

# Sestinas, farce, and rules of religious life: the performative theology of Giorgio Agamben

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## ABSTRACT

It is time that Giorgio Agamben's interest in theology—and in particular theology's literary presentation—was investigated. Ever since the celebrated *The Time That Remains*, Agamben's reading of theological sources—Scripture, the Fathers, Scholastics, Liturgy, even—has been more obvious to those with eyes to see. But of particular interest to this Journal, is the way in which that deep theological interest is allied to Agamben's long association with literature and literary theory. The theory of performative utterances is a particular feature of Agamben's approach, albeit, similarly, passed over in the secondary literature. And the way Agamben appropriates that debate, preferring the work of the French linguist Émile Benveniste over J. L. Austin, is a distinctive contribution to the ongoing fascination with speech-acts. This article is only able to scratch the surface in terms of its implications for theology, and, indeed, for philosophy.

*Key words:* Agamben; speech-acts; *The Time That Remains*; poetry; eschatology.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the serenity of the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, the busy comings and goings of Yale University on all sides, there lies a treasure trove for those intrigued by the work of the contemporary Italian philosopher, Giorgio Agamben (b. 1942). Agamben is best known as a political and juridical philosopher: for his brilliant and sometimes maddening reflections on the nature of human life, and the power of the State concerning that life.<sup>1</sup> But what distinguishes him as a Continental philosopher of note, what will demand the attention of several different disciplines in the future, and even what sets him apart from his oft-partnered contemporaries, Slavoj Žižek and Alain Badiou, is his deep engagement with theology—Scripture, the Fathers, Scholasticism, questions of doctrine, and even modern theology in the form of Barth and

<sup>1</sup> A recent example of a provocative work is Giorgio Agamben's collection of writings concerning Covid19 and the response in particular by the Italian government: *Where Are We Now? The Epidemic as Politics*, trans. Valeria Dani (Rowman & Littlefield, 2021). Agamben's multi-volume collection *Homo Sacer*, finally specified as a "collection" in 2017, comprises nine volumes but with little systematic focus or development. Some of these volumes will be addressed individually in what follows.

others.<sup>2</sup> Agamben's most striking incursion into theology came over twenty years ago with his "Commentary on the Letter to the Romans," *The Time That Remains*.<sup>3</sup> However, the theological focus of Agamben's work has only increased ever since. This article seeks to uncover part of that deepening of Agamben's theological engagement—a trend which has gone largely unnoticed; to expose for the first time the coupling of theology with Agamben's equal interest in literary studies; and to ask what is at stake in the self-consciously literary presentation of theological ideas.

It is true that *The Time That Remains* has piqued the interest of theologians, especially Pauline specialists. In that work, Agamben makes striking eschatological and philosophical claims. He offers a detailed reading of Paul and makes the eye-catching attempt to recover Romans, and Paul's letters more widely, as "the fundamental messianic text[s] for the Western [theological and philosophical] tradition."<sup>4</sup> He demonstrates an affinity between Paul and Walter Benjamin (1892–1940), and argues for the possibility that Benjamin was a close reader of Paul. And all the while Agamben discharges a debt of gratitude in developing the work of Jacob Taubes (1923–1987).<sup>5</sup> But the new interest of modern theology in Agamben has mainly been confined to the question of eschatology, and in particular Agamben's remarks in Chapter 4 of *The Time That Remains* concerning the effect of Christ's resurrection on temporality. This one aspect of this one work by Agamben has been widely considered by theologians, and often simply adopted (in voices as contrasting as Alexandra Brown, Catherine Keller, Graham Ward, and N. T. Wright).<sup>6</sup> But there are other striking claims made in the vein of philosophical theology in that same work. And, as the last two decades have proceeded, there is an increasing torrent of theological writing flowing from Agamben's pen. To name only some of the most notable, there is: the engagement with Aquinas and eschatology in *Nudities* and *The Kingdom and the Garden*; the "Theological Genealogy" of *The Kingdom and the Glory*; the short—*quasi*-homiletic—treatments of *The Mystery of Evil* and *Pilate and Jesus*; the engagement with the nature of Christian liturgy in *Opus Dei* and *The Highest Poverty*; and the Christological reflections inspired by the Neapolitan character of farce, *Pulcinella*.<sup>7</sup> Theology is not a hidden seam in Agamben waiting to be ploughed: it is in plain sight and ever present. So, there is at stake here a question of *theologia prima*—theology as a source for philosophy, theology as the direction and interest in the arts more generally, and in literary studies.<sup>8</sup> This article represents something of a foretaste for a monograph substantiating this claim more extensively.

<sup>2</sup> L. L. Welborn, grouping Agamben together with Slavoj Žižek and Alain Badiou, confidently—but, I argue, misguidedly—asserts: "none of them [are] Christian." They are "secular, indeed irreligious." L. L. Welborn, *Paul's Summons to Messianic Life* (Columbia University Press, 2015), xi.

<sup>3</sup> *Il tempo che resta: un commento alla Lettera ai Romani* (Bollati Boringhieri, 2000). English translation: *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. Patricia Dailey (Stanford University Press, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> Agamben, *Time That Remains*, 1.

<sup>5</sup> Jacob Taubes himself had discerned an affinity between Paul and Walter Benjamin in *The Political Theology of Paul*, ed. Aleida Assmann and Jan Assmann, trans. Dana Hollander (Stanford University Press, 2004), 70–76; Agamben, *Time That Remains*, 2–3.

<sup>6</sup> In his *magnum opus* on Paul, N. T. Wright adopts without hesitation "the remarkable, indeed explosive proposals of Agamben": N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (SPCK, 2013), 556. See also, N. T. Wright, *Paul and His Recent Interpreters* (SPCK, 2015), 315–23. Graham Ward, *Another Kind of Normal* (Oxford University Press, 2022), 122–26. Catherine Keller, *Political Theology of the Earth* (Columbia University Press, 2018), 3–5. Alexandra R. Brown, "Kairos Gathered: Time, Tempo, and Typology in 1 Corinthians," *Interpretation* 72, no. 1 (2018): 43–55. Another recent example is L. Ann Jervis, *Paul and Time* (Baker Academic, 2023) 43–45.

<sup>7</sup> Giorgio Agamben: *Nudities*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford University Press, 2011); *The Kingdom and the Garden*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Seagull Books, 2020); *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government*, trans. Lorenzo Chiesa and Matteo Mandarini (Stanford University Press, 2011); *The Mystery of Evil: Benedict XVI and the End of Days*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford University Press, 2017); *Pilate and Jesus*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford University Press, 2015); *Opus Dei: An Archaeology of Duty*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford University Press, 2013); *The Highest Poverty: Monastic Rules and Form-of-Life*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford University Press, 2013); *Pulcinella: Or, Entertainment for Kids in Four Scenes*, trans. Kevin Attell (Seagull Books, 2018).

<sup>8</sup> I am therefore seeking to reverse the priorities of Colby Dickinson and Adam Kotsko's otherwise fascinating *Agamben's Coming Philosophy: Finding a New Use for Theology* (Rowman & Littlefield International, 2015). Dickinson himself laments that four years after his own *Agamben and Theology* (T&T Clark, 2011), Agamben's "theological claims [have] almost escaped notice by the discipline of modern theology proper": *Agamben's Coming Philosophy*, 88.

But there is a point of particular pertinence for the aims and objectives of *Literature and Theology*. In passing over the significance of theology in and to his work, what is also certainly missed in those of whatever discipline considering the work of Agamben, is theology's presence *allied to* those of a certain literary structure. This is the particular *lacuna* which this article seeks to fill. In Agamben, theology and literature work hand in hand. This is especially true because of Agamben's notion of performative language, which he derives from J. L. Austin (1911–1960) and the French linguist Émile Benveniste (1902–1976), a theme to which he repeatedly returns.

So, what is at stake for present purposes is an argument not simply observing theology's performative and literary presentation but defending the *necessity* of such a presentation. Agamben's texts such as *The Time That Remains*, *Pulcinella*, and *The Highest Poverty*—three examples which I treat further below—represent a compulsion to respond qualitatively to the primary texts (Paul's letters, the *Pulcinella* drawings and paintings of Giovanni Domenico Tiepolo (1727–1804), and the rules of religious life of Franciscan spirituality). In fact, Agamben's approach is to “reorchestrate” these primary texts as part of *his* performance. For Agamben, as much as for Martin Heidegger or Hans-Georg Gadamer, understanding must shape our existence and represent a “genuine experience—an encounter.”<sup>9</sup> Successful understanding in this context is not a quantitative accumulation of knowledge; it is, rather, an affectual, qualitative response. *Not* to reorchestrate texts so as to secure this qualitative response would be to fail to mean what we say. This article will therefore raise new questions, inspired by Agamben, yet currently unperceived in critical appraisals of his work, such as: is *all* theology (worship, doctrine, theological art, and literature) to perform in this manner? How and why might such a performance occur, and is it *vital*? What grounds the necessity for such a performance?

To substantiate these claims and to begin to answer these questions, I will examine the literary substructures of three of Agamben's more recent “theological” works—*The Time That Remains*, *Pulcinella*, and *The Highest Poverty*. Through Agamben's reorchestration of the primary texts to which he is responding—whether poem, artwork, or rules of religious life—in each case, the experience of the reader and the reader's understanding are performed to in and through reading Agamben's writing. What does it mean, though, for language to “perform”? This is the methodological question to which I must first turn, of—in J. L. Austin's famous phrase—how to do things with words: “performative utterances,” or “speech acts” as they are perhaps more familiarly now known. Performative language is another important but as yet uncommented upon aspect of Agamben's work.<sup>10</sup> And for that, I need to start back in the Beinecke.

## 2. THE SINGING OF BIRDS AND THE CROAKING OF FROGS: “ON SPEECH ACTS”

In print, Agamben has deliberately ventured into the realm of performative language on three separate occasions in the last twenty years: in his methodological study *The Sacrament of Language*, concerning the nature and effect of the oath;<sup>11</sup> and then in two works for which the assessment of performative language holds wider and more structural significance: *The Time That Remains*, and *Opus Dei*.<sup>12</sup> I will turn to these treatments briefly at the end of this section. But

<sup>9</sup> See, for instance: Martin Heidegger, *The Phenomenology of Religious Life*, trans. Matthias Fritsch and Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei (Indiana University Press, 2010), 73; and Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald Marshall (Bloomsbury, 2021), 504.

<sup>10</sup> To be fair, Adam Kotsko does refer in passing to this aspect in his recent survey of Agamben's *oeuvre*, but without detailed consideration: *Agamben's Philosophical Trajectory* (Edinburgh University Press, 2020).

<sup>11</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Sacrament of Language: An Archaeology of the Oath*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford University Press, 2011).

<sup>12</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Opus Dei: An Archaeology of Duty*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford University Press, 2013).

a unified treatment of the phenomenon of language that performs, that realizes its own effects as opposed to denoting or meaning, is to be found in an unpublished lecture: “On Speech Acts.”<sup>13</sup>

A performative utterance, at a basic level, does not describe something, but secures that of which it speaks. A promise, a naming ceremony, the declaration of a marriage, or a bet, are all classic performative utterances. They do not primarily describe, but rather a new state affairs is proclaimed into being—they act in and through the words spoken. But Agamben, characteristically, is not content simply to observe, with Austin and others, that such a linguistic phenomenon exists, but to ask of it: “how?” How does a performative, he asks, “realise its efficacy? What allows a linguistic statement to become a fact, thus denying the old principle which says that words and facts are two distinguished values?”<sup>14</sup> What Agamben perceives in the discourse concerning speech acts—whether from philosophy, linguistics, or literary theoreticians—is a simple acceptance of the fact and nature of their existence. It is, Agamben says, “as if” these commentators “really believed in magic.”<sup>15</sup>

The starting point for each of Agamben’s analyzes of performatives is the debate between J. L. Austin and Émile Benveniste.<sup>16</sup> For Agamben, it is Benveniste’s more precise account which is to be preferred.<sup>17</sup> Whereas Austin had eventually come to the conclusion that the distinction between constatives (words “about” something) and performatives (words that do something, not necessarily “about” anything) was vanishing, Benveniste keeps the distinction intact in order clearly to define how performatives work. Whilst, as a linguist, Benveniste’s analysis is basically accurate, then, Agamben argues that it does not go far enough.

In “On Speech Acts,” Agamben ventures forward in two ways. Performative utterances operate through a linguistic suspension, and an ontological rupture. First, linguistic suspension. One of Benveniste’s significant findings about performatives was their self-referential nature. Unlike a classic “constative,” there is no distinction in a performative utterance between signifier and referent. The reference of a performative utterance is the utterance itself. A verbal promise, for instance, is linguistically constituted by the signifying words used, but its referent is not some other “thing,” but those same words. Word and act are one and the same. Thus, for Benveniste, the one who utters performatively also self-refers (“I promise” / “I bet you” / “I pronounce you ...”).

Agamben then asks, how does this “self-referentiality” work? Self-referentiality, according to Agamben, has a distinctive function in language. To self-refer in a performative utterance manifests a wilful suspension of the “normal” denotative capacity of language. “[T]he performative substitutes the normal constative or referential relationship between speech and reality [and posits] a new self-referential relationship which ... posits itself as the decisive fact.” No longer

<sup>13</sup> Giorgio Agamben, “On Speech Acts,” Beinecke Library, “Agamben Papers,” Box 13. Handwritten in English. Page references are Agamben’s own handwritten enumeration. Undated, but according to its chronological location in the well-ordered archive, given at some point between 2012–2013.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, c.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, a.

<sup>16</sup> J. L. Austin’s “performative utterances” first came to the attention of Continental philosophy at a Colloquium held at Royaumont Abbey in 1958, and his paper “*Performatif-Constatif*” (*La Philosophie Analytique* (Les Éditions de Minuit, 1962), 271–81). The French translation of *How To Do Things With Words* only arrived in 1970, with the interesting immediate after-shock of Jacques Derrida’s “*Signature, événement, contexte*.” Émile Benveniste had apparently come to performatives of his own volition in an essay first published in 1958 “*De la subjectivité dans le langage*.” The archival evidence suggests he did not attend the 1958 Royaumont Colloquium. His next essay on the subject, “*La Philosophie Analytique et la Langage*” (1963), directly refers to the first publication of the Royaumont papers, including Austin’s “*Performatif*” (both essays translated in: *Problems in General Linguistics*, trans. Mary Elizabeth Meek (University of Miami Press, 1971)). Shoshana Felman’s analysis of this encounter is so creative as to be almost fantastical: *The Scandal of the Speaking Body*, trans. Catherine Porter (Stanford University Press, 2003). She, too, like Agamben, is driven to perform.

<sup>17</sup> Notable, because in the subsequent history of performative utterances, Austin’s account is considered the forefather, mainly via pupils of Austin such as John Searle and Paul Grice. That Benveniste’s is the more formative for Agamben should not come as a surprise. Agamben recently contributed a foreword to a new edition of Benveniste’s *Indo-European Language and Society*, “The Vocabulary and the Voice,” commenting on Benveniste’s “totally unique” contribution (xii). The existence of this Foreword was unfortunately not made apparent to the author of too succinct a chapter devoted to Benveniste’s influence on Agamben (Adam Kotsko and Carlo Salzani, eds., *Agamben’s Philosophical Lineage* (Edinburgh University Press, 2017), Chapter 10).

is there a “referential correspondence between words and facts,” the “normal” relationship; “but ... the pure form of the relation between language and reality which by itself realises, effects a new situation, posits itself as a fact.”<sup>18</sup> This willful suspension has the feeling of a self-negation—to the extent that “self” is constituted by the “normal” denotative capacity of speech. Instead, the self turns back on itself, it self-refers, in order to present itself in language as “pure” act, “fact,” even.

Second, ontological rupture. Moving from the willful suspension of denotation into performative self-referentiality, Agamben sees a new vista opening on the circular question of the origin of language (*viz.* in order to invent language you must already have it). Consider, he argues, an already existing expressive or communicative praxis: the examples Agamben takes are the singing of birds and croaking of frogs.<sup>19</sup> The normal conditions of such sounds are not self-conscious. There is no distinction between *Sinn* and *Bedeutung*, meaning and denotation. Now, imagining that the bird or the frog becomes newly aware of its own utterance, such that the beginnings of denotation occur, and the communicative sounds *are* self-conscious, then, Agamben writes, “this praxis is separated from its taking place and othered to itself.” With denotation comes rupture. This same rupture, then, represents the linguistic conditions for humanity. “This rupture opens up for men the space of language subjectively and to history, but it will also subject him to the dark powers of magic, law, desubjectification, psychology and whatever constitutes the fate and the doom of men.”<sup>20</sup> In an apparently throw-away final line, Agamben effects—performs, even—his own self-conscious rupture of the lecture itself: “(My God, I am going too far, I should not say such things.)”<sup>21</sup>

So, in Agamben’s lecture “On Speech Acts,” a performative utterance (whether verbal or written) is both characterized and operates through suspension and rupture. It is self-referential in the sense that the normal denotative relation between word and thing is suspended and the utterer equates himself directly with act. In the case of a classic performative, this suspension is willful. Second, it represents or even exists as a constant rupture in language, drawing attention to the separation effected by speech in its “othering” of word to thing.

I can turn now more briefly to the published definitions Agamben offers for performative utterances. What is notable here, leading into the principal analysis of this article which follows this methodological section, are the literary aspects of the definitions themselves. The definition provided in *The Sacrament of Language*, which follows very closely the wording in *The Time That Remains*, refers to an inherent theatricality in a performative utterance:

[It] represents in language a remnant of a stage (or, rather, the co-originality of a structure) in which the connection between words and things is not of a semantico-denotative type but performative, in the sense that, as in the oath, the verbal act brings being into truth. This is not ... a magico-religious stage but a structure antecedent to (or contemporaneous with) the distinction between sense and denotation.<sup>22</sup>

In *Opus Dei*, by contrast, Agamben casts the performative in an ontological role that *counterbalances* the denotative. There is a historical “struggle” between the two. By placing it first in the treatment of the struggle, it seems that the performative is considered the more originary state:

<sup>18</sup> Agamben, “Speech Acts,” e.

<sup>19</sup> Frogs, via Aristophanes, are already associated with self-referentiality. Aristophanes’s play of the same name is a comedy concerning playwrighting.

<sup>20</sup> Agamben, “Speech Acts,” i.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, i.

<sup>22</sup> Agamben, *Sacrament of Language*, 54–56. Almost identically, Agamben, *Time That Remains*, 131–33.

There are ... two distinct and connected ontologies in the tradition of the West: the first, the ontology of the command, proper to the juridical-religious sphere, which is expressed in the imperative and has a performative character; the second, proper to the philosophical-scientific tradition, which is expressed in the form of the indicative ... Clearly distinct and in many ways opposed, the two ontologies live together, struggle with each other, and nevertheless never cease to intersect, to hybridize, and to prevail over one another by turns in the history of the West.<sup>23</sup>

A primordial “struggle” between two linguistic forces is posited, the jurido-religious “performative” against the philosophical-scientific “indicative.” This bears both similarity and contrast to Heidegger’s programmatic opening of *The Phenomenology of Religious Life*. Whereas Heidegger sought to recover philosophy from the defined “what” of science, for Agamben, what is at stake is language itself. And for Agamben, in the definition of performatives in *Opus Dei*, philosophy is joined with science in opposition to law and religion. Now, anything which seeks to erect this quasi-religious stage in opposition to denotation can be perceived as performative—text, art, music, even. And the loss of denotation does not render the performative text of any less value. Quite the opposite. It might be, for Agamben, that the use of the performative is precisely the way—as Heidegger perceived before him—to understand other texts (such as Paul’s letters). As Agamben tries to reorchestrate the texts of others, that recovery—Agamben’s texts themselves—must also act in altering conditions in time and space, severing a denotative link, and inhabiting the different semantic zone of the performative where words speak into being, and become actual. Otherwise do we really mean what we say?

So, I have shown Agamben’s self-consciously literary account of performative language. It is no surprise, then, that Agamben is not only drawn to texts which “perform”—*what* their constitutive performative aspects are; but, by inhabiting them and highlighting their performance, Agamben himself reorchestrates them for his readers—demonstrating his awareness of *how* they perform. I now argue, therefore, that Agamben’s performance is not only secondary—bringing the performance of another to the light. It is also primary. Agamben’s texts themselves contain something of the same suspension of denotative faculty in favor of seeking to actualize that which they examine. For example, as I will show in more detail, when considering the rules of life of Franciscan spirituality in *The Highest Poverty*, at times Agamben’s own text takes on the form of such a rule, such that the reader of Agamben is following a new form of theological rule or way-of-life. We can now turn, then, to the principal subjects of this article, the sestinas, farce, and rules of life which, in Agamben, go hand-in-hand with theological claims.

### 3. SESTINAS AND ESCHATOLOGY

The conclusion of Agamben’s discussion of Paul’s Messianic time in “Day 4” of *The Time That Remains*—the chapter which has drawn most attention from contemporary theology for its distinctive account of Pauline eschatology—addresses the “time” of poetry, and in particular a description of the sestina form. In the growing theological reception of this work—and this chapter in particular—it is perhaps unsurprising that the sestina passage is largely passed over.<sup>24</sup> But there is here an unperceived clue to the performative form and nature of *The Time That Remains* as a whole.<sup>25</sup> Before making that argument, however, it is necessary to understand

<sup>23</sup> Agamben, *Opus Dei*, 120.

<sup>24</sup> Paul Griffiths is an exception: Paul Griffiths, “The Cross as the Fulcrum of Politics,” in D. Harink, ed., *Paul, Philosophy, and the Theopolitical Vision* (Cascade Books, 2010) 186. Lexi Eikelboom’s study as a whole integrates poetic insights with the theological, but, in engaging with *The Time That Remains*, the particular significance of the sestina form is eroded to become a reference to “poetry”: Lexi Eikelboom, *Rhythm: A Theological Category* (Oxford University Press, 2018), 210fn30.

<sup>25</sup> Harink recognizes that something performative is occurring in the work as a whole, but only considers the fact of it being a commentary of the first ten words of Romans. Harink, “Time and Politics in Four Commentaries on Romans,” in Harink, *Paul, Philosophy*, 310.

the particular features of the sestina genre itself, for which purpose I use the assessment by Marianne Shapiro in *The Hieroglyph of Time*,<sup>26</sup> Algernon Charles Swinburne's "Sestina," and, firstly, Agamben's attitude to the performativity of poetry more generally.

For Agamben *any* poem contains an aspect of performance, and in particular a sense of Messianic time within it. In the title essay of *The End of the Poem*, Agamben assumes without comment that the poetic form is itself performative in the way its most basic features instills emotions or experiences in its readers/hearers. The effect of enjambment, rhythm and rhyme is to create "tension," a *literary* tension first of all "between sound and sense, between the semiotic sphere and the semantic sphere."<sup>27</sup> That tension, however, exists through the reader/hearer's expectation for sense to prevail through (if not over) sound. As that expectation is upended, there is "a disjunction that brings the mind to expect a meaningful analogy where it can find only homophony," like a "hesitation."<sup>28</sup> Whose hesitation is this, and where does the tension lie? It can only exist in the temporality of the reader/hearer.

This poetic performance is especially true of the sestina and its use by its most famous exponents such as Petrarch and Dante. Through its conventions of length and rhyme, the sestina creates a new experience of time for its readers. The Petrarchan sestina contains thirty-nine lines, structured into six stanzas (or strophes) of six lines each, and a seventh stanza of three lines—the *tornada*. Of its many potential structural devices, the most basic is that the rhyming words of the last lines of each strophe are repeated in the following strophes but at different line numbers; the most important such repeat is that the last line of each strophe is repeated as the rhyming word of the first line of the next strophe. The *tornada*, in conclusion, manifests all the rhyme-words (at half-line and end-of-line), sonically to affect the sense of closure and repose.<sup>29</sup> Through this play of rhyming words, a new experience of time is created for the hearer: the sounds of the rhymes, more than the "narrow lexical meanings" of the words themselves, predominate.

Whilst the sestina is a classic medieval and Italian poetic construction with Petrarch and Dante being the most notable exponents, it was adopted in English-speaking culture by the likes of Sir Philip Sidney and Edmund Spenser, then, more recently, by W. H. Auden. I will set out here a classic from the Victorian era, "Sestina" by Algernon Charles Swinburne (1878) to exemplify its features.

"Sestina"

I saw my soul at rest upon a day  
As a bird sleeping in the nest of night,  
Among soft leaves that give the starlight way  
To touch its wings but not its eyes with light;  
So that it knew as one in visions may,  
And knew not as men waking, of delight.

This was the measure of my soul's delight;  
It had no power of joy to fly by day,  
Nor part in the large lordship of the light;  
But in a secret moon-beholden way  
Had all its will of dreams and pleasant night,  
And all the love and life that sleepers may.

<sup>26</sup> Marianne Shapiro, *Hieroglyph of Time: The Petrarchan Sestina* (University of Minnesota Press, 1980).

<sup>27</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The End of the Poem*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford University Press, 1999), 109. Ibid., 109–10.

<sup>29</sup> Shapiro, *Hieroglyph of Time*, 8.

But such life's triumph as men waking may  
 It might not have to feed its faint delight  
 Between the stars by night and sun by day,  
 Shut up with green leaves and a little light;  
 Because its way was as a lost star's way,  
 A world's not wholly known of day or night.

All loves and dreams and sounds and gleams of night  
 Made it all music that such minstrels may,  
 And all they had they gave it of delight;  
 But in the full face of the fire of day  
 What place shall be for any starry light,  
 What part of heaven in all the wide sun's way?

Yet the soul woke not, sleeping by the way,  
 Watched as a nursling of the large-eyed night,  
 And sought no strength nor knowledge of the day,  
 Nor closer touch conclusive of delight,  
 Nor mightier joy nor truer than dreamers may,  
 Nor more of song than they, nor more of light.

For who sleeps once and sees the secret light  
 Whereby sleep shows the soul a fairer way  
 Between the rise and rest of day and night,  
 Shall care no more to fare as all men may,  
 But be his place of pain or of delight,  
 There shall he dwell, beholding night as day.

Song, have thy day and take thy fill of light  
 Before the night be fallen across thy way;  
 Sing while he may, man hath no long delight.<sup>30</sup>

There are many things to enjoy in this. For present purposes, one can see immediately the sonic scheme of the sestina. The key words relied on for their homophony are: day, night, way, light, may, and delight. The homophony created by the structure of these repeated line-ending words—even when one compares just stanzas one and two—follows a classic and taut formula—1,2,3,4,5,6, followed by 6,1,4,3,2,5. One can hear the device to which I have already referred of the final word of each stanza repeated at the end of the first line of the next stanza. And the three compressed lines of the concluding *tornada* contain each of the structural words in half and end-line rhymes. Swinburne's "Sestina"—self-referential in its very title—exploits the form to create an introverted, claustrophobic, sonic and thereby temporal performance as much as conveying an image or an idea. The structure of the sestina, as Shapiro describes it, is "a play of homonymic equivalences with a concomitant prevalence of semantic significance over narrow lexical meaning."<sup>31</sup> As such, the experience of reading or listening to a poem such as Swinburne's "Sestina," affects a new temporality. As Shapiro argues, the "hybrid concept" of clock time is mitigated in the sestina through the "power of memory, which can confer simultaneously on events of past and present, and it is on this simultaneity that poetry depends for the

<sup>30</sup> Algernon Charles Swinburne, *Poems and Ballads* (Chatto & Windus, 1891), Second Series, 34.

<sup>31</sup> Shapiro, *Hieroglyph of Time*, 7.

effect of duration.”<sup>32</sup> The new experience of time generated by the sestina, therefore, is that it is governed by the performance of sound rather than denotative meaning. And in its compression of the familiar rhyming words of the entire sestina, the *tornada* performs “an eschatological orientation ... it recapitulates the ages [of the sestina] including the last.”<sup>33</sup> In a poetic form where the precise location of particular words is so significant, Swinburne plays on the temporality of “day” and “night,” and “day ... light” in his concluding *tornada*.

The “eschatological orientation” inherent in the sestina is what draws Agamben. “[F]or the brief time that the poem lasts,” he writes, “it has a specific and unmistakable temporality; it has its own *time*.”<sup>34</sup> Through the sestina’s rhyming:

to-and-fro directed both forward and backward, the chronological sequence of linear homogeneous time is completely transformed into rhythmic constellations themselves in movement.<sup>35</sup>

There are three theological observations to draw before I identify Agamben’s own performance to *his* readers. Firstly, because of its “six+one” structure, the sestina is often recognized as a model of the time of creation (as described in Genesis 1–2). The *tornada*, as “the Sabbath” element of the poem when God comes to reside with his people—the messianic fulfillment, perhaps—is “a cipher of the messianic fulfillment of time.”<sup>36</sup> So, then, Agamben’s own work *The Time That Remains* is itself structured with “Six Days” for chapters, and a concluding *Tornada*.<sup>37</sup> At this level, it exists alongside the sestina in its relatedness to the days of creation. It is, perhaps, a “new creation”—in eschatological mode. For instance, on the fourth day, when (in the Genesis account) God created time through the separation of night from the day, letting them be “for signs and for seasons and for days and years ...” (Genesis 1.14), so, too, Agamben concerns himself with the question of temporality. Secondly, Agamben perceives in Paul an inner poetic exigency and “an epochal motivation.”<sup>38</sup> Paul is compelled by his subject matter, particularly when it comes to the eschatology of 1 Corinthians 7 and 15, to write with “an unprecedented play of inner rhymes, of alliterations and end words.”<sup>39</sup> Thirdly, “recapitulation” itself is a key theological theme for Agamben, who revels in Ephesians 1.10 almost to excess; it is:

laden with meaning to the point that one could say that several fundamental texts in Western culture—such as the doctrine of apocastasis in Origen and Leibniz; repetition or retrieval [*Gjentagelse*] in Kierkegaard; the eternal return in Nietzsche; and repetition [*Wiederholung*] in Heidegger – are the consequences of an explosion of the meaning harboured within.<sup>40</sup>

But *The Time That Remains* is not simply related to the days of creation in a similar way to the sestina; nor does it merely describe the features of Pauline poetic register as an interesting comment on Paul’s conversion of the eschatological imaginations of his interlocutors (as Richard

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 8–9.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>34</sup> Agamben, *Time That Remains*, 79.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>37</sup> In the many binders of preparatory notes at the Beinecke, notes which Agamben took before embarking on the seminars which led to *The Time That Remains*, there is indeed a page where he appears to be puzzling over the structure over the work, and wondering about a 6+1 or even a 7+1 structure.

<sup>38</sup> Agamben, *Time That Remains*, 86.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 85–86. For more on Paul’s eschatological poetry in 1 Corinthians 15, see my article “New evidence for ‘The Biblical Kierkegaard’? Several key annotations in Kierkegaard’s Greek New Testaments and their implications,” forthcoming in *Literature and Theology*.

<sup>40</sup> Agamben, *Time That Remains*, 75. Nor is he ignorant of the significance of Recapitulation in Irenaeus (*Kingdom and the Glory*, 31–34).

Hays would say). *The Time That Remains* is itself a sestina. Its six chapters—what Agamben self-referentially calls “days”—are the six stanzas of the poem, with their own interrelatedness and rhythmic progress. The concluding *Tornada*, whose entire concern is the discovery by Agamben of Benjamin’s clandestine allusion to Paul, provides the new grounding on which Agamben’s project of Messianic time has been founded. The very final breath of the *Tornada*—an extended quotation from Benjamin’s *Arcades*,<sup>41</sup> draws the threads of much of Agamben’s concern in *The Time That Remains*—referring to the notion of the constellation, of history, and of the imagistic dialectic between past and present which is the experience of “now.”<sup>42</sup> Indeed, Benjamin has been just under the surface as *The Time That Remains* has progressed; but now, in its conclusion, do we not only see, but *experience* (in the resounding “rhyme” of the conclusion of the *Tornada*) the influence of Paul on Benjamin, of Benjamin on Agamben, and now, too, of all three on “us” the reader.

So, when writing in an eschatological mode, it is not only Paul’s compulsion to write in a heightened register of rhythm and rhyme. Agamben, as he responds to the same subject matter both through Paul’s text and *de novo*, is similarly compelled. Just as “a kind of eschatology”<sup>43</sup> occurs within the sestina poem itself, just as “a kind of eschatology” therefore can be observed in Paul’s “inner exigency”<sup>44</sup> to write poetically, so too there is “a kind of eschatology” in Agamben’s own endeavor, straining towards its end, operating within a temporality of its own, and into which the reader is drawn. The reader therefore becomes “the-one-performed-to.” The normal denotative capacity of semiotics is suspended. In its place is a semantic experience which seeks the conversion of the eschatological imagination—one characterized by the suspension and rupture of “hybrid clock time.” It is surely no accident that Agamben’s “sixth” (and final) “day” (chapter) concludes with a section considering performative utterances, including the debate between Austin and Benveniste.<sup>45</sup>

#### 4. FARCE AND CHRISTOLOGY

What has farce to do with Christology? In *Pulcinella*, Agamben proposes—performs, even—an answer. The performance of Agamben’s *Pulcinella* is multifaceted and multi-sensory. The reader is led through imagined conversations, overhears archaic languages, learns about macaroni and acting styles, is invited to a gallery of “Pulcinella” frescoes (through the reproduction of many of these images in Agamben’s book itself), participates in what is designed to be an “entertainment” for kids, and, lastly, gets sucked in with Agamben to the mirror-like indistinctiveness of Pulcinella. Just as the life of Pulcinella displayed in the images of Agamben’s book merges with and becomes indistinguishable from the life of the artist,<sup>46</sup> so Pulcinella’s life also operates as a mirror for Agamben as a contemporary onlooker, and further, by extension, his readers.

It is the idea of the mirror of Pulcinella, first, which, for Agamben leads to Christology. Second, there is the speech which Agamben imagines Pulcinella using, in ancient dialect, performative once again, as opposed to denotative. Third, there is the pictorial reassertion of christological significance in Tiepolo’s Pulcinella scenes. And fourth, witnessing Pulcinella in these scenes and frescoes entails a form of redemption.

Pulcinella is ideally suited to perform this mirror-like function. A stock-character within the *Commedia dell’Arte* originating from the street theatre of medieval Naples, known for his lewd

<sup>41</sup> Quoting Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Harvard University Press, 2002), 463.

<sup>42</sup> Agamben, *Time That Remains*, 145.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 131–37.

<sup>46</sup> Agamben, *Pulcinella*, 122.

and indulgent outbursts, Pulcinella gained theatrical and civic fame and notoriety.<sup>47</sup> As the civic and national importance grew, however, Pulcinella became more of an Everyman, a collection of characters, with various guises, devices, and employments. He “experiences life as we do. He is no longer merely a ridiculous and obnoxious buffoon. He is a mirror of us and the world.”<sup>48</sup> A voice in Agamben's text reflects:

*To meditate on Pulcinella does not merely mean to ask ... “What man am I? What is my character?” but also and above all, “Have I truly lived my life? Or is there still something left in it that I have not been able to live?” This un-lived is like a faceless stowaway who accompanies me day after day who I am never able to catch and speak to.*<sup>49</sup>

In its multivalence and multivocality, the figure of Pulcinella becomes insubstantial (“faceless”) and elusive (“I am never able to catch”). What remains is the image of one's self, as if seen in a mirror; and an awareness of a gap between self and image, between perceived clarity and insubstantiality.

As if to underline the importance of the performative in Agamben's *Pulcinella*, the book is not merely described as being an “entertainment,” but is expressly dramatic: there are “four scenes.” There is no discernible linear progression through these scenes, as if there were a dramatic conflict to be resolved. Rather, the “scenes”—like the Evangelists, perhaps—provide four different reflections on the Pulcinella figure: the philosophical role of comedy, the actors who play Pulcinella, the history of the Neapolitan street-theatre, a study of macaroni, Christological and Benjaminian reflections, dialogues between a proliferating range of *dramatis personae*, and so on.

One of the aspects of Agamben's presentation of Pulcinella is the archaic Neapolitan dialect with which Pulcinella himself speaks in the *Entertainment*. In a much earlier essay, “The Dream of Language,”<sup>50</sup> Agamben “reads” a Fifteenth Century text *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, but encounters, in doing so, a resistance. Polifilo writes in a hybrid form of archaic language, merging the high registers of Latin and Greek with the common Tuscan and even vernacular, and perhaps other languages. It is a deliberate device. An attempt at syntactic-grammatical understanding is resisted, in favor of a “purely” lexical element. “It is this play,” Agamben goes on, “between the lexical and the syntactico-grammatical elements that, in Polifilo, produces the effect of immobility and almost pictorial rigidity ... And it is this very play that the work's illustrations, like mirrors seem to multiply.”<sup>51</sup> But the experience is not one of dead lexical sterility, because the language itself creates “life.” How? The answer lies in the performance of language *as speech*. A discipline like Christian theology, Agamben argues, recognizes that “[I]ife is what is made in speech and what remains indistinguishable from it and close to it.”<sup>52</sup> Dead language, or even an indiscernible language such as the *glossolalia* in 1 Corinthians 14,<sup>53</sup> can be brought to life through dramatic speech.

In Agamben's *Entertainment*, Pulcinella only appears “in the present” as a dialogue partner and speaking in the “dead” Neapolitan dialect. This causes the same immobility as Polifilo's hybrid language (reading in translation loses some of the effect). Just as the illustrations in the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* “like mirrors seem to multiply” the “almost pictorial rigidity” created

<sup>47</sup> Transporting Pulcinella internationally—arriving in the United Kingdom as “Punch.”

<sup>48</sup> Jeanne Chenault Porter, “The Naples Pulcinella: Mask and Mirror,” in *Stravinsky's Pulcinella: A Facsimile of the Sources and Sketches* (A-R Editions, 2010), 56.

<sup>49</sup> Agamben, *Pulcinella*, 106.

<sup>50</sup> Agamben, *End of the Poem*, 43–61.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>53</sup> Expressly considered by Agamben in this context: *ibid.*, 65–66.

by the dead language,<sup>54</sup> so too the reproductions of Tiepolo's Pulcinella etchings and frescoes in Agamben's *Entertainment* like mirrors multiply the rigidity of Pulcinella's Neapolitan dialect.

But beyond mirrors and the performance of an archaic language causing a present resistance to reading, there are two more explicit Christological motifs in Agamben's *Pulcinella*: the "re-presentation" of Christ through the Pulcinella drawings and frescoes; and Pulcinella's parodic "rendering effective of Christ's salvific action."<sup>55</sup> Within that drama of constantly altering relations between reader/spectator and narrator/Pulcinella, the figure of Christ is "re-presented."

In Tiepolo's Eighteenth Century drawings and frescoes, Pulcinella takes the place of—effaces, even—Christ. In Agamben's *Entertainment*, by contrast, the Christ-image, of which Pulcinella is a parody, is reasserted. The front cover of Tiepolo's *Divertimento per li Regazzi* (*Entertainment for Kids*) (1797) shows the hunched-back aspect of a Pulcinella figure. He stares melancholically at a sepulchre, with the title of Tiepolo's book inscribed thereupon. On the sepulchre rests a ladder, and at its foot are some firewood, wine in vessels, and a plate of gnocchi.

The scene evokes, in Agamben's assessment, an engraving Tiepolo undertook fifty years earlier: *Via Crucis*. In that engraving, the sepulchre is in the same position, but instead of "Divertimento" engraved on it, there is the title "Via Crucis." A cross and a crown of thorns lie on the ground where, in the later drawing, Pulcinella stands. In the far distance is a hill, upon which stand two other crosses.<sup>56</sup> "The Christological references in [Tiepolo's] *Entertainment* can easily increase" Agamben surmises. "Pulcinella triumphant on a donkey among watching



Giovanni Domenico Tiepolo (Italian, 1727–1804). *Title Page to the Punchinello Series*, ca. 1800. Brown ink and wash over black chalk on paper, 11 1/2 x 16 inches (29.2 x 40.7 cm). The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri. Purchase: William Rockhill Nelson Trust, 32-193/9. Image courtesy Nelson-Atkins Digital Production & Preservation, Melville McLean.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>55</sup> Agamben, *Opus Dei*, 30.

<sup>56</sup> Agamben, *Pulcinella*, 72–77.

companions certainly recalls the entrance of Jesus at Jerusalem; *The Burial of Pulcinella* (drawing 103) resembles a deposition ... even the gnocchi and wine that are always laid out evoke the species of the Eucharistic sacrifice in which the body of Christ is present.<sup>57</sup> Pulcinella—for Agamben as much as for Tiepolo—is no ordinary buffoon, but a parody of Christ. Whereas Tiepolo may have consciously effaced the image of Christ and its symbolism in the figure of Pulcinella, Agamben's reassertion of the preceding Christ-related images, and drawing of Christological associations, reasserts—reactualizes in the present, even—the sacred mystery of which Pulcinella, it is thereby revealed, is a secular parody.<sup>58</sup> The reader of Agamben's book is confronted by this same parody, in the guise of the mirror-like quality of Pulcinella.

Lastly, in the parody of Pulcinella, the “salvific action ... of Christ is rendered effectively present.”<sup>59</sup> Agamben describes Pulcinella as experiencing a parody of salvation. Through that parody, together with the correspondences to Christ, the reader's understanding of salvation encounters an experience of salvation. Agamben erects a judicial scenario, a “stage” perhaps. Human beings are “responsible for all of [our] actions” and therefore subject to rightful trial and conviction. In the case of Pulcinella, however, a mystery of freedom “explodes”: Pulcinella's body and will “separate their fates and wander away from each other.”<sup>60</sup> The body and the will are divested of responsibility. Pulcinella's body expresses “the absolute lack of all will and all character, being caught at every instant in flagrant, intransigent, blameless abulia.” The will, on the other hand—in a corruption of the famous passage from Paul's Letter to the Romans, Chapter 7—abnegates its “willing”: “I might have been able to want to, but I didn't dare want to.” The judicial “*actio*” therefore lies in the liberation of the “empirical character from any reference to an intelligible character, and of the intelligible character from any function of moral or legal imputation.”<sup>61</sup> This is the parodic soteriology in Pulcinella. Not only do Tiepolo's engravings and frescoes become “texts” which “perform” within the meaning I set out above. Not only can Tiepolo's art create a secular liturgy of its own through the parodic recollection of the mystery of Christ's passion. But also, Agamben's *Pulcinella* text itself, presenting the “mystery” of the effectiveness of Pulcinella's shedding of culpability, can present itself as a parody on which we are “meant not to explain so much as to contemplate, as one would an initiation.” We are placed, in the mirrors of *Pulcinella*, “before a *mysterion* in which life itself is at once that which initiates us and that into which we are initiated.”<sup>62</sup>

## 5. RULES FOR LIFE AND RELIGIOUS RULES

I turn, finally, to Agamben's consideration of the monastic rules and form-of-life of Franciscan spirituality in *The Highest Poverty*. In the depiction of a life lived fully in accordance with a rule of worship, a life which is wholly defined by its accord with such a rule, Agamben is able to implicate his readers in a question regarding their own rules of life. Agamben's *The Highest Poverty* is, in the sense I have developed it throughout this article, performative. The reader is the one engaged and acted upon, just like in the play of the sestina of *The Time That Remains* in the encounter with Paul's eschatology, just like the encounter with Tiepolo's Pulcinella frescoes

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>58</sup> The nearness of the two figures in Agamben's mind is evident by his recently published reflection on Gauguin's *Self-portrait Near Golgotha*. Agamben asks: “if every self-portrait harbours a testimony about oneself, what does this painting bear witness to? What has been seen by this man, reminiscent of Christ or Pulcinella, who looks at us from Golgotha?” Giorgio Agamben, *Studiolo*, trans. Alberto Toscano (Seagull Books, 2022), 115–16.

<sup>59</sup> In the words of Agamben, *Opus Dei*, 10.

<sup>60</sup> Agamben, *Pulcinella*, 115.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>62</sup> Giorgio Agamben and Monica Ferrando, *The Unspeakable Girl: The Myth and Mystery of Kore*, trans. Leland de la Durantaye and Annie Julia Wyman (Seagull Books, 2014), 33–34.

via Agamben's own *Divertimenti*. In Agamben's *The Highest Poverty*, a performative text such as monastic rules of life (as Agamben demonstrates)—is re-presented by Agamben performatively, reorchestrated, even. If the Cenobite is wholly a creature of the Franciscan rules, such that the performance of the rules themselves constitute the life to be lived, then the question provoked is: what are the rules by which we are wholly identified, and, indeed, might *the very reading of Agamben's book* constitute such a life? Indeed, the more significant question for literary scholarship and in particular theology, is that without such a reorchestration, has the primary text been engaged at all?

In the Franciscan rule-of-life, Agamben sees not the proliferation of law, but the formation of a new form of existence. "The specific eschatological character of the Franciscan message" he writes towards the end of *The Highest Poverty*, "is not expressed in a new doctrine, but in a form of life through which the very life of Christ is made newly present in the world."<sup>63</sup> How the rules have achieved this remarkable performative result is one of the principal arguments of the book.

In order to be effective in establishing an indistinguishability between rule and life, the texts of the rule must themselves be performative as they "seem to realize the life that they must regulate."<sup>64</sup> The particular facet of performativity manifest in the rules is an indistinguishability between orality and writing. For instance, Agamben considers one rule which demands that it be spoken: "You, therefore, who hear me speaking, listen through what is written here to what is being said to you not by my mouth but by God." In fulfilling this rule's command, the "reader performatively executes the rule *ipso facto* ... the observance ... is rendered indiscernible from the command that it obeys."<sup>65</sup> The rule, then, has a "special status":

which is not only a written text or simply an oral discourse ... The rule ... *stages* something that is not exhausted in either of these dimensions, but finds its truth precisely and solely in the tension that it installs between them.<sup>66</sup>

The significant aspect of the performance of the rules, then, is not merely in how the performative displaces the denotative relation between text and being, but in the tension between the two ontologies, the "struggle" of Agamben's definition of performative utterances in *Opus Dei*. The human experience engaged by such a text demonstrates awareness of both "poles" of language—the written text, and oral discourse. The very effectiveness of the rule—its contribution as text and as performance, lies in the ongoing and simultaneous awareness of both.

In the Franciscan rules-of-life, there is a nexus between time and worship such that the two interrelate. And there is also an intrinsic connection made between worship and what Gadamer calls "entire experience" life itself. First, the rule of life instills in the Cenobite an entirely different experience of time which is not filled with homogenous chronological instants, but with worship. The *horologium* ("clock") was originally a book "that contains the order of the canonical Offices according to the hours of the day and night."<sup>67</sup> It constituted in that way a *horologium vitae*—a clock of life. But due to the primitive nature of the instruments at their disposal, in reality the book of hours represents "a total hourly scansion of existence, in which every moment has its corresponding Office or duty" and thus "the whole of life [is transformed] into an Office by way of temporal scansion."<sup>68</sup> "[T]he cenobitic project can be defined" by contrast

<sup>63</sup> Agamben, *Highest Poverty*, 143.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 76–77.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 75, emphasis added.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 21–22.

to the claim of Christian liturgy's "sanctification of time" "as a sanctification of life by means of 'time.'"<sup>69</sup> Time, here, is nothing more nor less than worship: it is not a case of time governing the "when" of worship, but rather worship governing the "nunc" of time. Indeed, the only experience of time is through worship.

Second, there is a close nexus between the notion of the rule, and the life which they form. "[O]bservance of these rules, entails not so much a doctrinal, theological or juridical implication, as simply forming a life."<sup>70</sup> The rules themselves do not regulate the life: rather, they create a form of life governed by liturgy. This life-formation has a "relation" which is "at once antithetical and tightly entangled."<sup>71</sup> One side of the relation is the transformation of life into liturgy. The "hours" have no significance as chronological time, but only as delineators of worship. The other side of the relation, paradoxically, is that liturgy itself is transformed into life. As Agamben says "to the liturgicisation of life, there corresponds here a total vivification of the liturgy."<sup>72</sup> Liturgy is not denotative, an *anamnetic* representation. Rather, liturgy is fully embodied as effective mystery-as-sacred-action. Hence, the monk who is the subject of these rules is "a being who is defined solely by his form of life" a form of life which is pure liturgy.<sup>73</sup> A liturgy performed with regard to its purest performative ontology is nothing other than an expression of life itself.

The significance of the rules, therefore, and indeed Agamben's own work, is not the promulgation of "new doctrine, but in a form of life through which the very life of Christ is made newly present in the world to bring to completion, not the historical meaning of the 'person' in the economy of salvation, so much as his life as such."<sup>74</sup> This is the importance of the performative to Agamben, why performative utterances as a philosophical and methodological idea are of such importance to him, why he is drawn over and over again to texts which are themselves performative, and why, in turn, his own work seeks to erect a stage of performative utterances (as he writes in *The Sacrament of Language*). The key question for Agamben throughout the *Homo Sacer* series is the question of life. Ultimately, what Agamben has seen is both that performative language can reveal something meaningful about life normally passed over in philosophical accounts of language, and also that theology has a particularly strong heritage with which this claim has been forcibly asserted (without necessarily being given a name). By recovering and giving a voice to the latter's heritage in the context of performative utterances, broader questions concerning life, including the Classical dichotomy of *zoe* and *bios*, must now listen to a surprisingly new entrant.

## 6. CONCLUSION

I have brought to attention in this article three aspects of Agamben's work that have to date been passed over. First, Agamben's interest, evidenced further in the archive at the Beinecke, Yale, in performative language and the pressing question of *how* performatives operate. Benveniste—an inspiration for Agamben—first saw a performative's ability to determine "a change in the world, it creates something ... Dark and powerful values reside" here.<sup>75</sup> But the ascription of "magic" is not enough for Agamben. He delves deeper into the struggle of performatives against constatives, the decision willfully to suspend the "normal" denotative relation of word to thing, and the ontological rupture that such an ability or "power" manifests. Second, the torrent of theology which flows unabated from Agamben's pen. It is not a case of making a new use for theology, but

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 116–17.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 116–17, emphasis original.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>75</sup> Émile Benveniste, *Indo-European Language and Society*, trans. Elizabeth Palmer (Faber & Faber, 1973), 422–23; translation adapted.

of philosophy being challenged and confronted by the voices from the Christian Tradition.<sup>76</sup> And third, Agamben's theology is not presented in traditional form, but is allied to literary structures and concerns so as to further the performance of its ends. The implication is that theology does not mean what it says *unless* it responds performatively to that which it witnesses.

The implications for further research are most obviously to account for and chart Agamben's lively interest in theology much more fully than has been attempted, and indeed to update previous attempts which have preceded more recent publications. More importantly, however, the implication from "the Agamben" revealed above is to question the basis on which theology is undertaken. Without being allied to a sense of the performativity of literature, has theology conveyed its meaning? Without engaging the imagination and experience of the reader/hearer, has theology responded to that of which it speaks? Without presenting Christ whether in a Pulcinella-like parody, or in the rules of a Cenobite, has an actualization of Christ's salvific presence been deferred without warrant? Perhaps it is that every essay at dogmatic theology should end with the apophatic, self-negating, and indeed self-referential: "(My God, I am going too far, I should not say such things.)"<sup>77</sup>

<sup>76</sup> As he writes in the conclusion of *Stasis*, "it is certain that the political philosophy of modernity will not be able to emerge out of its contradictions except by recovering more of its theological roots." Giorgio Agamben, *Stasis: Civil War as a Political Paradigm*, trans. Nicholas Heron (Stanford University Press, 2015), 69.

<sup>77</sup> Agamben, "Speech Acts," i.