

Giorgio Agamben

The Signature of All Things: On Method.

Trans. Luca D'Isanto with Kevin Atell.

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Recently, upon receiving this slim volume by Giorgio Agamben, I remarked to a colleague that I was concerned that Agamben was headed the way of many peak-of-career thinkers, whose work degenerates into thin monographs on scholarly minutiae. I could not have been more wrong. The three 'meditations' comprising *The Signature of All Things* are easily among the lucid and brilliantly compelling pieces by Agamben I have read. Though loosely conceived as improvisations on a series of Foucauldian figures (namely the paradigm, the signature and archaeology), they form a dense and incisive account of Agamben's highly individual methodology.

The first essay is a philologically complex piece entitled 'What is a Paradigm?' In it, Agamben provides a whirlwind archaeological tour of various deployments of the concept of paradigm, moving from Kuhn and Foucault back through Plato and Aristotle with critical asides on Kant, Goethe and others (most notably Aby Warburg and Victor Goldschmidt). According to Agamben (31), the paradigm is comprised of six features:

- 1) It is analogical rather than deductive or inductive, and moves from singularity to singularity, erasing the dualism of the general and the particular.
- 2) Because of 1, dichotomous logic is supplanted by an analogical model.
- 3) By the same gesture, the paradigm belongs to the group and is suspended from it as a case: exemplarity cannot be separated from singularity.
- 4) The group is immanent in rather than presupposed by the paradigms.
- 5) There is no origin in the paradigm. Rather, every phenomenon is the origin.
- 6) The paradigm's historicity is an intersection of diachrony and synchrony.

Agamben suggests that Wallace Stevens best encapsulates all these in the following lines from 'Description Without Place':

It is possible that to seem—it is to be
And the sun is something seeming and it is.

The sun is an example. What it seems

It is and in such seeming all things are. (32)

The conceptual shortcut represented in this passage is a rather poignant example of what someone like Michel Serres would see as the mathematical ‘rapidity’ of poetic language.

The second and most substantive essay, ‘Theory of Signatures’, is also the most difficult of the three pieces. The shift from paradigm to signature is subtle but traceable:

Since language is the archetype of the signature, the signatory art par excellence, we are obligated to understand this similarity not as something physical, but according to an analogical and immaterial model. Language, then, which preserves the archive of immaterial similarities, is also the reliquary of signatures. (36)

What of the relationship between signatures and signs? Agamben observes that ‘[s]ignatures, which according to the theory of signs, should appear as signifiers, always already slide into the position of the signified, so that *signum* and *signatum* exchange role and seem to enter into a zone of undecidability’ (37). This sliding effect is crucial to alchemical, astrological and religious equivalences. Here, an ontological connection is established not just in the figure, but in the effect: resemblances have potencies. But these sympathies are not limited to the realms of the magical or the sacramental. The signature also establishes the efficacy of the figure in economics (through ‘coinage’ or denomination), language (in the move from acknowledged sign to understood discourse), and ontology itself (from unity to attribution and determination). In all these cases, it is the signature that functions as archaeological trace or clue: ‘the clue represents the exemplary case that puts an *insignificant* [my emphasis] or nondescript object in effective relation to an event (...a crime...a traumatic event) or to subjects (the victim, the murder, the author of a painting)’ (70). Indeed, for Agamben, ‘[a]ll research in the human sciences...necessarily has to do with signatures’ (76). Inquiry involves the identification of problems and the choice of appropriate concepts, ‘which entail signatures, without which they remain inert and unproductive’. This is a crucial point as it asserts the ‘primacy of the signature over the sign’ (78) in which the signature is at zero degree of signification. While the signature has no content in and of itself, the sign cannot efficaciously exist in its absence. The human sciences must accordingly seek ‘in every event the signature that characterizes it and specifies it and in every signature the event and the sign which carry and condition it’ (79-80).

The book’s final essay deals with philosophical archaeology, a concept that receives its first signature under Kant (*philosophische Archäologie*). For Kant, this philosophical history of philosophy is paradoxically a ‘history of the thing which has not yet happened’ (81), as it is a priori and lacks a true *archē*. Because philosophy has not yet been given, archaeology is ‘a science of ruins, a “ruinology” whose object, though not constituting a transcendental principle in the proper sense, can never be truly given as an

empirical whole' (82). While a rift is seemingly posited here between the historical and the archaeological, it is more a matter, as Foucault suggests, of exorcising 'the chimera of the origin' (84). One cannot assume an originary, primordial source for any event or subject, and the 'a priori, though conditioning historical experience is itself inscribed within a determinate historical constellation' (94). The indeterminacy of the prehistorical (Overbeck) or ultra-historical (Dumézil) is central to apprehending the repercussions of this exorcism: 'just as a chemical compound has specific properties that cannot be reduced to the sum of its elements, what stands prior to the historical division is not necessarily the sum of the characteristics defining its fragments' (90).

Given the *aporia* of this historical a priori, the problem of accessing the historical emerges. Agamben here deftly combines Elanzo Melandri's concept of archaeological regression with Walter Benjamin's angel of history, to argue that the present is the goal of historical inquiry, and that that present 'might be given in the form of a constitutive inaccessibility' (100). What would the contention 'that a history can be grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence' (101) mean? Functioning as a sort of signature, the prehistorical is unexperienced, and that it is the 'unexperienced, rather than just the experienced that gives shape and consistency to the fabric of psychic personality and historical tradition and ensures their continuity and consistency' (101). The un-lived past is, then, 'contemporary with the present, exhibiting itself as a "source"' (103). Correspondingly,

[C]ontemporaneity, insofar as it entails the experience of an un-lived and the memory of a forgetting is rare and difficult; for this reason, archaeology, going back to the side of memory and forgetting, constitutes the only path of access to the present. (103)

The future anterior disinterred by archaeology is 'the past that *will have been* when the archaeologist's gesture *has cleared away* the ghosts of the unconscious and the tight-knit fabric of tradition which block access to history' (107). While that which comes before conditions the possibility of that which comes after, that which follows (the event, the signature) renders those conditions comprehensible.

In writing this book Agamben has created the single best access point to his own method. This is a rich, tightly woven text which offers an efficacious and convincing paradigm of reading the historical and of reading historically. Moreover, in its approach to the conditioning tensions between 'an archi-past and the present' (110), it provides an excellent framing of the problem of contemporaneity. There are interesting echoes here with the recent thought of both Alain Badiou and Quentin Meillassoux, an interpretation which would no doubt find sympathetic resonance in the work of Mehdi Belhaj Kacem (*Événement et Répétition* and *L'esprit du Nihilisme: Une Ontologique de l'Histoire*). It is not without flaws, of course. Agamben's digressions, while always intriguing, do not always link seamlessly or even logically with the broader flow of his argument. While he

displays his habitually intimidating erudition here, his bibliographically sparse style also opens itself to the same criticisms of historical ‘cherry-picking’ that have been leveled at Foucault. There are also some minor editorial flaws, typographical errors, and an index which is thin at best and frequently inaccurate. Nitpicking aside, *The Signature of All Things* is a work of the highest intellectual caliber.

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