little-known documents

Decadenza

GIORGIO AGAMBEN

TRANSLATION AND INTRODUCTION BY DANIEL LUKES

Introduction

"DECADENZA" IS GIORGIO AGAMBEN'S FIRST PUBLICATION, A SHORT STORY THAT APPEARED IN THE ITALIAN SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINE *Futuro* in 1964 and was written in 1963, while Agamben was a law student at Sapienza Università di Roma. The story, an animal parable comparable to those of Franz Kafka, is about a community of birds by the sea facing uncertainty and possible extinction, and it deals with several themes central to Agamben's philosophical preoccupations, especially those that define his first four books: human and animal and what separates the two; the origin of language and theories of voice, negativity, and death; the function of art and the political value of testimony.

"Decadenza," a story whose title is best translated as "decay" or "decline" rather than "decadence," is told from the point of view of a bird. The unnamed singular narrator, in a communal, epic voice that frequently uses the first-person plural, describes a state of sterility that has taken over his species. After explaining how an unknown affliction has caused the birds' eggs to go still and stop hatching, snuffing out the seed and spirit of their civilization and creating faultlines between the younger and older generations, the narrator expounds on the role played by song in their world, the song of life that animates their community and transmits to them the existence of a higher, ineffable vitalism. Particular attention is given to the bird poet Marco, a singular figure whose original singing style ushers in a new aesthetic: a type of song concerned not with external matters but with itself as song. In essence, "Decadenza" is a fall story, the likes of which guide much of Agamben's early thinking. It also gives a glimpse into what might have been had Agamben—who was friends with Italo Calvino and Elsa Morante, appeared briefly in Pier Paolo Pasolini's film *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (1964), and wrote poems in the 1960s—chosen to become a literary writer instead of a philosopher.

The Man without Content (1970), Agamben's first book, is a polemic against criticism and argues that the category of aesthetics, as formulated by Immanuel Kant, has had a rupturing effect, separating art from being embedded in life and transforming it into an object dispassionately observed

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from a distance. The "poetic status of man on earth" has been lost and the "original unity of the work of art has broken" (67, 37): art has ceased to animate life as rhythm, as organic pulse, and a new type of art, devoid of contents and offering itself as blank canvas for transformative potentiality (such as Kafka's parables, so resistant to interpretation) is needed. In "Decadenza," Marco's new singing style, a double series of sounds that articulate and resolve chaos and unity, brings about a similar break with tradition, one that is comparable also to the "musical innovations of the *ars nova* . . . , the modulation of the song and the *fractio vocis*" proscribed by medieval bishops (Agamben, *Man* 3).

Marco's song is also tied to the birds' doomed predicament: it is a death song, an elegy for a dying species. *Language and Death: The Place of Negativity* (1982), Agamben's fourth book, considers Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's idea of language as born in the context of the animal's death cry: unlike the chirps and grunts that are seamlessly integrated into the natural setting, the death cry causes a rupture that generates the potential for language and consciousness, through the "vanishing trace" of the animal entering into the symbolic dimension of memory and history (45). Agamben identifies an intermediate space between *phoné* ("mere sonorous flux emitted by the phonic apparatus" [35]) and *logos* (human word), which he calls *Voice* (*la Voce*), translating Martin Heidegger's term *Stimme* and capitalizing it, as he does in "Decadenza" with the word *Song* (*il Canto*). Agamben sets up the category of Voice to critique it as the negative foundation of theories of language that prize the ineffable, and as generative of modern nihilism.

"Decadenza" recalls *Language and Death*'s woodland setting and its "rustle of invisible animals among the bushes flanking our path" (107), which signal Agamben's interest in the poetry of Giovanni Pascoli (1855–1912), with its countryside world of birdsong and death, elegy and suffering, and the poet somewhat separate from life. Agamben's essay "Pascoli and the Thought of the Voice" (1982) examines Pascoli's shifts among "ornithological onomatopoeias" (*End* 67), glossolalia, and elegy, to advance a notion of poetry as a dead language, a letter bearing the trace of the animal voice's absence.

Bruno Brunetti reads "Decadenza" as symbolically illustrating the "condition of literature, and more generally of art, in modern times" (309; my trans.): an unpoetic and shabby present in which the oneness of song and life persists only as memory of a condition irretrievably lost. Giulia Iannuzzi notes the import of "a narrator that is in good substance unreliable, of an internal and partial focus" (278; my trans.) and analyzes the magazine *Futuro*'s wide and hospitable vision of science fiction as literature (235–79). Paula Fleisner discusses the story's "preoccupation with the mystery of 'life'" (251; my trans.), its focus on suffering common to human being and animal (254), and its relevance to the philosophical attention that Agamben pays to community and cultural transmission in his biopolitical work: "the narrator is witness to the impossibility of the transmission of a specific cultural content, content in which, moreover, the survival of the species is played out" (258; my trans.). What connects Agamben's early interest in animals and human beings, and how language separates them, to his later work on the witness and the *Muselmann* (the witness who cannot testify), and his critique of the ineffable Holocaust, in *Homo Sacer* and *Remnants of Auschwitz*, is how the gap between the "natural voice" and the "cultural voice" (Durantaye 283) "can open the space of ethics and the *polis*" (Agamben, *Infancy* 8). "Decadenza" pairs the poet (Marco) with the witness (the narrator), not merely to lament humanity's fall into language, in a decline narrative positing an "unbridgeable abyss, dividing men and animals" (Agamben, *End* 106), but also to begin theorizing how art and testimony interact to provide an ethical language that reaches beyond death and into history.

Note

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Decadenza

I COULDN'T SAY HOW LONG WE'VE BEEN COMing back here every evening. After having wandered over the sea in search of food, following the trail of the large ships or coasting the shores, we fall down tired upon this beach and, nestling on one side, we begin to brood. It is sweet at that hour to catch the last warmth of the sand that slowly cools beneath our bodies. The oldest among us remember the beginning of the brood; but there are many youths who know nothing about it, and to them this practice seems incomprehensible. I myself (belonging to a generation of middle age) am unable to satisfy their curiosity, which has something morbid and unhealthy about it, rejects rationality, and moreover is frighteningly abstract. Thus the young gather in groups (not that they dare give up brooding, but they've pushed the eggs that have been entrusted to them close to one another), and they vent in plots the resentment that consumes them: at night we can see their heads constantly moving, and their slender beaks gleaming in the darkness like sparks. Even the most respectful ones, who don't dare join these childish conspiracies, stand by in silence, and if we approach them they turn their heads and pretend to be busy cleaning their wings.

I said I belong to a middle generation: more precisely, to the penultimate one, before the eggs stopped hatching. I was grown up enough when the event occurred, and I still remember the concerns and fears that strained the elders (who were then in the prime of life), the various hypotheses they came up with to explain the phenomenon, the discussions that went on long into the night, after which the mystery remained so thick and veiled with anguish that our parents, looking dismayed at our bodies deeply immersed in sleep, waited for the dawn without sleeping, to immediately take flight again. My mother was no longer the same: she hunted with great enthusiasm, it is true, and her dives still stirred my admiration: but when she would land (long after I had landed, because of my imperfect development), I would read anxiety in her eyes and see her wandering with her companions without even bothering to dry her feathers—wet from the waves, still all smelling of salt—on the sand.

The mothers had first raised the alarm; with their particular sensitivity, they realized

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from the beginning that things were not going according to the ancient teachings and immediately communicated this to the others, shaking their neck and wings. A strange phenomenon had occurred: the eggs had lost their whiteness and had become more yellow, and had stopped palpitating. A few days later, almost crying, the mothers told us that they did not hear the Song anymore, and—they barely dared to say it—it seemed to them that the seed had died out.

At first the news was not taken on board in all its gravity: it was much too large a thing, almost as if our minds could not conceive it; but very soon the fact was so evident that no one could deny or doubt it any longer.

Around that time the leaders decided to try an experiment. A building of clay and dried algae was constructed, next to a dune, sheltered from the wind, and a good part of the eggs were transported there; the strongest and toughest among the mothers were chosen and ordered to not stop brooding at any time during the day.

We younger ones brought food to the House of Life (as the building was called) and others, later, relieved us. But nothing happened except that after three weeks the experiment was abandoned. Since then a long time has passed: the wind has destroyed the alcoves intertwined with algae, and the House of Life is no more than a pile of sad ruins, through which, sometimes, old Marco, the poet, wanders.

In my youth I heard him sing, and I still preserve the memory of it: anyone who—while coming in from the sea, or sitting on the sand, or pecking at the shells on the shore—has heard certain songs from him, will not forget them easily.

My mother recounts that Marco was different from all the poets who in birds' memory preceded him in the art: more refined and also more primitive, artful and spontaneous, noble and ignoble at the same time. From his childhood he had done nothing but sing, always disdainfully rejecting any other occupation, especially hunting: thus, it was immediately clear to everyone that he had been chosen by fate to be our poet. He was of delicate appearance, very slight and thin, and his temperament was certainly unsuited to long labor; but if you got up close to look at him, there was such a beauty in him that it was impossible to take your eyes off him. We were especially attracted to his deep clear eyes, accustomed as we were to a black iris, circled with red; for him alone made sense the proverb that says the eyes are the most spiritual part of the body, after the feathers of the neck. His neck was always evenly graceful, with harmonious lines, flexible, restless, and all covered with fine feathers of many colors, with gray and violet prevailing.

He had gentle manners, and although he loved solitude, he never refused anyone a conversation (in truth few dared question him); as for his relationships with females, the strangest and most legendary rumors circulated: weak lover, he was called, reluctant to give himself, and always full of reserve; those who knew him in this regard complained of his lack of passion, and soon broke off the relationship.

Sometimes you would suddenly hear his song from the thick of a bush or from the innermost dunes, and in the evening he was seen flying in company along the shore; but after those times he stayed away for a long while, and for months we did not hear his voice. But his real originality was the new style he had brought to singing. Before him, poets had chosen a variety of things as the topic of their art, and had even come to excel at it: well, Marco called these poets naive, because they had no self-knowledge.

He was the first to choose Song itself as the object of singing, creating unknown harmonies.

Naturally we have always known that there exists a necessary connection between the song of the poets and Song, and this is evident also from the fact that we have given to the former the same name as the latter. Both

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appear to us as having the same nature, with regard to the process that is characteristic of them: both arise from an infinite fulfillment of life, and while in the lowest races and even in most of us, fullness follows satisfaction (indeed we sleep when we are sated), in poets and in our collective soul, a pause in real life does follow satisfaction, yet it produces not a stoppage but rather an unfolding of new life that takes place in the spirit, in which the real experience is repeated. However, since the link between spiritual life and its natural element is superior and of an infinite order, it cannot be in any way identified by means of reasoning or memory, without becoming abstract and incomprehensible to us. It is expressed in Song, in Song we learn to know it, and from the first moment Song seems to us the very essence of our nature and the most beautiful creation of our race.

I was lucky enough to hear it once: it was just before the birth of the last generation, when I was still too young to brood. The adults were busy carrying out the ancient rite; they stayed with their eyes closed, motionless, and only from a furrow dividing the feathers of their chests could one guess that under their bellies the white eggs palpitated. I fluttered about next to my mother, and stopped to contemplate the bliss emanating from her concentration. "Of course," I thought, "in this moment she is listening to the Song of Life, which she has told me about many times during my childhood. Our every legend, every fairy tale tells of it: and what a divine thing it must be, if my mother is so transfigured by it! Here I am next to her, bumping the feathers of her hips with my beak, yet she does not even notice me." And I was taken by an invincible curiosity to know that mystery myself. Just then my mother opened her eyes, and looking at me with infinite tenderness must have guessed the desire that tormented me. She moved onto one side, and uncovered the egg, inviting me with a gesture of her neck to get close.

The words of our language are inadequate to express what I felt, because the harmonies of the Song went through my whole body and forced me to close my eyes and almost to faint. I can only say that from that moment Marco's song seemed a very small and negligible thing, an imperfect imitation and doomed to fail, because, limited as it is, it wants to give form to the inexpressible. False is the word of the poets, far from life and also much closer to it than the Song of our eggs.

In fact, as I have already mentioned, we make a distinction between Life and Song, a very subtle and important distinction, which has been to this day the basis for our beliefs, and for no reason must be ignored. It is rich in justice and dignity: by virtue of it our race has always risen above the others who likewise inhabit the marine regions, and no one has the right to renounce it, even if they have to live their whole life alone. Because certainly it produces a great loneliness, almost a sweet farewell to ourselves; but then how we all come together in its breast! There is a song by Marco that expresses very well the meaning of this; it is a melody that has by now become popular among us, but it is not at all as simple as one may think on hearing it for the first time. It is a double series of sounds; I say double, and not two series, because they do not appear consecutively but in a synchronous way, with a refinement of overlap and accompaniment that is to our delight (strange that a poet so great has been fated to our generations in decay). The first series is alternately impetuous and sweet, and in appearance without much unity: in fact, its sole unity is given by the brutal and chaotic immediacy of the various sounds, one could say natural sounds rather than warbles; the second series (and here is the poetic mechanism) reproduces, from an exterior point of view, the same harmonies (or, if you wish, disharmonies) of the first, but it continuously moves them into a higher sphere, placing order and beauty where there was but chaos.

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How it manages to do this remains inexplicable to me, especially since the two series are seemingly identical, and the variations, if there are any, are disguised to the point of having become imperceptible. What I wish to say is that in any case the existence of a distinction between them is beyond doubt; and here I return to what I was discussing earlier.

Life is a divine gift, but, on its own, by its nature it turns toward evil, bends toward sorcery and devilry. Indeed, we suffer from it: and those who suffer desire life in an unlimited and furious way, so they end up losing it, they jump beyond it and do acrobatics. But there is a principle that can restore grace and dignity to it, and save it from the temptation to jump, a principle that is able, in fact, to bring order and beauty where there was but chaos, and is a negation of the acrobatic and the dancer's spirit. Its expression is Song, the pure truth of life, the work of everyone, thanks to which we feel that we are participants in a higher existence. Because Song is above all aristocracy of life, its fullness and election on the part of our being, the overthrowing of all contradictions, the happy reconciliation between what we are and life. Therefore, Song is connected to reproduction and eggs, is itself creation—because it connects us to life, and what is creation if not a superior unity with life?

But ever since the Song has died out, living seems to us a senseless thing, and all our ancient beliefs risk falling into the void. We are not at fault, it is true; heavens, we are absolutely in the dark as to the causes; I formally declare that we know nothing about it! For this we suffer our punishment in silence, almost with shame, and innocence is the measure of our impotence. This evil does not come from us; but I'd be foolish if I did not understand, now, that it belongs to us and that, in fact, our blamelessness is an entirely negligible matter. Merit and fault are childish things: everyone knows that merit is innate, and that fault is always innocent. Whenever something happens, there is merit or fault: in this case there is fault.

Therefore I worry and despair. Our young, even though few have the courage to openly admit it, no longer believe in the distinction, and how could they believe in it, since they have never heard the Song? Their generation was born when the eggs had already stopped palpitating, and the restless mothers scanned the sky, waiting. The anguish of those looks still lingers in their eyes. So they began to circulate the craziest rumors: that the eggs are empty, and all you'd need to do is break them with your beak to realize this; they want, in short, to suggest that everything our race has believed so far has been a fraud and a scam. I do not understand them, these youths; or, rather, I understand that their situation is very difficult and delicate, but in this way they will never get to the bottom of anything. Why talk about deception? Do they not see how things in which they no longer have faith still shine in the words of the elders, in Marco's songs? They circulate in their blood, just as they circulate in that of their mothers. So it is not a matter of deception, but of disease: this they should understand. A strange and terrible evil has taken possession of the most elect part of our being and is killing the seed of our race. Perhaps under the white shell of the eggs, under the apparent, deadly silence, the Song still leads a pitiful fight against the enemy that is poisoning it, and our anxiety is but a reflection of this.

But this talk the young call chatter, and they don't know what to do except plot at night. They lend their ears to new beliefs, and I fear the day they will begin to act, the morning when an egg will be found, split by beak blows. Because what good can they do, after having lulled themselves in the dark for so long in such vicious and infantile ideas? Above all, they lack tact, and tact is a virtue that the leaders, in our race, have always had in abundance.

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We have seen strange things in recent years; there have been unexplained, mysterious cases: the leaping fish linger on land, watching the sea from high up in the branches, and are unaware of the fishermen killing them with cudgel blows, or notice it too late, the deadly weapons reaching them as they dart on the sand and beat the air with their fins.

Our cormorant brothers, who previously came often to our land bringing news of the western country, have disappeared from these seas. Other birds, the brown coots, have dug underground burrows and do not come out into the light anymore. They feed on earthworms, no longer have eyes, do not fly; and when we meet any of them, sticking their neck out of the sand with all caution, if we question them, they have forgotten the common tongue, and cannot respond.

The migratory butterflies, which flew in endless swarms, skilled in zooming and changing direction, with whom we used to engage in furious fights, true sarabandes, now fall into the water before reaching the shore, and we can fill our bellies with their corpses.

But for us the days pass alike: the sun continues to rise and set over this desolate land; for years we've been waiting for something to happen. The old fall silent, the young cannot be trusted: when will the wait end? No one can say; we do not know if the eggs will hatch. But we have faith in the words of the leaders and we continue to brood.

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