
THE MAN
WITHOUT
CONTENT

Giorgio Agamben

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Agamben, Giorgio

[*L'omo senza contenuto.* English]

The man without content / Giorgio Agamben ; translated by

Georgia Albert.

p. cm. (Meridian, crossing asymmetries)

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-8047-3553-0 (hardcover : alk. paper). ISBN 0-8047-3554-9
(pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Aesthetics, Modern--20th century. 2. Art--Philosophy.

I. Title. II. Series. Meridian (Stanford, Calif.)

ML2206.A43 1999

ML55--dc22

99-21526

♻️ This book is printed on acid-free, recycled paper.

Original printing 1999

Last figure below indicates year of this printing:

08 07 06 05 04 03

Translated by
Georgia Albert

*Stanford
University
Press*

*Stanford
California*

The Man Without Consent
was originally published in Italian in 1994
under the title *L'uomo senza consenso*
© 1994 by Quodlibet for the Italian edition

Stanford University Press
Stanford, California

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Printed in the United States of America

CRS data appear at the end of the book

*To Giovanni Urbani
as a token of friendship and gratitude*

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Translator's Note

The Man Without Content engages in a dialogue with a large number of literary and especially philosophical figures, from Plato to Walter Benjamin. With the exception of the Greek and French sources, Agamben quotes in Italian translation, frequently his own. In the instances in which I have located English translations for the passages quoted, I have routinely modified them to follow more closely the wording of Agamben's Italian translations. In cases where no published translation is cited, the translations are mine.

Thanks to Thomas Albrecht, David Aradt, Jennifer Bajorek, E. S. Burt, Erin Ferris, Kevin Newmark, Richard Regosin, and Elizabeth Rottenberg for help with sources, and to Nancy Young for her excellent editing.

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1

§ 1 'The Most Uncanny Thing'

In the third essay of the *Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche subjects the Kantian definition of the beautiful as disinterested pleasure to a radical critique:

Kant thought, he was honoring art when among the predicates of beauty he emphasized and gave prominence to those which established the honor of knowledge: impersonality and universality. This is not the place to inquire whether this was essentially a mistake; all I wish to underline is that Kant, like all philosophers, instead of engaging the aesthetic problem from the point of view of the artist (the creator), considered art and the beautiful purely from that of the "spectator," and unconsciously introduced the "spectator" into the concept "beautiful." It would not have been so bad if this "spectator" had at least been sufficiently familiar to the philosophers of beauty—namely, as a great personal fact and experience, as an abundance of vivid authentic experience, desires, surprises, and delights in the realm of the beautiful! But I fear that the reverse has always been the case; and so they have offered us, from the beginning, definitions in which, as in Kant's famous definition of the beautiful, a lack of any refined first-hand experience reposes in the shape of a fat world of error: "That is beautiful," said Kant, "which gives us pleasure *without interest*." Without interest! Compare with this definition one framed by a genuine "spectator" and artist—Sterndhal, who once called the beautiful *une promesse de bonheur*. At any rate he *objected* and repudiated the one point about

the aesthetic condition which Kant had stressed: *disinteressiertheit*. Who is right, Kant or Merdahl?

If our aestheticians never weary of asserting in Kant's favor that, under the spell of beauty, one can *never* view undraped female statues "without interest," one may laugh a little at their expense: the experiences of *eros* on this ticklish point are more "interesting," and Pygmalion was in any event *not* necessarily an "aesthetic man."

The experience of art that is described in these words is in no way an *aesthetik* for Nietzsche. On the contrary: the point is precisely to purify the concept of "beauty" by filtering out the *erotic*, the sensory involvement of the spectator, and thus to consider art from the point of view of its creator. This purification takes place as a reverse of the traditional perspective on the work of art: the aesthetic dimension – the sensible apprehension of the beautiful object on the part of the spectator – is replaced by the creative experience of the artist who sees in his work only *one promise of happiness*, a promise of happiness. Having reached the furthest limit of its destiny in the "hour of the sunniest shadow," art leaves behind the neutral horizon of the aesthetic and recognizes itself in the "golden ball" of the will to power. Pygmalion, the sculptor who becomes so enamored of his creation as to wish that it belonged no longer to art but to life, is the symbol of this turn from the idea of disinterested beauty as a denominator of art to the idea of happiness, that is, of an unlimited growth and strengthening of the vital values, while the focal point of the reflection on art moves from the disinterested spectator to the interested artist.

In foreseeing this change, Nietzsche was a good prophet as usual. If one compares what he writes in the third essay of the *Genealogy of Morals* with the terms Antonin Artaud uses in the preface to *Theater and Its Double* to describe the agony of Western culture, one notices, precisely on this point, a surprising agreement in their views: "It is our accidental idea of art that has caused us to lose culture. . . . To our inert and disinterested idea of art an authentic culture opposes a violently egoistic and magical, i.e., *interested* idea."¹² In a sense, the idea that art is not a disinterested experience was perfectly familiar in other eras. When Artaud, in "Theater and

Plague," remembers the decree issued by Scipio Nasica, the grand pontiff who had the Roman theaters razed, and the fury with which Saint Augustine attacks the "scenic games," responsible for the death of the soul, one can hear in his words the nostalgia that a soul such as his, who thought that theater drew its only worth "from an excruciating magical relation to reality and danger," must have felt for a time that had such a concrete and interested notion of the theater as to deem it necessary to destroy it for the health of soul and city. It is no élan, it is superfluous to note that today it would be impossible to find such ideas even among censors. However, it may be useful to point out that the first time that something similar to an authoritarian examination of the aesthetic phenomenon appears in European medieval society, it takes the form of aversion and repugnance toward art, in the instructions given by those bishops who, faced with the musical innovations of the *ars nova*, prohibited the modulation of the song and the *factio vocis* during the religious services because they distracted the faithful with their charm. Thus, among the statements in favor of interested art, Nietzsche might have cited a passage in Plato's *Republic* that is often invoked when speaking about art, even though this has not made the paradoxical attitude that is expressed there any less scandalous to the modern ear. Plato, as is well known, sees the poet as a danger and a cause of ruin for the city:

If a man who was capable by his cunning of assuming every kind of shape and imitating all things should arrive in our city, bringing with himself the poems which he wished to exhibit, we should fall down and worship him as a holy and wondrous and delightful creature, but should say to him that there is no man of that kind among us in our city, nor is it lawful for such a man to arise among us, and we should send him away to another city, after putting myth down over his head and crowning him with fillets of wood.

"We can admit no poetry into our city," adds Plato with an expression that shocks our aesthetic sensibility, "save only hymns to the gods and the praises of good men."²

Even before Plato, however, a condemnation of art, or at least a

suspicious stare toward it, had already been expressed in the words of a poet, namely Sophocles, at the end of the first stasimon of his *Antigone*. After characterizing man, insofar as he is the one who has νόστος (that is, in the broad meaning the Greeks gave this term, the ability to produce, to bring a thing from nonbeing into being), as the most uncanny thing there is, the chorus continues by saying that this power can lead to happiness as easily as to ruin, and concludes with a wish that recalls the Platonic ban on poets: "Not by my fire, / never to share my thoughts, who does these things."²

Edgar Wind has observed that the reason why Plato's statement is so surprising to us is that art does not exert the same influence on us as it did on him.³ Only because art has left the sphere of *intéress* to become merely *interesting* do we welcome it so warmly. In a draft of *The Man Without Qualities* that Robert Musil wrote at a time when the definitive design of his novel was not yet clear in his mind, Ulrich (who still appears with his earlier name, Anders) enters the room where Agathe is playing the piano and feels an obscure and irresistible impulse that drives him to fire some gun shots at the instrument that is diffusing through the house such a "desolatingly" beautiful harmony. As for us, however, it is likely that if we attempted to go to the bottom of the peaceful contemplation that we, unlike Ulrich, usually reserve for works of art, we would eventually find ourselves in agreement with Nietzsche, who thought that his time had no right to answer Plato's question about art's moral influence, since "even if we had the art—where do we see the influence, any influence from art?"⁴ Plato, and Greek classical antiquity in general, had a very different experience of art, an experience having little to do with disinterest and aesthetic enjoyment. The power of art over the soul seemed to him so great that he thought it could by itself destroy the very foundations of his city; but nonetheless, while he was forced to banish it, he did so reluctantly, "since we ourselves are very conscious of her spell."⁵ The term he uses when he wants to define the effects of inspired imagination is θείον νόστος, "divine terror," a term that we, benevolent spectators, no doubt find inappropriate to define our reactions, but

that nevertheless is found with increasing frequency, after a certain time, in the notes in which modern artists attempt to capture their experience of art.

It appears, in fact, that simultaneously with the process through which the spectator insinuates himself into the concept of "art," confining it to the τόπος οὐράνιος, the heavenly place of aesthetics, we see the opposite process taking place from the point of view of the artist. For the one who creates it, art becomes an increasingly uncanny experience, with respect to which speaking of interest is at the very least a euphemism, because what is at stake seems to be not in any way the production of a beautiful work but instead the life and death of the author, or at least his or her spiritual health. To the increasing innocence of the spectator's experience in front of the beautiful object corresponds the increasing danger inherent in the artist's experience, for whom art's *promesse de bonheur* becomes the poison that contaminates and destroys his existence. The idea that extreme risk is implicit in the artist's activity begins to gain currency, almost as though—so thought Baudelaire—it were a sort of duel to the death "où l'artiste crie de frayeur avant d'être vaincu" ("where the artist cries out in fright before being defeated"); and to prove how little this idea is merely one metaphor among those forming the "properties" of the "literary historic," it suffices to quote what Hölderlin wrote on the brink of madness: "I fear that I might end like the old Tantalus who received more from the Gods than he could take," and "I may say that Agullo struck me."⁸ Or the note found in Van Gogh's pocket on the day of his death: "Well, as for my own work, I risk my life in it and my sanity has already half melted away in it." Or Rilke, in a letter to Clara Rilke: "Works of art are always the product of a risk one has run, of an experience taken to its extreme limit, to the point where man can no longer go on."

Another notion that we encounter more and more frequently in artists' opinions is that art is something fundamentally dangerous not only for the one who produces it but for society as well. Hölderlin, in the notes in which he attempts to condense the meaning of his unfinished tragedy, finds a close connection, almost

a unity between the principle of the Agōgeitans' anarchic nihilism and Empedocles' titanic poetry; and he appears, in a projected hymn, to consider art the essential cause that led to the ruin of Greece:

for they wanted to found
a kingdom of art. But they missed
the national [*das Nationalistische*] in the attempt
and wretchedly
Greece, the highest beauty, was ruined.⁷

And it is likely that in all of modern literature neither Monsieur Teste, nor Welf Röme, nor Adrian Leverkühn would disagree with him, but only a character with such seemingly hopeless bad taste as Romain Rolland's Jean Christophe.

Everything, then, leads one to think that if today we gave the artists themselves the task of judging whether art should be allowed in the city, they would judge from their own experience and agree with Plato on the necessity of banishing it. If this is true, then the entrance of art into the aesthetic dimension — and the understanding of it, starting from the *αἰσθητικὸς* of the spectator—is not as innocent and natural a phenomenon as we commonly think. Perhaps nothing is more urgent—if we really want to engage the problem of art in our time—than a *destruction* of aesthetics that would, by clearing away what is usually taken for granted, allow us to bring into question the very meaning of aesthetics as the science of the work of art. The question, however, is whether the time is ripe for such a *destruction*, or whether instead the consequence of such an act would not be the loss of any possible horizon for the understanding of the work of art and the creation of an abyss in front of it that could only be crossed with a radical leap. But perhaps just such a loss and such an abyss are what we most need if we want the work of art to reacquire its original stature. And if it is true that the fundamental architectural problem becomes visible only in the house ravaged by fire, then perhaps we are today in a privileged position to understand the authentic significance of the Western aesthetic project.

Fourteen years before Nietzsche published the third essay of the *Genealogy of Morals*, a poet, whose word remains inscribed like a Medusa's head in the casting of Western art, had asked poetry neither to produce beautiful works nor to respond to a disinterested aesthetic ideal, but to change man's life and to open the gates of Eden for him. In this experience, in which *le magique étude du bonheur* (the magical study of happiness) obscures all other desire to the point of becoming the sole faculty of poetry and life, Rimbaud had encountered Terror. Thus the "embarkation for the island of Cythera" of modern art was to lead the artist not to the promised happiness but to a conjunction with the Most Uncanny, with the divine terror that had driven Plato to banish the poets from his city. Only if understood as the final moment of this ongoing process, through which art purifies itself of the spectator to find itself faced by an absolute threat, does Nietzsche's invocation in the preface to the *Gay Science* acquire all its enigmatic meaning: "Añ, if you could really understand why we of all people need art . . ." but "another kind of art . . . an art for artists, for artists only!"¹⁰

§ 2 Frenhofer and His Double

How can art, this most innocent of occupations, pit man against terror? In *Les fleurs de l'acier*, Jean Paulhan takes as his premise a fundamental ambiguity in language—namely, the fact that it is constituted on the one hand by signs that are perceived by the senses, and on the other by ideas associated with these signs in such a way as to be immediately evoked by them—and makes a distinction between two kinds of writers. There are the Rhetoricians, who dissolve all meaning into form and make form into the sole law of literature, and the Terrorists, who refuse to bend to this law and instead pursue the opposite dream of a language that would be nothing but meaning, of a thought in whose flame the sign would be fully consumed, putting the writer face to face with the Absolute. The Terrorist is a misologist, and does not recognize in the drop of water that remains on his fingertips the sea in which he thought he had immersed himself; the Rhetorician looks to the words and appears to distrust thought.

That the work of art is something other than what is simple in it is almost too obvious. This is what the Greeks expressed with the concept of allegory: the work of art *ἄλλο λεγομένη*, communicates something else, is something other than the *material* that contains it.¹ But there are objects—for example, a block of stone, a drop of water, and generally all natural objects—in which form seems to be determined and almost canceled out by matter, and other ob-

jects—a vase, a spade, or any other man-made object—in which form seems to be what determines matter. The dream of the Terror is to create works that are in the world in the same way as the block of stone or the drop of water; it is the dream of a *product* that exists according to the statute of the *thing*. “Les chefs-d’œuvres sont bêtes,” wrote Flaubert; “ils ont la même tranquille comme les productions mêmes de la nature, comme les grands animaux et les montagnes” (“Masterpieces are stupid; they have placid faces like the very products of nature, like big animals and mountains”); and Degas, Valéry writes, used to say “C’est plat comme la belle peinture!” (“It’s just as dull as beautiful painting”).²

The painter Freehofer, in Balzac’s *The Unknown Masterpiece*, is the perfect type of the Terrorist. Freehofer has attempted for ten years to create on his canvas something that would not be just a work of art, albeit that of a genius: like Pygmalion, he has raised art with art to make out of his *Swimmer* not an assemblage of signs and colors but the living reality of his thought and his imagination. He tells his two visitors, “My painting [*ma peinture*], is not a painting, but a feeling, a passion! Born in my studio, it [*elle*] must remain here as a virgin and not leave if not covered.” And later: “You are in front of a woman, and you are looking for a picture. There is such depth on this canvas, its air is so true, that you can’t distinguish it from the air that surrounds us. Where is art? Lost, vanished!” But in this quest for absolute meaning, Freehofer has succeeded only in obscuring his idea and erasing from the canvas any human form, disfiguring it into “a chaos of colors, tones, hesitating nuances, a kind of shapeless fog.” In front of this absurd wall of paint, the young Poussin’s cry—“but sooner or later he will have to realize that there is nothing on his canvas!”—sounds like an alarm responding to the threat that the Terror starts posing for Western art.³

But let us take a second look at Freehofer’s painting. On the canvas there is only a confused mass of colors contained inside a jumble of indecipherable lines. All meaning has been dissolved, all content has vanished, except the tip of a foot that stands out from the rest of the canvas “like the torso of a Venus sculpted in Paros

marble standing among the ruins of a city destroyed by fire" (*Chef d'œuvre*, p. 305). The quest for absolute meaning has devoured all meaning, allowing only signs, meaningless forms, to survive. But, then, isn't the unknown masterpiece instead the masterpiece of Rhetoric? Has the meaning erased the sign, or has the sign abolished the meaning? And here the Terrorist comes face to face with the paradox of the Terror. In order to leave the extraneous world of forms, he has no other means than form itself, and the more he wants to erase it, the more he has to concentrate on it to render it permeable to the inexpressible content he wants to express. But in the attempt, he ends up with nothing in his hands but signs—signs that, although they have traversed the limbo of non-meaning, are no less extraneous to the meaning he was pursuing. Fleeing from Rhetoric has led him to the Terror, but the Terror brings him back to its opposite, Rhetoric. Thus mythology has to turn itself over into philology, and sign and meaning chase each other in a perpetual vicious circle.

The couple signifier-signified is, in fact, so indissolubly part of our linguistic heritage—of our language conceived metaphysically as φωνή σημασις, as signifying sound—that any attempt to get over it without moving at the same time beyond the limits of metaphysics is destined to fail short of its aim. Modern literature offers all too many examples of this paradoxical destiny awaiting the Terror. The whole man of the Terror is also an *homme-phème*, and it is needless to recall that one of the purest interpreters of the Terror in literature, Mallarmé, is also the one who made the book into the most perfect universe. Artaud, in the last years of his life, wrote some texts, called *Sépiotes et fragmentations* (Hemlock and fragmentations), in which he intended to dissolve literature entirely into something he had at other times called the theater in the sense in which the alchemists called *Theatrum Chemicum* the description of their spiritual itinerary, a sense to which we do not come an inch closer when we think of the current meaning of the word "theater" in Western culture. But what has produced this voyage beyond literature, if not signs whose meaninglessness makes us ask questions precisely because we feel that in these signs someone sought, to the

last, the destiny of literature? The only gesture available to the Terror that really wants to reflect itself to its ultimate coherence is that of Rimbaud, the gesture with which, as Mallarmé put it, he surgically removed poetry from himself while alive. But the paradox of the Terror is still present even in this extreme move, for what is the mystery we call Rimbaud if not the point where literature annexes its opposite, namely, silence? Isn't Rimbaud's fame divided, as Blanchot rightly observed, between "the poems that he wrote and those that he did not deign to write?" And isn't this the masterpiece of Rhetoric? One must ask at this point whether the opposition of Terror and Rhetoric may not conceal something more than an empty reflection on a perennial riddle, and whether the insistence with which modern art has remained entangled in it may reveal a phenomenon of a different kind.

What happens to Trenhofer? So long as no other eye contemplated his masterpiece, he did not doubt his success for one moment; but one look at the canvas through the eyes of his two spectators is enough for him to appropriate Porbus's and Poussin's opinion: "Nothing! Nothing! And I worked on this for ten years" (*Chef d'oeuvre*, p. 306). Trenhofer becomes double. He moves from the point of view of the artist to that of the spectator, from the interested *promesse de bonheur* to disinterested aesthetics. In this transition, the integrity of his work dissolves. For it is not only Trenhofer that becomes double, but his work as well; just as in some combinations of geometric figures, which, if observed for a long time, acquire a different arrangement, from which one cannot return to the previous one except by closing one's eyes, so his work alternately presents two sides that cannot be put back together into a unity. The side that faces the artist is the living reality in which he reads his promise of happiness; but the other side, which faces the spectator, is an assemblage of lifeless elements that can only mirror itself in the aesthetic judgment's reflection of it.

This doubling between art as it is lived by the spectator, on the one hand, and art as it is lived by the artist on the other is indeed Terror, and thus the opposition between Terror and Rhetoric brings us back to the opposition between artists and spectators from

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