

**Remnants of the World:  
Agamben and Messianic Affect<sup>1</sup>**

Robert C. Thomas

Published in *Crossings, Special Issue: The Uses of Religion*, (No.5/6, 2002/2003):  
269 - 295

The following is based on the experience, detailed study, and meditation on the teaching of Giorgio Agamben's *Il tempo che resta (The Time that is Left)*.<sup>2</sup> As such, it bears an intimate relation to Agamben's work and the project of *Homo Sacer* as a whole. *Il tempo che resta* was written and taught in the United States at Northwestern and UC Berkeley, between the publication in Italian of volume three of *Homo Sacer (Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive)* and *L'aperto: L'uomo e l'animale (The Open: Man and Animal)*.<sup>3</sup> As such, it occupies an instructive place in Agamben's work. It is both outside the work of *Homo Sacer*, properly speaking, insofar as it does not comprise one of its projected volumes, and yet remains thoroughly bound-up with its project, particularly regarding the development of the concept of the exception in relation to contemporary politics, a politics that Agamben has characterized as one of radical *failure*. Agamben's work is concerned with what has been *excluded* from our thought of a radical, non-dialectical politics of the past 30 years: the experience and reality of the exception and all of which this entails—for politics, for thought, for life. The project of rethinking the political in the context of the exception is, for Agamben, one that takes place *before* we are used to locating it; that is, *before* we are accustomed to thinking and doing the political. This is because the exception concerns what he calls a "*prior movement*."<sup>4</sup> We need to think about this *prior movement* and how it effects what we take for thought (or what Deleuze would call our "image of thought").<sup>5</sup> This essay is concerned, in large part, with the radical contours of this *prior movement* and what it might mean not only for the development of the thought of the exception, but also for *life* as the basis for thought, politics, and subjectivity today. This last question concerns my effort, enriched immeasurably by the work of our seminar, to rethink *affect* (in Deleuze's sense of that term)<sup>6</sup> and exteriority in light of the exception. The following meditation on and operative use of the potential—Agamben might say "sweetness"—of the concept of the exception follows two inter-related lines of inquiry. The first concerns "the eternal return" as an abyssal theory of the world that steps over (or ignores) the *prior movement* (and, thus, the problem) of the exception. The second

concerns my usage of Agamben's research on "weakness" in Paul and Benjamin as a basis for rethinking affect as a radical non-encounter; a *failed* encounter that *precedes* every encounter in the exception. This work is speculative in nature. Every aspect of its thought, despite its inseparability from *a* life, is bound-up with Agamben's work and the project of *Homo Sacer* as a whole. The formulations that I present here would be impossible to develop outside that work and, in particular, the seminar on *Il tempo che resta*. In this respect, there is a unique convergence (a "secret agreement") between Agamben's theoretical formulations and the existential conditions of my life (particularly over the past ten years). The reading of Agamben's work that I present here, therefore, fulfills itself in the radical failure of *a* life lived in the state of exception that has become the norm; that is, *a* life lived in relation to that outside which is broken.

### *Remnants of the World*

What we most lack is a belief in the world, we've quite lost the  
world, it's been taken from us.

—Gilles Deleuze

*The world has already ended, we just don't know it yet.* What can this statement mean? By stating this, I do not mean that the earth, universe, whatever we want to call "everything that exists (Spinoza's "God"?) or even immanence itself has radically and literally come to an end, nor do I mean that we are on the verge of imminent apocalypse. What I do mean by this statement, what I hope to capture with this formulation, is the *affect* (or subjective experience)<sup>7</sup> of a life lived in a "state of exception" that has become the norm. In this sense, it is meant to point to the proliferation of the radical separation accomplished in the exception. The "taking of the outside"<sup>8</sup> accomplished in the exception is a radical separation of our bodies from themselves, from immanence—the

outside, the “world”—as a non-essential, exterior foundation for politics, thought, and subjectivity. In this sense, this statement is meant to point to the despair of a life lived in separation from itself—from, even, its own encounters, relations, and exposures. Life in the state of exception is that which everywhere remains profoundly separated from itself. Life divided from life. A life that is perpetually emptied out, reduced to the brutal fact of mere survival (*naked life*)—the biopolitical production of life as mere survival.<sup>9</sup>

What *remains* of the world in the exception? Insofar as the time of and for the world (the outside) has grown short—insofar as the post-war era is marked by a state of perpetual suspension, a radical deferral and delay of the potential of subjectivity, thought, and politics—we can read this situation as the *beginning* of the end of time; of and for the political, of and for thought, of and for life. Within the closure of the outside that marks the exception, the time for any potential politics has grown short. There is little time left for the political—that is, before any hope of a politics becomes permanently suspended. Time is running out. The time that is left, the time that remains for life, for politics, for thought, has become contracted. This is the problem of messianic time. According to Agamben, Benjamin was the first to grasp the link between the state of exception and the messianic event in Jewish mysticism; that is, between the status of the law in the “state of exception” and the confrontation with the law marked by the arrival of the Messiah. The arrival of the Messiah does not, as is commonly thought, mark the end of time. It is not, as it has been assumed in many interpretations of Benjamin’s “Theses,” the time of the apocalypse, or the Last Days, but rather a time marked by the suspension of the Law.<sup>10</sup> With the arrival of the Messiah, “the hidden foundation of the law [as *being in force without significance*] comes to light, and the law itself enters into a state of perpetual

suspension.”<sup>11</sup> The arrival of the Messiah inaugurates a radical suspension of the Law. Messianism is, according to Agamben, “a theory of the state of exception—except for the fact that in Messianism there is no authority in force to proclaim the state of exception; instead, there is the Messiah to subvert its power.”<sup>12</sup> In the Jewish tradition, this is the time of the messianic event. Between the time of the creation, which includes the time of the end of the world, and the time *after* the end of the world, there is the time of the Messiah.<sup>13</sup> This time is a *remnant*—it is the (non-relational) time that remains in the disjunction between two traditional concepts of time (historical or chronological time, and a “future” time *after* the end of the world).<sup>14</sup> Messianic time, then, is an “immanent time. A time *within* time.”<sup>15</sup>

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 (the millennium) nor the past (the golden age): it is, instead, *a remaining time*.<sup>16</sup>

“Messianism,” as Agamben makes clear, “is not the end of time, but the time of the end.”<sup>17</sup> It is *the time that is left*.

What can it mean, Agamben asks throughout *Il tempo che resta*, to think this *remnant* of time? Following Agamben, I would like to ask how this contraction of time that marks our present relates to our ability to think and experience something called the world? What can it mean to think the world as that which has already ended, without our being able to say why or, even *that* we fully know that this event has happened? It is in

this image of the end of the world, I think, that the “now of recognizability <*Jetzt der Erkennbarkeit*>”<sup>18</sup> of the potential of the world (the outside) and its radical destruction and separation in the exception comes to us. How can we think—when thought itself, according to Deleuze, is based on an exteriority without reserve—in a situation that implies and enforces a radical separation from experience, one that would “take” any, potentially every, encounter with the outside? How, in the “taking of the outside” of the exception, is radical exteriority possible? And how, following Deleuze’s singular individuation, can thought be based on our unique experiences, encounters and relations—all of which “happen” in a space of radical exteriority, in the world— when it is precisely the “taking” of this that is accomplished in the exception? All of this is to ask, how can we think exposure in the exception?<sup>19</sup>

I am employing the term “world” here in the sense that Nietzsche uses it in his thought of the eternal return which, among much else, is also a theory of the world.<sup>20</sup> For Nietzsche, the “world” is the abyss in which subjectivity and exteriority coincide in the exact same moment—a moment that is grasped, or should we say expressed and performed, in the ethical stance of the return: the willing of the eternal return of all that exists (the abyss), and the affirmation of chance and chaos. Deleuze’s statement regarding the loss of the “world” cited above refers, I think, to this conception of the world. In the speculations that follow, I want to delimit my inquiry to this aspect of the return—as an abyssal theory of the world in which subjectivity and exteriority coincide in the same moment (within the abyss). Such delimitation allows us to simultaneously blur the distinction between the ethical and epistemological thought of the return without, at

the same time, completely abandoning every aspect of the latter (which seems both unnecessary and undesirable).

In this delimited sense, my statement about the end of the world means two things. In the first place, it means the loss of the concept of an abyssal encounter with the world (as an existential-ontological and epistemological foundation) contained explicitly in Nietzsche's "eternal return." In other words, the "end of the world" as the experience of the exception means the end of the eternal return, of any truly abyssal thought as the basis for thinking exteriority and subjectivity (I will explain this in more detail below).<sup>21</sup> Secondly, my statement is a play on the idea that without such a thought (which has influenced much, if not all, post-war thought on exteriority), we cannot think; it is the end of the world for thought, politics, and subjectivity. In other words, this statement points to the reaction to the thought of the exception and the problems it exposes, the unnecessary fear, I think, with which it has been met by theorists of radical exteriority.

The separation from the outside (which is also, to say, from our "selves") accomplished in the exception means that our ability to have a relation to the world, to make use of its potential—for thought, for life, for politics—has become permanently "policed" in the post-war era. The exception constitutes what Agamben calls a "prior movement"<sup>22</sup> not only for our lives, but also for any corresponding theory of exposure, affect, and "becoming."<sup>23</sup> The exception, in other words, may *precede* our ways of thinking about both subjectivity and exteriority. What can it mean to say that the world and our relation to it have become suspended? Any effort to affirm our lives today as exposure and vulnerability—as the encounter of an abyssal body with an abyssal world—runs up against this limit of a "world" that, defined in this sense, has effectively ended.

Every abyssal encounter with the world, with the very potential of the outside, is capable of being taken in the exception; it is in this sense that the “world” has become suspended. What can we do when the world itself is now what Gershom Scholem called “*being in force without significance*”?<sup>24</sup> As Agamben writes in *Potentialities*, “The entire planet has become the exception that the law must contain in its ban.”<sup>25</sup> In other words, we can no longer think the political (and, quite possibly, thought itself) as a (non-relational) relation to the world.<sup>26</sup> It appears that Carl Schmitt was well aware of this relation. According to Samuel Weber, in *The Nomos of the World* Schmitt seeks to recover the primordial and lost meaning of the word *nomos* “as a partitioning [partition] and a distribution [repartition]—of space, but most of all of the earth—which Schmitt calls a *Landnahme*, or, literally, ‘seizing of the earth.’”<sup>27</sup>

How can we suspend this force? How can we continue to believe, if not in a world that we have lost (the return), then in the potentiality of politics, subjectivity, and thought and that radical exteriority that subtends them? Once again, Agamben’s work on Messianism in Paul and Benjamin contains the elements for a remarkable response. I was haunted by a statement that Agamben made in our seminar: that ours is the era of the eternal return.<sup>28</sup> (As I understand Agamben, this statement refers to the self-image of our theoretical and pragmatic present; that we live in an age that is predicated, in part, on a radical separation from what he calls “bearing witness” and what Benjamin calls “history”.) What can this statement possibly mean? How can the present era, which corresponds to a global state of exception, be considered the age of the eternal return? This provocative statement set in motion a speculative study on my part; a re-examination of Agamben’s published work on the exception in light of this statement, the

work of *Il tempo che resta*, and the question of affect in the exception.<sup>29</sup> What I found as a result of this (incomplete and speculative) inquiry or, rather, the unique response to the questions enumerated above that emerged out of these speculations, has its trajectory in a thought that moves between Agamben's work on subjectivity in Foucault, "weakness" in Paul and Benjamin, the status of "bearing witness" in relation to language and poetry (or, rather, "non-language" and "non-poetry"), the brief statements about the eternal return that appear in a discussion of Primo Levi and the camps in *Remnants of Auschwitz*, and the unique experiences of my own life at the end of the 20th century.

In the "Theses on the Philosophy of History," Benjamin makes a distinction between the "virtual" state of exception and the "real" state of exception.<sup>30</sup> This distinction is made immanently; that is, within the text itself. Benjamin never explicitly states, much less explains, what he means by this distinction. We only know of it, in fact, because of the unique usage he makes of quotation marks. When Benjamin is referring to a "virtual" state of exception, he places the phrase "state of emergency" in quotation marks. When he writes in the eighth thesis of the production of a *real* state of emergency, the quotation marks are dropped. Keeping in mind that Benjamin died before he could complete the work that the "Theses" point to or, even publish the thought contained within them in a public form, it seems especially important for us to consider this distinction and the problem that it opens up for us—as Agamben proposes, with an appropriately Messianic gesture, to bring this unrealized or unfulfilled thought to completion.

Benjamin's distinction (which has nothing to do with the virtual and the actual in the work of Deleuze and Guattari) is crucial to the question of the *failure* of the



political.<sup>31</sup> In order for the political to happen, even to begin, for Benjamin, the virtual “state of emergency”—and with it, the “taking of the outside”—must be suspended. How can we suspend the force of the exception with regard to subjectivity (that is, forms of life, new ways of thinking and living)? Agamben, following Foucault, provides an extraordinary and provocative response to this question. Foucault presents a “split” or two-part notion of subjectivity: it has both the capacity to be produced (subjectivation, subjection, the subject) and to produce (auto-production, resistance, creation, desubjectivation).<sup>32</sup> Like Benjamin, Foucault was unable to complete this work before the time of his death. Picking-up this unfinished work—in the unique convergence between Benjamin’s final work and the final work of Foucault—Agamben argues that if subjectivation and desubjectivation “perfectly coincide” (i.e. occur, happen, in the exact same moment), then it is always possible for the first (subjectivation, the subject) to take the latter (desubjectivation) in the form of the exception.<sup>33</sup> In other words, the exception obliges us to find a way for desubjectivation to “own” or remain within itself (if, even, for a moment) without being taken in the exception (and this has nothing to do with a teleological movement, but an immanent transformation and accomplishment of potentiality itself). How can desubjectivation own its own potentiality as such? How can it accomplish or fulfill *even a part of* its potential? Which is to ask, how can the (virtual) potentiality of desubjectivation—which, in the global state of exception, is now everywhere, but only as unfulfilled potential—become, in even a small way, *real* (how can it begin to own itself)?

As Agamben noted in the seminar on *Il tempo che resta*, in all of the important work that has been done since May ’68, the question of the movement from the virtual to

the real—and, correspondingly, of how desubjectivation can accomplish or fulfill a part of its potential—has not even been posed.<sup>34</sup> Without exception, virtually all of our ways of conceiving of desubjectivation and of radical exteriority have been based on an abyssal encounter with the world. This is an extraordinary observation, particularly with regard to our theories of radical exteriority.<sup>35</sup> It points to the legacy, I think, of the political thought of the “eternal return” in post-war thought. (Alain Badiou goes so far as to assert that “One can argue that most of Deleuze’s work is devoted to defending, unfolding, and understanding more comprehensively the founding intuition of Nietzsche regarding the eternal return.”)<sup>36</sup> It is in this sense that Agamben formulates a fundamentally new way of asking the question, at a very intimate level, how can we refuse the subject? The exception, in other words, is a problem that precedes our notions of subjectivity (and thus enables us to carry the critique of the subject even further). The critique of the subject, which is an extremely important development in the history of thought, has increasingly been received with a subtle and unique form of dogmatism, to the point that it has been used to actively “police” subjectivities (new forms of life, new ways of thinking and living, new statements, etc.). The relatively recent “discovery” of the importance of subjectivity in contemporary thought (e.g. the *reception* of the theory of affect in Deleuze in the past 10 years) has done little to change this relation (and, one could argue, has only hastened this process of radical destruction). This is precisely because many of our theories of exposure, vulnerability, affect, and radical passivity have been separated from the experience and “reality” of the exception. (In terms of the reception of Deleuze’s thought, this corresponds to the complete separation of *affect* from any discussion, connection or relation to *incorporeal transformation*.) This is why Agamben’s work on

the exception is so important. It is *a redemption of subjectivity*—of what is “real” and vital in both the critique of the subject and the creation of new ways of living and thinking—in contemporary thought. It is the movement from the “virtual” to the “real” as the (incorporeal) transformation of contemporary subjectivities; from despair and a “living death” to faith (hope, redemption) and life. To put this in terms specific to this essay, it is extremely important for us to think about and take seriously those who have “failed” to be subjects, particularly those forms of life in which individuation and (de)subjectivation are lived problems. Nothing may be more annoying to the present order, marked by a proliferation of relations of subjection, than those who radically *fail* to treat themselves and others as “subjects.” This is not without consequence for the production and expression of thought itself.

It is important to note that the eternal return is both a theory of the world (exteriority) and a theory of subjectivity in which both moments, the encounter and the possibility of “becoming who you are,” must occur in the exact same moment. Because it is in the ethical relation to this abyssal moment, locating oneself, so to speak, within it (the abyss), that one “masters” one’s fate in the willing of its eternal return. This ethical stance, Agamben has noted, appears ridiculous, even appalling, when placed in relation to the camps.<sup>37</sup> Are we to believe, for example, that the Jews, in order to “master their fate” at Auschwitz, should will the eternal return of the camps and what happened there? Or does posing this question itself only serve to obviate the impossibility (and undesirability) of such an ethical response? Moreover, it seems that the very problem would remain veiled in the eternal return, which is not, “how can we will the return of the camps as a means of mastering the brutal fact that they happened (in opposition to the *ressentiment*

of negation)?" but, "how can we stop the camps (and the exception) from continuing to happen?"

As a "theory of the world" the eternal return provides an abyssal ground for subjectivity, one in which subjectivation and desubjectivation coincide in the exact same moment (the moment of the encounter itself). One can point to several recent, important texts that take this abyssal notion of subjectivity and exteriority (the return as a theory of the world) for granted, postulating it as the basis for all radical thought and politics, including, even, in response to the exception.<sup>38</sup> In a remarkable passage in *Being Singular Plural*, Jean-Luc Nancy points to this problem while, simultaneously, obscuring it:

. . . the thinking of the eternal return is the inaugural thought of our contemporary history, a thinking we must repeat (even if it means calling it something else). We must reappropriate what already made us who "we" are today, here and now, the "we" of a world who no longer struggle to have meaning but to be meaning itself. This is we as *the beginning and end of the world*.<sup>39</sup>

Nancy's project to appropriate our potential for "being meaning" rather than "having meaning" (as something that resists any teleological movement) shares much with the work of the exception (particularly the possibility of "inhabiting" the political as potentiality). But it should be clear by now that there are several problems with this (admittedly, complex) formulation. By formulating this problem within the abyss of the return, Nancy steps over the movement from the virtual to the real (continuing to "take" it

in an abyss), making his explicit project, named above, impossible to achieve. It seems unlikely that we will ever be able to realize the potential to “inhabit” meaning unless we confront the problem of the exception. Furthermore, Nancy’s formulation seems positively reactive in its insistence on the eternal return as the only possibility for thought and politics, exteriority and subjectivity, today. What is it in our contemporary experience of and relation to the eternal return that Nancy is afraid of? Could it be the very failure of this thought? Is this what is being defended against by continuing to think in a manner that may be wholly inadequate to the “reality” of our contemporary experience? Clearly, Nancy is correct in pointing to the return as the site of a problem, but what is that problem?

In *Il tempo che resta* Agamben discovers several hidden quotations of Paul in Benjamin’s “Theses.” The “Theses” opens with an enigmatic story.

The story is told of an automaton constructed in such a way that it could play a winning game of chess, answering each move of an opponent with a countermove. A puppet in Turkish attire and with a hookah in its mouth sat before a chessboard placed on a large table. A system of mirrors created the illusion that this table was transparent from all sides. Actually, a little hunchback who was an expert chess player sat inside and guided the puppet’s hand by means of strings. One can imagine a philosophical counterpart to this device. The puppet called “historical materialism” is to win all the time. It can easily be a match for anyone if it enlists the

services of theology, which today, as we know, is wizened and has to keep out of sight.<sup>40</sup>

Who, Agamben asks, is the secret theologian, “the hunchback dwarf concealed under the chessboard”?<sup>41</sup> Agamben is convinced that it is Paul and that the text itself is “a chessboard of a Messianic battle.”<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, the hidden quotations of Paul that appear in Benjamin’s text expose Paul to us as a radical theorist of the exception.<sup>43</sup> In the second thesis, Benjamin writes, “Like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a *weak* Messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim. That claim cannot be settled cheaply. Historical materialists are aware of that.”<sup>44</sup> The word “weak” in this passage—which appears in Benjamin’s own type-written manuscript in German spaced as *s c h w a c h e*—may be a hidden quotation of Paul.<sup>45</sup> The *schwache*, according to Agamben’s research,<sup>46</sup> may refer to a passage in 2 Corinthians 12:9: “The force fulfills itself in weakness . . . This is why I rejoice in weakness, in insults, in needs, in persecution and in anguish for the Messiah. For when I am weak, then I am powerful.”<sup>47</sup> Agamben asks, “Why is the messianic force weak? Is Benjamin quoting something here? Is this one of those hidden temporal indexes which will pose a text to another, especially in constellation with the past? The only text in which there is a mention of a weak force is the messianic text of Paul.”<sup>48</sup>

What can it mean for a force to fulfill itself in weakness? How can weakness be a messianic power or potential? In the first place, we should note that the second thesis *precedes* the eighth thesis, the latter concerning the movement from the “virtual” to the real state of exception. Why does the power (potential) of weakness *precede* the

movement from the virtual to the real? How is it that weakness, abjection and failure precede—in the everyday life that is lived within the exception—every effort to think through this problematic, even preceding the possibility of formulating and practically working on the problem of the movement from the “virtual” to the real? How is it that weakness is the existential ground—as radical exposure—of the non-philosophy (to borrow from Deleuze and Foucault) that subtends the philosophy of the exception?<sup>49</sup> And how is it that what Paul refers to as the condition of weakness—“whatever your condition make use of it brother”<sup>50</sup>—illuminates the pragmatic condition within which we find ourselves today? How is it that this weakness provides the very means of inhabiting the “failure” of the political? And how is it that this weakness—which has remained excluded from our ways of thinking about radical exteriority and exposure, precisely because it *precedes* them—has been excluded from the domain of virtually all post-war ethical and political thought?

This enables us to re-pose the question of exteriority in a new light. What can it mean to “fulfill” the thought of exposure and radical exteriority in weakness? To paraphrase Foucault, what use can the encounter make of becoming an error?<sup>51</sup> How can we inhabit the failure of the encounter—the failure to even “own” our own exposures, encounters, and relations—in the exception? How can we think failure as the gesture of a *worldless* people? Agamben provides us with some important clues in our efforts to answer these questions: in particular, his discovery of “something like a new ethical element” in what Primo Levi called “the ‘gray zone.’”<sup>52</sup>

What is at issue here, therefore, is a zone of irresponsibility . . . that is situated not beyond good and evil but rather, so to speak, *before* them. With a gesture that is symmetrically opposed to that of Nietzsche, Levi places ethics before the area in which we are accustomed to consider it. And without our being able to say why, we sense that this ‘before’ is more important than any ‘beyond’—that the ‘underman’ must matter to us more than the ‘overman.’<sup>53</sup>

I would like to reformulate Agamben’s treatment of Levi in terms specific to the question I am posing here: How can we think exposure in the exception? If the “taking of the outside” is accomplished, in part, through a productive use of immanence—as it was in the camps—then we can think, at least provisionally, about the need to relocate any encounter or exposure that we could own prior to an abyss (which would simply obliterate any such movement). That is, any answer to this question would have to concern that which *precedes* an abyssal encounter with the world: something that would, at the same time, allow the moment of desubjectivation to remain within itself and not be taken in the exception.<sup>54</sup> Perhaps, prior to every actual (abyssal) encounter, there is a failure to “have” this encounter (because it is always capable of being taken in the exception). Perhaps, it is this failure—this radical failure to “have” an encounter—that we can “own.” And, perhaps, maybe this is all that we can “have” with regard to exteriority in the exception. What’s more, this failed encounter may turn out to be substantially more than what we thought we “had” with the thought of an abyssal subjectivity-exteriority in the eternal return. That is, it may be *more intimate, more*



*exposed, more vulnerable*, than all of our previous ways of thinking about vulnerability and exposure, predicated, as they were, on an abyssal encounter with the “world,” excluding the exposure of this prior non-encounter. This failed encounter can be sketched out logically as a *non-encounter* that *precedes*, and may subtend, every encounter in the exception. Thus, just as testimony (language) requires a radical non-language, a “non-language in which language is born,”<sup>55</sup> in order to bear witness, and just as philosophy needs a non-philosophy (Deleuze, Foucault) in order for new ways of thinking and living to emerge,<sup>56</sup> so too, exteriority (our experience and thought of it) may need a radical non-encounter that would precede every encounter. This *non-encounter* may be more intimate, more intense (we do not know, yet, as this thought and idea is so new) than the encounter itself, precisely because it precedes it (precisely because it is that which subtends our relation to the outside—a relation that has been obscured, even excluded, by the abyss). The *non-encounter* is not simply a disjunctive synthesis, as in Deleuze, insofar as this concept remains tied to the abyss of the return (although, clearly, this is a question deserving of further research). If it were, we wouldn’t have a problem at all (the exception itself would not be a problem), and could go on thinking with Deleuze as before. (The *remnant*, as I read it in Agamben, cannot be equated with a “disjunctive synthesis” because it is neither a synthesis nor a relation. Rather, it is a *disjunctive potential*.) Rather, *the non-encounter*, as I conceive of it—and to reformulate Agamben’s work on testimony and “non-language”—*is what remains in the disjunction between a possibility and an impossibility of experience*. It is what remains in the gap between the possibility of “having” an experience and the impossibility of having an exterior encounter with anything at all (even as a non-relational relation, as in Deleuze’s

“disjunctive synthesis”). This *remnant of the encounter* is found and fulfilled in failure, in weakness, in that *exteriority without reserve that is broken*.

Here we must insist on proceeding with caution. This radical non-encounter cannot exist outside our expression of it. This means that it requires a performative in which the desubjectified subject would then be able to “own” or “inhabit” this very failure by means of *bearing witness to an encounter that did not take place*. (Potentiality may itself involve a mode of transformation that *precedes* any becoming-other: the potential, not merely of realizing itself in an actuality, but grasping itself in its own virtuality. This would point to the capacity of a given a-subjective body to live, to “touch” its own forces and relations, as weakness, error, and failure; to grasp itself in this failure, and, in the process, opening up the radical potential of potentiality as such).<sup>57</sup> To think the failed or non-encounter without the movement from the virtual to the real—that is, without posing the problem of subjectivity in the exception—is to run the risk of imposing all of our old ways of thinking about exteriority onto this (radical new potential for) thought. In this case, we would simply go on thinking exposure and exteriority as before, with the same values and practices of an abyssal encounter, simply displaced onto what I have formulated here as a non-encounter. This is a very real danger: the separation of this radical non-encounter not only from its pragmatic context within the exception, but also removed from any substantive effort to work on the problem of the exception as a concept or thought of its own. Thus, this thought would be separated and divided twice: from the existential conditions within which the problem exposes itself and from within the internal terms specific to its own line of thought, both of which are in the process of emerging (of finding the means of their expression within the exception). Such a non-

reading would be disastrous from the perspective of the potentiality of this thought, actively preventing what is truly new and radical in it from emerging in the first place. In this sense, it is important for us to consider the exception as something fully present within the site of our work.<sup>58</sup> (My work on the failed or non-encounter is not simply an explicit effort to re-think the concept of affect in Deleuze in light of the exception; it is also an effort to redeem this concept, to reclaim it from a similar separation and division of potentiality in its reception in the U.S., which seems to have been based on the radical exclusion of affect itself.)<sup>59</sup> This problem, that of the exclusion of (an immanent-subjective) thought on which all academic discourse today may be based, needs to be carefully considered along with any development of this line of thought (not to mention in any serious treatment of “intellectual subjectivities”).

To return to the outlines of this thought, it may be the case that it is only in *bearing witness to an encounter that fails*, that did not happen, an encounter that one is not able to “own,” that we can then be said to “have” an encounter at all. There are a lot of implications for this line of thought (including how it relates to the reception of *Homo Sacer* among theorists of radical exteriority). One of the first things it points to, I think, is the urgent need to re-evaluate the narratives of bearing witness that have emerged in the second half of the 20th century as containing a radically new thought of exteriority (one which enables us to rethink immanence in the exception). Here I think we need to look at the work of Primo Levi, Ota Yoko and David Wojnarowicz, to name three figures.<sup>60</sup> What is extraordinary about these thinkers’ work is precisely that, as narratives of extremity (the camp, Hiroshima, AIDS) there is no eternal return, no abyssal ground for thought and politics, contained within them.<sup>61</sup> It is essential that these narratives be

placed in this context—as existential-philosophical narratives about exteriority in the post-war era, and the “taking of the outside” that this involves. Of course, Agamben has already sketched out an approach to this with regard to Primo Levi in *Remnants of Auschwitz*. It is vital for us to pick up this line of thought and extend it further. But such work cannot be separated from the work of patiently elaborating and developing the unfinished, unfulfilled concept of the exception. Without this, we will simply find new ways to continue thinking about exteriority as we have before, not only missing the challenge that the thought and experience of the exception poses for us, but also emptying out (in the process) its radical potential.

What remains of the encounter in the exception? That is, what can it mean to think *the encounter that is left*? The idea of a non-encounter, a failed encounter, is simply one way of thinking the encounter as a *remnant* (an encounter that cannot be divided from itself). As such, the non-encounter may point to the limit-concept of the limit itself (with regard to the thought of the outside), insofar as it doesn’t so much displace the limit, as it does relocate it prior to any previously thought notion of the limit itself. Does not this failure to even experience, or, encounter a limit indicate something *far more intense, more vulnerable, more exposed* than we have previously thought? Isn’t it time for us to take this exposure seriously?<sup>62</sup>

My friend Chris Allert has an amazing, singular, way of describing everything that he sees around him as “broken.”<sup>63</sup> At some point in my encounters with him, I realized that Allert wasn’t merely making pejorative comments by naming everything in his exterior path as “broken;” he was describing, in effect, his very encounter(s) with the world, with the “outside” as that which is broken. This naming and visualization of

exteriority itself as that which is “broken” is, I think, highly provocative. Allert’s statement, uttered with amazing frequency throughout his everyday life, is a performative that concerns the radical separation of exteriority, of the outside, in the exception. And as a performative, intimately tied to the sensibility of a life, it seeks to make use of this very separation; to make “being broken” a form of life that one can then inhabit or “own.” This is remarkable precisely because its intelligence comes from everyday life within the exception. We need to ask, with Allert, what can it mean to think that which is broken? That is, how do we think that which is in error, what doesn’t work, as the expression of an existence, of a life? In other words, what can it mean to think the very experience of radical exteriority in the exception as one of “being broken?” To think being as that which, in the state of exception, is “broken,” as that which is capable of inhabiting this failure, claiming this very “brokenness” as its own. There is, in this sense, a relation of this line of thought to an aesthetics, or, art of existence (which, I think, is precisely what is operative in Allert’s life and thought). How can we think the beauty of that which is broken? And, clearly, there is a connection, which I do not have time to sketch out here, with Benjamin’s notion of the “ruin,” as well as Agamben’s notion of the “irreparable” in the *Coming Community*. What can it mean to be broken?<sup>64</sup> This makes possible a redemption of affect in the exception (pointing to its inseparability from redemption itself). Is it even possible to think affect, in Deleuze’s sense, as something separate or divided from its redemption within the exception? This means that the broken is not an “end” in itself—as an aestheticization of the exception and its insidious continuation—but the “means without end” of a redemptive existence. In order to “be beautiful” it is not enough that the broken simply be embraced and affirmed (this would be nothing more

than the horror of merging the exception with the sublime, of aestheticizing the exception—or, what is the same thing, grasping the beautiful as *being in force without significance*). Rather, the grasping of that which is broken *cannot be separated* from a love for its reparation and redemption; that is, its *life*. The broken is beautiful *because it calls for the work of redemption*, because it needs to be repaired (and not in any teleological or ideal sense).<sup>65</sup> To see, experience and grasp—that is, to love—that *which is broken* is to redeem the potential of what does not exist; the potential of that being (*brokenness*) which has been excluded *from life* in order to return it *to life*. And, thereby, to move *life* from the radical separation and division of the “virtual” to the fullness of the real. This is the ethical operation that cannot be separated or divided from Messianic affect. It is the unknown or unrealized potential contained in every failed encounter. It is the potential *of life* (a life that is capable of *being broken*). The love of the broken is the *love of life* (and this, outside, or radically *before*, any abyssal moment, any philosophy of will).

One of the final works that the artist, writer, and activist David Wojnarowicz ever created, “Untitled, 1992” (Gelatin-silver print and silk-screened text, 38 X 26”), features an image of a pair of broken and bandaged hands, with an accompanying text that was originally recorded, in slightly different form, in his final diary entry dated August 1, 1991.<sup>66</sup> The text, in red, laid over the black and white image of broken and bandaged hands reads:

Sometimes I come to hate people because they can't see where I am. I've gone empty, completely empty and all they see is the visual form: my

arms and legs, my face, my height and posture, the sounds that come from my throat. But I'm fucking empty. The person I was just one year ago no longer exists; drifts spinning slowly into the ether somewhere way back there. I'm a xerox of my former self. I can't abstract my own dying any longer. I am a stranger to others and to myself and I refuse to pretend that I have history attached to my heels. I am glass, clear empty glass. I see the world spinning behind and through me. I see casualness and mundane effects of gesture made by constant populations. I look familiar but I am a complete stranger being mistaken for my former selves. I am a stranger and I am moving. I am moving on two legs, soon to be on all fours. I am no longer animal vegetable or mineral. I am no longer made of circuits or discs. I am no longer coded and deciphered. I am all emptiness and futility. I am an empty stranger, a carbon copy of my form. I can no longer find what I am looking for outside myself. It doesn't exist out there. Maybe it's only in here, inside my head. But my head is glass and my eyes have stopped being cameras, the tape has run out and nobody's words can touch me. No gesture can touch me. I've been dropped into all of this from another world and I can't speak your language any longer. See the signs I try to make with my hands and fingers. See the vague movements of my lips among the sheets. I'm a blank spot in a hectic civilization. I'm a dark spot in the air that dissipates without notice. I feel like a window, maybe a broken window. I am a glass human. I am a glass human disappearing in rain. I am standing among all of you waiving my invisible arms and hands.

I am shouting my invisible words. I am getting so weary. I am growing tired. I am waiving to you from here. I am crawling and looking for the aperture of complete and final emptiness. I am vibrating in isolation among you. I am screaming but it comes out like pieces of clear ice. I am signaling that the volume of all of this is too high. I am waving. I am waving my hands. I am disappearing. I am disappearing but not fast enough.

Wojnarowicz was bedridden from December of 1991 until his death from an AIDS related illness in July of 1992, so this is one of the last works he created. Perhaps this image and its accompanying text need to be read along with the “final” works of Foucault, Deleuze, and Benjamin, per Agamben’s project, in *Homo Sacer* (as a Messianic moment), particularly with regard to the questions of subjectivity it raises. The image and text are startling in what they evoke: Wojnarowicz’s hands, his body, his potential to touch other bodies and the world, to encounter anything at all—including, perhaps, his “self”—has become completely broken.

What *remains* of the world may be, perhaps, our failed encounter with it—and not, let us hope, any final or, teleological end to the world, to thought itself. The idea that the world really is ending, that thought and politics are no longer possible, needs to be resisted (insofar as this exposes the radical separation accomplished by the exception). But this resistance should not be at the expense of an immanent subjectivity that remains immersed in a world that, for it, really is at an end precisely because there is no possibility of working on the questions I am raising here, due both to the contraction of



time in everyday life, and the radical separation of potentiality from itself. It is in this dual sense that the “end of the world” must be suspended: we cannot allow the realization of any such teleological “end” to happen. The latter experience of the “end,” as a subjective experience of the outside and the political as that which is broken, has, for far too long now, been “policed” by an abyssal thought of exteriority placed, ironically, in the service of the former “end.” It is time to begin the work of suspending both of these “ends.” The reception of *Homo Sacer* in the U.S. is instructive in this respect. The reaction to the thought of the exception (particularly among theorists of radical exteriority) is most unfortunate (and something, as Agamben’s own work suggests, we should take note of and learn from). But, rather than dwell on the negativity of this experience (which, as a graduate student, I can only describe as extreme), perhaps it would be more productive for us to think the “loss” of the eternal return, the “end of the world,” as a failure, an error, that we can now begin to inhabit as thought. When I was first formulating my thoughts along these lines, I mentioned my work to a colleague and his response was one of complete horror. “That leaves us,” he said, “with absolutely nothing.” Perhaps from the preceding exposition one can gather that I beg to differ. It may be that we, as theorists working at the end of the 20th and the birth of the 21st century, never “had” anything to begin with (at least with respect to the thought of the return as a theory of the world—a thought which may be wholly inadequate to the period of time, *after* World War II, in which it emerged as a popular current of thought). Maybe the very idea that we actually “had” something with any of our lines of thought contributed to this failure to see and experience something that was happening all around us (the exception). And with it, a failure to see a prior limit on the important work that we

have expounded so much energy on over the past 30 years. In other words, maybe it is time for us to inhabit our own failure of thought, which may be the weakness of all thought in the face of the exception. Perhaps, this weakness of thought, this failure to “know” what it is that we are thinking and doing at any given moment, will open up lines of thought that we had previously not considered. It’s just a thought.

---

NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This essay is dedicated to my friend Chris Allert, whose unique thought and sensibility subtends its work. It is envisioned as the nascent introduction to a larger book-length project, *Broken: Thought-Images of Life in the State of Exception*, to coincide with the work of my dissertation. The book is to be composed of four thought-images in Benjamin's sense, modified as *subjective* thought-images. Each chapter is to be dedicated to the unique intelligence and sensibility of a life—as Deleuze defines it, an individuation without subject or object—but which, nevertheless, points to a *real* person whose intelligence subtends its thought. The entire project is an effort to bear witness to the intelligence of a subjectivity—immersed in the exception, but rendered mute and speechless within it—that does not exist (in the realm of expressions and public gestures). It is my hope that this will aid, however slightly, these forms of life to begin to realize or accomplish even a part of themselves. I would like to thank Giorgio Agamben for his brief conversations with me on affect and the exception during the seminars on *Il tempo che resta* at UC Berkeley in the fall of 1999 (where this work began). In fact, it was Agamben's suggestion that the unique notion of failure and weakness in Paul and Benjamin could enable us to rethink affect in light of the exception. Clearly, without his extraordinary teaching, work, and *sweetness*, this essay would never have been written. I would also like to thank the members of my Master's Thesis committee at San Francisco State University: Sandra Luft, Saul Steier, and Ruth Knier, for reading and commenting on the earliest version of this work in the spring of 2000. Thomas Carl Wall, Therese Grisham, and Robert Burns Neveldine deserve particular thanks for reading and commenting on various drafts of the manuscript. Matt Laferty provided invaluable editorial advice. Finally, I want to thank my students at Binghamton University from Spring 2001 until Spring 2002, for putting up with my efforts to teach the thought of the exception to (mostly) first and second year undergraduates and, more importantly, for their inspiration. This essay is a revision and reformulation of my "Appendix: The End of the World," 41-51 in my "Living in Urgency: *Homo Sacer* and the State of Emergency of AIDS," *Symposium* No. 6, (2001): 9–76.

<sup>2</sup> *Il tempo che resta. Un commento alla Lettera ai romani* (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2000). (*The Time that Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*.) The literal translation of *resta* is “remains”. The English word “remains,” however, includes a meaning of something “supplementary” or left over, as in a remainder. This meaning is not only absent in the Italian *resta*, it is directly at odds with Agamben’s concept of the *remnant* as that which can never be divided (a supplement or left over remainder would, in fact, allow for division, exclusion, and therefore, the exception). This is why Agamben prefers the translation *The Time that is Left*. Both the seminar and the text are organized according to the first sentence of Paul’s “Letter to the Romans” *Paulos doulos iesus christu, cletos apostolos eis evaggelion theou* (Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle set apart for the announcement of god), Giorgio Agamben, “The Time that is Left” (Audio tape recordings of course lectures, U.C. Berkeley), October 6, 1999. Throughout the following text, I refer to the audio tape recordings of the course lectures according to the title of the course, “The Time that is Left,” and the date of the particular lecture or discussion cited. Incidentally, there was no discussion of the last word of the first sentence of Paul’s “Letter to the Romans” because, as Agamben explained in the final seminar, “One should be free to write a work on theology without mentioning the word ‘god,’” “The Time that is Left” November 10, 1999.

<sup>3</sup> *L'aperto: L'uomo e l'animale*, Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2002. At press time I had just received this text. A brief glance at the chapter headings indicates that there is some correspondence and overlapping between the concerns of the present essay and *L'aperto*. It is my intention to integrate a thorough study of *L'aperto* in my future work.

<sup>4</sup> “The Time that is Left,” *passim*. As Agamben made clear in the seminar, this is not an *a priori* movement, but a *prior* movement. It is a movement that *precedes* every encounter, exposure, or relation and must be reckoned with by any politics, subjectivity, or thought that takes seriously the state of exception.

Matt Laferty 7/23/02 11:32 AM  
Formatted

<sup>5</sup> For Deleuze on the “image of thought,” see his *Proust and Signs*, trans. Richard Howard (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000) and *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).

<sup>6</sup> Deleuze’s theory of *affect* concerns the composition of a given body’s forces and relations (its potentiality) as it is produced in its encounters with/between other bodies and the world (the outside)—in other words, the exposure or vulnerability of bodies in relation to each other and the limit within which these bodies subsist. To slightly modify, or, qualify the above: *affect* is a pre-personal intensity which “happens” in the space of a given body’s exposure. It is what “happens” (with regard to subjectivity, potentiality, and power) in the encounter between two or more bodies. Exposure *is* the intimacy and inseparability of thought and being—or, rather, the “space” of radical exteriority in which they occur. Thought is *the outside*, and individuation is the selective *folding* or, singularization of *the outside*—what Deleuze called the “inside of thought.”

<sup>7</sup> The term “experience” is used in the context of Deleuze’s “transcendental empiricism” as an anonymous, pre-personal subjective encounter, exposure, or relation. An encounter without subject or object. As Deleuze characterizes this concept “It is distinct from experience in that it neither refers to an object nor belongs to a subject (empirical representation).” “Immanence: A Life . . .” *Theory, Culture, and Society*. Vol. 14. No. 2. (1997): 3.

<sup>8</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen. (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1998), *passim*. Hereafter cited as *Homo*.

<sup>9</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Rosen. (New York: Zone Books, 1999): 156. Hereafter cited as *Remnants*.

Matt Laferty 7/23/02 11:16 AM

Deleted:

---

<sup>10</sup> “The Messiah and the Sovereign” in *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, trans. and intro, Daniel Heller-Roazen (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2000): 166. Hereafter cited as “The Messiah.” The “end of time,” as I read Agamben, does not literally mean that we are living in the time of the return of the Messiah, but rather that we are living in the “end of time” of a politics that would be counter to Modernity and the West (as a result, I think, of the complex force relations which have emerged since the end of World War 2; forces which have as their goal the destruction of the world itself). This “contracted” time is marked, as it is in the return of the Messiah in Jewish mysticism, by the pragmatic structure of the “state of exception.” It is precisely because of this moment, this now, Agamben suggests, that the “now of knowability” and the “now of readability” of Benjamin’s text—comes to us. A useful introduction to Messianic thought is Gershom Scholem’s “Toward an Understanding of the Messianic Idea” in his *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (New York: Schocken, 1971).

<sup>11</sup> “The Messiah,” 162, brackets mine. Here Agamben makes the point that the Messianic, insofar as it can be defined by this unique relationship to the law, is the “limit concept” of religious experience (just as the exception is the limit concept of State power). Furthermore, insofar as the Messianic confronts a meaningless law—a law that is *being in force without significance*—it exposes “the problem of law in its originary structure” *Ibid.*, 167. On these points, see also, *Homo Sacer*, 56-57.

<sup>12</sup> *Homo*, 57-58.

<sup>13</sup> “The Time that is Left,” October 20, 1999.

<sup>14</sup> The concept of the *remnant* does not refer to a supplement—to something supplementary or left over—but to that gap which occupies the “empty space” in the disjunction, the non-coincidence, between a possibility and an impossibility (in other words, the remnant is contingency). The remnant is, “*the non-coincidence of the whole and the part*,” *Remnants* 164 (emphasis mine).

---

What *remains* is that which can never be entirely subsumed by a representative power. In *Remnants*, “testimony is the disjunction between two impossibilities of bearing witness,” 39. The witness *is* the remnant (in the sense that the witness marks that empty space that *remains* in the disjunction between those who died and those who survived). On these last two points, see *Remnants*, 133-134, and 164. Insofar as Auschwitz marks the terrifying emergence of the impossible into the real, perhaps we could say that every *constituted* relation of force in the post-war era is an “impossibility,” is itself an incursion of the impossible into the real. (In other words, the concept of desire as force and power as force may present a trace of this incursion of the impossible into the real—as absolute necessity—insofar as they remain predicated on a relational image of meaning). In this sense, the concept of the remnant may point to a new concept of force; that is, of meaning itself. A concept of force that would be specific to the state of exception and its “taking” of the outside. It is force neither as desire (Deleuze) nor power (Foucault), but as contingency, or potentiality.

<sup>15</sup> “The Time that is Left,” October 20, 1999. In the same lecture he states that this remaining time is “a gap between our image and our experience of time. *It is the gap between representation and thought*”—emphasis mine. The first definition of messianic time is “the time it takes the ‘time’ to come to an end (to finish, to accomplish itself)” (*Ibid.*) This “taking” or “grasping” of time is operational: it is an immanent work on time itself. What is being brought to an end, what is being accomplished—the time that is being “operated” on—is our “image” of time; the image of chronological time in which we live and breath. In other words, it is representation. Agamben’s work on the “state of exception,” it seems to me, must be grasped as an effort to flesh out the final vestiges of representation in the West (beyond that accomplished in the work of Deleuze and Foucault).

<sup>16</sup> *Remnants*, 159. The last sentence means, literally, the time that is left. A few pages later in the same work he defines messianic time as the disjunction between historical time and eternity, 164.

---

<sup>17</sup> “The Time that is Left,” October 20, 1999.

<sup>18</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999): 867.

<sup>19</sup> This question was posed more explicitly in my M.A. thesis where an earlier version of this text originally appeared. See my “Thinking in Urgency: Deleuze, Agamben and the Politics of Thought” (San Francisco State University, May 25, 2000).

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, the following sections of Nietzsche’s notes translated by Kaufmann and Hollingdale under the title *The Will to Power* (New York: Vintage, 1968): 1062, 1066, and 1067 (pages 546–50).

<sup>21</sup> Here, we need to note that not all theories of immanence are created equal—the thought of immanence does not depend, thank goodness, on an abyssal moment in which subjectivity and exteriority coincide.

<sup>22</sup> “The Time that is Left,” *passim*.

<sup>23</sup> And, in particular, Deleuze and Guattari’s theory of “lines of flight.” The exception *precedes*—and is therefore capable of taking—the creation of any line of flight, any process of becoming-other. It seems important to point out, in this regard, the appearance of *homo sacer* in the final pages of Agamben’s *Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993): 86-87. I am suggesting that immanence itself has become “policed” in the post-war era precisely because it presents the possibility of an experience of the world—the outside—without relation. The theory of singularity and transcendental empiricism in Deleuze are not immune to this *prior movement* (although Deleuze’s final work is, as I point out below, a special case).



---

<sup>24</sup> Cited by Agamben in *Homo*, 50–51.

<sup>25</sup> This idea, this simple statement—the world has become suspended—is not merely provocative, it is radical in every sense of the word; and this, precisely because the thought of the exception calls into question every major political ideology, ethics, and philosophy of the post-war era.

<sup>26</sup> 170.

<sup>27</sup> Samuel Weber, “*Nomos* in the Magic Flute” *Angelaki* Vol. 3 No. 2, (1998): 61–68. Also, see *Homo*, 19. It is in this context, going beyond this meaning, that Agamben points to the meaning of the exception as a “taking of the outside.”

<sup>28</sup> In the seminar, Agamben made it clear that he was referring to the ethical and political dimensions of the return, and not its “epistemological” aspects. This was, for me, all the encouragement I needed to pursue this line of thought, which had already been sketched as a philosophical problem in my work on the “End of the World” prior to the Agamben seminar (incidentally, this work began with an unfinished meditation on the work of Swiss author Robert Walser, whose work, it seemed to me, coincided with a love for the world—the outside—without presupposition). It is important to point out that Agamben does not treat the eternal return as I do here. His comments on the eternal return are much more careful than my own. I am deliberately—and, hopefully, provocatively—blurring the distinction between the epistemological and ethical dimensions of the return precisely because they remain blurred in our ways of thinking exteriority. It may well be the case that this “blurring” of the boundaries—the idea that the epistemological must perfectly match the ethical and political—is part of the work of the exception itself. My statements should be taken as experiments with this problem rather than as final or definitive answers.

---

<sup>29</sup> “The Time that is Left,” October 22, 1999.

<sup>30</sup> *Homo*, 54–57.

<sup>31</sup> In the seminar, Agamben presented an extraordinary reading of the presents as a politics of failure (which includes our astonishing failure to think the exception until now). While there is far more to his formulations than I can go into here, I feel that I would be remiss if I failed to mention one of the most provocative “theses” that Agamben advanced in this context, particularly with respect to the political. In a lengthy and provocative discussion on the new area of research he was staking out (following Foucault and Benjamin) on the “paradigm” (as a “relation of movement” or “paradigmatic relationship” which takes place “between the singular and a concrete historical object”) he stated that “the internal paradigm of democracy, which has now been lost, could be civil war. Why? Because civil war is today what must be excluded at any price,” “The Time” November 10, 1999. Agamben went on to clarify these remarks by suggesting that *civil war is the exception on which civil society is based. Ibid.* (Again, Agamben’s work is pointing toward what we have failed to think, and excluded, in our thought of a radical, non-dialectical politics of the past thirty years—the state of exception.)

<sup>32</sup> This formulation of Foucault’s becomes complicated in Agamben’s thought. It is not simply a matter of desubjectivation (as something “good”) as opposed to subjection (as something “bad”). As the Nazi’s demonstrated in the camps, both immanence and desubjectivation can fully be made use of in the radical destruction of the human being. This is why, Agamben argues, something more is necessary: the possibility of “owning” our own desubjectivation (or, as he puts it in *Remnants*, the possibility of the desubjectified subject giving an account of its own ruin, and thus transforming itself). The same is true, I think, for immanence (or, what is the same thing, exteriority, the encounter, affect, etc).

---

<sup>33</sup> “The Time that is Left,” October 13, 1999. This is an extremely complex formulation. If we remember that the camp is a space of total immanence—based on zones of indistinction—which corresponds with the complete and radical destruction of the self (of the human being), then this formulation can, perhaps, acquire its full force in relation to contemporary thought. Immanence and desubjectivation (and potentiality), in contrast to the not-so-subtle *reception* of much that is important in contemporary thought, are not ends in themselves. We need something more; we need to be able to “own” our own desubjectivation and realize some part of our potential (otherwise, both will continue to be taken in the exception).

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> It is in this respect that Benjamin may be the first philosopher of the 20th century.

<sup>36</sup> “Eternal Return and Chance” in his *Deleuze: The Clamor of Being*, trans. Louis Burchill (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000): 67. Badiou’s text is really quite remarkable in the context of the work I am doing here. I only wish that I had more time to explore it within the problem at hand. Briefly, Badiou’s text is directed against three misinterpretations of the eternal return: 1) that it is the repetition of the same and the similar, 2) that it is a “formal law” imposed on chaos, and 3) that “the return of the same can be considered to be a hidden algorithm that would govern chance, a sort of statistical regularity, as in probability theory,” 71. Neither of these misinterpretations is operative in my discussion of the eternal return here (precisely because it points to something, following Agamben, that is new, that we have not yet thought or considered, in relation to this thought). Badiou’s text is so provocative for me because in the course of my ongoing research I have often found myself asking the question: what remains of Deleuze’s thought without the return? This is a provocative question that I cannot even begin to answer here (if I have even adequately posed it). In many respects, I have come to think of my own work as an effort to re-think or re-write Deleuze’s *Nietzsche and Philosophy* in light of the exception (insofar as this text points to a radically non-dialectical ethics). One area that the thought of the exception,

---

in particular the concept of failure and weakness in Paul and Benjamin, necessitates, I think, is a radical rethinking of the theory of fascism in the work of Deleuze and Foucault (which, it seems, can no longer be defined purely in terms of reactive power and *ressentiment*).

<sup>37</sup> *Remnants*, 99-103.

<sup>38</sup> See Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), *passim*, and Manuel De Landa, "Deleuze, Diagrams, and the Open-Ended Becoming of the World" in *Becomings: Explorations in Time, Memory, and Futures*, ed. Elizabeth Grosz (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999): 29 – 41.

<sup>39</sup> *Being Singular Plural* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2000): 4, emphasis mine.

<sup>40</sup> Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968): 253. Hereafter cited as "Theses."

<sup>41</sup> Agamben, "The Time that is Left," November 10, 1999.

<sup>42</sup> "The Time that is Left," October 6, 1999.

<sup>43</sup> According to Agamben, there are three potential hidden quotations of Paul in the "Theses." Unfortunately, I do not have the time to adequately discuss all of them here.

<sup>44</sup> "Theses," 254.

<sup>45</sup> "Thesis Two: Typewritten Manuscript" from the Benjamin archives. A Xerox of this manuscript was provided to the students in the course by Agamben himself. Reprinted in *Il tempo che resta* 130.

---

<sup>46</sup> For the sake of time, I am skipping over a great deal of information and research. I hope to provide a much fuller account of the place of Paul, and in particular this text and citation in Benjamin, in a forthcoming work: “Weakness: Agamben and the Politics of Messianism.” For now, it is particularly important to note the place of citation in Benjamin’s work, as well as to consider the following two examples from Agamben’s research. As Benjamin writes in “What is Epic Theater?”: “to quote a text involves the interruption of its context,” *Illuminations*, 151. He goes on to say that “An actor must be able to space his gestures the way a typesetter produces spaced type,” *Ibid*. Interestingly enough, Agamben discovers that there is a reference to the same passage in Paul (2 Corinthians 12:7) in Scholem’s commentary on Benjamin’s “Agesilaus Santander.” This appears in English in “Walter Benjamin and his Angel” in Scholem’s *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis* (New York: Schocken, 1976): 216. According to Scholem, the anagram that is the title of this text is “Angle of Satan,” and with this device, Benjamin is referring to himself as the “angel of Satan.” Agamben refers to this as an “indirect proof” that Benjamin is quoting Paul. “This means,” Agamben says, “and who knows if it is true, that Benjamin is identifying himself with Paul, because Paul is the one who was an angel of Satan.” “The Time that is Left” November 10, 1999. The specific passage, which directly precedes the one on weakness, is 2 Corinthians 12: 7: “to keep me from being too elated, a thorn has been thrust into my flesh, an angel of Satan has been sent to torment me, to keep me from being too elated.”

<sup>47</sup> This reference is extremely complex. On page 130 of *Il tempo che resta*, Agamben writes:

Mentre Girolamo traduce “*virtus in infirmitate perficitur*,” Lutero, come la maggioranza dei traduttori moderni, ha “*denn mein Kraft is in den schwachen Mechtig*,” entrambi i termini (Kraft e schwache) sono presenti ed e questa iperleggibilità, questa segreta presenza del testo paolino in quello delle tesi, che la spazieggiatura vuole discernmente segnalare.

---

While Girolamo translates [this as] “*virtus in infirmitate perficitur*” [virtue completes itself in illness], Luther, as a majority of modern day translators have [done, translates it as] “*denn mein Kraft ist in den schwachen Mechtig*” [for my force is powerful in the Weak]; both the terms (*Kraft* and *schwache*) are present, this spacing between the lines discreetly indicates the presence of the text of Paul in the thesis.

According to Agamben, Luther’s translation of the *Bible* (1534) is the text that Benjamin *probably* had available to him during the time he wrote the “Theses,” *Il tempo che resta*, 130. The original German appears in the second paragraph of 2 Corinthians 12 (*Die ander epistel/an die Corinther*) in Luther’s translation of the Bible. In Italian, the first sentence of the passage (translated by Agamben from the Greek) is rendered as “*Potenza si compie nell bebolezza*” (The power fulfills itself in weakness), *Il tempo che resta*, 129. I want to thank Therese Grisham for her help with the translation of the Italian and Gisela Brinker-Gabler for her help with the German.

<sup>48</sup> “The Time that is Left,” November 10, 1999.

<sup>49</sup> For two examples of Deleuze on non-philosophy, see Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994): 218, and Deleuze’s interview “On Philosophy” in *Negotiations* trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 139–140.

<sup>50</sup> Paul, 1 Corinthians 7:21. “And even if you become free, make use of it brother.” Cited by Agamben, “The Time that is Left,” October 8, 1999. This points to the importance of “usage” in the theory of Messianism. (This was the subject of several lectures in the seminar).

<sup>51</sup> See Foucault, “Life: Experience and Science,” trans. Robert Hurley. *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology: The Essential Works of Michel Foucault, 1954–1984 Vol. 2*, ed. James D. Faubion

---

(New York: The New Press, 1998): 465–478. Foucault defines “life” as “that which is capable of error,” 476. For Agamben on this essay, see his “Absolute Immanence” in *Potentialities* 220 – 239. And my earlier essay on affect and drag, “Becoming-vulnerable: The Sensation of Drag,” 1991 [[http://www.gestures.org/teach/becoming\\_vulnerable.html](http://www.gestures.org/teach/becoming_vulnerable.html)] where, paraphrasing Foucault, I ask the question “What use can a body make of becoming an error?” 4. For Agamben, the project of *Homo Sacer* is an effort to *go on thinking with* Deleuze, Foucault, and Benjamin at the final point of their work; to pick up their thought where it left off, where it remained incomplete and unfinished, precisely in order to bring this work to completion (again, there is nothing teleological in this movement). And it is precisely to the “final” texts of these three thinkers that the project of *Homo Sacer* points: “Immanence: A Life” (Deleuze), “Experience: Life and Science” (Foucault), and the “Theses on the Philosophy of History” (Benjamin). In the language of Messianic time, Agamben is considering these three thinkers’ thoughts at the moment not of the end of their time, but the time of their end (in other words, thought and subjectivity at a unique moment of particular intensity, a Messianic moment). This is the point at which there is an inseparability of thought from *a* life, in Deleuze’s sense, and a “real” life that is actually lived (in other words, this Messianic moment, it seems to me, is predicated on a zone of indistinction between *a* life and one’s “real” life, the singularity of a “person”). This is why the idea that thought has absolutely nothing to do with the “personal” life of the one who thinks, the author (which seems to find its most ardent proponents among post-war Heidegger scholars), is really the ultimate division and separation of thought from life. In other words, we need, I think, to look more closely (and poetically) at the inseparable convergence of individuation and thought.

<sup>52</sup> *Remnants*, 21. Here we should note Deleuze’s comments on the “gray zone” in his interview with Antonio Negri, “Control and Becoming” in *Negotiations*, 172.

<sup>53</sup> *Remnants*, 21.

---

<sup>54</sup> On the very last day, at the very end—immediately *after* the final moment of the seminar (in other words, the “time of the end”)—I suggested to Agamben that precisely because the exception concerns a “prior movement” and because the “second thesis” precedes the “eighth thesis” in Benjamin’s own formulations, that this may give us a clue in our efforts to rethink affect both in light of the exception and in relation to Paul’s work on weakness. His comment on the beginning of this thought was, “I like the way you think” (Personal communication, 1999). This thought finds the beginning of its fulfillment in the theoretical formulations sketched out above.

<sup>55</sup> Agamben, *Remnants*, 38. This is the figure of the witness and the problem of testimony. In testimony, “the impossibility of bearing witness, the ‘lacuna’ that constitutes human language, collapses, giving way to a different impossibility of bearing witness—that which does not have language,” 39. Agamben formulates this as a radical non-poetry that subtends poetry itself. The remnant, as I read it in Agamben, cannot be equated with a “disjunctive synthesis” in Deleuze because it is neither a synthesis nor a relation. It is a *disjunctive potential* that calls for the work of redemption; it is *the encounter that is left*.

<sup>56</sup> As Deleuze states in an interview, “philosophy needs not only a philosophical understanding, through concepts, but a non-philosophical understanding, rooted in percepts and affects. You need both . . . Nonphilosophical understanding isn’t inadequate or provisional, it’s one of philosophy’s two sides, one of its two wings.” *Negotiations*, 139–140.

<sup>57</sup> As I am formulating it here, the failed encounter is an encounter with the exception. This failure (as an encounter with the present) is expressed and revealed in the despair of everyday life in the exception. How can we own this failure? How can this experience with what is beyond the tragic be used to refuse the exception, to refuse the very “taking” of the outside that is this failed encounter? That is, as an encounter that fails or refuses to be taken, on the one hand, and that makes of this failed encounter its own being?



---

<sup>58</sup> See, for example, Agamben's stunning reformulation of the problem of the "author" in the context of the exception in *Remnants*, 148–150.

<sup>59</sup> I have been patiently sketching out this line of thought in relation to my everyday life over the course of the past few years. Such work takes time. Here we would be well advised to consider the extreme patience of the man from the country in Kafka's parable "Before the Law." To close the gate on the problem of exteriority in the exception may take a very long time—the work, even, of a lifetime. (This is, in any event, how I have considered my own work for the past several years—existentially, politically, and intellectually.)

<sup>60</sup> See, for example, Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal. (New York: Vintage, 1989); *Survival in Auschwitz*, trans. Stuart Hood. (New York: Summit Books, 1986); *Voice of Memory: Interviews 1961–1987*, Ed. Marco Belpoliti and Robert Gordon, trans. Robert Gordon. (New York: The New Press, 2001); Ota Yoko, *City of Corpses* in Richard H. Minear, ed. and trans., *Hiroshima: Three Witnesses*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990); and David Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* (New York: Vintage, 1991). The films of Tsai Ming-Liang could also be included in this list, as comprising what I refer to as a cinema of failed encounters. "On *The Hole*: Tsai Ming-Liang's Cinema of Failed Encounters" (Unpublished manuscript. Binghamton University, Spring, 2001). In literature, the work of Kafka and Robert Walser can be pointed to as important philosophical precursors of this line of thought: that is, as figures, together with Benjamin, of radical failure. Finally, the life of performance artist, filmmaker, and writer Jack Smith would have to be included in any treatment of this subject. What is unique about all of these figures is that there is no "becoming-other," in a sense that would remain tied to Nietzsche's eternal return, in any of their work. These figures simply "inhabit" a radical otherness that does not take place in an abyssal moment. In other words, their otherness is grasped or inhabited *prior to* any abyssal movement of becoming.

---

<sup>61</sup> Agamben makes this point with regard to Levi's work in *Remnants*. Referring to the ethical and political thought of the return, Agamben states "There is nothing of this in Primo Levi," 101.

<sup>62</sup> As Agamben writes in *Remnants*, "The *Musselmann* is a limit figure of a special kind, in which not only categories such as dignity and respect but even the very idea of an ethical limit lose their meaning," 63. He goes on to state, "If one establishes a limit beyond which one ceases to be human, and all or most of human kind passes beyond it, this proves not the inhumanity of human beings but, instead, the insufficiency and abstraction of the limit," *Ibid*. Everything I have been doing in my work on the exception can be characterized as an effort to think the terrain that Agamben has fleshed out with regard to ethics in relation to epistemology (i.e. exteriority, affect, etc).

<sup>63</sup> Personal communication, 1996.

<sup>64</sup> I want to leave this question open for now in order to return to it in another context. My thought on that which is broken not only derives from the sources named above, but from my more explicit work-in-progress on affect in the exception: "Sweetness, or, How Not To Become a Bitter Old Queen." This work concerns the "beauty of the broken" as a way of thinking affect in the exception through a discussion of the messianic dimensions of easy listening and lounge music, the subculture of 8-track tapes (which are broken *and* beautiful), and the political economy of music in relation to everyday life in the post-war era.

<sup>65</sup> In a passage in "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," Benjamin writes:

What prevents our delight in the beautiful from ever being realized is the image of the past, which Baudelaire regards as veiled by the tears of nostalgia. "*Ach, du warst in abgelebten Zeiten meine Schwester oder meine Frau!*"—this declaration of love is the tribute which the beautiful as such is entitled to claim. Insofar as art aims at the beautiful

---

and, on however modest a scale, “reproduces” it, it conjures it up (as Faust does Helen) out of the womb of time. This no longer happens in the case of technical reproduction. (The beautiful has no place in it.) *Illuminations*, 187.

While this last statement may be debatable, we can deduce the following from the logic sketched out by Benjamin in this passage. In the age of technical reproduction—and beyond it, the spectacle and the exception—the beautiful may only exist as something forever lost; something broken which *becomes* beautiful only through its redemption and reparation. This redemption and reparation, as Benjamin notes, can only proceed through love. Perhaps, it is only in the love for that which has been lost, for the “irreparable” and the broken, that this redemption and reparation can happen.

<sup>66</sup> This is the text that begins “Sometimes I come to hate people . . .” and ends “I am disappearing. I am disappearing but not fast enough,” which first appeared in print in *Memories that Smell Like Gasoline* (San Francisco: Artspace Books, 1992): 60–61.) A reproduction of this image can be seen in his *Brush Fires in the Social Landscape* (New York, Aperture Foundation, 1994): 83. The diary entry can be found in *In the Shadow of the American Dream: The Diaries of David Wojnarowicz*, ed. and intro. by Amy Scholder, (New York: Grove Press, 1999): 265–266.