

# REVIEWS

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## Agamben

Claire Colebrook and Jason  
Maxwell

Polity Press, 350 Main Street, Malden,  
MA 02148, USA. Website: <https://politybooks.com>. 2016. 227 pp. \$24.95. PB.  
ISBN 9780745653112.

John Keats' (1795–1821) *Ode on a Grecian Urn* (1819) which is not based on any real urn but refers intertextually to Sir Thomas Browne's (1605–82) *Urn Burial* (1658) and anticipates Walter Pater's (1839–94) works, which are imperfect urns, as it were, are all poetry. How so? Giorgio Agamben's (b. 1942) dazzling answer is his definition of poetry in *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans* (trans. Patricia Dailey, 2005, henceforth *TR*):

The poem is therefore an organism or a temporal machine that, from the very start, strains towards its end. A kind of eschatology occurs within the poem itself. But for the more or less brief time that the poem lasts, it has a specific and unmistakable temporality, it has its own *time*. ... By now you will have perfectly understood the hypothesis I am about to put forth, which should be taken more as an epistemological paradigm rather than as an historical-genealogical hypothesis: that rhyme issues from Christian poetry as a metrical-linguistic transcodification of messianic time (198) (*TR*: 79, 85, quoted by Colebrook and Maxwell).

The value of the book under review lies in Colebrook and Maxwell's precise understanding of Agamben as an astute philosopher and theologian. It is another matter that this book was written before Agamben published his *Karman* (2017) which has been correctly critiqued for its misunderstandings by many Indologists. Otherwise, the pre-*Karman* Agamben has been well researched

and correctly represented as he is in this book.

To return to Agamben's definition of poetry quoted above, we now see why Keats's odes, Browne's and Pater's prose are all poetry since all of them effect eschatologies bound within messianic time. In all three cases, the great code, to quote Northrop Frye (1912–91), is as Agamben indicates, the Bible. The Bible refers continually to the potentiality of Greek philosophy and potentiality is a very important trope in the works of Agamben. There is a continual distinction between the Greek *dynamis*, potentiality and *energeia* or actuality within Agamben's works (188).

The authors of this book emphasise Agamben's moorings within the archaeology of Aristotle's metaphysics, or Aristotle's lack of metaphysics. Here is Colebrook and Maxwell commenting on Agamben's debt to Aristotle:

Going back to Aristotle, ontology had always been theorized as 'first philosophy', and Aristotle is frequently cited by Agamben as the key corpus that frames later political and theological questions. ... To ask questions of ontology, which has been philosophy's and theology's main task, is to ask about what it is for something to be, and what truly and ultimately is. ... For Agamben, following [Martin] Heidegger, asking questions of ontology—or asking about what truly and ultimately is, or what remains present—can only occur if we forget or fail to ask about how beings emerge, or how beings come into being. That is, the question of presence—or that which remains the same—has covered over the question of how being comes into presence; for Heidegger, this forgotten dimension was that of time and appearing. For Agamben, the 'threshold' of the dimension that gets covered over by onto-theology is not quite time and appearing (phenomenology), but something even more elusive, which is the potentiality for appearing and not appearing (188).

This search for the foundations of being is what the *Isha Upanishad* is all about; though Colebrook and Maxwell can be excused for not pointing that out since Agamben had yet not shown his Indic interests in 2015, when Colebrook and Maxwell wrote this book. The *Isha Upanishad* too searches for ‘this forgotten dimension ... that gets covered over by onto-theology’. For an accessible version of the *Isha Upanishad*, see Swami Paramananda’s reprint edition of the *Four Upanishads* published by Sri Ramakrishna Math, Chennai in 2012. This lucid edition was first serially published in America during 1913–4. Colebrook and Maxwell miss the Indic foundation of Agamben, Heidegger and even, Aristotle. To connect all three thinkers with Indic thoughts is beyond the scope of this review.

Another reason why this book is indispensable to historians of ideas is that it clearly shows the limitations of Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), Gilles Deleuze (1925–95), and Jacques Derrida (1930–2004) while locating precisely the disjuncture between postmodernism and Agamben’s inauguration of posthumanism, which struts about now as the ironically named robot, Sophia. Colebrook and Maxwell do not see Agamben’s work in 2015, to no discredit of theirs, as posthuman:

Both Heidegger and the late twentieth-century thinkers who responded to his work accepted the Heideggerian criticism of presence. ... For most French thinkers after Heidegger there was a problem of this privilege of *Da-sein*. ... Derrida and Deleuze, for example, in different ways begin from *différance*—the difference from which relations and distinctions emerge rather than some being or substance prior to differentiation. In this vein, neither Derrida’s *différance* nor Deleuze’s ‘time in its pure state’ or differentiation remain the sole terms through which they think the potential from which determined differences emerge ... By contrast, rather than gesture toward some difference that is always other than differentiated being, Agamben presents his own work as a path toward the experience of the threshold (194–5).

It is precisely in Agamben’s stress on the potentiality of the threshold, or, ‘scission’ (3), which should not be misconstrued as any sort of liminality but Agamben’s continuous ‘politicisation of ontology’ which is ‘a deeper rupture of negativity’ (1), that

Agamben’s value as an apophatic thinker or theologian lies. And unlike Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913), language’s relationship with the world in the here and the now, is not arbitrary but is problematically sovereign for Agamben. Agamben understands language as being ‘itself something like a movement or bringing into being of relations’ (3); that is, language is foundational and thus, structurally inscrutable. In passing we might note that this understanding of language as foundational and non-arbitrary is rooted within Hindu tantras and agamas. These latter canonical works see language as non-arbitrary and the linguistic system itself as sacred and foundational to the ontic ‘Da-sein’.

Further, it is Agamben, as noted in this book’s ‘Introduction’ (1–33), begins the contemporary focus within the humanities on animals and their interior lives: in his *The Open: Man and Animal* (trans. Kevin Attell, 2003), Agamben points out that ‘The messianic end of history or the completion of the divine oikonomia of salvation defines a critical threshold, at which the difference between animal and human, which is so decisive for our culture’ (5) is terrifyingly annihilated. It is this insight of Agamben into the silent life of the ‘Da-sein’ to be found everywhere, as mentioned in the *Isha Upanishad* that makes Agamben necessary for studying Thomas Hardy’s (1840–1928) animals, the horses, and the wolves in Cormac McCarthy’s (b. 1933) *Border Trilogy* (1992–8) and most memorably in William Golding’s (1931–2018) gesturing Neanderthals in Golding’s *The Inheritors* (1955).

This silent economy of Agamben’s animal-world is a result of Agamben’s rejection of St Thomas Aquinas’s (1225–74) ‘theology of essence and existence’ displaced by Agamben’s theology of ‘existence without essence—a pure taking place’ (98). Agamben’s *The Coming Community* (trans. Michael Hardt, 1993), which our authors go on to quote is useful in understanding the recurrent motif of the face both in Western and Hindu theologies: ‘God or the good ... does not take place, but is the taking-place of the entities, their innermost exteriority. The being-worm of the worm, the being-stone of the stone is divine. That the world is, that something can appear and have a face, that there is exteriority and non-latency as

the determination and the limit of every thing: this is the good' (98).

The *Isha Upanishad* too gestures to the veiled face of God. Agamben does not acknowledge this Upanishad in his works till date. Had a Hindu theologian from a developing world made this elision, then she or he would be called a plagiarist. Colebrook and Maxwell also do not credit Vedanta while studying Agamben. Yet, all the while Agamben is moving towards his *Karman* (2017) which is very Hindu in tone and quotes the Shaiva agamas. Thus Agamben's refusal to acknowledge Hinduism in his earlier works is especially jarring while Claire Colebrook and Jason Maxwell may be too entrenched in white academia to bother with a religion from a poorer nation rendered poor by the aggression of their ancestors.

Nonetheless, the ingenuity of Agamben lies in his disjuncture from the works of materialists like Michael Hardt (b. 1960) and Antonio Negri (b. 1933) whose 'Spinozist Marxist project' stresses on immaterial labour ... [now] subjected to external technologies of production. New communicative systems have enabled the possibility of a new self-forming humanity [unlike Stephen Greenblatt's concept of 'self-fashioning' during the European Renaissance]. Sovereign power has now been rendered immanent. ... But Agamben has quite a different conception of Spinozist immanence that is not about the sovereign split between 'power to ...' and 'power over' becoming humanity's own. Whereas Marxism generally regards the world as that which is negated or labored upon in order for humanity to become conscious of itself, and whereas Hardt and Negri [in their book *Empire*] see the process of global immaterial labor as one in which humanity produces itself through itself (by communally affecting itself in a mode of positive expression and creation), Agamben's Spinozism is far more passive and ... is a surrender to *not* owning one self, and an openness to one immanent life that is not subject to the sovereign mode of recognizing a properly human political being at the expense of an abandoned bare life (144).

Claire Colebrook and Jason Maxwell's book is timely but in the final analysis, is a heresy of paraphrase so feared by Cleanth Brooks (1906–94)

in his *The Well-Wrought Urn* (1947). Agamben's poetry in the sense of poetry so defined by Agamben himself and quoted at the beginning of this review, should remain veiled since Agamben's is a literature of replenishment, to quote the American novelist, John Barth (b. 1930).

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**Kierkegaard's Journals and Notebooks, Volume 9: Journals NB26–NB30**

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Edited by Niels Jørgen Cappelørn, Alastair Hannay, Bruce H Kirmmse, David D Possen, Joel D S Rasmussen, and Vanessa Rumble

Princeton University Press,  
41 William Street, Princeton,  
New Jersey 08540, USA. Web-  
site: <https://press.princeton.edu>.  
2017. 800 pp. \$150. HB. ISBN  
9780691172415.

**K**ierkegaard's *Journals* are endlessly entertaining and illuminating. Volume 9's value lies in insights that are precisely worth our time since they are unsettling.

Kierkegaard's observations about the press now appear to be so true that one needs to quote him at some length:

I [Kierkegaard] have shown that the view of the 'daily press' that has prevailed up until now entirely misses the point. The press has been understood as follows: the major premise is that the daily press is good; the minor premise is that it sometimes causes injury by being misused to propagate lies and evil, etc. What I am aiming at, however, is this: the daily press is evil, especially with respect to minor matters, simply and solely on the basis of the power of dissemination. In minor matters it is an entirely disproportionate means of communication, and in this respect it is a kind of lunacy that tends to turn society into a madhouse, just