Continent. Year 1: A Selection of Issues 1.1–1.4

Jamie Allen, Paul Boshears, Vincent W.J. van Gerven Oei, Adam Staley Groves, Nico Jenkins

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Covering Giorgio Agamben’s Nudities

Gregory Kirk Murray

“Here I accoutred myself in my new habiliments; and, having employed the same precautions as before, retired from my lodging at a time least exposed to observation. It is unnecessary to describe the particulars of my new equipage; suffice it to say, that one of my cares was to discolour my complexion, and give it the dun and sallow hue which is in most instances characteristic of the tribe to which I assumed to belong; and that when my metamorphosis was finished, I could not, upon the strictest examination, conceive that any one could have traced out the person of Caleb Williams in this new disguise.”

– William Godwin

A. The Protective Overcoat

The most pervasive, resilient, robust, sneaky, and significant concept in all of Giorgio Agamben’s essays is that of separation. This is not the same as alienation. Separation is more nostalgic, for Agamben valorizes an ancient world in which human society and its beings were not subject to such separation. He implies that these separations are damaging to human beings, crippling them at the very level of their identities.

1. “The aim here is not to tap into an original state prior to the separation but to comprehend and neutralize the apparatus that produced this separation.” (66)

**B. The Handsome Gloves**

Giorgio Agamben’s *Nudities*, like *Profanations* before it, employs a wide range of subjects in order to establish separation as a metaphor, in much the same way that interdisciplinary scholars have adopted Michel Foucault’s concepts in order to rethink societies and texts. The longest essay from *Profanations*, entitled “In Praise of Profanation,” laments humankind’s inability to profane as the result of what Walter Benjamin has called “the capitalist religion.” Likewise, “Nudity” adopts a pessimistic stance on the Christian theological tradition’s perverse asphyxiation of the unclothed body.

$2.50

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**C. The Hoop Earrings**

Religion separates humans from things by procuring for itself items as “sacred,” thus taking them out of common use. In this state, human beings are unable to play with them, unable to change their use-value. They become off-limits, museified.

$1,499.00

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**D. The Uncomfortable Shoes**

Biometrics polices identity, replacing meaningful metrics of identity. It is a deplorable situation that leaves human beings in danger of, and indeed already victims of, mass persecution.

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2. “The contemporary is he who firmly holds his gaze on his own time so as to perceive not its light but rather its darkness.” (13)

3. “We can therefore only experience nudity as a denudation and a baring, never as a form and a stable possession.” (65)

4. “Just as genius and talent originally distinct and even opposite – are nevertheless united in the work of the poet, so the work of creation and the work of salvation, inasmuch as they represent the two powers of a single God, remain in some way secretly conjoined.” (6)
E. The Prince Albert
One could characterize Giorgio Agamben’s desire to catalogue a history of ignorance as a recognition that human beings are separated from knowledge by language. Where then is the prophet, and how shall we be saved?

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F. The Corset
Franz Kafka’s character of Joseph K. has put himself on trial, as in Roman trials when the Kalumniator was marked with the letter K. The torture he undergoes is meant to elicit a confession of the truth. It is possible that Giorgio Agamben perceives his role as a philosopher to be confined to self-trial, and that with every passage he flays the unclothed page with prophetic intent.

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G. The Derby
Giorgio Agamben himself tries to bridge various separations through exploratory play. He is not a performative writer semantically, but his exploratory style is rooted in the play spirit. His strategy of numbering points is almost comical, yet it is not misleading. It is play, after all, not ruse. He denudes with pecks, like carrion on a tattered corpse.

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5. “In our culture, the face–body relationship is marked by a fundamental asymmetry, in that our faces remain for the most part naked, while our bodies are normally covered.” (88)

6. “Every man initiates a slanderous trial against himself.” (21)

7. “The glorious body is not some other body, more agile and beautiful, more luminous and spiritual; it is the body itself, at the moment when inoperativity removes the spell from it and opens it up to a new possible common use.” (103)
H. The Trousers
Although Giorgio Agamben is elsewhere concerned with the profanation of religion’s apparatuses, in essay nine he would like to consider what is consumed during days of inoperativity, how religion governs these, and nine he would like to consider what is consumed during how to account for our binges and purges. Inoperativity is inextricably bound to feasting, to the festival.

I. The Stylish Belt
The only essay in Nudities to contain photographs is the essay entitled, “Nudity.” All of these photographs project human bodies.

8. “As Kleist understood so well, the relationship with a zone of non-knowledge is a dance.” (114)

9. “The deactivation of this apparatus retroactively operates, therefore, as much on nature as on grace, as much on nudity as on clothing, liberating them from their theological signature.” (90)

10. “At any rate, whether festive inoperativity precedes religion or results from the profanation of its apparatuses, what is essential here is a dimension of praxis in which simple, quotidian human activities are neither negated nor abolished but suspended and rendered inoperative in order to be exhibited, as such, in a festive manner.” (112)

11. “This is just how much [of] the land [the] surveyor is allowed to catch a glimpse.” (36)
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