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*The Literary Agamben: Adventures in Logopoiesis* by William  
Watkin (review)

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posed by Adorno's theory of the late style of artwork defined as "intransigent, difficult, and unresolved" (107).

At its best, Rubin's book offers a form of "investigational literary historiography" that challenges "the epistemological limits of the archives of authority that increasingly define the conditions of modernity" (22). What I miss in this insightful book is a clearer sense of the interactional cultural narrative developed in the West in response to the narrative of Communism. The references to the dominant role that the "socialist rhetoric of the Communist Information Bureau" (11) had in the late 1940s and 1950s are rare. The political archives on the other side of the ideological divide are as important to the Cold War narrative as the Western documents explored in this book.

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**William Watkin.** *The Literary Agamben: Adventures in Logopoiesis.* London: Continuum IPG, 2010. 336 pp.

As its title suggests, *The Literary Agamben* stakes a new claim in a field normally devoted to the two more well-known Agambens: the political thinker and the metaphysician. In a configuration familiar since Kant, Watkin presents Agamben's aesthetic thinking as a bridge between the two. And, indeed, readers can hope for new insight into key political and metaphysical concepts, especially those of "life" and "language." The rest of the title refers to the *adventurous* spirit of the text, seeking as it does not only to analyze Agamben's aesthetic thinking but to begin exploring with the results and to develop the independent notion of "logopoiesis" as both a poetic form of thought and a poetry that thinks.

With a wink, Watkin compares his own aims to Agamben's: "Thus if Agamben wishes to access the linguistic basis for all being, my own sensibly founded modesty forbids me from venturing any further than a total reappraisal of all the arts in terms of their being a form of thought" (200). The first section of the book, "Projection: There is Language" begins to situate Agamben's work in terms of the Heideggerian split between Being and the being of particular beings, a split recast as linguistic and reflected in the scission between philosophy and poetry. Throughout the book, however, Watkin is careful to show us how the demands of semantics, prose, and philosophy, on the one hand, and semiotics, poetics, and poetry, on the other, are kept in tension within poetry itself. The specificities of poetry's formal requirements and freedoms, along with the fact that its material is language, make poetry the exemplary art form for Agamben.

The discussion of poetic thinking is also neatly linked to both the broader tradition of aesthetics since Kant and the younger tradition of "modernity studies" in Watkin's third chapter, "Modernity, Productive Anti-Poiesis."

By reviewing the link between Agamben's work and Benjamin's, we start to understand that "modernity" designates a breach with history and in the cultural mediation of individual experience, as well as what it means to say that a productive work of logopoietic art makes "something appear which is hidden and remains so" (120). Experience has been reduced to undergoing or suffering, on the one hand, or knowing, on the other. On this account, the work of art, now, is to give us a shared experience of what we have lost, precisely *as* lost.

*Specifying* the loss is harder, if not impossible, since it gestures to the loss of a transmissible culture, a gulf between the semiotic and the semantic, the personal and the public. Watkin describes Agamben's account of what is revealed in such a work as "the subjective non-being of the artist" (86). In more than one of Agamben's essays, the figure of Bartleby lurks as a perfectly modern specter, with his "I would prefer not to." Certainly, this is a way of appearing that is also a refusal to appear with any specificity, and Watkin follows Agamben in citing artists and poets who choose *not* to work as exemplary. There is something, to me, singularly unsatisfying in the claim, for example, that Rimbaud's best work is his long silence (106). Yet the claim also helps us understand the dramatic emphasis on "productive nihilism" in its refusal to given false and comforting shape to its content.

That said, both Watkin and Agamben are at their best when they are looking at concrete examples and specific strategies tied to poems that were actually written. This has to do with the absence of tension in a silence that lasts too long, and it is that tension that gives poetic thought its capacity to bring non-being (or the semiotic) before us. It also has to do with the way examples move us beyond general claims, such as that a poem's "very puzzlement is its truth" (179). Chapters 4, 5, and 6 move back and forth between formal poetic strategies and traditions and specific poems to provide a rich set of reflections, and they are particularly interesting insofar as they begin to illustrate the capacity for poetic thought to give us access to new senses of time and space. That line of thought seems ripe for developing further the question of a breakdown of our capacity for socially mediated *experience* other than by way of causal, narrative form on the one hand or as the shared suffering of shock and novelty on the other. This is the deeper meaning, then, of the distinction between poetry and prose for Agamben and Watkin: that poetry is the place where the conditions of individual memory and hope can successfully register a claim against the demands of linear time and causal accounts.

In all, this is a rich and exploratory book. There are certain obstacles that might prevent a casual reader from making her way through it, not least is the thicket of terms it inherits from its tradition of poetic philosophy (Agamben, of course, but also Heidegger, Derrida, and Badiou). Watkin also tends to attribute an ambitious efficiency to both philosophers and artists: "Under pressure from such attacks modernity can barely be said to remain intact" (87). It is unclear whether this is wishful thinking, a kind of poetic strategy,

or the result of a deeply held belief in the ideality of the deepest structures of being. No matter what, I recommend working through these issues for the pleasure and reward of its poetic examples, and for the enriched philosophical, aesthetic, and poetic vocabulary the text ultimately offers. Finally, for those among us skeptical of the metaphysical (or post-metaphysical but surprisingly idealist) traditions of the twentieth century, Watkin absolutely succeeds in positioning Agamben's aesthetic thought as a genuine *entrée* into not only Agamben's metaphysical and political thinking but indeed into the entire tradition.

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**Jean Michel Rabaté, ed. *A Handbook of Modernism Studies*. West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013. 480 pp.**

There is a term missing from, but strongly implicit in, the title of Jean Michel Rabaté's admirable edited volume, *A Handbook of Modernism Studies* – that term, ironically, is *new*. The essays collected in the volume address an array of emerging trends in the so-called “New Modernism Studies” (more often rendered as the “New Modernist Studies”), not just exemplifying these developments, but also reflecting on them with a series of deft intellectual genealogies, literature reviews, and scholarly overviews. That Rabaté, or perhaps his editors at Blackwell, might want to avoid using the term in the title of the handbook is understandable. After all, the New Modernist Studies faces the same difficulty that modernism, with an obsessive drive to “Make it new!,” always faced: soon enough, the new is no longer new. In the cases of both artistic and academic production, the movement of time tends to either canonize and institutionalize, or render obsolete and forgotten, so that activity in each field is always marked by the shadow of its own future, its own ossification or demise. Yet this situation also gives the work done in both fields its urgency and, for the cultural workers from the early twentieth to early twenty-first centuries, a sense of the shared fate of modernism and modernist studies. The current vitality of the latter field, which began to assert itself in the late 1990s, is evident enough in the crowded marketplace of new companions, guides, and handbooks, including the two closest competitors for Rabaté's volume, *The Oxford Handbook of Modernisms* (2010) and the *Cambridge Companion to Modernism* (2011). What sets the Blackwell handbook apart is not just its sustained attention to modernist studies as such, but its repeated reflection on the relationship between theory and literature, theory and the arts. Rabaté's introduction nicely exemplifies this effort in its account of Clement Greenberg's art criticism, which drew on Kantian philosophy to establish a theory of modernism that provided aesthetic criteria for new developments in the arts and in the process “[ai[d] down the law of the art