁸ In the concluding chapter of his *Agamben and Theology*, Colby Dickinson tackles the possibility of bridging the missing link between Agamben and “the Spinoza-Deleuzian nexus,” while here I am more oriented toward Agamben’s messianism in alignment with Marxist-socialist revolutionary thinking and praxis. Actually, Dickinson does not—and neither do I—posit Agamben as a thinker of pure immanence. As Dickinson notes, “As with the force of the messianic which renders the boundary between the transcendent and the immanent completely obscured, a philosophical movement toward a plane of immanence likewise undoes the representations of thought founded upon a dichotomous logic of transcendence/immanence” (172).

repeated use of this formula, as a manifestation of irreducible singularity, ultimately becomes the absolute anaphora “I would prefer not to prefer not to . . .” that spins on itself and undermines all causal and representational relations; it engenders a “luminous spiral of the possible” at the threshold between Being and non-Being, the sensible and the intelligible, word and thing (257, 259). Agamben reads Bartleby, as in *The Coming Community*, as a Messianic figure who comes to “save” (or make possible) the potential to not-be, not-think, and not-write—that is, to save *impotent-iality*—or who announces the trial of impotent possibility that creates an ontology beyond Being and non-Being (*Potentialities* 259, 270). In a word, the messianic according to Agamben is “constitutively weak,” and it is from such weakness that the messianic wields its power (Agamben, *Time* 97).

The equivalence of undead passivity, potentiality *qua* impotentiality and messianism in the case of Bartleby has its sonorous echoes in *The Open*. In the opening chapter of *The Open*, for example, Agamben refers to the miniatures in a Hebrew Bible in the Ambrosian Library in Milan, which for him represent the righteous on the last day as figures with animal heads. We would be justified in reading these “representatives of the remnant of Israel, . . . of the righteous who are still alive at the moment of the Messiah’s coming” (2) as the undead who inhabit the zone of indistinction between humanity and animality. Such undeadness also stands out in Agamben’s explication of Heideggerian “profound boredom,” which takes the animal’s captivation by the environment as a point of departure. What appears to be an ontological enclosure or “poverty in world” takes on a new ethical light. That is, the human subject in a state of boredom first feels left in a state of emptiness in the face of the indifference of all the things around. In the next phase of its boredom, the subject, while being held in suspense or in a state of oblivion to concrete space and time, encounters the refusal of the possibilities of *Dasein*, or the moment when all its own unrealized possibilities are announced to the subject. Ultimately, Agamben reads into this profound boredom, which captivates the subject in a state of indistinction, in what Agamben calls “a potential-not-to, . . . an impotentiality,” that is, an “originary possibilitization” that makes possibilities possible without pointing to any concrete possibilities (67).

Now we may see that Agamben’s messianism, be it figured in *homo sacer*, Bartleby, or Christ, passes beyond the domain of any specific religion. Profusely citing Judaism, Christianity, and Shiite Islam in *The Time That Remains*, Agamben hollows out the specific religious contents of the messianic so as to preserve the latter’s potentiality *qua* impotentiality. With all the above discussions of potentiality in mind, we will have no difficulty in understanding Agamben’s messianic reading

of St. Paul's letters in *The Time That Remains*. Pauline texts for Agamben aim to resolve all problems regarding what it means to live in the Messiah, what the messianic life is and what the structure of messianic time is. Once again, it is the undead logic of the remnant that persists throughout *The Time That Remains*. First of all, messianic time, the contracted "time that remains" (between Christ's resurrection and the apocalyptic completion to come), designates neither secular, chronological time nor eternal time (or the end of time), but a singular interruption of both. It introduces a remainder into, but exceeds the division between, the two times. It does not come as a transcendental absolute from outside but as "a time within time" (67), an Event that transforms the chronological time from within and makes it out of joint with itself: hence, making "as not" (*hōs mē*) possible (68). That is to say, the messianic seizure of time comes neither as a golden age nor as a completion of totality; it breaks with any such conceptions of time as homogeneous time, the process of degeneration, cyclical time, and dialectical and directional progress (Roberts 77-78): simply put, it is both non-teleological and non-progressive. The messianic converts the "now-time" into a moment, an opening for our actions (de la Durantaye 302), or "an *immanent transcendence*" signaling that "the future is 'already here,' insofar as the revolutionary event can break through at 'any time'" (Roberts 77; emphasis in original).⁹ In fact, near the end of *Remnants of Auschwitz*, Agamben, in a Benjaminian anti-teleological fashion,

⁹ Regarding the exigency of the now-time, we are unlikely to bypass its Benjaminian undertones, though it is a topic more appropriate to another project than my current one:

In reality, there is not a moment that would not carry with it *its* revolutionary chance—provided only that it is defined in a specific way, namely as the chance for a completely new resolution of a completely new problem. For the revolutionary thinker, the peculiar revolutionary chance offered by every historical moment gets its warrant from the political situation. But it is equally grounded, for this thinker, in the right of entry which the historical moment enjoys vis-à-vis a quite distinct chamber of the past, one which up to that point has been closed and locked. (Benjamin 402; emphasis in original)

The messianic, revolutionary intervention in the now-time, for Benjamin, coincides with entering into the past and redeeming the repressed memories of the past of the oppressed and defeated. On top of this, the dialectical image unexpectedly "flashes up in a moment of danger" (Benjamin 391) or occurs in the moment of a standstill like "ball lightning that runs across the whole horizon of the past" (403). These speculations are perfectly justified by Agamben's recurrent invocations of Benjamin in *The Time That Remains*, particularly regarding the exigency to remain faithful to the unforgettable (39-42), and his discussion of the gaze that fulfills and puts an end to the past in the freezing moment of the now-time in *Potentialities* (153). For both Benjamin and Agamben, in a word, the undead past has a claim on the weak messianic power at issue.

already takes this messianic time as a remnant, as a time that remains:

[At the center of historical processes] lies an irreducible disjunction in which each term, stepping forth in the place of a remnant, can bear witness. What is truly historical is not what redeems time in the direction of the future or even the past; it is, rather, what fulfills time in the excess of a medium. The messianic Kingdom is neither the future (millennium) nor the past (the golden age): it is, instead, a *remaining time*. (159; emphasis in original)

This time as a remnant in excess of, “as not,” itself also pertains to the ontological change in the subject. For Agamben, Christ’s resurrection, a revolutionary event as Paul preaches, revokes a Christian citizen’s vocation (or “calling”) by way of “crucifying” it. This crucified and revoked vocation does not have any positive content; it has, in the logic of potentiality, vocation as its object. In a similar vein, the messianic vocation forces the subject to live “as not” (*hōs mē*) itself, to call into question every world-condition by way of adhering to it: the messianic vocation is, then, “the revocation of every vocation” (Agamben, *Time* 23). The subject who lives in messianic time is thus ontologically dislocated and becomes a remnant in excess of itself and out of joint with itself (41, 52-53), out of joint with any socially constructed identity and reality, with linear time and “the history of progress.” As testified by his own passage from regal grandeur to creaturely insignificance, Paul’s messianic vocation invokes a sense of power from weakness, a “God without sovereignty,”¹⁰ who stands in solidarity with the poor

¹⁰ “God without sovereignty” is an essential part of Caputo’s postmetaphysical, deconstructive theology that arises in the wake of the 1960s’ “death of God” theology (Robbins, *Radical* 174-75). The death of God theology, as voiced by Thomas J. J. Altizer, William Hamilton, and Gabriel Vahanian, seeks to sever theology from its traditional moral-metaphysical and ontotheological bearings. As Robbins explains, “This radical death of God theology . . . represents a critical and prophetic voice in the midst of a culture and faith in crisis, one that was moving away from the old religious certainties and assurances” (“Introduction” 9). It helped to lay the foundation for postmodernist critique in general and, by incorporating deconstructive philosophy, gave rise to postmodern theology (Robbins, *Radical* 7). Whether this death of God theology and the subsequent various radical theologies are sufficiently political or authentically radical, as Robbins wonders, remains a debatable topic beyond the scope of this paper. More relevant to the concerns of this paper is the fact that Caputo, in his seminal *Weakness of God: A Theology of Event*, aligns his theology of event or “theology without theology” with Benjamin’s “weak messianic force” as well as Derrida’s “religion without religion” (7), which fits Agamben’s persistent efforts to free religious faith of its positivist contents and, hence, preserve its potentiality and weak messianic power. Caputo’s theology of event, as an offspring of deconstructive “spectral hermeneutics,” is

and the outcast (Robbins, *Radical* 7, 175-76) rather than wielding violent political power to cast them out. The messianic community and political agency thus formed are those of neither the majority nor the minority; rather, they are closer to the Marxian proletariat and Rancière's "non-parts" (Agamben, *Time* 57-58), those who remain uncoun- ted by the sovereign power and who cannot be reduced to any class, communitarian affiliation or cultural intelligibility. Thus we see the intersection of the Christian and Marxist revolutionary tradition in Agamben,¹¹ though his alignment with either of these is far from self-evident.

On the other hand, this interruption or seizure of time and this messianic calling suggest a kind of inoperativity (*katargeō*), one which deactivates the subject

congenial to Agamben's theology in the way that it stresses the ghostly look, potentiality, and irreducible possibility of the event, which constantly presses for expression but resists being contracted into any finite form, instantiation or order (*Death* 50-51, 55). The task of a theology like Caputo's, according to Robbins, is not to "restore transcendence over against the immanent logic of secular reason" but to follow the way of the Christ who is "thrust inextricably into this world" (*Radical* 175). But Agamben's congeniality to Caputo's and other versions of negative theology stops at his biopolitical views of the realm of the undead, the zone of indistinction between life and death.

¹¹ For more on this, see Roberts. Roberts's work offers a comparative reading of Agamben, Badiou, and Žižek within the dialectical tradition in which, according to him, Christianity and Marxism easily fit: in spite of their divergence, all three theorists hold on to the universalism of the break and the messianic destruction of history as progress and eternal recurrence; they are all concerned about how the past is redeemed and recognized in the present in order to be wakeful to the future. Roberts's reading, nevertheless, does not particularly address the undead, which, as this essay argues, is the necessary ground of the theological, emancipatory project that does not lose sight of biopolitical conditions. Put in more explicit terms, the undead deactivates, disrupts, and remains in excess of the process of symbolization and historicization; this first and foremost must not be foreclosed in our authentic understanding of the radical potentiality of the Christian and Marxist dialectical tradition. For example, in spite of his "fighting, militant universalism," which appears to be diametrically opposed to the Agambenian weak messianism, Žižek draws on a variety of sources, such as Schelling, Lacan, and quantum physics, to formulate a dialectical materialism grounded in the logic of "non-all," the inherent gap, and indivisible remainder: that is, the logic of the undead. Obviously, Žižek orients the undead to more downright Marxist-inflected conceptions of reality, identification, subjectivity, and class struggle. As Žižek straightforwardly puts in "The Spectre of Ideology," class struggle "designates the very antagonism that prevents the objective (social) reality from constituting itself as a self-enclosed whole" (74). Such non-all undeadness pertains to the ontogenetic kernel of the subject: the subject emerges out of but is never reducible to the material Real. The tendency to immaterialization, spiritualization or spectralization gaps and undeadens the material Real *from within* and makes it something in excess of, out of joint with itself—in other words, it doubles the condition of the subject's freedom (Johnston 82-83). Thus I am arguing that any comparative or differential reading of Agamben, Žižek or any other in alignment with the so-called dialectical tradition can fruitfully take the undead as their shared ground but, at the same time, as that which resists or remains in excess of any imposed unity.

by making it inoperative rather than annihilating it (Agamben, *Time* 43). Agamben's task, in other words, is "how to conceive a law beyond law rather than a law without law" (Crockett 118). He sees in Paul's use of *aphōrismenos* (separation or division) a presupposition of the law or a need to grasp the complex structure of the law in order to be separated from it, to make it other than itself or, as indicated by Thanos Zartaloudis when addressing Agamben's act of profanation, "to eliminate the negative division of law and make it 'coincide with social praxis'" (281).¹² Here, once again, we should not fail to grasp the logic of the remnant at work. In Agamben's own words: "[M]essianic division introduces a remnant into the law's overall division of the people, and Jews and non-Jews are constitutively 'not all'" (Agamben, *Time* 50); it is "an operation that divides the divisions of the law themselves and renders them inoperative, without ever reaching any final ground" (52). This operation opens up an indestructible, resurrectional realm of radical universality beyond the normative force of the law, rather than one without the law as such, and ultimately brings about the "the fulfillment and the complete consummation of the Law" (Agamben, *Homo Sacer* 56). As Eleanor Kaufman explains, "[T]he very act of wanting to overturn the law . . . is symptomatic of an inability to escape the thought structures of the law and the state" (43). The messianic political subject thus formed acts in a kind of quietest disinterestedness in the outcome of actions (Griffiths 190-91), or a kind of undead, Bartlebyan potentiality to not-be, not-think, and not-write, or a finding of power in weakness, a departing from the supremacy of will.

If God has always been seen from the traditional Western theological perspective as potentiality *par excellence* actualized in His act of creation, Agamben's messianism thinks "impotentiality as the limit of potentiality" and aims not so much at the creation of a new world as at decreation (as the limit of creation): this, and nothing more, is exactly what Crockett names as the task for today's theology (57). However, the non-apocalyptic and constitutively ambiguous messianism at which Agamben arrives through the undead figures of *homo sacer*, the *Muselmann*, and Bartleby has received a variety of critical responses. This uneven reception could be attributed to Agamben's figural thinking. Figures

¹² Besides, through the remnant as I am discussing here, one may understand the messianic deactivation or profanation of the law, as Dickinson suggests, in linkage with children's play. As an image recurring in Agamben's works such as *State of Exception*, *Infancy and History*, and *Profanations*, children play with objects not in the way that adults use them, and then discard them when they are no longer needed, just as in messianic time when humanity can profane, play with, and free the law from value, humanity, and sacredness, as well as from its binding with the violence of sovereign power (Agamben, *Profanations* 76; Dickinson 84-85).

embody for him the truth about our bare life in the world of modern biopolitics, where “we are all virtually *homines sacri*” (*Homo Sacer* 115)—for instance, Agamben has designated the *Muselmann* as the true witness and his marginalization and exclusion in the camp as paradigm of modern politics. Many critics, however, see Agambenian figures as rhetorical devices employed to wake readers up to the dire biopolitical conditions around them.¹³ Other critics, like Leland de la Durantaye, may caution us against exaggerating the scope of *homo sacer* and see this as “a figure from the remote past who brings into focus a disturbing element in our political present—and points toward a possible future” (211). These critical responses are mostly enunciated in the name of terminological exactness and historiographic vigor. However divergent, they either refuse to go to the limit and see that boundaries or oppositions, including the one between singularity and universality, no longer hold in the undead Agambenian threshold figures, or they leave unexplained the concept of messianic political potentiality, agency, and community.

The point is that Agamben is always aiming at that which remains in excess of historical specificities, for his theological project takes biopolitics as the ontological dimension of human existence. Thus for Agamben, if any redemption is possible, it will arise from that which *undeadens* us, rather than in any ahistorical, apolitical utopia. Critics like Patrick O’Connor may take Agamben’s philosophical output as a repetition of traditional metaphysical constructs of a redeemed life “impervious to transformation and temporality” (336, 348), a happy life “over which sovereignty and right no longer have any hold” (Agamben, *Homo Sacer* 115). However, I believe we may see the form of life Agamben is speaking of as being never identical with the human-all-too-human subject, or any essence in the metaphysical sense or practical goal to be actualized, but rather as a potentiality *qua* impotentiality in excess of violent sovereign power and biopolitical domination. The undead from the Agambenian perspective is life as pure potentiality, on the threshold, out of joint with itself and thus *not as* biopolitical life, *not as* the “immanent reign of sovereignty” or any sort of “idyllic life.” Such pure potentiality belongs to neither animality nor human rationality, nor does it imply the Nietzschean overman’s surmounting of humanity (Dickinson 118-19). It is the kernel of redemption, freedom, and justice that remains in excess of and in this way *de-limits* linguistic representations, logical reasoning, metaphysical and onto-theological presuppositions, sovereign power, identitarian markers, and all historical, biopolitical determinations.

¹³ See, for instance, LaCapra, “Approaching.”

A weak messianic angel like Bartleby points out to us the “limit of limits of all possible politics” (Beverugen and Dunne 181). From what I see as the Agambenian perspective, what appears to be a quietist withdrawal and resistance—resignation or even a form of regression¹⁴—in effect radically clears the ground for the political and is thus a form of that passive aggression which in Žižek’s view we urgently need today.¹⁵ For this is a time when higher Causes have lost their *raison d’être*, politics has collapsed into life itself through so-called biologico-scientific principles, and life has become an immanent essence subject to biopolitical administration; this is a time when so many ethical imperatives of the care of self (body, health, sex, happiness . . .) have turned out to be the other side of biopolitical domination, when the world is being seen and measured from the perspective of risk and risk calculus, when liberal democracy engenders a continuous or even permanent state of emergency and legalizes its right to resort to the extra-legal (Milbank, “Paul” 129); this is a time when, in sum, everything is a depoliticizing move that works to prevent the true Event from happening.

¹⁴ Of course, “regression” in a unique, non-commonsensual sense. Dickinson’s *Agamben and Theology* offers an insightful genealogical reading of Agamben’s philosophico-theological work as a whole through the perspective of regression. Compared with a variety of thinkers and writers such as Freud, Benjamin, Beckett, who are preoccupied with infancy, trauma, ruins, and so on, Agamben through the act of regression uncovers the irreducible facticity and singularity of *Dasein*, of the prelinguistic or prerepresentational subject, of the whatever-form of life. For Dickinson, Agamben “is actively seeking to undo the false dichotomies of all representations, such as that between the particular and the universal, or between historiography and history, which are reproduced or staged, so to speak, by the conscious/unconscious division itself” (109). This gesture of regression, in the context of this essay’s arguments, amounts to the messianic division of divisions, as discussed above, and introduces a remnant into, and hence undoes, the Western representational, metaphysical, and onto-theological architecture.

¹⁵ Armin Beverugen and Stephen Dunne have offered a differential reading of Bartleby via a variety of contemporary theorists including Hardt and Negri, Deleuze, Žižek, and Agamben. For Beverugen and Dunne, Agamben’s “whatever Bartleby” is a figure of pure potentiality—a reading congenial to mine—while Žižek overpoliticizes Bartleby as the paradigmatic figure of “interpassivity,” that is, a subtraction from contemporary forms of pseudo-resistance (Beverugen and Dunne 175; Žižek, “Notes” 393). However, the logic of the undead as I formulate it in this essay also applies to the figure of Neighbor-Thing, as exemplified by Kafka’s Odradek as well as Melville’s Bartleby, which Žižek brings together with the Agambenian *homo sacer* and *Muselmann* in his works such as “Neighbor and Monsters” and *The Parallax View* (Chapters 2 and 6). At this point, we may venture to claim that Agamben’s formulation of the Pauline *hōs mē* and *katargeō*, that is, weak messianism as discussed above, resonates forcefully with the purely structural, formal minimal difference that Žižek reads into Bartleby’s gesture: that is, “what remains of the supplement to the Law when its place is emptied of all its obscene superego content” (*Parallax View* 382). This amounts to, again, the ground-clearing gesture at issue here, “a new space outside the hegemonic position and its negation” (Žižek, “Notes” 393; emphasis in original), or the way to undo the vicious circle of the Law and its transgression.

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