

## Agamben and Lacan (by way of Joyce). A short note about *L'uso dei corpi* (2014).

The almost invincible force of language is into its own weakness, in its being unthought and not-said into what is said and into which is said about what is said (Agamben, 2014, p. 343)<sup>1</sup>.

La question est plutôt de savoir pourquoi un homme normal, dit normal, ne s'aperçoit pas que la parole est un parasite, que la parole est un placage, que la parole est la forme de cancer don't l'être humain est affligé. Comment y en a-t-il qui vont jusqu'à le sentir? Il est certain que là-dessus Joyce nous donne un petit soupçon (Lacan, 2005, p. 95)<sup>2</sup>.

*L'uso dei corpi* (*The use of the bodies*) is the last volume of a unitary series of books begun with *Homo sacer* (1995). It is a very important book, which contains a lot of different thesis and analysis. In this short note I will concentrate myself on the apparent coincidence – even if the name of Jacques Lacan is never quoted in this book – between the notion of «forma-di-vita» (*life-form*) and the Jacques Lacan notion of «sinthome» (Lacan, 1975-1976). It is a notion that Lacan elaborated in the *Seminar*

*XXIII*, dedicated to James Joyce, which somewhat fulfills the same logical and ontological functions Agamben assigned to the notion of «forma-di-vita». It is important to correctly quote this notion, «forma-di-vita» everything attached, because Agamben explicitly stresses that it is not equivalent to a «forma di vita» (*form of life*). A «forma-di-vita» it «is a life that cannot be never separated from its own form, a life where it is not possible to isolate and to maintain as disjoint something like a bare life» (Agamben, 2014, p. 264)<sup>3</sup>. Each of us lives a life in a determinate socio-historical form: as woman or man, as professor or student, as Italian or Turkish, as old or young and so on. That is, every (human) life is cast in some form (this is the *Geworfenheit* — *thrownness* — Heidegger wrote of in 1927 *Being ant Time*). The point is that no one had decided the form where s/he is thrown in. From this point of view, each of us lives the life that s/he did not decide to live. It is important to note that the *Subject* too is a form of life that the human organism receives from the outside. Such a situation produces a being which is cut off into two parts, body and mind, bare life and 'I', physiological machine and person. On the contrary, a «forma-di-vita» is a life that has become all one with the form it received. Now the body does not simply suffer from the accidental forms it received during ontogenesis; at the end the body is able to make some *use* of the form it casually and historically embodies. Form and body are no more separated, now there is a 'new' entity (it would be more correct to define it as a 'new' mode of being of the 'old' body), that is no more marked by transcendence and separateness: «a form of life can develops itself, in its own facticity and thingness, in *life-form*, where it is impossible to separate

<sup>1</sup> La forza quasi invincibile del linguaggio è nella sua debolezza, nel suo rimanere impensato e non-detto in ciò che si dice e in ciò di cui si dice [The translations from *L'uso dei corpi* and from *Le sinthome* are of the Author].

<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the problem is to understand why an ordinary man, the so-called ordinary man, does not realize that language is a parasite, it is a plating, it is the human form of cancer that afflicts him. Why does not anyone feel that? It is certain that Joyce gives thereupon us a suspicion.

<sup>3</sup> Una vita che non può mai essere separata dalla sua forma, una vita in cui non è mai possibile isolare e mantenere disgiunta qualcosa come una nuda vita.

something like a bare life» (p. 268)<sup>4</sup>. In this sense «into the life-form activity and passivity coincide» (p. 350)<sup>5</sup>. A «bare life» is simply the opposite side of the mind; into a «forma-di-vita» such a division is no more operating, and such form that once was a destiny can be somewhat used by the body.

The notion of «forma-di-vita» has to be framed into the philosophical problem of *immanence*, that is, a condition that is no more marked by such ancient divisions of Western philosophy and politics as *zoè* and *bios*, bare life and rational life, body and mind, multitude and State. The notion of immanence tries to catch a yet unthought condition, which neutralizes such distinctions (Cimatti, 2014): «the plane of immanence thus functions as a principle of virtual indetermination, in which the vegetative and the animal, (the inside and the outside and even the organic and the inorganic), in passing through one another, cannot be told apart» (Agamben, 1999, p. 233). From *Homo sacer* forward Agamben tried to define the characters of a «coming philosophy» where «“life” designates nothing more and nothing less than *the immanence of desire to itself*» (p. 235). Therefore, in general terms a «forma-di-vita» is a human life that is no more cut off into two parts: the animal and the rational, the physiological and the ethical, the private and the political.

The first point worth stressing is to understand why human experience has been subjected to such a split. Human being *is* such a split. According to Agamben – who from this point of view is a perfect example of analytic philosopher, that is, a philosopher who considers language as the human essence (Dummett, 1996; Virno, 2004) – the ground of human experience is exactly language. The specific effect that language produces on human being is the very institution of a separation between the body from one side and a mind – the “I” –

on the other. When something receives a name, an irremediable separation is traced between what the name refers to – the substance – and the characteristics such an object is supposed to own:

the being which is called into question by the language point of view, from the very beginning divides itself into an existentive being (the existing being, the first *ousia*) and into a predicative being (the second *ousia*, what is said about the first one): therefore the task of thought will be to recompose in a unity what thought – that is, the language – presupposed and divided (Agamben, 2014, p. 160)<sup>6</sup>.

Human life and nature are affected by such an «ontological apparatus» [*dispositivo ontologico*]. It is an *ontological* apparatus, because it literally ‘creates’ the entities human world is made of: bodies, animals, objects, States, subjects and so on; it is an ontological *apparatus* because it works on his own, somewhat impersonally and automatically. Whatever an entity passes through the «ontological apparatus» it becomes an object, that is an entity that is individuated in space and time: «in the very gesture with whom language splits the being, it produces the time» (p. 168)<sup>7</sup>. The starting point of Agamben philosophical work lies in a deep and quite unusual awareness of the power language exercises on human experience. The basic idea is that the very fact of speaking dramatically changes the way human beings make experience of their own life and world. From this point of view, language is the unique «transcendental» of *Homo sapiens*, that is, it is the non-human principle, which determines the *whole* of human experience. Apart from Agamben, Jacques Lacan only has been able to see with such an intensity

<sup>4</sup> Una forma di vita può diventare, nella sua stessa fatticità e cosalità, *forma-di-vita*, in cui non è mai possibile isolare qualcosa come una nuda vita.

<sup>5</sup> Nella forma-di-vita, attività e passività coincidono.

<sup>6</sup> Chiamato in causa dal punto di vista del linguaggio, l’essere si scinde fin dall’inizio in un essere esistentivo (l’esistenza, l’*ousia* prima) e in un essere predicativo (l’*ousia* seconda, che di esso si dice): compito del pensiero sarà allora quello di ricomporre in unità ciò che il pensiero – il linguaggio – ha presupposto e diviso.

<sup>7</sup> Nello stesso tempo con cui scinde l’essere, il linguaggio produce il tempo.

how huge is the effect that language has on human life. Agamben, like Lacan, looks for a way to imagine a human organism, which passes through language (what Lacan calls the Symbolic), and it reemerges in a completely new form: «the fundamental relation — the onto-logical relation — takes place between the entity and the language, between the being and its being said or named. The *logos* is such a relation, where the entity and its being said are in the same time identical and different, remote and inseparable» (p. 343)<sup>8</sup>.

At the very center of any «forma-di-vita» is the notion of «uso» (*use*). First of all, to use something doesn't imply that what is used is also possessed by the user. A use is a gentle and unobtrusive action. The use of something participates to the flow of life: a body uses a path in the woods, but it doesn't need to possess such a path; another body uses a leaf to collect water from a stream, but the water isn't its own water; finally a body eats another body because it needs food for living. In this extreme case too the eaten body is not a possessor of the first one: life implies that each body eats some other body. While use doesn't run out what it is being used, the consume — on the contrary — leaves nothing behind. A «forma-di-vita» is the use of itself. Every body is cast in some form — a form of life — there is no life which is not cast in a particular form. When such a body becomes able to use the form it is cast into, then the life it accidentally lived can become the life it chooses to live: this is «the capacity to “use” the factitious condition in whom everybody finds itself» (p. 87)<sup>9</sup>. This is not properly a new body, rather it a different way to make experience of the ‘old’ form the body once lived in: «the “new creature” there is nothing than the capacity to make inoperative and to use in a new way the old

one» (Ibidem)<sup>10</sup>. A body only that is able to make use of itself it is somewhat free (where the factitious body's *thrownness* into a form becomes a *thrownness* endorsed by the body). It is important to observe that what is at stake here is only a body; in this analysis, there is no more space for the subject. Each subject is the master of the body, which is in a condition of slavery in respect to the subject. In such a case, the subject is exactly the form that does not coincide with the life. The subject — that is, in juridical terminology a *person* — needs private property, fences, police force. The subject consumes, while the body uses. The subject places itself outside from the world, while the body is part of the world. When the very distinction between form and life is made inoperative («inoperosa»), there is «a neutralization of the opposition subject/object, therefore there is no place here for a subject who is proprietary of the habit, a subject who can decide to put or not to put in place it. The self, which is constituted inside the relation of use, it is not a subject; it is nothing else that such a relation» (p. 90)<sup>11</sup>.

Therefore, a «forma-di-vita» embodies a use that is neither a knowledge nor a possession of what it is being used, because a subject only can know or possess something: «*the use, like the habit, is a life-form, it is not a knowledge or the faculty of a subject*» (p. 92)<sup>12</sup>. The similarity of such a condition to animality condition is apparent (Cimatti, 2013). Agamben dedicated a whole book to this topic (Agamben, 2002), but in *L'uso dei corpi* only he seems to realize that the very idea of a «forma-di-vita» is very similar to what a *human animality* could be. The very possibility of a «forma-di-vita» implies that the metaphysical distinctions between subject and object — form and life — are made

<sup>8</sup> La relazione fondamentale — la relazione onto-logica — corre tra l'ente e il linguaggio, tra l'essere e il suo esser detto o nominato. Il *logos* è questa relazione, in cui l'ente e il suo esser detto sono insieme identici e differenti, remoti e indistinguibili.

<sup>9</sup> [Si tratta] della capacità di “usare” la condizione fattizia in cui ciascuno si trova.

<sup>10</sup> La “nuova creatura” non è che la capacità di rendere inoperosa e usare in nuovo modo la vecchia.

<sup>11</sup> [S]e questo [...] implica una neutralizzazione dell'opposizione soggetto/oggetto, allora non vi è qui posto per un soggetto proprietario dell'abito, che possa decidere di metterlo o non metterlo in opera. Il sé, che si costituisce nella relazione d'uso, non è un soggetto, non è altro che questa relazione.

<sup>12</sup> *L'uso, come l'abito, è una forma-di-vita e non il sapere o la facoltà di un soggetto.*

completely inoperative. The body inside a «forma-di-vita» is a living body like any other living beings; however, it is different from the body of a non-human animal because *this* body only passed through language. A «forma-di-vita» is exactly what a human body could be that *lives like a (human) animal*:

against the prestige of knowledge into our culture, it is again and again the case to remember that sensation and habit, like the use of itself, articulate a non knowledge zone, that is not a mystic fog in which the subject stray itself, on the contrary it is the habitual home where the living being, before any subjectification, it is completely at ease. If the gestures and acts of the animal are agile and graceful (“no animal is clumsy in the use of itself”), that is because no act, no gesture represents for it a “deed” of whom it places itself like the responsible author and the conscious creator (pp. 94-95)<sup>13</sup>.

Agamben through his characteristic movement of thought looks for an intermediate space *between* the classical philosophical oppositions. In particular, in this case the notion of «forma-di-vita» makes inoperative the distinctions between ethics and esthetics. A life-form is the life a body lives because it is the life it somewhat chooses to live in; in this sense it is the *right* life it ‘wishes’ to live (ethics). At the same time such a life doesn’t aim to nothing else that exactly the actual life it is being lived. In this sense what only matters is the *experience* — esthetics — of living the life

it really lives. The right life is the life the body is actually making experience of: «*the ethical experience is not what the subject holds behind, or above or under its own life, rather it is the life where the subject constitutes and transforms itself in a indissoluble immanent relation to its own life, while it is living it*» (p. 143)<sup>14</sup>. While the form of life is undergone like a destiny — a condition which excludes the very possibility of finding its own way of living — life-form is such a life where each body can attain a condition of happiness, because such a possibility only exists when the body can ‘freely’ participate to the life is living. Therefore, what is at stake here is the possibility «to place happiness into the life» (p. 277)<sup>15</sup>. This an happiness which is completely different from the many forms of transcendent happiness philosophy proposed. A transcendent happiness is located before or beyond the actual life a body is living. In such a case the body in fact is separated from happiness; it is something to regret or to desire. On the contrary a «forma-di-vita» is happy — if and when it is happy — here and now, just because it is the life the body lives: «the happy life presents itself here like a life that doesn’t possess its own form as a part or a quality, but it *is* such a form, it is fully passed in this [form] [...]. In this new and extreme dimension, the ancient opposition between *bios* and *zoè* definitively loses any sense» (p. 279)<sup>16</sup>.

Let us try to resume what has been said so far. Language, that is the «ontological apparatus», opens into the human experience a deep cut (cfr. Cimatti, in press), the opposition/separation between mind and body, which is the matrix of all other oppositions that all together sign human life

<sup>13</sup> Contro il prestigio della conoscenza nella nostra cultura, occorre sempre di nuovo ricordare che la sensazione e l’abitudine, come l’uso di sé, articolano una zona di non conoscenza, che non è qualcosa come una nebbia mistica in cui il soggetto si smarrisce, ma la dimora abituale in cui il vivente, prima di ogni soggettivazione, è perfettamente a suo agio. Se i gesti e gli atti dell’animale sono agili e graziosi (“nessun animale è maldestro nell’uso di sé”), ciò è perché nessun atto, nessun gesto costituisce per lui un’“opera” di cui si pone come l’autore responsabile e il consapevole creatore.

<sup>14</sup> *Ed etica non è l’esperienza in cui un soggetto si tiene dietro, sopra o sotto la propria vita, ma quella il cui soggetto si costituisce e trasforma in indissolubile relazione immanente alla sua vita, vivendo la sua vita.*

<sup>15</sup> [Si tratta] di situare la felicità nella vita.

<sup>16</sup> La vita felice si presenta qui come una vita che non possiede la sua forma come una parte o come una qualità, ma è questa forma, è integralmente passata in essa [...]. In questa nuove ed estrema dimensione, l’antica opposizione di *bios* e *zoè* perde definitivamente il suo senso.

and world. In this book, Agamben tries to imagine a new concept — «forma-di-vita» ≠ form of life — that has the function to help us imagining how a human life could be beyond such a cut. More precisely, Agamben tries to imagine a life that could dwell just in the opposition between body and mind, *bios* and *zoè*. Such a life is the «forma-di-vita». It is a life without any form of transcendence; therefore, it is a life without subject, mind, State, religion, psychoanalysis and so on. It is a life, which simply coincides with itself, «it is a being that is its own way of being» (p. 286)<sup>17</sup>:

The life-form is not something like a subject, who pre-exists to life and who gives it substance and reality. On the contrary, it generates itself by living, it is “the result of what it is the form”, therefore — in respect to the living — it hasn’t any priority, neither substantial nor transcendental. It is only a way of being and living, that in no manner determines the living, as it is not determined by it, even if it is inseparable by it (Ibidem)<sup>18</sup>.

A life-form is a life that is not lived in order to attain some other state, in this sense it is a inoperative life (every operation is in sight of a goal, it is enslaved to such a goal). In particular, it is a life that does not need to work (i. e., wage labor), because it needs nothing more than what allows it to live. It is a life, which unaware respects the world, because it uses it, it does not consume it. According to Agamben there are only two ways of living, which have such character: politics and art. In this paper, I will

concentrate myself on the artistic mode alone, because it is the mode that shows the major similarities with Lacan. The starting point is a common observation: «all living beings are in some form of life, but not all of them are (or not always are) a life-form» (p. 350)<sup>19</sup>. That is, a «forma-di-vita» is a condition that a human being could attain, but it is not a ‘natural’ condition (this means that an effective human animality is completely artificial). A «forma-di-vita» is a condition a human being only can arrive to if s/he tries to transform the factitious form of life it has been thrown in into a «forma-di-vita». Here the similarity with the psychoanalytical experience begins to be visible. The «forma-di-vita» is a repeatedly sought state of a body, which more and more is capable to dwell into the very life it already lives in. That is, a «forma-di-vita» is the condition a body can only attain when it arrives to embody integrally the form is has been cast into at birth:

the constitution of a life-form integrally coincides with, then, the destitution of the social and biological conditions where it has been thrown in. The life-form is, in this sense, the revocation of all the factitious vocations, which deposes and stresses from within in the very same gesture in which it keeps itself and dwells inside them (Ibidem)<sup>20</sup>.

Such a «particular absence of deed» (p. 351)<sup>21</sup> is what characterizes art. That is, such a peculiar human activity that does not intend to mean or express anything. In artistic experience, the body makes something that is not designed for any

<sup>17</sup> [U]n essere che è il suo modo di essere.

<sup>18</sup> La forma-di-vita non è qualcosa come un soggetto, che preesiste al vivere e gli dà sostanza e realtà. Al contrario, essa si genera vivendo, è “prodotta da ciò stesso di cui è forma” e non ha, pertanto, rispetto al vivere, alcuna priorità, né sostanziale né trascendentale. Essa è solo una maniera di essere e vivere, che non determina in alcun modo il vivente, così come non ne è in alcun modo determinata ed è, tuttavia, inseparabile da esso.

<sup>19</sup> Tutti gli esseri viventi sono in una forma di vita, ma non tutti sono (o non sempre sono) una forma-di-vita.

<sup>20</sup> La costituzione di una forma-di-vita coincide, cioè, integralmente con la destituzione delle condizioni sociali e biologiche in cui essa si trova gettata. La forma-di-vita è, in questo senso, la revocazione di tutte le vocazioni fattizie, che depone e mette in tensione dall’interno nel gesto stesso in cui si mantiene e dimora in esse.

<sup>21</sup> La particolare assenza di opera che siamo abituati a chiamare [...] arte.

specific purpose. The artistic object is the inoperative object par excellence. This is a doing, which does not produce anything. Here Agamben meets Lacan, although he does not tell it us explicitly.

Turn back to language. The proper character of every linguistic sign is that it 'refers' to something that is not present. That is, language is transcendence; language pushes away the body from itself into the past or the future. In this sense, the peculiar deed of language is to cut off the human organism from itself. In the *Seminar XXIII* Jacques Lacan faces a similar problem to the one Agamben tries to think of by elaborating the notion of «forma-divita». Lacan's starting point is the ancient semiological notion of "symptom". When a hysterical body is unable to raise its own right arm, such an anatomical impossibility is a *sign* of an inner conflict. That is, in such a case the body is literally become a sign, the body literally *is* language. This means that the hysteric body is worth nothing by itself, because its value is placed beyond such very same body: it lies in the *meaning* of the symptom, for example into the psyche. What Lacan looks for is a body that is no more a sign, rather a body that is full, that is worth by itself (while the value of a sign is its meaning). What Lacan is looking for is a sign that is no more a sign, like what Agamben is looking for is a form of life where form and life are no more simply juxtaposed and became a life-form. In order to individuate such a body that is no more a sign Lacan thinks up the notion of «sinthome», which is the ancient writing of the actual French *symptôme*. A «sinthome» is such a body that has passed through the experience of being split by language, and that found a way to recompose what language divided.

According to Jacques Lacan, human world is made of three registers: Real, Imaginary and Symbolic. A «sinthome» is the unique and contingent way each human body finds to hold together these three registers: «it is something which allows to the symbolic, imaginary and real to keep all together, though [...] any of them holds together with

the others» (Lacan, 2005, p. 94)<sup>22</sup>. The three registers affect human body in some way (*a form* whatsoever), which is not chosen by the body. In such a case, the affected body is just a sign of the form it has been cast into. Take the case of a woman: she speaks a language, she dresses in a certain way, and she loves in a determinate way, and so on. All these behaviors refer to the forms she has been raised in. The forms have been these ones, but they could have been others. Whether such a thing like a human charge exists, this is the charge of completely embodying the casual form one is born inside. According to Lacan, James Joyce «sinthome» was the new language he invented in *Finnegans Wake* (1939). Take the case of its famous beginning: «riverrun, past Eve and Adam's, from swerve of shore to bend of bay, brings us by a commodius vicus of recirculation back to Howth Castle and Environs». It seems English, but it is not *really* English. It is not so important to establish *what* the language Joyce actually used is. What is worth remembering is that such a language is *his own* language. That is, this is not the form Joyce has been cast into at birth, on the contrary is a form he invented by himself. *This* is the «sinthome» that Joyce made at the end of his life, that is, his own peculiar way of using the form of life – in this case the English language – he was born into. The *Finnegans Wake* language coincides with Joyce's «forma-divita». The language of *Finnegans Wake* embodies the peculiar *use* Joyce makes of 'his' mother language (this is a very precise expression: it is the language of Joyce's mother, it is not his own language). The passage from a factitious form of life to one's own life-form is exactly the same passage from English to *Finnegans Wake* language: «one is responsible of oneself to the extent of its own know-how. What such a know-how is? This is the art, the artifice, what gives to the art one is able [to do] its own value» (p. 61)<sup>23</sup>. While everyone simply uses the form of life one is born into, James Joyce is the example of someone who is able *to make use* of 'his' own life. This is the passage to a «forma-di-

<sup>22</sup> C'est le quelque chose qui permet au symbolique, à l'imaginaire et au réel de continuer de tenir ensemble, quoique là, en raison des deux erreurs, aucun ne tient plus avec l'autre.

<sup>23</sup> On n'est responsable que dans la mesure de son savoir-faire. Qu'est-ce que c'est que le savoir-faire? C'est l'art, l'artifice, ce qui donne à l'art don't on est capable une valeur remarquable.

vita», from being-used by a form of life to the immanent use of a life-form. Joyce's writing «disjoins English language [...]. This is truly a process that exercises itself in the sense of giving to the language one is writing in another usage, which anyhow is far from the ordinary one» (p. 74)<sup>24</sup>. The passage from the symptom to the «sinthome» is the same passage that Agamben analyzed in the last page of *L'uso dei corpi*, when he writes about «contemplation and worklessness» which «free the living human being from any biological or social destiny and from any predetermined task, and make it available to such a particular absence of deed we are accustomed to call [...] art» (Agamben, 2014, p. 351)<sup>25</sup>. Art means by itself, that is, art does not mean anything, «because the sinthome abolishes the symptom» (p. 164)<sup>26</sup>. James Joyce tried to make use of himself, that is, he tried to transform the formed body he received at birth into a body which makes use of himself. A form of life is the superimposition of a previous and general form onto a body; on the contrary, a life-form is individual, like any artistic object is unique: «the sinthome [...] is what is singular in any individual, [...] it identifies itself with the *individual*» (p. 168)<sup>27</sup>.

Lacan and Agamben try to think what a humanity could be, which ceases to be spoken by language and form (or religion and economics), a humanity which finds in itself its own value. Such a life would be the life of a living being which is completely immanent, a life where the bodies are no more instruments. *L'uso dei corpi* is a use, which is neither a consumption nor an abuse of them. It is simply a *life* (Deleuze, 1995).

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<sup>24</sup> Joyce écrit l'anglais avec ces raffinements particuliers qui font que, la langue, anglaise en l'occasion, il la désarticule. [...] C'est vraiment un processus qui s'exerce dans le sens de donner à la langue dans laquelle il écrit un autre usage, en tout cas un usage qui est loin d'être ordinaire.

<sup>25</sup> Contemplazione e inoperosità [...] liberando il vivente uomo da ogni destino biologico o sociale e da ogni compito predeterminato, lo rendono disponibile per quella particolare assenza di opera che siamo abituati a chiamare [...] arte.

<sup>26</sup> Si je dis Joyce le *Symptôme*, c'est que le symptôme, le symbole, il l'abolit.

<sup>27</sup> C'est en tant que l'inconscient se noue au sinthome, qui est ce qu'il y a de singulier chez chaque individu, qu'on peut dire que Joyce [...] s'identifie à l'*individual*.