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WHAT WE SAW, HEARD, LEARNED (FROM AGAMBEN AND FROM ONE ANOTHER): TESTIMONIES DEDICATED TO OUR LOVE OF COLLECTIVE READING, WRITING, AND EXPERIMENTING WITH TEXTS

Co zobaczyliśmy, usłyszeliśmy, nauczyliśmy się (od Agambena i od siebie nawzajem): świadectwa naszej miłości do wspólnego czytania, pisania i eksperymentowania z tekstem

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Abstract

This paper asks the question: How to write a research article about an intimate experience of falling in love with a book through collective practices of reading and writing together? While unable to present a methodology for such an endeavor, the authors instead provide a testimony to a year-long process which they undertook while engaging with the short text by Giorgio Agamben titled *What I Saw, Heard, Learned*…. The resulting article outlines their practice before turning to a theory of testimony as a particularly educational form of writing that has three distinct features: it is a public declaration, it is inspired, and conveys the urgency of an experience. By giving testimony to the effects of reading and writing about Agamben, the authors propose that educational philosophy be an occasion to publicly declare the possibility of joyful experimentation that is radically open to all despite the increasing instrumentalization of educational life, which often denies such affirmative possibilities.

Keywords: Agamben, testimony, adventure, collective reading and writing, experimenting.

Streszczenie

Niniejszy artykuł stawia pytanie: Jak napisać artykuł badawczy o intymnym doświadczeniu zakochiwania się w książce poprzez wspólnotowe praktyki czytania i pisania? Nie będąc w stanie przedstawić metodologii takiego przedsięwzięcia, autorzy dają zamiast tego świadectwo rocznego procesu, który podjęli,

pracując z krótkim tekstem Giorgio Agambena zatytułowanym *Co widziałem, słyszałem, czego się nauczyłem…* . Powstały artykuł przedstawia zarys ich praktyki, następnie przechodząc do teorii świadectwa jako szczególnie edukacyjnej formy pisania, która ma trzy odrębne cechy: jest publiczną deklaracją, jest zainspirowana i oddaje pilność doświadczenia. Dając świadectwo czytania i pisania o Agambenie, autorzy proponują, aby filozofia edukacji stała się okazją do publicznej deklaracji możliwości radosnego eksperymentowania, radykalnie otwartego dla wszystkich, pomimo rosnącej instrumentalizacji życia edukacyjnego, która często neguje takie afirmatywne możliwości..

Słowa kluczowe: Agamben, świadectwo, przygoda, wspólne czytanie i pisanie, eksperymentowanie.

The first time we read Giorgio Agamben's short and enigmatic text titled *What I Saw, Heard, Learned…* (2023), we realized it posed perplexing questions for philosophers of education both in terms of form and content, and yet through collaborative experimentation with reading and writing, we ended up falling in love with the book. Admittedly, it is a strange text to fall in love with, as it is a loose compilation of very short, aphoristic descriptions of various moments when Agamben learned something. Some of the aphorisms reveal the philosophical gravity of exceedingly minor incidents that might otherwise go completely unnoticed, like a goat walking across the threshold of a temple or looking at one's reflection in a mirror. In such cases, three or four lines of prose capture a fleeting instance, in order to then suddenly release a messianic "lesson." Small things contain multitudes for Agamben. Other aphorisms start with dramatic experiences of listening to opera or reading Spinoza in order to reveal somewhat minor lessons learned. When juxtaposed next to one another, the varied experiences of learning offer a greater educational lesson: through our senses, we are gifted the opportunity to pay attention to the details of experience so as to rediscover meaning.

Upon reflection, we realized that because of the singular nature of the text and the unique way in which it engages its readers, we could not simply or easily express our love in the form of the standard academic paper. There seemed to be something inadequate about simply choosing this or that aphorism and interpreting it, situating the whole in relation to dominant discourses/questions in the field of educational philosophy, arguing for the relevance/urgency of reading Agamben at this historical moment, drawing out conclusions, etc. This instrumentalization of the text and our experience of it would betray the poetic nature of the text and its educational clarion call for another form of educational life. Agamben's book asks us to enter into a highly meditative state, to dwell with the world, to be taken up by something in that world, and in turn to be affected by it. The typical format of the journal article could not possibly express this educational logic. If we wrote about our love for this idiosyncratic text, the results might very well be deemed too "unprofessional" to be published. We could imagine the editor of a journal asking questions such as "Where are the citations?" or giving suggestions, such as "You need to clarify this or that point." These questions might maintain the academic standards of the

field but would, at the same time, undermine the phenomenological experience of engaging with Agamben's thinking as a form of profound educational love.

It is easy to fall in love with a text, but how does one sustain this love, nurture it without subjecting this love to external professional demands, without instrumentalizing such love? Scholarly love of reading and writing seem to only have one "legitimate" manifestation: you read to write, and you write to publish. On the positive side, this emphasizes the public dimension of scholarly love, which is not so much a private affair, as it is a public address (what we will later describe as testimony). But on the negative side, this manifestation of love is highly standardized, if not formulaic, always restricted by certain professional standards that drain the love of its power, force, and singularity. As such, there is very little room for expressing love through alternative models of engaging with texts (like collective, slow reading and open-ended writing that may or may not result in publishable work). With regards to Agamben, we realized we had to invent a new way of engaging with the text that was immanent to our love for the text, regardless of whether the result would be acceptable for publication. In this way, education could further our love rather than merely report on a past love now long gone.

In what follows, we outline two dimensions of a year-long love affair with this book. First, we will share some of our experiments, which were enactments of what we call "protocols," or short prompts for reading, thinking, and writing collectively. Second, we will offer three different testimonies for how this process affected us. In conclusion, we suggest that this experimental procedure might be a post-critical approach to reigniting love for texts in an age in which reading is under threat.

The Text, The Protocol, and the Experiment

Inspiration for our practice came from three sources. First, there is of course Agamben himself. *What I Saw, Heard, Learned…* inspired a desire to take up new modes of scholarly engagement beyond typical models of critical reading and writing. Although Agamben is most frequently cited for his critical work on such topics as the state of exception, in his late works, he has taken a decisively post-critical turn toward affirming forms-of-life that are joyful and experimental. In a more recent text on Pulcinella, Agamben (2018) summarizes this turn as follows:

> Though I was convinced that it was better to keep the mimes of the comic writers rather than tragedies under my pillow, the darkness of the times in which I was given to live had constrained me to research that some thought betrayed a rather gloomy soul – which, as my friends, know, is clearly untrue. This is why today, having nearly reached my last labor, I would like it not to be toilsome but cheerful and playful, and hope I can show beyond any doubt not only that comedy is more ancient and profound than tragedy – something upon which many already agree – but also that it is closer to philosophy, so close that the two ultimately seem to blur into each other. (pp. 3-4)

Critical theory, for Agamben, is something that is forced upon the scholar by external world conditions, whereas late in life, Agamben gives us a gift of a post-critical theory that seems to prefer not to abide by the forces that had previously constrained him. In this sense, post-critical theory turns its back on the immediacies of what is necessary. *What I Saw, Heard, Learned…* turns away from constraints toward what remains in potentiality within various moments of Agamben's life. Instead of being forced on Agamben from without, the post-critical mode of writing emerges from an internal process of examination. Indeed, it would appear as more basic and essential than the pessimistic categories of bare life, sacrifice, guilt, and even critique that are associated with his earlier work. In this sense, Agamben's early writings were critical, but he never embraced a critical ontology, which would condemn us to perpetual guilt, sin, or punishment. Ype De Boer (2024) draws attention to Agamben's affirmative definitions of life and of use beyond nihilism, thus countering critics of Agamben who see his work as overly pessimistic, passive, and negative. Instead, de Boer rightly focuses on the persistent themes of potentiality, infancy, use, and happiness as the foundations for a new ethics of the happy life. We would simply add to De Boer's argument that *What I Saw, Heard, and Learned…* gestures toward a specific form of *educational life* that finds joy in the world (despite all the horrors). For us, this posed a scholastic question: How can we take up and develop further Agamben's notion of educational life through a practice of using his book? How can we allow his book to affect us?

Part of our answer to these questions was found in another of Agamben's texts. In his book *Highest Poverty*, Agamben (2013) discusses Franciscan monasteries and how the monks constituted collective modes of being together through the generation and implementation of rules. This was an immanent relationship between rules and group formation. Instead of being dependent on external laws, the community constituted its own form-of-life by inventing rules to live by. Rules were, in other words, a manifestation of how the community used its own body in order to define its body. These rules were not simply there to abide by, but were discretionary rules-of-thumb meant to guide action. In this sense, the monks were not subjected to rules but rather used the rules to constitute common life. If laws separate forms of life (dividing life against itself) then rules become indistinguishable from life (meaning, rules remain immanent to life). Summarizing, Agamben (2013) writes, "The rule is not applied to life, but produces it and at the same time is produced in it" (p. 69). Rules allow one to *use* something. For Agamben, use emerges when the external imposition of laws over life are suspended, and life can determine its own rules through experimentation with itself. Similarly, we wanted to constitute a set of rules through which we could define our collective study practices. We did not want to submit to generic methodologies well established in research literature on how to productively form study groups. Instead, we wanted to experiment with rules that emerged out of and were in intimate dialogue with our existing

modes of textual engagement. We were looking for rules that would enable us to *use* Agamben's texts.

Second, we turned to artist and scholar Jorge Lucero's practice for facilitating synchronous, collaborative writing as a form of performance art. The outcome for Lucero is what he calls a "bookwork," which is part book and part artwork. As an artwork, the book suspends or renders inoperative many of the standardized assumptions about what a "scholarly" book ought to do or ought to look like. And as a book, the artwork becomes a composition of thoughts that emerged collectively out of a shared experience. To produce a bookwork, Lucero often writes questions, which he then gives to participants. These questions give *permission* to the participants to write in playful yet rigorous ways (Travis, Smith, Hernández-Cabal, & Lucero, 2024). Once received, participants have a designated amount of time to write responses, which are uploaded to a website for Lucero and his graduate students to curate and publish as a print-on-demand collective bookwork. For us, what is important about Lucero's bookwork methodology is that participants have to write together. Within a fixed timeframe they have to submit themselves to a specific regime of writing defined by a particular prompt/set of rules.

We also took inspiration from the notion of study as described in *Studious Drift: Movements and Protocols for a Postdigital Education* (Lewis & Hyland, 2022), which highlights the role of protocols (simple sets of rules) to (a) suspend everyday habits of bodies and functions of things/ideas/gestures in order to (b) unleash new potential uses. In all three cases (Agamben, Lucero, Lewis and Hyland), rules were not thought of as restrictions limiting thought or action so much as ways to activate new forms of thought and action by modifying sedimented habits and routines. They organized the scene for thinking, providing the parameters within which our intellectual work was able to happen in an experimental modus. These rules made possible looking for new ways of engaging with the book that neutralized the usual process of academic production. In this sense, rules became a highly localized and singular mode for fashioning group study practices.

In the end, we came up with the following elegantly simple set of rules to help guide our practice of reading, discussing, and writing about Agamben's book:

1) We would each come up with a protocol that would be given to the others. These protocols had to engage with either particular aphorisms in the text or with themes in the aphorisms.

2) We would meet via zoom for a short kick off (seeing each other, reminding ourselves of the procedure, scheduling the next meeting, and setting the timer), give ourselves various protocols for writing, log out, and then take one hour to complete the protocols.

3) Once the hour had passed, we would post the responses to a cloud document so that the other participants could read the results.

4) A follow-up zoom meeting would take place to discuss the responses, as well as the relationship between the responses and Agamben's original text.

Our wager was that this process would liberate us from the constraints of the normative academic formula for reading, writing, and publishing while also freeing us up to experiment with new ways of interacting with texts and with each other. In other words, we wanted an approach that would enable us to sustain our love for Agamben's book, and perhaps fall in love with a process that was not determined ahead of time by any projected outcomes. This is to say: we wanted and needed to use this book, which demanded a break from "business as usual." Instead of falling back into preestablished and well-trodden rituals of academic reading and writing, we needed to invent an accurate way to deal with this book (to be in its company, to go back to it, and to think with it), that is: to do justice to our love for this book. To do otherwise would be a betrayal. Without knowing what we were looking for, or where we were going, we had to experiment and thus embark on an adventure.

Specifically, our practice consisted of three rounds of protocol writing, implementation, and reflection. Here are several examples.

Protocol 1

Please read the aphorisms from p. 4, 26[1], 32[2], 39[3]
Please invent an assignment for your students that relates to any of these or all of them.

Response 1:

Assignment in response to aphorism on p. 4 ("In Rome I heard someone say that Earth is the hell of some unknown planet, and that our life is the punishment meted out for their faults on the damned from that other realm. But then what about the sky and the stars and the crickets' singing? Unless we're supposed to think that, in order to make the punishment that much subtler and more atrocious, hell was placed inside paradise").

1) Have students walk around their neighborhood every day for a week

[1] "In Vienna, one summer many years ago, conversing with a friend, I came to understand that, as important as it is to measure up to the speck of goodness in us all, it is just as important to measure up to our dreck, our abjection. Only the former can give us the strength to accept the latter, but only an understanding of the latter can render the former true."

[2] "From José Bergamín and the philosophers I love: that comedy is truer than tragedy, and innocence deeper than guilt. From Prince Siddhartha: that guilty action – *karman* – does exist, but not the subject – *ātman* – to which it can be attributed. From Elsa: that if you believe unreservedly in fiction, everything becomes real."

[3] "From Joachim of Fiore: that the new never comes about through the destruction of the old, because the age to come doesn't annihilate the age that is passing, but rather completes the figure contained therein. And that the ages of the world succeed one another like leaf, stalk and spike."

2) They must record things which they have heard, seen, smelled, tasted, or touched that they would not have otherwise paid any attention to.

3) The resulting "journal" must be a multimedia document that ought to include some mix of visuals, auditory files, and so forth.

4) Along with the journal, they have to reflect on how the minor details they have recorded affect their lives, even if they had never previously paid any attention to them. What beauty do they create? What meaning do they have? Or, how do they contribute to something else that is already valued as beautiful or meaningful?

Response 2:

I found it a particular tough challenge to respond to this prompt. In a sense we ourselves are students to this book – in the very profound sense of not knowing yet what there is to know about the book and what we can do with it. At first, I suffered for this reason, as I felt that, being addressed as a teacher, I am no longer supposed to be a student of the book, but somehow to have gained superior insight in it. And, as I haven't this insight yet, I can't possibly come up with an assignment for my students, I felt.

Giving it some more thought and finally having overcome these doubts, I think I would limit myself to Aphorism 4, which I found the most beautiful and compelling of the four. I would ask students to come up with two descriptions of ways of how to conduct our lives as humans, to paint two portraits so to speak. On the one hand a portrait of the type of person Agamben met in Rome and who claimed that Earth is hell. How must we relate to ourselves and the world to come up with such a view? On the other hand a portrait of the type of person who has an eye and an ear for the skies, the stars and the crickets – in spite of it all. What kind of person is this? Maybe an element of trying to bring the assignment to an interesting end, is to ponder on the way comedy and tragedy (cf. p. 32) are related – maybe the whole exercise could be restated as: a portrait of someone who finds tragedy truer than comedy versus a portrait of someone who believes the opposite.

Protocol 2

Agamben focuses on a connection between seeing, hearing, and learning. These are often called the noble senses. How would the book be different if the title were changed to the following: *What I tasted, smelled, learned…* thus emphasizing the ignoble senses. You can either provide a metacommentary on this question or perform it by writing a brief aphorism.

Response 1:

Smell. That's an earthy sense. What is remarkable is that it immediately recalls dirt, decay, decomposition: "it's smelly" refers most often to "it's rotten". People smell

– normally, without all the work we do not to smell, we stink mercilessly. We also produce a lot of smell (like all the industry produces stink – none of that smells nicely). So in the universe of stink, we are on a lookout for a beautiful smell – we sense it immediately. And primary, beautiful smell was: food in the making. All the rest: flowers, perfumes, fresh air, all that comes later (and mostly as a result of technology). In Polish we say that we can have a nose for something, meaning: we have a hunch. Again, this is guts, it sits deep in our animal nature. Smell is wild, and true. Cannot be controlled, hidden, masked. Maybe if the book would be about smell – there would be a different take on truth: as immediate, direct, non-discursive? What I smell here is a deceit – smelling is connected with suspicion: there are appearances, but thanks to smell we are able to discover the truth. We can also stick our nose in not our business. There is something naughty in the ability to smell.

Response 2:

I smell therefore I am. But, writing this, I realize that the verb smelling (and tasting by the way too) is a middle voice verb. I can smell the book, but someone else can smell me. Therefore the accurate formula reads: I am smelling and being smelled, therefore I am. It is in smell (and in taste) that existence, my existence, your existence, finds its fullest self-awareness and footing. It is in the simplicity of what I smell, as well as in the reciprocal smell-ability of all things, that a life comes to know that reality has always already been redeemed.

Protocol 3

Think of one situation when you became sensitized to some nuance. How did that happen? What was it? How does nuance work on you: what does it do, and what does it enable you to do?

Response 1:

The most distinct experience one can have of nuance is in the act of flirting. Flirting is, we might argue, the art of nuance. Nothing in flirting is overt. It is all subtle, indirect, yet charged with meaning and significance. A flirtatious gesture might be a momentary glance that lingers for a millisecond too long, or it could be a "friendly" hug that is just a little too tight. For most of my life, I completely ignored these subtle nuances of gesture. I was ignorant of the almost secret, private language of flirting between two people and how this is a mode of communication. But it was only when I became aware of the power of these seemingly minor, peripheral gestures that the world of sexuality actually opened up for me.

Perhaps writing philosophy is a kind of flirting with ideas?

Response 2:

As a child (it is remarkable how many times during this exercise we keep returning to this stage – the book somehow has this effect …), I discovered to be extremely sensitive to differences between how things taste. As my mother keeps reminding me: I was an extremely picky child, and annoying for being so. For instance I would only eat strawberries grown in Belgium and not in the neighboring countries. Probably this is the case with many children, but with me it was the case that I was actually able to tell the difference with absolute certainty. Even if people tried to feed me with one thing saying that it was another thing, I saw through it – or better: tasted through it. If I have to think about the effect this has had, two rather opposite things come to mind. First, on the more negative side: a kind of impatience with other people who apparently were not able or (in my view of things) not willing to become able to have the same experience. Pondering on this, such a seemingly banal thing has had a most formative effect, as it might explain part of my (bad) character – an ongoing impatience with people, even if this doesn't go well together with my theoretical and pedagogical convictions. If I want to bring my Rancièrian pedagogical beliefs in practice, this somehow always somehow goes together with fighting a 'deep' counterforce inside me. Second, on the more positive side, this experience might be at the root of what could be called an attitude of trust of the world. This is, in spite of the many things that go wrong and that are frustrating, the world is a rich and interesting place, where – if you give it a try – nuances can be discovered, i.e. ever more unexpected differences and intensities might affect me/us. There must be something out there that might surprise me/us, impress me/us and seduce me/us to want more of this. Getting the hold over the art of nuancing is therefore an act of love for the world.

In line with Agamben's title, the above aphorism should be called: What I tasted, what I nuanced, what I learned …

The Testimony

Once three rounds of protocol experimentation were complete, we decided to invite a fourth colleague, Chris Moffett, to join our group. At first, we wanted him to invent another protocol, but instead, we ended up having a meta-conversation about the experience as a whole. Through this reflective process (mediated by an external facilitator), we once again returned to the problem of how to express our love not only for the text but also for the experimental *process* that we had undertaken for over a year. And also, considering the aphorism on p. 55[4]: how to do this while staying faithful to the book itself? Simply recounting the process as a methodological reflection felt like a reification

[4] "From Saint Francis: 'speak and write simply and purely… and understand just as simply and without gloss'. We, on the other hand, do nothing but gloss one another"

and abstraction of something that was much more intimate and alive. At the same time, we had fears that a personal narrative would trivialize or relativize what we felt was a practice with much broader philosophical and educational importance. The former was too impersonal and the latter was too personal. We were looking for something (im)personal, or rather a form appropriate for expressing a love that was intimate yet held more generalizable consequences.

In an attempt to solve this problem, we turned toward testimony as a literary genre capable of conveying to a larger audience a *sense* of the process without reducing it to merely another abstract, methodological procedure or another (somewhat banal, if not purely relativistic) narrative. This turn toward testimony was not imposed from the outside but rather emerged out of our engagement with Agamben. Of course, Agamben's book *Remnants of Auschwitz* (2025) is a philosophical justification of testimony as a way to witness that which is unwitnessable (or to speak that which is unspeakable). But we also feel that the concept of testimony is perhaps the best framework for understanding the peculiar form of Agamben's book *What I Saw, Heard, Learned…*. The title itself provides the perfect formula for understanding the rhetorical structure of testimony "here is what I saw/heard…and this is what I learned from it [and by extension, what *you* can learn from it as well]."

Extrapolating from Agamben, the concept of testimony has three important dimensions. First, it is a public declaration. It is either spoken or written for an audience. In this sense, it is a moment in which a personal educational experience turns outward to face others and give an account of itself. Second, it is inspired writing or speech. One testifies in order to convey something that is urgent, meaning something that demands to be expressed at *this* time and in *this* way. There is thus an internal compulsion to testify in order to "set the record straight" or "convey an insight" that is bursting forth, ready to be shared. And third, it expresses an intimate relationship with the world that bears greater significance beyond the individual. The wager of the testimony is that there is something in an experience that is of general concern. The testimony can only be of an individual, but the act of testifying concerns consequences and implications that are collective in nature. In this sense, the testimony is not merely an act of sharing a personal opinion. Not unlike Kant's paradoxical notion of a subjective universal judgement of taste, the testimony is subjective yet *feels* like it transcends our private subjectivity. To give a testimony is to bear witness to something that cannot be verified and yet the form of the testimony calls for an (ultimately unjustified) universal assent.

Testimony is a unique educational form of writing that can be differentiated from prophecy and confession, both of which are dominant modes of writing found in the critical pedagogy tradition. The confession is an expression of judgment over one's actions. It embodies a paradigm of guilt and absolution. Confessional writing abounds in critical theory where writing is a way to confess one's privileges or one's mistakes, always with the dual goal of punishing the self and then asking for forgiveness from the

reading public. On our reading, testimony does not presuppose guilt and does not aspire for salvation, and thus suspends the dialectic at the heart of the confession. It is thus a post-critical mode of writing the self that takes the simple form "this is what I saw/heard…and this is what we can learn from it." Notice that the learning in this formulation is not predicated on judgment. It is a description that neutralizes the critical gesture and instead is an *affirmation* of what happened and what was learned (and can be learned by others). For this reason, testimony is uniquely related to post-critical education.

Testimony is also not prophetic. Prophets are always mediators between this world and a transcendent world. Through the prophet, some transcendent power conveys commandments, laws, truths which are then to be taken on faith (on the word of the prophet as "the chosen one"). The prophet demands obedience to that which cannot be seen or heard by ordinary folks, who must rely on the prophet to act as their mediator. Testimony is not a sacred form of speech. It is decisively *profane*, meaning that it can only testify to what happened in this world, to this body, at this time. "This is what I saw/heard…and this is what I learned." The formulation concerns learning through the senses and thus is a purely embodied form of learning that rejects the idea of prophetic access to a transcendent power. Furthermore, testimony cannot predict the world to come (through apocalyptic visions or utopian fantasies). Instead, it concerns what *was* seen/heard, and therefore concerns a recounting of the past in relation to the present. Of course, this past can have implications for the future. Indeed, the urgency and force of the testimony implies ongoing relevance of what was learned. Yet, what is learned is not predicated on prophetic sight so much as what has been seen by worldly eyes or heard by worldly ears. If there is utopia here it is as a small or weak utopianism of immanent practices and the potentiality within them that can be redeemed through testimony.

Critical theory has a tendency to be filled with prophetic visions of imminent collapse/apocalypse coupled with laws by which we ought to live our lives so as to avoid such collapse. These visions hinge on the charismatic persuasiveness of prophetic figures who seem to have access to wisdom or critical knowledge that the rest of us lack. Only the critical pedagogue can see the future accurately and is capable of giving the rest of us early warning of what is to come. The prophet's position rests on authority granted to them by a transcendent power/force/presence/law.

Turning to testimony as a post-critical pedagogical form of speaking and writing questions the authority of the prophet, doubting the unwavering conviction of their knowledge of the future, or the universal necessity of the laws they command obedience to. To testify is to speak from one's lived experience rather than from the wisdom granted by a transcendent power. *Anyone* can testify, and it is therefore radically democratic in ways that undermine the inherent hierarchy of prophecy in which the prophet

stands closest to the center of power, truth, law. Testimony is not predicated on proximity to the law, nor does it disseminate laws (in the form of commandments). It is rather a weak and profane exercise in speaking what has mattered to one's self and what this matter might mean for others.

Not only is testimony post-critical, it is also post-juridical. While it might be assumed that one testifies in a court of law, on our reading, this is actually an attempt to absorb testimony into a legal framework that denudes the testimony of its educational importance. Perhaps one of the most important post-critical books on education is by Maarten Simons and Jan Masschelein, and is titled *In Defense of the School: A Public Issue* (2013). While calling for a return to what is educational about the school, Simons and Masschelein nevertheless utilize a decisively legal (rather than educational) concept, "defense," in the title of their book (or "apology" in the original Dutch). One could read this as a slippage out of the educational register back into a broader, unacknowledged, juridical language. In this sense, the public issue of education cannot be expressed in educational terms but rather must fall back on juridical discourse in order to "make a case" for preserving the institution of the school. Education cannot make a case for itself in educational terms but must rely on juridical frameworks to make itself intelligible. This is not unlike the typical liberal gesture that continually codes the public issue of the school in terms of "rights" and "responsibilities." But we could read Simons and Masschelein's gesture differently as a freeing up of the notion of defense from its juridical context. We argue a similar move is necessary for testimony. It is not a sacred, critical, or judicial act, but is decisively educational in the sense that it conveys insights from one's lived experience and shares these insights with others.

In sum, testimony is a profane form of speech that (a) does not judge or command, (b) is immanent to this world and our experiences, (c) is directed at a public (a multitude) rather than a judge and jury, and (d) expresses an insight that is subjectively universal. We find this fundamental sense of testimony alive and well in *What I Saw, Heard, Learned…,* and in turn, it is a form of writing that we wanted to experiment with ourselves through our own testimonies of reading and thinking collectively about the text.

We now conclude this essay with three of our own testimonies.

Tyson's Testimony:

For over a year now, we have engaged with 'What I Saw, Heard, Learned…' on multiple levels and through multiple protocols, each time, discovering new meanings in the text while also enriching our intellectual friendships. Here I want to testify to how the process as a whole has helped me realize several dimensions of the meaning of studious experimentation that I have thought about in the past but never really experienced firsthand with such intensity. In short, the following testimony highlights how the protocol of our shared bookwork was an…

1) …experiment with educational time. When I first read the book, I wanted to talk about it and quickly write an essay to express my enthusiasm. But now I realize how the speed of this approach might very well have missed something essential about the educational potentials the book was offering me. Through our collective practice, I recognized the need to cultivate slow haste, which is an impossible suture between the urgency of wanting to publish something so as to share with the broader world and the slowness necessary to cultivate attentiveness to the book and to the rhythmic development of a collective practice that emerges out of various experimentations.

2) …experiment with digital technologies. While the digital sphere might be characterized in terms of the movement of whizzing around (Han, 2017), one can interrupt the pacing of this world through slow haste. At first, I was skeptical that the kind of close reading and experimental writing that we were calling for could be done during Zoom meetings. It all seemed too distant and too mediated. I longed to be in a shared physical space with friends during our discussions and our writing sessions. Yet it turned out that Zoom afforded us a unique opportunity to discuss and write that would not have been available if we were in a shared physical space. For instance, we would log into Zoom with our protocols. Once the protocols were distributed, we would log out of Zoom and write in our separate, autonomous spaces. The results would be uploaded into a google document, and we would schedule a time to meet and discuss. A rhythm to group study thus appeared: the need for time together and time apart, the need for shared moments of discussion and the need to withdraw into more private studio spaces for contemplation and writing. The virtuality of Zoom space and time thus became an asset to our study practice.

3) …experiment in friendship. Over the course of my career, I have coauthored many texts. There is a familiarity to this ritual practice that is comforting, and I have a high level of confidence that I know how certain writing relationships will evolve and develop. In short, I had stopped experimenting. A habit had formed that prevented me from trying out new possibilities. This experiment taught me that intellectual friendship can be cultivated through the uncertainty of risky practices that need not be predefined in advance. There can be joy in not knowing where something is going, in exploring scholarly questions that are playfully open-ended.

4) …experiment in love. Throughout this experiment I was consistently reminded of the importance of love in education. From Agamben I learned to love small, seemingly insignificant details of life; to love error; to love thresholds; to love fragile, ephemeral things and events. And from Joris and Piotr I learned to love the potentiality of scholarly life that is full of laughter, surprise, and serious reflection. Scholarly life is a happy life of being moved by something and someone. Love is comical not tragic.

Piotr's Testimony

This was not love at first sight. Joris and myself were contacted by Tyson, saying that we absolutely have to read this book – and so we did. At first I was a bit disappointed with 'What I Saw, Heard, Learned…' It was as if Agamben wrote this quickly, if not hastily, repeating threads and technical solutions he invented a long time ago, and putting all into a format that resembles early modernity and seems pretentious today. This was a plausible interpretation especially because of the second part of the book, where Agamben is auto-mythical: he writes a biographic parable mythologising his entire creative work. I was reluctant to work further on this, but I decided to trust Tyson and Joris. I left the book on the shelf until the day of the first meeting when I read it again – this time with the intention of discussing the book with my friends. And this time I saw something important I did not notice via my first reading: Agamben's book is about us being able to be in (educational) relation with the world. It is about the possibility of engendering a bond with what exists. There are things there that we might notice. These are sometimes very unexpected, minor, on the edge of existence, or maybe just on the edge of being perceived, of perceptibility. They play no role in the gargantuan mechanisms of politics, economy, globalization, or climate change, but they caught our attention, and if we focus enough, we can see the whole world through them and in them.

That was my entry point to this book. I wanted to explore this further and develop this thought – but soon enough I felt that what can be said about this matter fits a page, so it might be important, but is way too little for an article (not to mention a small book). Then two things happen:

Joris asked me "do we really have to be so strategic in our work with this peculiar beautiful book and set a clear goal to write a publishable text out of it?". "Maybe we should just enjoy thinking together around this book?" – he asked.

Tyson proposed we would try out more experimental forms of working on this text together (as described in the previous sections).

Again, I decided to trust my friends and to let go of my solidified academic habits, i.e. to embark on an intellectual adventure with no expectations. What happened next was an unexpected and truly amazing mixture of very demanding and quite intense work with Agamben's "What I Saw, Heard, Learned…" and a joyful experience of playing together with friends. Mixture of serious intellectual work on something important and having sophisticated fun with two, and then three people becoming closer to me than ever before.

Joris's testimony

My first serious engagement with the oeuvre of Giorgio Agamben dates back to 2008 when I was a doctoral student. Interestingly, in the beginning this work did not speak to

me at all – and I struggled to see why some of my colleagues thought this was an important thinker philosophers of education should learn from. What saved me, and what set me on a life-long engagement with Agamben is, I guess, a combination of chance, friendship and study practice. That is, my dear friend Thomas Storme seduced me – in a manner he alone can – to start reading one of Agamben's texts, The Idea of Prose, on a daily basis, together, in a shabby pub in Leuven (at a time people still smoked in pubs). I can't explain what happened and how it happened, but it appeared that this text suddenly started to make sense and that Agamben turned out to be the guy that was to replace other authors as the conceptual guides for my PhD thesis, and my later work.

I was immediately filled with enthusiasm when another dear friend and intellectual companion, Tyson, informed me, sixteen years later, about a new, albeit quite special Agamben-book. The first impression I had when reading it was one of joyful affirmation – in a double sense: the text deals with most of the themes Agamben touches upon in his rich oeuvre, and somehow here he succeeds in communicating the gist of many of his ideas, each time in a few beautiful sentences. Many insights I drew from his work, but which I never could put in words, appeared before my eyes – and I was left with the cheerful feeling that what I had believed to be at the heart of his thought was now confirmed. And, secondly, what seemed to be ultimately at stake in this oeuvre is indeed an ethics of the good life (rather than a critique of how power holds us captive), which turns around a pure affirmation of what life has on offer. Comedy is stronger than tragedy.

Rereading the book at an extreme slow pace during a hiking trip in the beautiful Alsace mountains over the summer, I made many notes during my breaks, to come up with the idea that together with Tyson and Piotr, yet another friend and companion in thought, that we should write a book on Agamben that covers in a highly systematic way all aspects of his complex, yet so important philosophy.

As in 2008, chance, friendship, and study practice made us do something altogether different. And maybe for the better. We thus embarked upon an exercise of writing protocols for each other and producing small texts in response – without any clear goal in mind, except to celebrate our love for this book and its author. The lesson I took from this is how important it can be to just try out something and see what happens – to experiment, in the strong sense of that word, i.e. risking to fail. In hindsight, I think we didn't fail because this kind of exercise appeared to resonate exactly with what this book demands of its readers – suggesting that this exercise is not meant to become a template one can then apply to any text.

Speaking for myself, the exercise helped to overcome my initial idea to jump from the book to systematic philosophy. More specifically, it aided me in doing, or experiencing, the opposite: seeing and learning that there is an existential depth to all that Agamben has noted down, and that this demands a careful reading and rereading – one to which the proper answer, one that does justice to the text, involves testimony, and

hence some kind of sharing of something about one's own existence. The risk here is one of sentimentalism and/or exhibitionism – a worry that I regularly shared with my co-exercisers. To make such an exercise into something worthwhile, the three requirements of chance, friendship and study practice seem right. I mean, it is the chance of risking to fail, the type of communication one can only have among friends and the precisely protocolled nature of the whole endeavor that made this exercise into something I consider profoundly meaningful.

Conclusion

Philosophical writing is not reducible to merely explaining what one has loved. It can also be an attempt to testify to the experiment of actively loving something. As such, we have not explained anything in Agamben's text *What I Saw, Heard, Learned*…. In a sense that would be too detached, too analytic for the experience of loving the text, which was renewed through each of our experimental protocols. Rather, this essay has been an attempt to convey our way of loving the text through our continued use of it. It would be too crass to describe such a practice as a "methodology" as this would miss how our friendship and our love for Agamben's book were inextricably woven into the practice itself. As such we cannot end by giving instructions for others on how to engage this or any other text. Instead, we can only testify to the joy of our adventure in order to remind others that *despite* all the true horrors of the world, some other form of educational life is still possible and worth pursuing.

What is of crucial importance is that this joy is not reserved for a few, but literally available to anyone. It is not some exclusive joy to which one responds with jealousy and indignation. Instead, this joy is virtually for all. The adventure we embarked on did not require anything special, anything exclusive, anything rare. We have, for instance, not used sophisticated technological devices, and we did not have any form of funding available. This work did not benefit our academic institutions, nor our positions within them. We have just used our free time, personal computers and widely available software. The only financial threshold, so to speak, was that we all bought the book by Agamben. What we would like to claim with this text is that free, experimenting, adventurous, studious love for the world is virtually for all, something everybody can do. It does not have to require much, and it brings the joy of delving into what really matters together with friends. This is perhaps the real lesson of our testimonies.

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