4. Glenn Gould's Mastery of Not-Playing: Style and Manner in the Work of Giorgio Agamben

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In the short essay *Bartleby*, Giorgio Agamben (1993) states that Glenn Gould is the only pianist who can play with his potentiality not to play. The claim is repeated in two of his recent publications in a slightly reformulated version (Agamben, 2017; 2019). This fragment has given rise to divergent interpretations, partly because Agamben does not explain why precisely Gould exemplifies the ability to play by not playing. For example, the passage has been interpreted as referring to Gould's unusual gesticulation while playing (Katschthaler, 2016); it has also been argued that Gould's musical genius always accompanies him, whether he is playing the piano or not (de la Durantaye 2009).

In this chapter, we argue that some of these interpretations demonstrate insufficient applications of Agamben's writings on potentiality. Based on Agamben's reading of Aristotle, potentiality is always both potentiality to and not-to, and this double structure is transported into actuality in a way that allows for the potentiality not-to, or *impotentiality*, to be preserved within the act. This chapter attempts to demonstrate that the reference to Glenn Gould should be interpreted precisely in these terms: while playing, Gould manages to exercise a way of not-playing. This is, in simplicity, also Agamben's argument, although in the original text he does not explain this in detail. However, in the more recent essays, Agamben discusses Gould in the context of other artistic practices and through the differentiation between *style* and *manner*. While style denotes the recognizable traits of a specific way of doing art or a genre, such as 'French Baroque' or 'Viennese Classicism,' manner denotes the artist's idiosyncratic way of resisting and playing with these canonical elements. In line with this, we argue that Gould's not-playing is exercised through a relatively high degree of mastery, which allows him to interpret a score and play with it freely, this way resisting the style he engages with in an original manner.

Instead of being a singular fragment that needs to be clarified, the reference to Gould highlights larger points of analysis: the focus on manners forms a line of development in the late work of Agamben (Agamben, 2016; 2017; 2019). In addition, we investigate how the idea of mannerism may be applied to analyze politics, arguing that the idea of mannerism is implicit in more established conceptions of politics. In the following section, we first briefly summarize Agamben's reading of Aristotle's discussion of potentiality. We then provide an overview of how Agamben's reference to Glenn Gould has been interpreted and demonstrate why these interpretations require further elaboration. Finally, we investigate how the theme of manner

features in the recent work of Agamben and argue that the notion of manner may be applied to praxic and poietic conceptions of political action as well as identity politics.

<a> BACKGROUND

> Only a power that is capable of both power and impotence, then, is the supreme power. If every power is equally the power to be and the power to not-be, the passage to action can only come about by transporting (Aristotle says 'saving') in the act its own power to not-be. This means that, even though every pianist necessarily has the potential to play and the potential to not-play, Glenn Gould is, however, the only one who can *not* not-play, and directing his potentiality not only to the act but to his own impotence, he plays, so to speak, with his potential to not-play. While his ability simply negates and abandons his potential to not-play, his mastery conserves and exercises in the act not his potential to play (this is the position of irony that affirms the superiority of the potentiality over the act), but rather his potential to not-play (Agamben, 1993, p. 36, italics in original)

The last sentence of this paragraph is slightly modified in the essay *What is the Act of Creation?*, which has most recently appeared in *Creation and Anarchy: The Work of Art and the Religion of Capitalism*. In this text, the last sentence is replaced with the following one: 'As opposed to ability, which simply negates and abandons its potential not to play, and talent, which can only play, mastery preserves and exercises in action not its potential to play but its potential not to play' (Agamben, 2019, p. 19). As the passage reveals, the Aristotelian discussion of potentiality functions as a starting point for Agamben's statement that Glenn Gould has the potentiality to play the piano by not playing. Before providing an overview of how the passage has been interpreted by various authors, we briefly rehearse Agamben's interpretation of Aristotle's concept of potentiality.

In the essay *On Potentiality* (Agamben, 1999a), two main elements capture Agamben's attention in his discussion of Aristotle: on the one hand, the mode in which potentiality can be said to exist independently from actuality and, on the other, the mode in which potentiality can be said to be present in actuality. Following Aristotle, Agamben discusses the former problematic – concerning the existence of potentiality – through the differentiation between *dynamis* and *energeia*, potential and act. To illustrate how potentiality exists independently from its actualization, Agamben explicates that Aristotle differentiated between the generic potentiality of a child that can possibly be developed and the existing potentiality of someone

who has already acquired a skill. The core argument is in the end rather simple: when architects are not designing buildings, they nevertheless have the ability to do so; when a sculptor is not sculpting, the ability to sculpt does not vanish into thin air. Human beings are capable of *having* a potentiality even when not exercising it. In this sense, Agamben can say that there is something like 'pure potentiality,' 'existing potentiality' or, by borrowing from Aristotle, that 'there is a presence and a face of potentiality' (Agamben, 1999a, p. 180). It is from this position that Agamben also formulates his broader critique of the primacy of actuality in the Western tradition, arguing that ever since ancient times and particularly within the rise of the Christian doctrine of the will, we have been accustomed to think in terms of that which is actualized instead of exploring the depths of our ability to *not* actualize our potentialities.

However, as Kevin Attell (2009, p. 41) also argues, the most idiosyncratic move in Agamben's interpretation of Aristotle is not his request for granting primacy to potentiality instead of actuality, but his way of understanding the relation between potentiality and impotentiality (*dynamis* and *adynamia*). As a starting point, Agamben again follows Aristotle in proposing that the structure of potentiality always entails the co-existence of potentiality and impotentiality with respect to the same thing: to be able to write entails that one is also able to not write. This is what leads him to the question of what happens to the potentiality not-to when it passes into actuality: whereas the actuality of a given potentiality, for example to play the piano, is of course that of playing the piano, what happens to the potentiality to not-play when it passes into actuality (Agamben, 1999a, p. 183)? Instead of simply vanishing at the threshold of actuality, Agamben argues that impotentiality is in fact *preserved* in the act. Relying on a fragment from the *Metaphysics*, Agamben reads Aristotle as having suggested that the potentiality not-to '*does not lag behind actuality but passes fully into it as such*' (ibid., italics in original). In other words, the original structure in which potentiality to and not-to coexist is transported into actuality as such.

We could thus speak of two steps in Agamben's interpretation of Aristotelian potentiality: existence *as* potentiality and existence *within* potentiality. In the first case, we have potentiality that exists even when not exercised, precisely as illustrated by the example of the skill to play the piano. This type of potentiality might in fact exist in a form that *never* passes into actuality, which might have been the case with the pianist Andrew Garrido, who taught himself to play the piano by drawing a keyboard on a piece of paper and memorizing the pitch of each key with the help of material he found on the internet (*The Guardian*, November 22, 2019). Had he not been given the chance to develop his playing by getting hold of a real piano, we might argue that his ability to play exists entirely in the form of potentiality.

In distinction to this type of potentiality we have something slightly more complicated, which we will call 'potentiality within actuality' for the remainder of this text. In this case, potentiality preserves itself within an actual operation in a way that does not exhaust the potentiality not-to. As Agamben demonstrates through his well-known concept of inoperativity, to be inoperative means precisely that one preserves a way of not being or doing within the act. For instance, in the paradoxical structure of sovereignty, analyzed in detail in the first volume of *Homo Sacer* (Agamben, 1998), the sovereign suspends itself from the law by deciding on its exception: this way, the inoperativity of law is manifest in its ability to be in force, yet without significance. In performative arts like dancing, we experience and witness a way of moving, yet not towards a determined end (Agamben, 2000; 2018). In the religious hymn, the conventional function of language – to transmit a specific content – is suspended and replaced by pure praise: language remains in use but inoperative as it does not communicate anything other than itself (Agamben, 2013).

In this chapter, we explore how the latter case of potentiality – potentiality within actuality – functions in Agamben's discussion of style and manner. As the reference to Glenn Gould can be argued to illustrate this question in an exemplary way, we start by giving an overview of how the passage in question has been interpreted by other authors. The following subsection includes two interpretations in which Agamben's reference to Gould is discussed in the context of the work of the composer John Cage and two additional interpretations that appear in volumes dedicated to Agamben's thought. All four approaches ultimately fail to take into consideration Agamben's formula of potentiality within actuality, either implicitly by placing Gould's playing by not-playing somewhere outside his piano-playing or, in a more explicit manner, by maintaining that Agamben is primarily interested in the autonomous existence of potentiality. In the second subsection, we analyze two texts that propose that the passage in question has to do with Gould's ability to renew an interpretative tradition or play with his own artistic capacities. While it can be argued that these interpretations cast new light on Agamben's reference to Gould, we point out that they could be further articulated in relation to the author's concepts of style and manner. Finally, in the third subsection, we delineate the concept of manner in more detail.

<b> **John Cage, silence, and Glenn Gould's musical genius**

Karl Katschthaler (2016) devotes a chapter to analyzing 4'33", a well-known composition for the piano by John Cage from the 1950's. No notes are written in the score, only breaks: the

piece consists of four minutes and thirty-three seconds of silence. We first examine Katschthaler's interpretation of Agamben's reference to Gould, as this is one of the author's starting points for his broader analysis of the role of silence in music, especially as regards Cage's 'silent piece.' We then assess the author's application of the concept of potentiality to the absence of sound.

As Katschthaler rightly points out, Agamben gives no clear explanation as to why Glenn Gould is his preferred example of not-playing while playing. He offers Gould's peculiar way of gesticulating with his left hand while playing only with his right as one possible explanation, arguing that these silent gestures 'make perceivable Gould's potential to not-play, to read the score and incorporate his reading in gestures which do not produce sound' (Katschthaler, 2016, p. 167).

The question of the bodily presence of a musical performer functions as a broader source of inspiration for Katschthaler's analysis of silence in music. He offers sophisticated insights into how bodily gestures as well as other visual elements structure music, an aspect that he demonstrates has received little attention in interpretations of Cage's silent piece. The 4'33" piece has been understood primarily as a time frame during which the audience may listen to the ambient sounds of the concert hall, thus becoming aware of the fact that there is no silence at all. However, for Katschthaler's analysis of David Tudor's premiere performance of 4'33", the bodily presence of the performer is important. He argues that Tudor did not merely open and close the keyboard lid to indicate the beginning and the end of the piece but read the score in a concentrated manner, diligently turning the pages throughout the piece. Although not referring to Agamben explicitly in this context, Katschthaler seems to suggest that performing an empty score is a way of manifesting the potentiality to and not-to of music. Accordingly, he mentions that 'Tudor shows that music may come into existence by reading the score alone without playing the music' (Katschthaler, 2016, p. 172).

Katschthaler analyzes three additional performances of 4'33", all featuring John Cage himself. The first one is a video recording of a performance that was organized in Harvard Square in 1973, showing Cage recreating the premiere performance of the piece on a grand piano that has been transported to the centre of the square. For the second performance, the score was modified so that instead of three movements it comprised four separate movements, each performed at different locations in New York City. These performances were organized without a piano; the video simply shows Cage standing at a given spot and listening to the surrounding noises of the city. It is the spot in Harlem that Katschthaler focuses on in his analysis: during this performance, curious teenagers start asking what Cage is doing. Instead of staying silent, Cage

answers their questions. Finally, a third performance of the piece included in Katschthaler's analysis took place at the opening of an art exhibition in Kunstverein in Cologne in 1986. Close to nobody in the exhibition audience took notice of Cage starting his stopwatch and performing 4'33".

Based on his interpretation of these three performances, Katschthaler explores whether there exists something like a potentiality of silence. He cites a passage in *Potentialities* (Agamben, 1999a, pp. 180-181) in which Agamben elucidates the potentiality not-to by referring to the human ability to experience the privation of sense activities – we can experience the absence of vision and hearing in the sense that we can 'see darkness' and 'hear silence.' Regarding these notions, Katschthaler argues that this is technically impossible as a complete lack of sound can only be attained in laboratory conditions – he points out that '[we] can close our eyes to see darkness, but we cannot close our ears to hear silence' (Katschthaler, 2016, p. 176). As he thus excludes the possibility of hearing silence (understood as the absolute absence of sound), he concludes that silence takes place when nobody is listening: whereas the teenagers in Harlem stop the performance to ask questions, the exhibition audience in Cologne fails to realize that there is a performance taking place (ibid, p. 177).

In summary, Katschthaler first concludes that Glenn Gould's silent left-hand movements constitute a way of not playing while playing. With respect to the premiere performance of 4'33", he holds that Tudor's physical presence brings music into existence even in the absence of a score, this way manifesting both the potentiality to and not-to of music. Finally, regarding the three different performances of 4'33", he contends that the 'potentiality of silence' occurs when nobody is listening. Although these conclusions offer sophisticated insights into how the bodily presence of the performer structures the 4'33" piece and how different framings affect the audience's interpretation, the first two conclusions suffer from a slight overcomplication of Agamben's idea of potentiality within actuality. If there is a way in which Glenn Gould plays by not playing, this needs to be present in the actuality of playing the piano and not in any alternative or accompanying activity. Similarly, Tudor's way of 'playing' an empty score can hardly be treated as a rigorous example of performing music. Although Tudor's physical presence may be central for providing the context for listening to the surrounding 'music' of the concert hall, as Katschthaler suggests, he is not strictly speaking producing these sounds himself. Additional gestures or performing music that is not written cannot thus be understood as a way of playing in a sense that would illuminate Agamben's idea of what happens to the potentiality to not play or not perform music in the actuality of these activities, at least not if

these activities alone are understood as a musical performance. We return to this question in the following section.

With respect to the 'potentiality of silence' that Katschthaler attempts to reconstruct by arguing that complete silence is impossible, it could be noted that it is probably a correct notion that for John Cage, there could be no such thing as complete silence. This is what he announced himself: 'Until I die, there will be sounds' (Cage, 2013, p. 8). Agamben's point is however different to a substantial degree. Rather than being concerned with whether we can create a space in which all sound waves are blocked, Agamben is interested in formulating a way of being in relation to the sense of hearing even when there is nothing particular to listen to. In other words, it is not with respect to *silence* that we should formulate how the potentiality within actuality takes place. Rather, silence itself manifests the impotentiality with respect to the sense activity of *hearing*. When we do not hear any specific object of hearing, such as speech, noise, or music (understood in a somewhat conventional way), we nevertheless remain in relation to hearing itself: this is the potentiality of hearing.

Let us briefly examine another interpretation of Agamben's reference to Glenn Gould that also connects it with Cage's work on silence. Seth Kim-Cohen (2012) offers a critique of Cage's conception of silence, focusing on his performance lectures, particularly *Lecture on Nothing* (Cage, 2013, pp. 109–127). While a closer analysis of Kim-Cohen's objections to Cage's approach is beyond the scope of this chapter and his reference to Agamben and Gould cannot be said to be a central framework for his text, it points toward almost identical problems to the ones identified in the text analyzed above. It seems that Kim-Cohen attempts to turn Agamben's definition around – to place the potentiality to not-play outside playing. He first argues that although Agamben speaks of playing by not-playing and Cage seems to be doing the opposite by saying nothing as a way of saying something, their aims are in fact similar. This is what leads him to ponder whether piano-playing is somehow present in Gould's other activities: 'When Gould types a letter, do the Goldberg Variations haunt the movements of his fingers across the Qwertyan expanse?' (Kim-Cohen, 2012, p. 92). However, as already argued above, if we want to follow Agamben's model of potentiality within actuality, the potentiality not-to of a given activity cannot be understood as taking place in the absence of this activity. Just as the potentiality to not-play the piano cannot be understood as doing something additional while playing or as 'playing' an absence of anything to play, we cannot define it by simply reversing the process and examining what happens to the potentiality not to play whenever the pianist is not seated at the piano. It is in the *actuality* of playing that we should be able to trace its impotentiality.

Leland de la Durantaye (2009) devotes a short chapter of his book on Agamben to the somewhat cryptic passage referring to Gould. He starts by citing a play by C.E. Lessing in which one of the characters wonder whether Raphael would have been such a great painter had he been born without hands. De la Durantaye suspects that this idea has its origins in the very same discussion of Aristotelian potentiality that Agamben also departs from. He does not rely on Agamben's main sources for interpreting Aristotle, the *Metaphysics* and *De Anima*, but instead refers to Aristotle's example of a dormant geometer, which illustrates the very same difference that Agamben also mentions as a starting point for his discussion: that between the mental capacities of a child that may or may not be developed and the already existing knowledge of a geometer. In de la Durantaye's interpretation, Gould functions as a modern example of the latter type of skill: 'Gould's musical genius is such that it accompanies him at every step; whether in the presence of a piano or not, whether playing or not, the potentiality to play remains richly and fully his' (ibid, p. 55). He admits that this proposition is somewhat self-evident: artists remain artists even when not exercising their art. What he argues to be less self-evident, however, is how to adequately describe 'potentiality independent of its actualization' (ibid.). However, as we have already argued, there is nothing particularly problematic in conceiving how potentiality exists when not actualized. This is precisely what the example of the dormant geometer illustrates: that there is a form or presence of the geometer's abilities even when he is not exercising them. What is less self-evident is thus not this 'existence as potentiality.' but rather the way in which both potentiality to and not to are preserved in actuality. De la Durantaye, however, rejects this option from the outset and, in his interpretation of Agamben, asserts that impotentiality 'is not to be understood in the context of actuality *at all*' (ibid, p. 5, italics in original).

Of course, it can be argued that the formula 'potentiality within actuality' presents a contradiction. Yet this is precisely what Agamben proposes, whether his interpretation of Aristotle is correct or not. Thus, de la Durantaye's interpretation of Glenn Gould being an example of someone who possesses the potentiality to play and not-play – whether in the presence of a piano or not – simply reintroduces the idea of 'existence as potentiality' and fails to follow Agamben's reading of Aristotle until the end.

Claire Colebrook and Jason Maxwell's understanding of the Glenn Gould reference offers likewise an insufficient account of impotentiality with respect to actuality, although in a slightly different way than in the above-analyzed interpretations. In their book *Agamben* (Colebrook and Maxwell, 2016), the authors maintain that Gould's way of not-playing is exercised within his praxis of piano-playing, which is essentially correct. In a more problematic manner, they

argue that Gould remains in relation to not playing because he is capable of 'positively extinguishing the potential not to play' (ibid, p. 28). They contrast this to both duty and accidental playing: playing the piano is not something Glenn Gould must always necessarily pursue, nor does he simply happen to be playing. Instead, while playing, he stays in 'an intimate relation to a power *not* to do that which also has come to define him' (ibid.). It is possible that their emphasis on 'extinguishing' impotentiality while playing stems from Agamben's reading of Aristotle in the *On Potentiality* essay discussed above; Agamben ends the presentation of his original approach by stating that '[what] is truly potential is thus what has exhausted all its impotentiality by bringing it wholly into the act as such' (Agamben, 1999a, p. 183). However, in a manner that we have by now become familiar with, to 'exhaust' does not mean in this context to 'extinguish' in the sense of actively resisting impotentiality within the activity, this way retaining some form of relation to it, as Colebrook and Maxwell seem to suggest. On the contrary, the potentiality not to is welcomed to the act as such in the form of the artist's ability to resist the conventions of style.

<b> **Toward potentiality within actuality**

Citing Agamben's reference to Gould in *The Fire and the Tale*, James Salvo (2018) suggests that Gould is a 'luminary' who opens a new path for other pianists to follow. As Gould was the first one to record Bach's Goldberg Variations on the piano instead of the harpsichord, for which it is originally written, Salvo views him as a pianist who is 'not fully exhausting the potential for ways to interpret the Goldberg Variations' (ibid, p. 201). In other words, Gould's ability to not-play while playing is expressed in his way of interpreting Bach in a novel way.

Salvo further investigates the role of this type of vanguards as both initiators and arbiters of a tradition that others can engage with. Partly relying on Agamben's definition of style, the author understands style as the specific form that something takes when it is transmitted through tradition. In line with Agamben, the author conceives of style as the impersonal element of tradition – that which stays essentially the same although it may be approached by different interpreters in a personal way. In the context of music, Salvo argues that what makes a given style impersonal is in a crucial way indebted to the instrument it is realized through: 'If style is that which is brought forth from a particular instrument, what's brought forth through the hands using that particular instrument is shared inasmuch as all the hands use that same instrument' (ibid, p. 204). As the focus is here on the instrument itself, the author highlights the material

conditions of Gould's artistic practice throughout the text, such as the already mentioned choice to record the Goldberg Variations on a harpsichord. In addition, Salvo mentions the creaking and unusually low piano chair that brought a unique twist to Gould's performances and a recording that was produced entirely with computer technology.

Based on these remarks, Salvo argues that whereas one can follow a tradition opened by a luminary like Gould, one wins nothing by simply repeating the same thing: 'Repetition in tradition amounts to nothing but a spiritless impersonation' (ibid., p. 207). Thus, what makes a tradition interesting is not that a style is perpetually repeated either through imitation or elaborate technology, but that each interpreter brings something idiosyncratic to it. As Salvo puts it very simply, 'one must find one's own way' (ibid). It could be argued that this is not exclusively a question of what type of *instrument* one is playing but concerns more generally the way in which musical works are interpreted. Salvo seems to suggest the same when mentioning that Simone Dinnerstein's interpretation of the Goldberg Variations 'accomplishes the seemingly impossible of being fully aware of Gould, yet covering none of the same ground' (Salvo, 2018, p. 208).

It is precisely in the essay cited at the beginning of Salvo's chapter that Agamben delineates his idea of manner as the personal element that manages to resist the impersonal inscribed in the style. This is, in short, the potentiality at work within the actuality of artistic creation: the idiosyncrasy of an artist's expression that forms a way of not exercising the style within the style. From this perspective it is notable that despite Salvo's overall faithfulness to Agamben's thought, no thorough engagement with the concepts of manner or potentiality appears in the text. We argue in the following section that Agamben's reference to Gould should be understood primarily through the concepts of style and manner rather than being specifically connected to Gould's position as the initiator of a tradition.

In an article exploring the ethical implications of Agamben's thought, Simon Marijsse (2019, pp. 144-145) makes a distinction between 'existing potentiality' and 'existence as potentiality' to illuminate precisely the same distinction that we presented at the beginning of this section. In the first case, we have the presence of a capacity independently of its actualization; in the second, the power not-to preserves itself within actuality. Following Agamben, Marijsse uses Glenn Gould throughout the text as one example of the latter, which we have in this article presented as 'potentiality within actuality.' He understands Gould's ability to play with his potentiality not to play as 'a certain playfulness toward his own artistic expression' (ibid., p. 151); it is precisely this 'playfulness' that makes him a supreme player. Thus, in a similar manner as in Salvo's interpretation, Marijsse suggests that the unconventional touch that Gould

gives to his performances constitutes a way of not fully exhausting the potentiality not-to within the act of playing. Largely adopting these insights as correct, we scrutinize them more closely in the following section through Agamben's concepts of style and manner. As an addition to Marijsse's account, we point out that Gould's playfulness is not only directed at his own artistic capacities but remains in tension with the very *material* he is working with.

<a> STYLE AND MANNER IN ARTISTIC PRACTICES AND BEYOND

<b> **Glenn Gould's mannerism**

In the more recent texts including the reference to Glenn Gould (Agamben, 2017; 2019), Agamben places his discussion of potentiality in the context of style and manner. In this essay, Agamben uses examples of poetry, painting, and music to demonstrate how style and manner form a tension between the impersonal and the personal element of artistic creation. Style is the impersonal and general element in art, which, as implied in Salvo's text above, remains independent from the individual touch of the artist. In this sense, it could be understood as a genre or a recognizable way of doing art. Manner, on the other hand, imprints the work with the artist's unique mark, with an element that sometimes 'almost enters into conflict' with the impersonal element (Agamben, 2019, p. 21). As Agamben's example of a late canvas painting of Titian suggests, the traces of the master painter's several attempts to remake and delete parts of his work do not simply testify to a defect or indecision, but 'perfectly [express] the twofold structure of every authentic creative process, intimately suspended between two contradictory urges: thrust and resistance, inspiration and critique' (ibid., p. 20). Style and manner thus form something like a bipolar gesture in which the artist both masters a genre or a technique and simultaneously takes distance and deviates from it. Expressed through Agamben's interpretation of Aristotle, we could say that manner is the potentiality at work within the actualization of a style.

It is from the perspective of style and manner that Agamben's reference to Glenn Gould gains clarity: Gould's mastery preserves a resistance to the works he is performing within the process of playing. Instead of simply executing the complicated scores of the works he masters, he imprints them with an idiosyncratic mark, with his own *manner* of playing. This type of mastery manifesting the ability to resist the style is in some ways intrinsically connected with tastefulness and quality. Whenever there is only formally correct execution of a style, there is

no degree of ability not-to present in the performance and hence no taste: 'Those who lack taste cannot refrain from anything; tastelessness is always a not being able not to do something' (Agamben, 2019, p. 20).

The question of taste also sheds light on the following distinction Agamben makes between ability, talent, and mastery in the Gould passage: 'As opposed to ability, which simply negates and abandons its potential not to play, and talent, which can only play, mastery preserves and exercises in action not its potential to play but its potential not to play' (ibid., p. 19). In the case of ability, the difference with respect to mastery is rather clear: someone who has acquired enough skills to read a score can somehow pull off playing a piece without this being an act of distinctive mastery. The differentiation between mastery and talent, on the other hand, is slightly more intricate. We can perhaps understand talent as an unusual kind of ability to, for example, compose works of a specific style. Think of the early works of a child genius like W.A. Mozart: as perfect demonstrations of Viennese Classicism, they manifest the extreme talent of the composer. However, being a perfect example of a specific style is not enough for something to count as genuinely interesting – we rarely listen to this bulk of Mozart's compositions today. Instead, it is the later mature works that we appreciate because they demonstrate a sophisticated ability to slightly deviate from the style in question, making it personal and interesting.

Simply executing a style thus amounts to nothing but tasteless imitation or, in Salvo's words, 'spiritless impersonation.' On the other hand, although mastery remains tied to a certain sense of taste, mannerism does not always introduce an amelioration of the style – some aspects of Gould's mannerism could be deemed almost unbearable or, in Agamben's terms, to 'almost enter into conflict' with the style, such as humming while playing. It is in this sense that Gould's silent left-hand gestures, which grasp Katschthaler's attention, could also be accommodated within an Agambenian framework. Instead of constituting a form of playing on their own, these gestures can be understood as aspects of Gould's distinctive mannerism.

As some of Agamben's more extreme examples suggest, mannerism can also occur in a form that is not tied to mastery at all. For example, Kafka's Josephine does not have the slightest idea of how to sing, yet she manages to produce sounds that nobody else is capable of (Agamben, 2019, p. 22). In other words, Josephine has no knowledge of the art of singing and accordingly, lacks both mastery and taste, but succeeds nevertheless in playing with manner alone. We could therefore understand all three instances of mannerism – tasteful mastery, transgressive use of manner and pure manner – as expositions, or *paradigms*, of the very same logic. At the very least, style is modified with a tasteful hint of personal mannerism like in the case of a composer like Mozart. In the middle, there is a manner so strong that it almost violates the style, like in

some aspects of Glenn Gould's idiosyncrasy. As an extreme example, we have Josephine who has no knowledge of any style but manages to produce a manner like no other. This threefold differentiation may also further clarify Agamben's enigmatic insistence on Glenn Gould being the *only* pianist who can play with his potentiality not to play. It might perhaps be argued that it is only in the case of Gould that we tolerate precisely the kind of mannerism *he* is known for, such as humming or interpreting Bach in a completely unheard-of way. In a more general sense however, there seems to be no reason why the interplay between manner and style would not be present elsewhere. In line with Titian, Josephine and all other examples that Agamben himself makes use of, Glenn Gould functions as a paradigm – a singular example – of the larger phenomenon of mannerism. We investigate in the following subsection how manners form a larger area of inquiry in Agamben's thought and how these could be utilized in analyses of politics.

<b> **Manners beyond artistic creation**

In *The Use of Bodies*, Agamben demonstrates how the relationship between style and manner can be approached as an experience of that which is most proper to us but simultaneously 'inappropriable' and beyond our reach (Agamben, 2016, p. 80-94). He argues that our own body becomes foreign to us precisely the moment we experience its most elemental activities, such as the need to urinate; in need, the body is experienced as proper yet strangely external because one remains helplessly trapped in the body part from which the need originates. Similarly, although our mother tongue appears intimate to us, we do not own it in any meaningful sense; language is imposed on us since childhood and remains an object of common use shared with other speakers. This bipolar tension within language is particularly evident in poetry: to master language to the point of playing with it creatively, poets must take distance from all conventional uses of language and approach it as if it were an unknown terrain. Precisely as in the case of Glenn Gould's mastery of playing the piano, Agamben thus illustrates through these examples how style and manner form 'the two irreducible poles of the poetic gesture: if style marks its most proper trait, manner registers an inverse demand for expropriation and non-belonging' (Agamben, 2016, p. 86-87).

Agamben also connects the notion of manner to his modal ontology, which he develops in this concluding volume of the *Homo Sacer* series. Undertaking what he calls an 'archaeology of ontology' in chapter 2, he asserts that Aristotle's division between primary and secondary

essence is a fundamental framework that has conditioned Western ontology despite the various formulations it has taken during the course of history (ibid, p. 115). The general argument that Agamben makes in this context is that being has traditionally been understood as something that presupposes a subject that is prior to or lies underneath every predication; 'man' is always predicated on the basis of a singular and determinate man (whence the term *sub-iectum* in Latin and *hypokeimenon* in Greek, designating something that lies underneath). Against this apparatus, Agamben proposes his modal ontology in which modes are not understood as predicates added to a prior subject or substance but constitute being as such: 'Being does not pre-exist the modes but constitutes itself in being modified, is nothing other than its modifications' (ibid, p. 170). It is in this sense that he can refer to an 'ontology of the how' (ibid, p. 231); what is at stake is not *what* being is but *how* it is, an aspect that also permits Agamben to make a connection to the notion of manner toward the end of the volume. When explicating his enigmatic concept of form-of-life, he has in mind precisely a being that does not *have* but simply *is* its modes; a form-of-life is "a 'manner of rising forth,' not a being that has this or that property or quality but a being that is its mode of being, which is its welling up and is continually generated by its 'manner of being' (ibid, p. 224).

The distinction between essence and existence, or being and beings, finds its correlate in the separation of life from its form, of *zoe* from *bios*, which functions as the kernel of the Western biopolitical order according to Agamben's analysis of the Western tradition. And although overcoming these distinctions is what he presents as the central political task of the West, one will search in vain for a programmatic application of these insights to current forms of political praxis. For the most part, Agamben discusses politics in rather general terms – what he demands of a coming politics is precisely that the entire ontological apparatus of the West be modified. Occasionally, the role of provocative figures in everyday politics is mentioned in passing. In *Homo Sacer*, we find the figure of 'the troublemaker:' because the right to suspend itself and to not pass into actuality is reserved to the sovereign, '[the] troublemaker is precisely the one who tries to force sovereign power to translate itself to actuality' (Agamben, 1998, p. 47). Similarly, in *Creation and Anarchy*, Agamben mentions 'the so-called provocateur' 'who has precisely the task of obliging those who have power to exercise it' (Agamben, 2019, p. 17). We may perhaps understand various kinds of activist figures as precisely this kind of 'provocateurs' who demand something to be done about the current state of affairs.

Although Agamben's engagement with politics in the above-described sense is either extremely general or restricted to unspecified remarks, his notion of manners can be argued to offer tools for re-examining predominant understandings of political praxis in the West. We may approach

these conceptions of politics as formed within what Agamben calls apparatuses of tradition. Inspired by Foucault, Agamben defines an apparatus as literally anything that captures human life in order to orient it toward a specific function, such as a discourse, institution, technology, or canonical way of acting (Agamben, 2009, p. 14). We may also understand styles – which we have discussed in relation to the body, language, and art above – as formed within apparatuses of tradition. If the apparatuses define and shape a style, manner adds to the style a potentiality not-to, which enables a different use of it. In line with this, we explore in the remainder of this chapter how the concept of manner may be applied to *styles* of political action that may be described as formed within Western apparatuses of tradition.

If we approach politics as a type of activity, we may argue that the classical Greek distinction between *praxis* and *poiesis*, acting and producing, still continues to shape Western conceptions of political action. Agamben has regularly engaged with this distinction from his earliest work onward (Agamben, 1999b), arguing in his subsequent works (Agamben, 1999a; 2018a) that his somewhat enigmatic concept of gesture denotes a type of activity that is separate from praxis and poiesis. While Agamben never presents gesture as a fully developed framework and implies that it points to a politics that remains to be invented, we argue that what Agamben develops under the concept of manner points to a more promising attempt to disclose a force working *within* praxis and poiesis. We first outline how the distinction is observable in the Western political tradition and then highlight how a certain notion of manners is implicit in these approaches. In addition to praxis and poiesis, we also note how mannerism might be applied to identity politics, which is highly prevalent in contemporary politics. The purpose of this engagement is not to offer a thorough analysis of manner in these contexts, but to point out how Agamben's focus on manners might be further developed in relation to more established theories and discourses of politics, a dimension that remains relatively underexamined partly because of Agamben's own lack of rigour in this regard.

In a poietic sense, politics is understood as an instrumental activity that is undertaken for the sake of producing or bringing about something external to the activity itself. Although the classical age may have categorized engaging in the public life of the polis under praxis, action with no end other than itself, thinkers like Plato and Aristotle nevertheless compared politics to the poietic act of weaving: governing was like weaving together a perfect piece of garment, implying the activity of *producing* the material and social conditions of a political community. The Marxian conception of the dialectics of history is also, in this overall sense, inherently poietic: politics is contained in the making of history and the ultimate *product* of this process is a new humanity free from class struggle. In the context of modern electoral politics, politics is

framed perhaps entirely as governmental action that is expected to produce outcomes like infrastructure, workplaces, a clean environment, and so on. According to the model of praxis, in contrast, politics is understood as voluntary action, for instance in the form of public protests. Hannah Arendt's approach to politics is perhaps one of the best-known examples of a praxis-oriented understanding of politics, and it is precisely to the poietic conception that she contrasted it by defining political action as being contained in the experience of freedom itself and not in any external outcome that results from it. The emphasis on the necessity of government, of ruling the unpredictable realm of human action, is what Arendt criticized Plato, Marx, and the entire modern generation of political thinkers. Put very briefly, one of the most established distinctions which Western politics revolves around – insofar as we operate on the plane of activity – is the interplay between what governments do (in the sense of producing) and what people want (in the form of voluntary public action). In this sense, although Agamben's engagements with praxis and poiesis sometimes seem rather sketched, it is in no sense arbitrary that his attempt at 'going beyond' is articulated precisely in relation to this distinction.

If we approach the poietic conception of politics through manner, it is immediately obvious that with reference to modern governments, it implies something like a public demand for governments to produce outcomes of a certain quality. Politics is not just about producing something for the sake of it, but about producing relevant and justifiable outcomes. This is in some ways what is at stake in modern electoral politics: ideological controversy over what kind of a society is to be produced, not least in the wake of the current climate crisis and the new ramifications it poses for the productive function of governments. In other words, it is not enough that governments perpetually reproduce what already is – there is always, at least in democratic politics, the presence of a critical eye that demands deviations from the political legacy that has been handed down through previous administrations.

If we in turn approach Arendt's ideal of political agency through the concept of manner, it is also rather easy to detect that the type of public action she prefers demands a specific manner of performing it. It is not least in the parallels that Arendt draws between theatrical and political performances that we find inscribed an invitation to perform politics in a distinctive manner – not awkwardly at home and alone, but by appearing publicly among fellow men. In contrast to the automatism of the labour processes that sustain life itself, argued Arendt, in political life we are exposed to a community of equals in our *uniqueness* (see Arendt, 1998, p. 176). Examples of successful protests also attest to the fact that public action requires skill and creativity to gain attention and momentum. For instance, one of the most distinctive traits of the Serbian social

movement Otpor! of the late 1990's was its innovative use of humour in its campaigns against Slobodan Milošević; the central figures behind the Arab Spring knew likewise how to skillfully utilize social media platforms to mobilize a large spectrum of people.

In addition to producing and acting, Agamben's concept of manner may help understand certain aspects of identity politics. Whereas identitarian politics often rests on the assumption that there is a fixed identity that is expressed in political action (one speaks for example 'as a woman' or 'as a person of colour'), manner instead points to a certain distancing from identity. This aspect is evident for instance in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's influential term 'strategic essentialism.' She has strongly emphasized the notion of 'strategy' in various identity battles, arguing that identities do not refer to an essence but may instead be used as strategies for expressing marginalized positions; her own disavowal of the term has precisely to do with the tendency to forget the idea of strategy (Spivak, 1993). In line with this, we might argue that for identities to function as an effective ground for political change, they need to be utilized in a manner that takes a critical distance to the identities in question.

These brief reflections on the meaning of manner in politics, although in some sense obvious, highlight that Agamben's idea of the dynamic between style and manner is not just an obscure form of praxis that remains to be invented by a completely novel politics of the future. Instead, the interplay between the two is already present in the entire field of politics as we know it. When we demand governments to produce outcomes, we do so with a specific quality of outcomes in mind; when we favour people's power and engage in public protests, we do not merely follow the masses but seek to appear in a distinctive way. And for identity politics to gain effective leverage, there is always the presence of a critique and resistance to the very identities in question.

<a> CONCLUSION

Insofar as Glenn Gould is understood as a skillful pianist who individualizes his performances with a distinctive manner of interpretation, his playing displays a degree of mastery that allows him to exercise a way of doing otherwise within the artistic performance. This is a way of 'not-playing' while playing – a trait that could be argued to be present in any skillful musical performance. On the other hand, Agamben's puzzling assertion that Gould is the *only* pianist who has this ability is further clarified if we scrutinize it through a distinction between tasteful and transgressive use of manner. Manners that are exclusive to Gould, such as humming while

playing or interpreting classical piano repertoire in an unconventional manner, face the risk of drifting toward a violent transgression of the style. In this sense, Agamben can perhaps argue that Gould is the only pianist who plays with this particular kind of mannerism. We have demonstrated in this chapter that, instead of being restricted to Glenn Gould or artistic practices, the dynamic between style and manner is present in other forms of non-canonical use and highlights a larger area of interest in Agamben's recent work. In addition, we have pointed out that the concept of manner may be applied to describe distinctive ways of doing politics: producing outcomes of quality, acting publicly in a creative way, and fighting inequalities by strategizing one's identity. Central to all these instances of mannerism is that the potentiality not-to that they entail does not mean withdrawal from activity or the simple refusal to act. Rather, by exercising the potentiality not-to *within* the activity, a type of resistance internal to the act, the utilization of manner enables an alternative use of activities formed within apparatuses of tradition.

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