

“A Universal Hubbub Wild of Stunning Sounds and Voices all Confused”:  
The Genesis and Degeneration of Speech in Agamben’s *Infancy and History*  
and Milton’s *Paradise Lost*

CHRISTOPHER ROBINSON

HEC-PARIS

1. **I**n *The Open*, Giorgio Agamben locates a division between the human and the animal within man, and argues it is the very fact of this divided being which defines our humanity:

In our culture man has always been thought of as the articulation and conjunction of a body and a soul, of a living thing and a *logos*, of a natural (or animal) element and a supernatural or social or divine element. We must learn instead to think of man as what results from the incongruity of these two elements [...] What is man, if he is always the place—and, at the same time, the result—of ceaseless divisions and caesurae<sup>1</sup>?

2. In an earlier book, *Infancy and History*, Agamben likewise focuses on a fracture, only in this case it is a linguistic divide, one known by many different names: *phōnē* and *logos*, *langue* and *parole*, the semiotic and the semantic. And it so happens that the origins of this particular book lie in another unfinished, or rather abandoned work, which was to have focused on the human voice. On one of the surviving pages from that project, which is reproduced in the preface to *Infancy and History*, Agamben asks:

Is there a human voice, a voice that is the voice of man as the chirp is the voice of the cricket or the bray is the voice of the donkey? And, if it exists, is this voice language? What is the relationship between voice and language, between *phōnē* and *logos*? And if such a thing as a human voice does not exist, in what sense can man still be defined as the living being which has language<sup>2</sup>?

3. These, Agamben claims, are “cardinal philosophical question[s]” that date back to the ancients (4). From the dawn of western philosophy, humans have distinguished themselves from animals on the basis of speech, and this distinction has hinged upon the nature of the voice. All other distinctions between animal and man, such as the human sense of good and evil, the just and unjust, the beautiful and base—which is to say, the very categories upon which humanity organizes itself socially and politically—all these begin with the differences between the voices of man and beast.

4. To support his claims, Agamben quotes a passage from Aristotle, who writes in the *Politics*:

Nature, as we say, does nothing without some purpose; and for the purpose of making man a political animal she has endowed him alone among the animals with the power of reasoned speech. Speech is something different from voice [*phōnē*], which is possessed by other animals also and used by them to express pain or pleasure; for the natural powers of some animals do indeed enable them to feel pleasure and pain and to communicate these to each other. Speech on the other hand serves to indicate what is useful and what

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1 G. Agamben, *The Open*, 16.

2 G. Agamben, *Infancy and History*, 3-4. Subsequent references appear in the text.

is harmful, and so also what is right and what is wrong. For the real difference between man and other animals is that humans alone have perception of good and evil, right and wrong, just and unjust. And it is the sharing of a common view in these matters that makes a household [*oikia*] or a city [*polis*]. (8-9)<sup>3</sup>

5. Commenting on these remarks, Agamben explains that, for the Greeks, the passage from nature to culture, from the biological organism to the social body, from the simple expression of *pathemata* to that of *logos* is made possible thanks to the articulation of the voice. For, where the animal voice is said to be confused, the human voice is composed of and structured by *gramma*. This latter term indicates both signs that represent the voice, and also the differential structure of the human voice itself. In other words, unlike the animal voice, the human can be divided into minimal sound units which can then be represented in writing. The Greeks believed that, as a constitutive element of the voice and also a sign unto itself, the *gramma* could serve as a bridge across the gap that separates *phōnē* from *logos*, voice from discourse.
6. Thanks to the influence of structuralist linguistics, which recreates *gramma* in the guise of minimal sound units operating within a closed differential system, this antique vision of language and culture has been revived in various domains of contemporary thought. Agamben himself frequently cites the structural anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss, whose work illustrates how ways of thinking and ways of living are generated by nomenclature and kinship terminology<sup>4</sup>. In other words, he demonstrates how the articulation of language gives rise to the social structures of the household, or *oikia*, and community, or *polis*. From this modern example, we can see how the notion of the articulation of language refers, not only to phonological units of speech, but to a semiotic or sign-based system that covers an entire gamut of sound trends, word combinations, and conceptual categories.
7. Contrary to both ancient and modern conceptions, however, Agamben argues that *phōnē* and *logos* form two sides of a void or chasm, which the *gramma* cannot bridge. As he puts it:

The moat between voice and language (like that between language and discourse, potency and act) can open the space of ethics and the polis precisely because there is no *arthros*, no articulation between *phōnē* and *logos*. The voice has never been written into language, and the *gramma* (as Derrida fortuitously demonstrated) is but the very form of the presupposing of self and potency. The space between voice and *logos* is an empty space [...] (9-10).<sup>5</sup>

3 The original passage appears in Book I, chapter 2 of the *Politics*, 28-29.

4 See, for example, his discussion of names and naming in two chapters of *La Pensée sauvage*, “Universalisation et particularisation”, 194-229, and “L’Individu comme espèce”, 230-259.

5 This reference to Derrida makes for a barbed compliment, and one suspects that Agamben is attempting in these pages to pit Benveniste’s scheme of the semiotic and the semantic against Derrida’s opposition between grammatology and phonologocentrism, or the fixation on phonology. Where ancients and moderns alike give priority to spoken over written speech, to the phonetic structure of the voice over the written symbols that represent the phonemes, Derrida reconceptualizes the concept of writing and reverts the hierarchy with his concept of arche-writing, or the imposition of a differential structure that precedes the division of speech into phonetic, that is, transcribable units. Agamben appears to agree on this specific point, and notes that the speaking voice is, in fact, undivided. In a gloss on the origins of modern grammar, he gives a résumé of scientific studies that demonstrate how the speaking voice amounts to a sonorous flow that does not subdivide into a succession of minimal units. Yet, he

8. In light of these observations, we find that the functions of designation and classification exemplified by the act of naming, or the kind of “grammar” or “grammatology” at work in the kinship and other classificatory schemes studied by Lévi-Strauss, represent something other than discourse. This leads Agamben to reject what he deems as “the dominant model” of language in our culture, which is to say, “a state or a patrimony of names and rules which each people transmit from generation to generation” (10), and to turn toward a different model, that of Emile Benveniste.

9. In his celebrated essays “On the Nature of Pronouns” and “Subjectivity in Language,” Benveniste develops a distinction between the semiotic and the semantic<sup>6</sup>. The semiotic relates to the sign. It refers to a closed system, and as such does not form a bridge or link to anything outside of itself, but is rather pure identity in reference to itself, pure difference in reference to all else. The semantic relates to discourse. Where the sign has no particularity, and transcends individual human existence, discourse is always particular, always individual. The semiotic and semantic are thus radically separated, and this disjunction can be demonstrated in two ways. The first is in terms of translation. The semantic, as represented by ideas and rhetoric, can be more or less translated, while the semiotic, represented by phonology and syntax, usually cannot. A second demonstration is that, where the sign only requires recognition, discourse requires understanding. Agamben explains that:

Every language that is wholly contained within a single dimension (whether it is the chirp of the cricket or sign systems employed by man other than language) necessarily remains within the semiotic, and its functioning requires that it be merely recognized, not comprehended. Only human language [...] adds another sense to semiotic meaning, transforming the closed world of the sign into the open world of semantic expression (67).

10. The mention here of the emblematic chirp of the cricket leads us to ask what happens, within the context of Benveniste’s model, with the distinction made by Aristotle between the voices of man and beast. Unsurprisingly, Agamben locates the animal voice on the side of the semiotic, and even goes so far as to equate the semiotic with nature and the “endosomatic”—that is, the genetic and neural transmission of language. Conversely, he equates the semantic with culture and the exosomatic, or the historical transmission of language. This does not mean, however, that he unproblematically equates the human with the semantic. To the contrary, human speech is divided between the semiotic and semantic, the natural and cultural, the endosomatic and exosomatic.

11. Indeed, the genesis of human speech is made possible by this very division within language, a fracture that man himself introduces as he emerges from infancy to become the speaking subject. As Agamben puts it:

It is the fact of man’s infancy (in other words, in order to speak, he need [*sic*] to be constituted as a subject within language by removing himself from infancy) which breaks the closed world of the sign and transforms pure language into human discourse, the semiotic into the semantic. Because of his infancy, because he does not speak from the very start, man cannot enter into language as a system of signs without radically transforming it, without constituting it in discourse.

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ultimately sweeps away Derrida’s opposition, arguing that, if anything, grammatology belongs on the same side of the linguistic divide as phonology. (The English version omits this section on the birth of grammar. See the French translation, *Enfance et histoire*, 72-76).

6 Both essays appear in *Problèmes de linguistique générale*.

12. It thus becomes clear in what sense Benveniste's "double signification" should be construed. Semiotic and semantic are not in substance two realities but are, rather, the two transcendental limits which define and simultaneously are defined by man's infancy. The semiotic is nothing other than the pure pre-babble language of nature, in which man shares in order to speak, but from which the Babel of infancy perpetually withdraws him. The semantic does not exist except in its momentary emergence from the semiotic in the instance of discourse, whose elements, once uttered, fall back into pure language, which reassembles them in its mute dictionary of signs. Like dolphins, for a mere instant human language lifts its head from the semiotic sea of nature (63-64).
13. Now, when Agamben discusses infancy, he goes beyond the familiar etymological gloss. The figure of the infant is more than a being that cannot articulate words and string them together into grammatically coherent structures, and infancy is more than a mere "impossibility of saying" (8). Infancy is rather a passage through, or to take up the dolphin metaphor, a leap across the divide that separates the semiotic from the semantic. For this reason, Agamben identifies infancy as the source or original dimension of humanity. (69)<sup>7</sup>

### Naming the Animals

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14. A similarly anagogical or mythical and historical conception of human infancy lies at the heart of John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. In Book VIII of the poem, which takes as its central episode the celebrated myth of Adam naming the animals, we discover that Adam is endowed from the moment God breathed life into him with a mastery of both the languages and the names of the animals. He describes to the angel Gabriel how, upon coming to life:

[...] to speak I tried, and forthwith spake,  
My tongue obeyed and readily could name  
Whate'er I saw [...] (271-273)<sup>8</sup>

Slightly later Adam speaks once again of the naming of the animals, adding that:

I named them, as they passed, and understood  
Their nature, with such knowledge God endued  
My sudden apprehension: but in these  
I found not what methought I wanted still (352-355)

In response to this complaint, Raphael gently rebukes Adam, saying:

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7 A passage in Y. Hersant's French translation reads, "l'enfance comme dimension originelle de l'humain" (81).

8 All quotations are taken from A. Fowler's revised second edition. Numbers in parentheses refer to lines of verse, not pages.

[...] is not the earth  
 With various living creatures, and the air  
 Replenished, and all these at thy command,  
 To come and play before thee, knowst thou not  
 Their language and their ways [...] (369-373)

15. Taken all together, these lines suggest that Adam is born with an innate mastery of *phōnē*, in the sense of the voice of nature, or the languages of bird and beast<sup>9</sup>, and also of *gramma*, understood in the broadest possible sense of a system of designation and classification, as we saw with the reference to Lévi-Strauss' *pensée sauvage*<sup>10</sup>. These phonological and grammatological aspects of language together make up the semiotic realm. Indeed, as God parades the animals before him, Adam names the beasts "with a sudden apprehension" that recalls the recognition that Agamben mentions with respect to the semiotic.
16. For Agamben, however, all of this is something radically different from discourse. Milton seems to be thinking along the same lines, for Adam adds that "in these / I found not what methought I wanted still". In his ensuing entreaty to God, he adds that it is

[...] of fellowship I speak  
 Such as I seek, fit to participate  
 All rational delight, wherein the brute  
 Cannot be human consort; they rejoice  
 Each with their kind, lion with lioness;  
 So fitly them in pairs thou hast combined;  
 Much less can bird with beast, or fish with fowl  
 So well converse, nor with the ox the ape;  
 Worse then can man with beast, and least of all. (389-397)

17. Now, when Adam claims that "the brute cannot be human consort", he is reiterating the same kind of ethical and also linguistic distinctions that Aristotle draws up between man and beast. Thus, the animal couples "rejoice each with their kind"—which is to say, they not only feel, but also share and communicate to one another basic emotions and sensations of pleasure. But only humans possess, in addition to these lower senses, that

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9 There is a debate amongst Milton specialists as to whether the poet intends the languages of the beasts to be understood in the naturalistic sense of "inarticulate sounds" or to a prelapsarian state in which the animals talked, or possessed forms of speech approximate to that of man. See Fowler's footnote to line 373. My own reading, which establishes a comparison and contrast between Adam's naming of the animals in book VIII and Satan's encounter with the nameless creatures of Hell in book II, sides with the first view.

10 For Milton's interests in the scientific designation and classification of animal species, see Fowler's footnote to lines 343-356.

higher sense of goodness, justice and beauty, which Adam sums up in his ideal of an “all rational delight”. An ideal whose formulation alludes to the *logos*, and which, Aristotle claims, founds the human household and community. So, in these lines, Adam is asking God, not merely for a mate with whom he may consort as beasts consort, but rather for a partner with whom he may converse. The aim of this discourse is mutual understanding, which is as impossible between man and beast, as between man and God. As the appeal to understanding is one of the hallmarks of the semantic, we can say that, until he has found his Eve, Adam will remain stuck in that semiotic realm into which he has so miraculously sprung into being; he will be unable to make the leap into the semantic, that very leap which will inaugurate desire and subjectivity. In a word, Adam will remain an infant.

### The Plunge into Chaos and Sin

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18. In Book II of *Paradise Lost*, Milton provides a counter-scenario to the naming of the animals, in what also amounts to a complete inversion of the Aristotelian model of linguistic genesis. It is, of course, significant that this inversion should occur in the earlier book, prior to the appearance of Adam in the garden of Eden; for the degeneration of speech, as discussed below, paradoxically represents the pre-condition of infancy understood in the linguistic and historical sense that Agamben gives to the word. The counter-scenario in question begins with Satan’s exploration of the landscapes of Hell, following his expulsion from the kingdom of Heaven, and ends with his plunge into the depths of Chaos. With this headlong plummet of his anti-hero, the poet fathoms the potential destruction of the very foundations of human language and culture, an utter breakdown of the *logos* into *phōnē* and *pathemata*. These depths of linguistic madness and mayhem are depicted thus:

[...] Into this wild abyss,  
 The womb of nature and perhaps her grave,  
 Of neither sea, nor shore, nor air, nor fire,  
 But all these in their pregnant causes mixed  
 Confusedly, and which thus must ever fight,  
 Unless the almighty maker them ordain  
 His dark materials to create more worlds,  
 Into this wild abyss the wary fiend  
 Stood on the brink of hell and looked awhile,  
 Pondering his voyage: for no narrow frith  
 He had to cross. Nor was his ear less pealed  
 With noises loud and ruinous (to compare

Great things with small) than when Bellona storms,  
 With all her battering engines bent to raze  
 Some capitol city, or less than if this frame  
 Of heaven were falling, and these elements  
 In mutiny had from her axle torn  
 The steadfast earth [...]  
 At length a universal hubbub wild  
 Of stunning sounds and voices all confused  
 Borne through the hollow dark assaults his ear  
 With loudest vehemence: thither he plies,  
 Undaunted to meet there what ever power  
 Or spirit of the nethermost abyss  
 Might in that noise reside [...] (917-927, 951-957)

19. An especial emphasis has been placed in these lines upon the unarticulated or confused voice of nature; the very word “confused” is repeated twice, both in reference to the “dark materials” from which God has fashioned the universe, and also to the “universal hubbub wild” that fills the realm of Chaos.
20. Satan will pass into this chaotic realm through the back-gates of Hell, which are guarded by a Melusine-like creature named Sin and her shadowy off-spring, Death<sup>11</sup>. It is Sin, in fact, who holds the key to Chaos—in more than one sense. Following the age old metaphor of the female sex as a keyhole, it might very well be that Satan’s plunge into Chaos is in fact a tumble into the vast and voluminous folds of the gate-keeper’s flesh. Indeed, when the poet, employing a cliché from the Greeks, describes Chaos as “The womb of nature and perhaps her grave,” he is referring obliquely to Sin<sup>12</sup>. For, as we shall see, a “wild hubbub” resounds not only throughout the realm of Chaos, but also within the womb of Sin. When he speaks of the grave, of course, the poet is also alluding to Death, which violently issues forth from Sin’s belly to tear and distend it, disfiguring his mother’s flesh, and transforming her into a serpentine monster:

The one seemed woman to the waist, and fair,  
 But ended foul in many a scaly fold  
 Voluminous and vast, a serpent armed

11 In his notes to these lines, Fowler cites two precedents for Milton’s figure of Sin: Spenser’s Error and Phineas Fletcher’s Hamartia, meaning error or sin.

12 In a well-known passage from the *Cratylus*, Plato elucidates the phrase, “the body is the tomb of the soul,” with a series fantastical lexical associations that link together the Greek words for body, tomb, and sign: *sōma*, *sēma* and *sema* (437-438). The third item in the series is particularly interesting for reading the body of Sin in terms of linguistic genesis and degeneration.

With mortal sting [...] (650-653)

21. The hybrid figure depicted in these lines is formed of an unnatural combination of human and animal bodies that foreshadow Eve's seduction by the serpent. More than that, Sin's body incorporates the eternal enmity with which God will punish woman and snake after the Fall, to result in a forced coupling of warring opposites that gives rise to and perpetuates the pain and strife of childbirth<sup>13</sup>.
22. The hybrid figure of Sin is one of the most horrific embodiments imaginable of the Aristotelian concept of *teras*, the perverse or "unusual birth" that goes against the established order of the universe. Far from being perceived merely as a biological accident, the unnatural birth is to be interpreted as a symbolic event of divine import. As such, *teras* refers to "a sign, wonder, or marvel", and its use is often synonymous with the Latin words *monstrum*, *omen*, *portentum* and *prodigium*<sup>14</sup>. That Sin's body is a sign, or a semi-otic figure, is underscored in the poem in several ways. First, Milton quite simply puns upon the name of *Sin* and the word *Sign*, to construct what some scholars have identified as an allegory of the "corruption of language"<sup>15</sup>. Playing upon the etymology of her consort's celestial name *Lucifer*, which means "bringing or bearing light"<sup>16</sup>, Sin explains to Satan:

Likest to thee in shape and countenance bright,  
 Then shining heavenly fair, a goddess armed  
 Out of thy head I sprung: amazement seized  
 All the host of heaven; back they recoiled afraid  
 At first, and called me *Sin*, and for a *sign*  
 portentous held me [...] (756-761, italics added)

23. Second, the fact that her nether parts acquire the form of serpentine folds or coils suggests that the morphology of Sin embodies the figurality of language or the genetic process of troping, which means "to turn". Finally, in a passage that makes multiple references to the body of Sin, Milton plays with the etymology of the word *monstrum*, which

13 See Genesis 3:14-16: "And the Lord God said unto the serpent, Because thou hast done this, thou art cursed above all cattle, and above every beast of the field; upon thy belly shalt thou go, and dust shalt thou eat all the days of thy life: And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel. Unto the woman he said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children [...]"

14 In a gloss on Aristotle's term, E. Ingebretsen cites the Liddell and Scott Greek dictionary: "*teras*: a sign, wonder, marvel. Lat. *portentum*, *prodigium*. In Homer, esp. of signs from heaven. II. In concrete sense, a monster" (*At Stake*, 211). See also note 18 below.

15 See Fowler's footnote to line 752.

16 In lines 84-87 of Book I, Satan is described in these terms: "how changed/ From him, who in the happy realms of light/ Clothed with transcendent brightness did outshine/ Myriads though bright [...]"

means “that which reveals” or “that which warns”<sup>17</sup>. The passage in question paints the landscape of Hell in these terms:

A universe of death, which God by curse  
 Created evil, for evil only good,  
 Where all life dies, death lives, and nature breeds,  
 Perverse, all monstrous, all prodigious things,  
 Abominable, inutterable, and worse  
 Than fables yet have feigned, or fear conceived,  
 Gorgons and Hydras, and Chimeras dire. (622-628)

24. We find in these lines three words that are in fact synonyms: *monstrous*, *prodigious*, and *abominable* (the latter being derived from *omen*). As such, the lines succinctly recreate the proliferation of terms that have aggregated, through a long and convoluted history, around the word “monster”<sup>18</sup>. The three synonyms, moreover, establish a parallel with three creatures that are similar to, but not the same as, monsters of Greek antiquity. In other words, these creatures are not the gorgons, hydras and chimeras of pagan myth, which is a frequent and erroneous reading of this last line, but rather beings so monstrous and abominable that, while they might resemble these fabled beasts, they are in fact unspeakably worse, to the point of being “inutterable”—which is to say, unnameable. Combining hyperbole with the ineffability topos, the Christian poet points to, without being able to name, creatures that are far more dire than anything the Greeks may have feigned to conceive.
25. That the dense, multi-layered import of this passage also applies to Sin is made clear by her morphological kinship with the creatures chosen as points of reference. For one thing, all three contain snakes: the Gorgon’s hair, the Hydra’s head, and the Chimera’s tail. Then, more particularly, the proliferation of the Hydra’s multiple heads anticipates both the magnification of Sin’s serpentine coils, described as falling “in many a scaly fold/ Voluminous and vast”, together with the massing of the hounds encircling her waist (as described below). The Gorgon and Chimera, meanwhile, anticipate the hybrid construction of Sin’s body. The three monsters, furthermore, are introduced into this passage with a chiasmus that sets up a categorical confusion between life and death, evil and good. Far from collapsing, bridging or crossing over these primary categories of philosophical discourse, the chiasmus reveals a chasm between opposing ontological and ethical terms, an abyss from out of and in which nature breeds her monsters. It is per-

17 As J. Cohen writes, “A construct and a projection, the monster exists only to be read: the *monstrum* is etymologically ‘that which reveals,’ ‘that which warns,’ a glyph that seeks a hierophant” (“Monster Culture”, 4).

18 Ingebreten writes, “Popularly the etymology of the word ‘monster’ derives from the Latin *monstrare* (with cognate forms *demonstrate* and *remonstrate*), as well as *monere*. The OED cites Chaucer using ‘monstre’ as marvel in 1374, while ‘monstre’ as misshapen is cited in 1300 [...] The word’s complicated etymology suggests a long and sometimes convoluted history of events *contra naturam*, whether *portentum*, *prodigium*, or *ostentum*” (*op. cit.*, 211). In a later note, he aptly comments on the difficulty of sorting out “the origin of the word ‘monster’ from the efflorescence of accrued meanings, connotations, and implications” (213)

haps this, more than anything else, that most powerfully anticipates the perverse body of Sin. For her sex and womb serve as far more than the middle ground between her womanly and serpentine halves; they are rather more like a battle ground, over and in which the conflicting pulsions of life and death, *thanatos* and *eros*, wage unholy war with one another, as Sin gives life to Death, and unbirths the living.

26. This division can also be read in terms of a metalinguistic allegory, founded upon that very same rift which Agamben describes in the preface to *Infancy and History*, the two sides of the chasm separating *phōnē* and *logos*, *langue* and *parole*, the semiotic and the semantic. To enter into this space between sign and discourse, he writes, “is to venture into a perfectly empty dimension [...] in which one can encounter only the pure exteriority of language, that ‘*étalement du langage dans son être brut*’ of which Foucault speaks [...]” (6). It is, in other words, to experience nothing less than language as such, or what Agamben calls an *experimentum linguæ*, a form of experimentation “which is undergone only within language” and “in which what is experienced is language itself” (5). What he means by “experience” and “experimentation” appears to be something like the remembrance or recovery of that originary leap from language to discourse which he characterizes as infancy. A parallel can be drawn here between Agamben’s ideas and those of Paul de Man, who likewise conceives of language in terms of a leap across a divide. Where the Italian philosopher finds the luminous source of all mystery and wonder, however, de Man uncovers within that gap something strange and uncanny<sup>19</sup>. He argues that to venture into the breach, and to experience the *être brut du langage*—that “brute being” of language as such—would be in and of itself a completely incomprehensible exercise. For “[w]e would then have witnessed [...] the undoing of cognition and its replacement by the uncontrollable power of the letter as inscription<sup>20</sup>”. He is referring here to the sheer materiality of the sign and its tendency to proliferate, a tendency which baffles both recognition and comprehension.

27. This is, in fact, precisely the kind of experience found in Saussure’s experimentation with hypograms, which offers a disquieting counter-example to Agamben’s wondrous *experimentum*, and stands as emblematic of all reading—which means, for de Man, all acts of interpretation and understanding. Indeed, to make sense of any written or spoken utterance requires that a set of arbitrary choices be imposed upon aggregations of brute linguistic matter—individual letters, syllables, words—that are in and of themselves meaningless. De Man himself puts it this way:

When you spell a word you say a certain number of meaningless letters, which then come together in the word, but in each of the letters the word is not present. The two are absolutely independent of each other. What is being named here as the disjunction between grammar and meaning, *Wort* and *Satz*, is the materiality of the letter: the independence, or the way in which the letter can disrupt the ostensible stable meaning of a sentence and introduce in it a slippage by means of which that meaning disappears, evanesces, and by means of which all control over that meaning is lost. (89)

28. To pass from one side of the rift to the other can thus be imagined in terms of a leap across the great divide separating the non-signifying materiality and arbitrary “positional power” of the letter from the readable or articulable word. Yet, in making the jump, the

<sup>19</sup> Citing a passage from Wittgenstein, Agamben suggests that “the most appropriate expression of wonderment at the existence of the world is the existence of language” (10-11).

<sup>20</sup> P. de Man, *The Resistance to Theory*, 37. Subsequent references appear in the text.

infant may be subject to “a terror glimpsed” by Saussure, who, having grown self-consciously aware of the folly of his decryptations, wrote that “[s]ome unheard of, monstrous species of things are involved” (37). De Man seizes upon this teratological figure to suggest that it “is not at all certain that language is in any sense human” (87). He then goes on to describe “the inhuman” as “linguistic structures, the play of linguistic tensions, linguistic events that occur, possibilities which are inherent in language—independently of any intent or any drive or any wish or any desire we may have” (96). Agamben likewise suggests that “language is not the same as the human” (59-60), though he would argue that it is precisely the division between the human and non-human which defines human speech. Even with this added nuance, however, his vision of linguistic genesis is comparable in many respects to that of de Man: the difference between the play of the signifier, on one hand, and human intentions, wishes, desires, and drives on the other, results in a blank, non-human lacuna, one that represents nothing less than the ground of potentiality upon which the founding distinctions between *langue* and *parole*, grammar and meaning, or speech and discourse are erected. It is therefore the very space of linguistic genesis, the matrix of human speech and subjectivity, and the passage of infancy in the philosophical sense of the term.

29. Yet, if human thought and discourse, and with it the speaking or reading subject, are to come in to being, the infant must make the leap across this gap between the two dimensions, and this means that the fears and anxieties engendered by the inhuman aspect of language must be confronted, overcome, and perhaps forgotten or effaced<sup>21</sup>. What happens, however, when the incipient subject hesitates or fails to make, or the speaking subject is unable to forget, the potentially traumatizing experience of that inaugural leap into thought, discourse and subjectivity? Book II of *Paradise Lost* provides, if not an answer to that question, then a provocative image in response to it, with Satan perched on the brink of Hell, before taking the fateful plunge into Chaos. Among other things, Milton’s poem evokes a frightful plummeting into the void, and prompts us to take Saussure’s “monstrous species” *à la lettre*, so as to read the creatures of Hell as signs—or more precisely, as figures that lurk within, or emerge from out of that “wild abyss” of infantile experience to embody language as an object of anxiety and fear, rather than wonder.

### The Unholy Family

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30. This linguistic terror and mayhem, moreover, breaks down the basic structures that articulate, not only human speech, but also human society—the *logos* understood, not only in terms of the Word, but also in terms of Aristotle’s *oikia* and *polis*, the household and community. Indeed, with the Unholy Family of which Sin is the hapless matriarch,

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21 My discussion of de Man is deeply indebted to D. Clark, who comments: “For de Man language is indistinguishable from the forgetting of the condition of its possibility in this inaugural breaching; it thus functions at two levels that are unaccommodated to each other and yet inextricably interinvolved: on the one hand, the inhuman lacuna that is signification’s possibility and, on the other, the blotting out of the intolerable blankness of the lacuna so that language may occur and the subject—among all other conceptualizations—may appear” (“Monstrosity, Illegibility, Denegation”, 46).

the concept of *teras* assumes truly prodigious proportions, piling abomination upon abomination. To begin with, Sin turns out to be both the daughter and the consort of Satan. Speaking to her father-husband, Sin describes the fruit of their incestuous union in these terms:

At last this odious offspring whom thou seest  
 Thine own begotten, breaking violent way  
 Tore through my entrails, that with fear and pain  
 Distorted, all my nether shape thus grew  
 Transformed: but he my inbred enemy  
 Forth issued, brandishing his fatal dart  
 Made to destroy: I fled, and cried out Death;  
 Hell trembled at the hideous name, and sighed  
 From all her caves, and back resounded Death. (781-789)

31. When Sin reveals, with a blasphemous echo of the Bible, that Death is Satan's "own begotten"<sup>22</sup>, she identifies her off-spring as the anti-Christ. Which means that he is also the antithesis of the *logos*, or the Word made flesh. In other words, Death is the *anti-logos*, a figure of linguistic havoc and destruction.
32. Indeed, Death disfigures his mother's body as he bursts from the womb, literally twists it beyond recognition, into the scaly coils of a giant snake. As such, Death is a figure that takes its very form from the disfigurement of its mother's body, a symbolic troping that casts into a sinister light Agamben's observation that the speaking subject "cannot enter into language as a system of signs without radically transforming it" (63). To borrow a phrase from de Man, Death is "shaped by the undoing of shapes"<sup>23</sup>, both his mother's and his own:

[...] The other shape,  
 If shape it might be called that shape had none  
 Distinguishable in member, joint, or limb,  
 Or substance might be called that shadow seemed,  
 For each seemed either; black it stood as night,

<sup>22</sup> See I John 4:9, "God sent forth his only begotten son into the world, that we might live through him."

<sup>23</sup> De Man's comments on a passage from Shelley's *The Triumph of Light* are highly appropriate for a reading of Milton's poem in terms of the division between *phōnē* and *logos*, a rift which serves as a space of linguistic genesis and degeneration: "The property of the river that the poem singles out is its sound; the oblivious spell emanates from the repetitive rhythm of the water washing away the tracks, it generates the very possibility of structure, pattern, form, or shape by way of the disappearance of shape into shapelessness. The repetition of the erasures rhythmically articulates what is in fact a disarticulation, and the poem seems to be shaped by the undoing of shapes" (*The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, 107).

Fierce as ten Furies, terrible as Hell,  
 And shook a dreadful dart; what seemed his head  
 The likeness of a kingly crown had on. (666-673)

33. To make full sense of these lines, and the figure of Death which they describe, it is necessary to think in terms of that homology Milton establishes between the two matrices of Chaos and Sin. In the first excerpt from Book II quoted above (lines 917-927), the realm of Chaos is described as a space akin to the chora (the Greek word for *womb*), a heterotopic repository of those “dark materials” that God employs in his creation of the material universe<sup>24</sup>. The poet, moreover, has modeled this dark and formless matter upon the *gramma*: genetic particles that can only be set into action by the will or Word of God, which is to say, by the *logos*. In absence of the Word, Chaos will remain the realm of shapeless sound, the utterly “confused” as opposed to the “articulated” voice, something comparable to, but infinitely worse than the voice of nature, and the sounds emitted by ordinary beasts. This violent mélange of *phōnē* and *pathemata*, or “stunning sounds and voices” that assault Satan’s ear “with loudest vehemence”, amounts to a formless mass of brute linguistic matter, one that is characterized in terms of sheer potentiality and potency. These happen to be twin genetic qualities that are attributed to the figure of Death, the anti-*logos*, which is described as seeming fierce, terrible, deadly—and also kingly. So, when Death violently issues forth from the womb of Sin, he generates what de Man describes as “the very possibility of structure, pattern, form or shape by way of the disappearance of shape into shapelessness<sup>25</sup>”. Only in this case, it is no passive “disappearance”, but rather the willful violence and destruction of linguistic form that gives shape and substance to the figure of Death.
34. It is also the willful destruction of human society, for Death violates that primordial taboo which forbids the mother’s body as an object of desire and consummation, and which serves as the foundation of all kinship and social relations. Indeed, in a grisly parody of Ovid, Death multiplies and prolongs the violence engendered by his birth as he forcibly couples with Sin. As she herself bemoans:

I fled, but he pursued (though more, it seems,  
 Inflamed with lust than rage) and swifter far,  
 Me overtook his mother all dismayed,  
 And in embraces forcible and foul  
 Engendering with me, of that rape begot

24 In the *Timaeus*, Plato refers to the chora as a chaotic matrix or receptacle that confounds language and matter, from out of which God orders the cosmos. In contemporary discourse, the term is frequently associated with J. Kristeva, who fits the platonic concept into a psychoanalytical scheme: the chora represents the semiotic (hence pre-linguistic) space of unordered drives, from out of which the subject will emerge into articulated language, or the realm of the symbolic. (See *La Révolution du langage poétique*, 22-30). Kristeva’s use of “semiotic” does not correspond to the sense that Benveniste and hence Agamben gives to the term, and is moreover incompatible with the latter’s concept of infancy, which he emphatically states does not denote a pre-linguistic stage in psychic development (54).

25 See note 23 above.

These yelling monsters that with ceaseless cry

Surround me [...] (790-796)

The pack of “yelling monsters” to which the unholy coupling of Sin and Death gives birth are described in the following terms:

[...] about her middle round

A cry of hell hounds never ceasing barked

With wide Cerberean mouths full loud, and rung

A hideous peal: yet, when they list, would creep,

If aught disturbed their noise, into her womb,

And kennel there, yet there still barked and howled

Within unseen. (653-659)

35. The word *rung* in line 655 brings to mind the homonym, *wrung*, the past participle of *wring*, which is etymologically related to *writh*, *wraith* and *wreath*, words that fall into the same lexical field as *twist*. This association is rather fitting. For these lines then suggest that the hounds carry on the process of that violent troping, that twisting and wringing of the mother’s body which was initiated by their incestuous father, Death. Indeed, insofar as the monstrous body of Sin is a sign—or better yet a trope, since the form her body takes after parturition is one of serpentine coils—the violence enacted upon her is primarily a violence of language and rhetoric: specifically the disarticulation of linguistic forms and figures—not only kinship terms, but all articulated sound—into senseless brute noise. This is underscored by the repeated emphasis on the noises made by those “yelling monsters”, barking and howling without cease, their wide “mouths full loud”.

36. It is also underscored in yet another fashion, one that is even more appalling. As Sin herself laments, the hounds of hell are:

[...] hourly conceived

And hourly born, with sorrow infinite

To me, for when they list into the womb

That bred them they return, and howl and gnaw

My bowels, their repast; then bursting forth

Afresh with conscious terrors vex me round,

That rest or intermission none I find. (796-802)

37. These latter lines foreshadow Eve’s punishment, as it will be pronounced by God: “I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow shalt thou bring forth chil-

dren<sup>26</sup>". Only it is not children, but rather a pack of dogs that are born of this foul union. These creatures not only kennel within their mother's womb, but feed upon her bowels, a repeated act of violence that adds up to more than an object of moral outrage and revulsion. In linguistic terms, these ravenous beasts with their "wide Cerberean mouths" collectively stand as a monstrous figure for the orality of speech, which is related to the bodily or material aspect of *phōnē*<sup>27</sup>.

38. What we witness with the incessant birthing and unbirthing of the hell-hounds, then, is yet another reversal or inversion of linguistic genesis, as a figure of speech, embodied by Sin, degenerates into primal *phōnē* and *pathemata*—sheer noise, affect and sensation. In the first reversal, the semiotic realm based upon the functions of designation and classification—the very functions exemplified by Adam's naming of the animals—is confounded in the landscapes of Hell. In stark contrast to the beasts of Eden, the creatures encountered by Satan resist naming, and possess hybrid bodies that overturn the basic ontological, aesthetic and ethical distinctions upon which thought and discourse are founded. They thus defy recognition and consequently thwart any attempt to make that leap of understanding which leads into the semantic realm. Then, with the most Unholy of Families, we pay witness to the utter violation of anything that might resemble a proper household, or *oikia*. Indeed, we confront a confusion of kinship terms so vile and perverse that it renders anything Lévi-Strauss might have uncovered in the Oedipus myth rather lame by comparison. These inversions correspond to the two types of disfigurement in and/or of language that de Man paradoxically identifies as the necessary pre-condition of meaning and subjectivity. In one sense, disfigurement refers to the violence of corporal mutilation, as we find in the twisting and distending of Sin's body, which represents violence against the body of language<sup>28</sup>. In another sense, disfigurement refers to the undoing of a figure, and more generally speaking of the figurality of

26 See note 13 above.

27 The orality of speech plays a central—and oftentimes violent role—in Deleuze's model of linguistic genesis. As he theorizes it, the human voice is located in an intermediary position between the noise of the depths and the surface structures that articulate language. It is a space where the voice has ceased to be noise, but is not yet speech. As he writes *La Logique du sens*: "Rendre le langage possible signifie ceci : faire que les sons ne se confondent pas avec les qualités sonores des choses, avec le bruitage des corps, avec leurs actions et leurs passions. [...] C'est toujours une bouche qui parle ; mais le son a cessé d'être le bruit d'un corps qui mange, pure oralité, pour devenir la manifestation d'un sujet qui s'exprime. C'est toujours des corps et de leurs mélanges qu'on parle, mais les sons ont cessé d'être les qualités attendant à ces corps pour entrer avec eux dans un nouveau rapport, celui de la désignation, et exprimer ce pouvoir de parler et d'être parlé" (212). The surface structures to which the voice aspires—structures that include, but are not limited to phonotactics and grammar—are all established by way of the repression of bodily instincts and drives in the course of the infant's acquisition of language. Yet, what is repressed will return. And in Deleuze's model, the noisy depths of the body are forever threatening to erupt into speech, overwhelming and destroying it. This philosophical model aptly fits Milton's scenario of the birthing and un-birthing of the hounds as read in terms of a metalinguistic allegory.

28 See de Man's discussion of disfigurement in Rousseau and Hardy: "The erasure or effacement is indeed the loss of a face, in French *figure*. Rousseau no longer, or hardly ... has a face. Like the protagonist in the Hardy story, he is disfigured, *défiguré*, defaced. And also in the Hardy story, to be disfigured means primarily the loss of the eyes, turned to 'stony orbs' or to empty holes" (*Rhetoric*, 100). J.-J. Lecercle's comments in *The Violence of Language* are likewise appropriate for the figure of Sin: "Before it is a practice, language is a body—a body of sounds. There is violence in a scream [...] Violence here is to be taken at its most literal, as body penetrating body" (229).

language, as we find in the shapeless body of Death to which Sin gives birth. Both types of disfigurement are found with the collective body of the hounds, which carry on the deformation of the maternal body, and which themselves form a shapeless mass or pack.

39. The din made by these hounds, born of incest only to become incestuous in their turn, recreates the confused voice of nature and the animal in the most horrific and beastly guise imaginable. Resounding throughout the womb of Sin, their “hideous peal” and “ceaseless cry” are akin to that “universal hubbub wild of stunning sounds and voices all confused” that assault the ears of Satan as he plunges down into Chaos, down into a chora-like realm that lies at the furthest possible remove from anything resembling the *logos*. Moreover, the very fact that the beasts are “hourly conceived” and “hourly born”, their howls “never ceasing”, signifies that the violence of and/or in language which they represent is constantly renewed. This last point sets Sin apart from the theriomorphous creatures with which Agamben begins *The Open*, and which he treats as emblems of humanity’s divided nature. These hybrids, which appear in a Hebrew Bible from the thirteenth century, are meant to signify that, “on the last day, the relations between animals and men will take on a new form, and [...] man himself will be reconciled with his animal nature<sup>29</sup>”. In contrast to these eschatological symbols, Milton’s hybrid figure paints the opposition between the human and the animal in violent and horrific terms, and moreover shows these divisions to be perpetually renewed, an enmity as hateful and eternal as that between woman and serpent. What this means in terms of linguistic allegory is that the division between language and discourse is the very precondition of human speech. Indeed, the reconciliation of her serpentine and womanly halves would represent, not only the end of time—and thus of infancy and history as Agamben conceives them—but also the end of human language and therefore of man. With her belly as a space of perpetual genesis and degeneration, the “womb of nature and perhaps her grave”, the figure of Sin thus provides a particularly monstrous and appalling, yet apt incarnation of that double fracture, that perpetual rift which is linguistic and anthropological, separating and conjoining the two aspects of both man and speech: the semiotic and the semantic, the natural and the cultural, the beastly and the divine.

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29 *Op. cit.*, 3.

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