

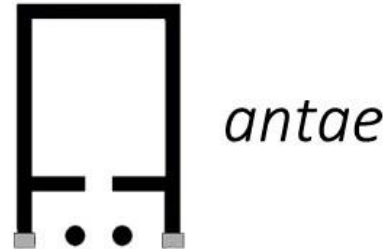
“How have you constructed life?": An Interview with William Watkin

The *antae* Editorial Board

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“How have you constructed life?”: An Interview with William Watkin

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ANTAE: You are here in Malta as a keynote speaker at a symposium called, ‘In Our Time’. At one point in your keynote you ask how an aesthetic attitude to time could be temporally contained and how it can come to be subjectivised (or not). What would be a satisfactory answer to your own question?

WILLIAM WATKIN: That’s really Badiou asking that. His question, which I guess I don’t agree with, is ‘can there be an attitude to time for modernism that is subjectivised? Can there be an attitude to time that is constructed from modernism, other than an idea of time that is imposed upon modernism?’ Badiou would listen to the views on temporality of the modernists and construct their idea of time from their own self-conscious reflections of what time is. That would be subjectivised and presumably subjectivated from their own perspective. But that’s a bit of a lie, because he doesn’t actually then go on to do that. Although he says that he’s going to construct an idea of time in an effectively inductive way, and listen to the actual ideas of time that come, for instance, from Mandelstam, all it does is pose a problem for him: the similarity of the central sense of time for the modernists that is the *now*, and the event, which is I suppose his theory of time.

There is some difficulty to that, because as I said in my paper, Badiou wants to have a consistent set of temporality which belongs to modernism, and that consistent set consists of a view of temporality subjectivated for them, which is the now. But what if that were the same as your universal view that event is interrupted? All of that is a bit fake so that he can set up this alternate view of the time of the now as something quite unexpectedly different, not as something to do with eruptive moments of innovation at all, but to do with the way that ultimately support his idea of the event. So, in some ways, it’s basically a bit of a lie.

Do I think there was a subjectivated sense of time or a time that belongs to modernism? No, because I don’t believe in Modernism. I think it’s a silly and unconvincing construct. I teach it to my students every week and I lie to the students every week when I say that I believe in it. There is no Modernism or Romanticism or Deconstruction. Those are strategies that we use seemingly innocently because we need to teach. Modernism is a very good example because it is intrinsic to modernism to contain within it a temporality that disrupts the idea of a sequential temporality. That is the case with Badiou, and he does well. That is also however, why I think Agamben sees that as a weak spot in Badiou, who will have to jump through hoops to differentiate between event and now, which is what he does.

A: You conclude *The Literary Agamben* by referring to an enigmatic postcard you had received from Agamben, in which he writes: ‘By the way, ignore the example of Orpheus. There are always benefits to be accrued from looking back along the way you

have come.’¹ Would this advice in favour of a backwards gaze feature in your own understanding of contemporaneity?

WW: Retrospection is a big part of the work that I do. It is a key part of Agamben’s system, for example in the ‘archae’ and the archaeological method, which I didn’t know at the time but went on to be very impressed by. Agamben was accused quite a lot of having a like of forced foundationalism. It was as if he’d found the secret of things, then people would say: “Oh, you thought you’d found the secret but I found another document”. He was able to escape from that.

Retrospection remains a key part of a lot of things that I do. It is a big part of Agamben’s axiomatic method and axiomatic retrospection, which is predicting that you are able to do an impossible thing, even though you’re told it’s impossible. You try and do it, it seems that you have achieved it, but you have to retrospectively check it against the axioms that determine that what you did is a legitimate example of what you intend to do. If you are a mathematician and you prove that there is actual infinity, you have to check that you didn’t break the laws of all the other axioms that you need to be called a mathematician.

Those kind of backward glances, which I wasn’t really aware of when I wrote that, become quite important in a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy. On the other hand, I have to say I never really go back to look at *The Literary Agamben*.

A: In *The Literary Agamben*, you distinguish your writing about Agamben by focusing on those of his writings which are lesser known, rather than Agamben’s work on metaphysics or politics. What drew you to what you call Agamben as an ‘adventurer in poeisis’?

WW: Firstly, it’s because I wasn’t a philosopher in those days. I was a literary theorist and I specialised in poetry. I was writing a book on the singularity of poetry. That’s what I was intending to do when I wrote *The Literary Agamben*. It was going to just have four sections, and there was going to be a section on Agamben, a section on Derrida, a section on Jean-Luc Nancy and then a section on Badiou. I still have all the notes for that in my office. I started on the Agamben section because it was what I was working on most of the time (although I started as a Derrida specialist). And I started to write that chapter and that just proliferated into a book and study. But even at that point, I didn’t intend to then go and do more work on Agamben, and I didn’t intend to go on and do the opposite of what I said, which is to go on to write about everything on Agamben except the material on poetry, which is what the next book then did. I didn’t intend to do that at the time, and even after having finished *The Literary Agamben*, the only reason I went on was because I didn’t think that I had got it right the first time. I thought I could write a chapter on indifference; that would be the bit that I was uncertain about. That again turned out to be another book and study. By that point I’d pushed my work a long way away from poetry.

¹ William Watkin, *The Literary Agamben* (London and New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010), p.202.

I don't know now about *The Literary Agamben*. I was still suggesting that Agamben is in favour of poetry because it's singular and semiotic and so on. Eventually I came to realise that even that wasn't true. It was quite easy to give up on the idea that there was no such thing as life, power and language. But it was quite difficult for me to also accept that you'd have to indifferently differentiate poetry. In fact, at a recent conference, of all the things I've said, the only thing that really upset people was that with Agamben you would have to indifferently differentiate poetry as a signatory category as well. I was always a specialist on poetry and philosophy, that was always what I was intending to do. It was just that feeling of unfinished business.

A: Speaking of revisiting work and rewriting, in your paper this morning you mentioned that no one word is better than another. And yet, most of what we do is grapple with words. Is this the only conclusion to your understanding of indifference, as a radical non-relational, non-comparable indifference?

WW: In a way I suppose you'd have to start all over again with what language is. You have to start thinking of language in terms of words, and this is something that I stopped doing a while ago. One of the great things I found from Deleuze is when he pointed out that words are always in a series. We don't have to deal with 'a' word. And although I have some problems with Deleuze, that was quite a significant moment because then you stop thinking about this idea of one word being better than another, or that because I've chosen this word, it is the *just* word or the best referential circumstance.

This is absolutely not what Agamben means by language and it is absolutely not what Badiou and Deleuze mean (well, Badiou's not really talked about language but his systems are linguistic because they are logical). It's like a radical re-education in our dependency on language. I've been more guilty of this than anybody else—of presupposing this idea of signified and signification and representation. That was what we did in the eighties and nineties, and increasingly I've come to understand that language is a performance that makes something happen. In a bizarre way, it doesn't matter what you say, one word is the same as any other. This is a part of my work that I didn't talk about today. Indifference is one side and communicability or intelligibility is the other side.

I have written a two-volume study of both books of Badiou's *Being and Event*. Book one is called *Indifferent Being*; book two is called *Communicable Worlds*, and it links indifference (which is a sort of ontological or metaphysical attack on difference) and communicability (as a way to reconstruct rationality). In a relational system it absolutely matters that one thing is not the same because otherwise they would be non-relational. So that's a good place to start. Words as we use them are differential because we use them in a differential environment that is relational. We compare one word to another or we place it in a different location.

So the question is, does it not matter that I call a saucer 'Peter'? In a way it doesn't matter. Derrida and everyone else says that we have several words for several different things and we agree on them. Well I would go beyond that, because I've done that, but I don't really think it matters what you call a saucer. The large majority of things in the world are not determined

by misunderstandings of someone saying something about objects in the world. And that's one of the false problems that linguistic philosophy and philosophy in general has focused on.

What matters is the context of communicability and intelligibility that are constructed and that are operative and that function, and then include power, and that you include you in a situation, and that includes you in a relational set. Maybe it's against your will, maybe you are complicit with it. It matters how you negotiate across those and so on and so forth. That's how language works for me. Whether or not, in that, it matters whether you call this a saucer or something else, it doesn't matter. Whether or not, in that, it matters whether Beckett was or wasn't a great writer and someone else isn't a great writer, in a bizarre way I suppose that doesn't necessarily matter either. I love Beckett, but you really have to ask yourself what are communicable contexts (power relations/rationalities and so on) that allow me to make that statement. Am I strong enough to let that go if I have to? Most people in our field are not going to let that go because that's so crucial to them, and on a day-to-day basis I am one of them.

It would be wrong to think of indifference as Deleuze thinks about it, as bad indifference, that basically 'everything is the same' indifference. That is an undeniable feature of how you understand indifference. I don't hold with the perspective that 'it doesn't matter what you do, life is indifferent', because I don't think of indifference as just that. I think it's the beginning of a long conversation. And even if that conversation about indifference is wrong, but it got people to stop talking about language as signification, I would retire. I wouldn't want to do any more than that. But I can see that people don't think about language like that yet—even though communicability is traced back to Kant's Third Critique and certainly Foucault's theory of intelligibility (which has been around since the sixties). We've absorbed Foucault but we've not really, necessarily understood what's important about him.

A: We have spoken about contemporaneity and Agamben, but moving beyond Agamben, in your book, *On Mourning*, you write about a post-September-11th 'mourning culture'.² How have more recent terrorist events affected your thought on loss, mourning and commemoration? How can 9/11 be conceived as an event?

WW: 9/11 isn't an event. It would be offensive to Badiou or any philosopher to think of it in terms of an event. The repercussions of 9/11 are horrendous for the world, but it's not an event. My ideas on mourning have changed dramatically because at the time I was writing *On Mourning*, which is a long time ago, I was still influenced by the Heideggerian ideas on death as finitude. I absolutely don't hold with that, I have no interest in that at all. I don't believe it exists in that way. I think that all the work that we did in the eighties and nineties on death, finitude, alterity and so on were a little bit self-indulgent, and I was indulging in that. I don't hold with those anymore. Life is a construct. I gave a paper on this just last week, about the presupposition that death is the opposite of life. That's wrong. Life is constructed as

² William Watkin, *On Mourning: Theories of Loss in Modern Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), p.10.

a *zoē* and *bios*, it opposes itself. If I had to write that book again it would be dramatically different. But that isn't to say that mourning studies has necessarily gone in a bad direction.

I was reading Butler's work recently and I don't agree with everything she says. In *Precarious Life*, she believes in some kind of sanctity of life and that death kills that sanctity.³ I think she's wrong there and that she's co-opted when she does that. I'm not saying that people should die. I'm saying that that question is exceptionally difficult. People are much too willing to fall into the idea that life must be protected without any conception of what they mean when they say that. The simply don't know what life is. If they don't know what life is and they want to oppose that to death, they don't know what death is. We've constructed quite a lot of arguments around that. But Butler does talk about life as a construct in that book, and from a geo-political perspective, it's true that if you're born in the Congo your life is not worth very much. Those lives are non-grieveable.

There was a terrible case recently about a couple who was refused an entry VISA into Britain to go to the funeral of their own child, because it broke the immigration law. What you're simply saying is that your child is not worth as much to you as my son would be to me if my son died. This constructability of life is like the hypocrisy of the West at the moment, and people don't tell the truth about it. That's the problem when we talk about human rights. We've sanctified the view of 'right of life' that belongs to us in Europe and in North America. You can sit alone in a room, and not be cruel. Meanwhile, Bangladesh has disappeared. The boys of Congo have died. All of those were because of us and how we live now. We only live the life we do now because we've exported death to the rest of the world.

But the end of Butler's book did talk about 9/11 and the countability of life. It was about 3,000 people who had died, versus the infinitely larger number of civilian casualties in Iraq at the time. I could see where that was going, but ultimately, that was still a book that was still sucked into the Heideggerian and Derridean view of responsibility and ethics, which I don't have anymore. It gets much more interesting but also more correct to start with asking the question: "if life is valuable, how have you constructed life?" That's the question that people fail to answer. It's a very lazy oppositional thing, to say that if there's life, then the opposite is death. That makes sense to everyone else, but as a philosopher, it doesn't make sense to me.

A: What is life?

WW: If you want to know what life is, the most likely direction you'd go in is a biological, genetic determination of what the life principle is. You would look for a scientific determination of what life is. At the back of most people's mind, when they think of vitalism, they think there is such a thing, and that therefore such a thing materially exists and therefore one day science will be able to describe it. If science were able to describe it, the first thing you would discover is that life is basically immortal relative to the beginning and the continuation of life. It is the continuation of the same genetic coding.

³ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London and New York: Verso, 2004).

Does that mean that there's death? No, because there is no organism. Life does not belong to the body. Science doesn't view life as organistic. Organism is a philosophical construction that we could learn from science to reject, because the base unit of your generic material is not your body but is something very small, interior to you, that you may think of as a parasite or as an invader. The organistic view that is that there is a consciousness in a body, or even embodiment, and all that sort of stuff. I find that really unconvincing because I see that that's a materialist argument. What people have in their mind is that “surely you can't say that people don't die?” And that means, “surely there is material proof that people die?” There isn't. There are gravestones and there are memories but is that material proof? They don't die because you remember them. Those questions remain really relevant but most people still think that there's still their bodies with a life in it. That seems like something that we were thinking about when Mary Shelley wrote *Frankenstein*, but we're a long way away from that now.

The philosophical systems that I work with, like Badiou and Agamben, don't have a theory of centralised consciousness like Heidegger does to some degree. That is another key. Once you free life up from centralised consciousness then you have to start again reconstructing what the base unit is. The base unit is the non-divisible sub unit, like the organism. If you don't have this, then you don't know what life is. If you don't have a non-divisible sub unit, then are we all sharing our life? You need a sub-unit that is non-divisible and what Haraway does in her essay is point out that geneticists themselves use philosophical arguments at that moment because they don't know what the non-divisible sub-unit of life is, so they impose a halting point.

This brings up the idea that philosophy relies on a materialistic view of life which is actually quasi-scientific. When you actually look at what scientists are actually trying to do in having a non-divisible sub-unit which is life, you realise that they've become philosophical because they've hit the classical problem of sub-divisibility, which was also Aristotle's problem of the non-moving substance. So in the end they come together there, which is quite fascinating. It might be that genetics has moved on, but that strikes me still. Sub-divisibility is a massive problem for mathematics and physics. If life exists in an organism, there must be a delimitation of an organism, and there isn't one. There isn't a materially available view on that at the moment.

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