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Waiting for Giorgio

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WAITING FOR GIORGIO

ANANYA VAJPEYI

IN THE SPRING OF 1970, my father — the poet Kailash Vajpeyi, then 36 years old — went to Europe, the UK, and the USSR to meet fellow writers and critics. The Indian Council for Cultural Relations arranged the tour, which lasted about three months. He was a young poet writing in Hindi, intent on meeting other poets, traveling to deepen his understanding of the world and to fire his imagination. As a child I was told of his visits to all manner of exotic cities: Samarkand, Bukhara, Tashkent, Leningrad, Moscow, Athens, Florence, Rome, Cannes, Marseille, Paris, Berlin, London, Cambridge. From such accounts I confirmed my suspicion that my father was a great man — but perhaps as his only child, and an adoring daughter at that, I was not hard to impress.

Then one day I found, tucked away in my parents' rambling collection of books and papers, a sheaf of photographs depicting a handsome man in narrow suits of the style last sported by a young Raj Kapoor or Dev Anand, superstars of the Bombay film industry in the 1960s — standing about in what were clearly foreign locales.

On the back of each photograph was written “*Meri Videsh Yatra*” (“My Journey Abroad”). They were all stamped “Television Center: *Akashvani*.” These were stills from a TV program in the early 1970s that told of my father's experiences in the former Soviet Union and Europe. How strange that one man's travels should be broadcast on the only state-run television channel, that his countrymen should watch, wide-eyed, images of this young ambassador of Indian poetry engaging the world of literary culture. How long ago it all seems — my father's youth, my own childhood, and an era of the nation's innocence.

In France he met Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Nathalie Sarraute, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Eugène Ionesco, Pierre Emmanuel, Philippe Sollers, and Marcelin Pleynet. It was the heyday of existentialism, the *Tel Quel* movement, and the New Left. My father was an avid reader and a dissenting intellectual, a critical, rebellious figure in the sphere of Hindi letters. He was interested in new trends in European and Latin American arts and ideas — perhaps even obsessed by the ruination of European civilization in World War II. Like his peer the Hindi novelist Nirmal Verma and his mentor the Hindi poet and fiction-writer Sachchidananda Vatsyayan “Agyeya,” he was open to and curious about the world. But most of all, on his first trip overseas, my father wanted to meet Samuel Beckett.

Arranging a meeting with the enigmatic Nobel laureate was no easy task. The Irish writer was notoriously reclusive. He lived in a country house about 40 miles outside Paris, in Ussy-sur-Marne,



NATHALIE SARRAUTE WITH KAILASH VAJPEYI, PARIS, SPRING 1970

and reportedly had no telephone. My father put in a request with the French cultural authorities for an appointment, and waited. Two weeks later, he received this brief note:

Kindly inform Mr. Vajpeyi (if he is still in Paris) that I shall be waiting for him at my Paris residence on the 3rd of April at 6 o'clock in the evening. There is no need to inform me if he is not coming.

The apartment was in Montparnasse, on Boulevard Saint-Jacques, close to the Prison de la Santé. At exactly 6 p.m. on April 3, 1970, my father took the elevator up and rang the doorbell. He was accompanied by his interpreter, a young Frenchwoman by the name of Chantelle, who expected to stay for their meeting. Beckett permitted her to take a photograph of my father with him, but since both men spoke English, he then dismissed her and asked her to return later. The photograph she took had Beckett and my father standing together in front of a wall lined with books. The negative was accidentally exposed when the camera film was sent to be developed a few weeks later (in Stockholm, according to my father); the black-and-white picture now shows my father in front of a bookshelf, next to a weird patch of white light and brownish blotches that would have been Samuel Beckett. The jacket-clad left shoulder of the much taller Beckett is faintly visible; my father, with his prominent sideburns, is looking down at a book he is holding, probably to have Beckett sign it.

My father wrote a long account of their meeting, which was published in the *Times of India* weekend edition on January 24, 1971, under the title “An Evening with Beckett”:

Now he is growing old. His tall lanky frame is thin after the recent operation of a lung abscess he had been suffering from. His sensitive face is covered with a web of lines,

which tell their own story. His blue eyes are short-sighted and he almost never laughs. But there is a strange compelling charm in his personality when he fumbles for the right word in trying to explain an idea or talk about one of his characters. There is a certain shyness and reserve about all his ways. That is how I found him in his Paris flat.

All these years later, he still remembers their conversation in vivid detail. When my father said he was a poet, they spoke about the Indian poet and painter Rabindranath Tagore, who had become Asia's first Nobel laureate for literature in 1913, and whose Bengali poetry had traveled to Anglophone audiences through the good offices of W. B. Yeats and Ezra Pound. Beckett, an Irishman, had a painting on his wall that he said was made by Yeats's brother. "I am close to that family," he told my father, according to the *Times of India* piece.

Now my father remembers it slightly differently; he thinks that Beckett might have told him that he was distantly related to Yeats, or that they belonged to related "clans." (I read recently that Beckett was indeed friends with W. B. Yeats's brother Jack Butler Yeats, who was a painter — the work my father saw on the wall must have been by him.) Mention of Tagore led to a brief digression into the *Upanishads*, the *Bhagavad Gita*, and the Buddhist texts of ancient India. My father thought that as an existentialist thinker, perhaps Beckett would be familiar with Indian systems of thought that problematized or negated the idea of a stable, permanent "self," and with various nihilistic and skeptical philosophical traditions emanating from the subcontinent. But he drew a blank.

The younger writer had so many questions. In his newspaper article, he says: "To read Beckett is to confront one's own skeleton in the mirror." "For Murphy [the protagonist of an eponymous novel by Beckett] life is nothing but a glamorous grave." Why did Beckett stop writing poetry? Why are the characters in his plays physically deformed and wildly eccentric? Why did he decide to be a writer at all? Why did he write in French and not English? Why did he live in Paris and not in Ireland? How come, the Theatre of the Absurd? My father tells me that Beckett related a story of how once, as a young man, he was knifed on the street by a stranger. Beckett went to the hospital; his attacker went to jail. When he recovered, Beckett went to visit the man. "Why did you want to kill me?" he asked his unknown assailant. "I don't know," the man said. "I have been trying to figure out the same thing." This encounter was the beginning of Beckett's philosophy of the Absurd.

Nearly half a century later, I get the strong sense that my father managed to pierce some of Beckett's reserve even in their short meeting. The Indian poet seemed to know every work of Beckett's, and to have thought about his language, his characters, his form, his nationality, and his ideas with an unexpected degree of seriousness and intensity. (If one word may be used to describe my father, throughout his life, it is "intense.") This passage in the newspaper article seems to me most telling:

"Yes, I have no faith in anything."

This emphatic statement coming directly from him (although I had known it through his works) upset me greatly. Suddenly I became aware of the closing darkness in the book-lined study, draped with heavy gray curtains, and of Beckett, his face graven deeply with the lines of thought, looking at me with a question in his shy blue eyes. I wanted to know if this faithlessness did not lead to a new kind of faith, that of having no faith? His husky voice was chilling, when he said: "It's not something metaphysical. I understand one thing — the excitement of the body." And when I suggested that the functions of

the body follow their own logic, and that we breathe, sleep, wake automatically, he cut me short, exclaiming — "Yes, and that's the end of it!"

Each statement of negation — "I have no faith in anything," "That's the end of it" — is prefaced with a contradictory "Yes," and it seems my father's moods are sensitive to Beckett's sentences, as if rising and falling at the turn of an invisible dial.

A set of Beckett's plays, and a set of sepia photographs of his craggy, distinctive face, signed for my father, have been part of my parents' library for as long as I can remember. The books have yellowed now; their edges are frayed, their jackets spoiled by water, dust, termites. My mother taught from the signed copy of *Waiting for Godot* for most of her career as a professor of English literature at a women's college in Delhi. Beckett gave my father the books then and there; the signed photos of himself he sent later, when Chantelle's photograph was discovered to have been overexposed.

During one of his earliest meetings with my partner, who is a writer, my father naturally told his Beckett story, much to their mutual delight. Every time he repeats his narration — which is nearly every time they meet — my better half graciously pretends that he has never heard it before.

In the spring of last year I was in Venice, teaching a graduate course at Ca' Foscari University. When I mentioned to my husband that I was trying to locate and arrange a meeting with the notoriously reclusive Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, he laughed and said, "I guess this is going to be your evening with Samuel Beckett, Dr. Vajpeyi."

Agamben's thought has been a locus of my scholarship for several years. In 2006, I had written a "letter" to Agamben, a long scholarly paper of 25,000 words about camps, refugees, the rule of law, and the state of exception in South Asia — published as a short monograph the next year. My letter engaged with four of Agamben's books — *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, *State of Exception*, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, and *Means Without End: Notes on Politics* — in some detail. I never sent him this "letter," addressing it to him only as a conceit, a way of speaking to European political theory from a South Asian perspective.

I was trained in modern literature, literary criticism, and philology throughout the 1990s. Like so many beleaguered graduate students in the era of poststructuralism, postmodernism, and postcolonialism, I had plodded my way through Foucault and Derrida, Benjamin and Baudrillard, Deleuze and Guattari, Spivak and Bhabha. But that was mostly just a decade-long blur of exceedingly difficult homework and tortured, near-incomprehensible term papers cranked out in India, England, and America.

I more or less accidentally discovered Agamben later in my career. Unlike all the other continental theorists I had read, with Agamben I felt an elective affinity. He did with Greek and Latin what I could only dream of doing with Sanskrit. Through a certain kind of etymological panache and genealogical imagination, he found the roots of our contemporary condition in a remote antiquity. I found him alert to the haunting presence of the past. He effected a happy marriage of philology and philosophy that moved me deeply; his command over traditions of systematic thought extended back over two millennia.

Some of his early writings had helped me enormously in thinking about the modern Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore and his relationship to the classical Sanskrit poet Kalidasa. His exegesis of *poiesis* — the production into visibility of form — and of *aphasia* — the state of language-less-

ness — gave me an insight into the dialectic of presence and absence, speech and silence, effulgence and privation, union and longing, through which Tagore articulates his theory of history. The chapter on Tagore was the core of my first book, and the first chapter in it that I wrote. Those were a heady few days in the early summer of 2009 when I was writing the book, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, holed up in my apartment off Harvard Square, alone in my kitchen-cum-study with Plato, Aristotle, Kalidasa, Tagore, and Agamben. Staggered centuries of time, several different languages classical and modern, and separate European and Indian traditions of philosophy fused into a humming three-dimensional space whose only property was its perfect luminescent clarity.

Of the scholars whose influence has impacted my work, meeting Agamben was near, if not at, the top of my list.

There was a time when young scholars were encouraged to train with their mentors as apprentices; when scholarship was about more than just absorbing ideas from the page (or the screen). Surely it is valuable, if not essential, to form an impression of the living being, the singular mind, the unique repository of human experience behind the words. So much of learning for a student comes from the voice, the eyes, the facial expressions, the mood, the health or sickness, the age or youth of the teacher, from the questions and answers flying back and forth, the pauses and occasional breakdowns in a dialogue — or monologue. This mode of generating and circulating knowledge seems to me an endangered practice in our times, as even classrooms give way to remote forms of instruction, and there are fewer opportunities to experience the embodied intelligence of those whose ideas shape our own.

In New Delhi, where I've lived for the past three and a half years, the psychologist Ashis Nandy is both my senior colleague and my neighbor. In fact he was one of the founders of the place where I work, the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, back in the early 1960s. Nandy is possibly India's most famous living public intellectual. It's as difficult to study India in any discipline of the humanities or social sciences and not come across his work, as it might be to avoid Michel Foucault in the Western academy. At 77, Nandy is affable, incisive, playful, and entirely comfortable in his reputation as an insouciant maverick. I've never been his student — come to think of it, he has never taught anywhere — nor was I particularly aware of his canonical status, except in a very vague sort of way, during my extended and meandering education overseas. But ever since I came back to live in Delhi, the principal gain of this move, I would say, is my happenstance proximity to this man.

Just spending unstructured, meandering time with Ashis Nandy, as I do on a regular basis, is more enlightening than reading dozens of books, taking or teaching seminars, conducting field work and archival research, or any other kind of study to which as scholars we dedicate ourselves. I don't go to him to talk about articles or projects (although I pester him with all sorts of questions). We seldom have planned, directed, or predictable conversations. There might be months between our chats, or we might see one another every day for a week over coffee and his occasional pipe, his occasional whiskey. I don't take notes and I couldn't tell you details of even the most recent meeting I had with him. But I know that hanging out with Nandy — people who know him call him "Ashis *da*," "*da*" (the "*d*" is a soft, dental sound, like "th" in "the" or "there") being an affectionate honorific for an elder brotherly figure in his native Bengali — has radically shifted how I view politics and academia.

My informal apprenticeship with Ashis da may explain my desire to meet Agamben (and not

just know his work): I'm a firm believer in the intellectual value of a person's presence, and in the pedagogy of conversation. There might be something in this akin to what my father could apprehend by seeing the deep lines etched on Beckett's face and looking in, in past his reticence, past the blue of his eyes shaded by those picturesque eyebrows, in to this unique human consciousness lit by a faith in nothing at all.

For weeks I asked colleagues at the University of Venice and friends who are scholars of political philosophy around the world how one might contact Agamben. He is listed as being on the faculty of the European Graduate School in Switzerland, but without any contact information. I was told that it was impossible to get an email address for him, that he was "off the grid."

"You might see him at a café or bookshop in Venice," said my friend Federico Squarcini, a left-wing professor of Indology, a philologist and a Marxist in the best Italian way. "In which case you should go up to him and say hello." I had seen some photographs of Agamben online, but this piece of advice carelessly tossed off by my friend left me anxious and frustrated; I walked around Venice every day looking for anyone I felt even vaguely resembled the elusive philosopher. I was afraid I would spot him, but that he would cross one of the city's innumerable bridges or vanish down one of its narrow alleys before I could be sure it was him, or that I would accost the wrong person entirely and make a fool of myself. I scarcely noticed anything about Venice, except the ubiquitous absence of Giorgio Agamben.

Another friend, Shaul Bassi, a Shakespeare scholar and professor of postcolonial literature, recalled that Agamben used to be with the Architecture Institute in Venice — not a particularly happy stint, I gathered. But this position had ended some years ago. "It's possible to have a macchiato or a spritz with him if you should run into him," Shaul said, helpfully, but with a grin that gave him away. In fact Shaul knows everybody, from Vikram Seth to Salman Rushdie, from Amitav Ghosh to Jhumpa Lahiri, so this dead end was particularly galling.

Finally I mentioned the problem to my friend, the intellectual historian Noga Arikha, whose father, Avigdor Arikha (1929-2010), had been a well-known painter in Paris. Avigdor Arikha and his wife, Noga's mother — Anne Atik, the poet — were close friends of Beckett, and their house in Paris is to this day full of paintings, photographs, writings, and memories of him. Atik has written a memoir about their friendship with Beckett, titled *How It Was* (2005). Noga immediately closed the circle for me. It turned out Agamben knew Arikha quite well, and had written a moving obituary for him in *Le Monde* when he died. Agamben has co-written a book with the contemporary artist Monica Ferrando, titled *The Unspeaking Girl* (Seagull 2014, Electa 2010). Ferrando was an admirer and acolyte of Arikha's in the 1990s. This little piece of information did the trick. I wrote to Ferrando and Agamben together; I got back an email from Agamben with his telephone number.

I rang him. I was so flustered that we spoke in an inelegant mixture of English, French, and Italian; he asked me to meet him at his residence near the Frari church on the 6th of May at 3 p.m.

The day I was to meet Agamben, I first went to Fondazione Querini Stampalia, to look at the Giovanni Bellini paintings — most famously *The Presentation of Jesus at the Temple* (1469). The tiny

museum contains a number of jewel-like works by Venetian masters of the 15th and 16th centuries. The walled garden, designed by the modern architect Carlo Scarpa, is quasi-Japanese in its minimalist style, its precise yet restful arrangement of water, stone, and plants. There were no other visitors, for which I was grateful: as summer approached, Venice was becoming overrun with tourists. I had visited the Peggy Guggenheim Collection just a few days before, and it had been rushed and crowded to the point of being unpleasant.

I lingered for a long time in the Stampalia palazzo, looking at so many glowing, beating tableaux of Jesus and Mary, thinking about the relationship between religion and art, and religion and political theory. (Later I would learn that Agamben played a bit part in the 1964 film *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, directed by his friend Pier Paolo Pasolini. Even later I learned that Pasolini was murdered in 1975.) In Agamben and Ferrando's book, *The Unspeakable Girl* — which is about the mythical and mysterious figure of Kore or Persephone, a daughter of the Greek god Zeus from Demeter (his sister) — I would eventually come across a description of Renaissance painting in which “thought and vision coincide.” They write: “The ‘image of thought,’ like Renaissance allegory, is a mystery wherein that which cannot be discursively presented shines for a moment out of the ruins of language.” I stood transfixed before image after image of Christ and his virgin mother, luminous with unutterable significance.

Suddenly I realized I had barely 20 minutes left to race from Castello to San Polo, and of course I didn't know the way, because in Venice it is impossible to know the way. After running in a panic through mazes and warrens of streets with an arrow-like sense of direction that I had never suspected myself of possessing, I arrived hot and out of breath but on time. The square was deserted; the *sottoportego* he had directed me to led to an alleyway that admitted little sunlight even at three in the afternoon. Two brass plates affixed to the wooden door had four surnames on them; one was “Agamben.” The buzzer rang me in, and I went up two flights of stairs, wondering if wearing my favorite cherry-red boots bought in New York had been the best plan in the circumstances. It was too late.

It turned out, as these things do, that contrary to his daunting reputation, Agamben was as cordial and relaxed as any eminent intellectual of global renown whom one might try to meet in person. He ushered me up the stairs and into his book-lined study. My French quickly broke down; my Italian evaporated entirely. We talked in English for nearly two hours. I wanted very much to record our conversation, to make notes and take pictures, but politeness held me back. The sofa and the rug, the bookshelves, the knickknacks, everything was worn and lived-in, of a bluish hue (perhaps). I decided it was best to settle in and enjoy this opportunity to actually converse with someone whose work I had read, admired, and thought about for years; someone who, to my mind, exemplifies the power of philology not just to read arcane texts of philosophy, but also to decipher the structure of political reality in the world around us.

He had as many questions for me as I for him. In January 2007, he had traveled around India — Delhi, Calcutta, Hyderabad, and Kerala — delivering a series of lectures, but I had been overseas at the time. He told me how he was struck by the vivid colors and diversity of India, and asked me if it had changed in the past few years, if it now looked like every other place on earth. He asked about the part-Italian Nehru-Gandhi dynasty and its future prospects in politics; about how the fracas over the Italian marines arrested in Delhi for shooting and killing Indian fishermen in international waters affected India's perception of Italy; how corruption was creating a political crisis in India and hollowing out the polity, exactly as had happened in Italy. In Delhi he remembered staying in a lovely “residence for scholars, quite far from the Nehru university campus” (I suspect he meant the India

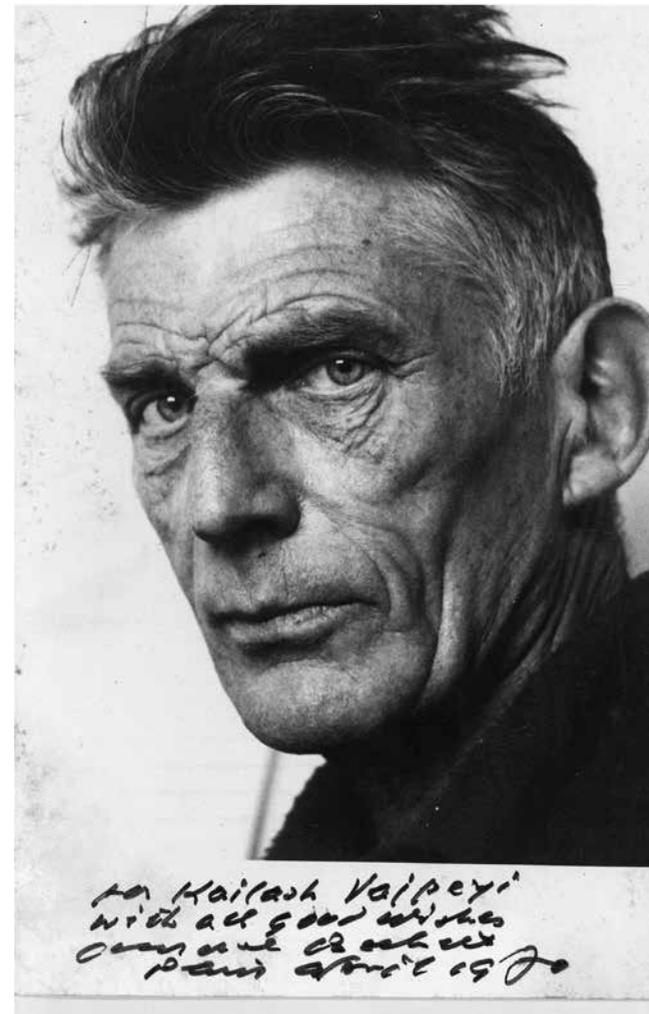
International Centre), next to a very large park “with beautiful trees and Mughal monuments” (which must have been the Lodi Gardens).

Since it was hardly 10 days before the results of India's 2014 national elections, I filled him in on Narendra Modi (who then did become prime minister), his party, the BJP, and what was to be expected of the new right-wing government. “The Nazis too were elected to power,” he said. “It's always from democracy that totalitarianism comes, and into totalitarianism that democracy descends.” Agamben has written a commentary and critique of Carl Schmitt, in his slim volume *State of Exception* (2003, 2005), part two of the *Homo Sacer* trilogy. I had studied this intensively before writing him my letter in 2006, but I had never thought the day would come when liberal democracy in India would stand

so precariously face-to-face with neo-nationalist, majoritarian, and authoritarian ideologies. In fact Modi and the members of his political party and its affiliated cultural organizations openly admire Mussolini and Hitler.

Agamben's book co-written with Ferrando was placed on the table in front of us, in Spanish. I saw it but didn't want to ask about the lady, nor did she make an appearance. The Spanish word for “girl” in its title caught my eye: “*muchacha*.” When I was little my father was a visiting professor for a few years at a university in Mexico City. The mere sight of that word was like a momentary tunnel through time, and I felt myself tumbling down into the depths of my earliest impressions of language. (I subsequently lost all my Spanish, because my parents returned to India, though I suppose learning it as a very young child helped me later on with French and Italian.) Agamben went to answer a call — he had an old-fashioned landline phone placed on his writing desk — and I struggled to surface, as from a dream of water. “La Figlia che Piange,” T. S. Eliot's poem, bobbed and swirled in the same current, momentarily, like a leaf. My host returned and sat down, and the disorienting memories were washed away.

We then turned to the rout of the Indian Left, and to the gradual collapse of meaningful ideological differences between Left and Right all over Europe. He spoke about Italy under Silvio Berlusconi for a long time, and then Matteo Renzi, with a mixture of fury, bitterness, and amusement:



NOTE FROM SAMUEL BECKETT

Democracy today is just a way to completely control and subjugate people — in the name of liberty, free markets, consumer capitalism, and neo-liberalism. Democracy has become the worst form of politics, because unlike other political systems, it fools us into

believing that we are free and equal, that we exercise power, that we choose our leaders and rulers, that we have representative government. It is the biggest hoax history has perpetrated on the West.

At one point Agamben had refused to travel to the US after biometric security measures were introduced in the wake of 9/11. “I declared that I would not submit to this new regime and so I have not gone to the States in the past 12 to 13 years. I will never go.” When I came back to Delhi, I sought out my well-worn copy of *Homo Sacer*, first published in Italian in 1995, and translated into English in 1998. I was alarmed by what Agamben had said about the proximity of democracy and totalitarianism; returning home to India on the day of the election results made me even more concerned.

In a chapter titled “The Politicization of Life,” he writes:

And only because biological life and its needs had become the *politically* decisive fact is it possible to understand the otherwise incomprehensible rapidity with which twentieth-century parliamentary democracies were able to turn into totalitarian states and with which this century’s totalitarian states were able to be converted, almost without interruption, into parliamentary democracies. In both cases, these transformations were produced in a context in which for quite some time politics had already turned into biopolitics, and in which the only question to be decided was which form of organization would be best suited to the task of assuring the care, control and use of bare life. Once their fundamental referent becomes bare life, traditional political distinctions (such as those between Right and Left, liberalism and totalitarianism, private and public) lose their clarity and intelligibility and enter into a zone of indistinction. The ex-communist ruling classes’ fall into the most extreme racism (as in the Serbian program of “ethnic cleansing”) and the rebirth of new forms of fascism in Europe also have their roots here.

That day in Venice we spoke about Agamben’s eccentric career as a scholar and his marginal position in Italian academia; about his publishers, acolytes, students, and translators over the years (two of whom, Daniel Heller-Roazen and Leland de la Durantaye, I had met in New York some years earlier); his decision to settle down to write in Venice — a city where the philosophers Antonio Negri and Massimo Cacciari also live; his efforts that very week to finish going through the proofs of his latest manuscript, and a new introduction to his work by an Italian scholar upon which he accidentally stumbled in a bookshop, and which surprised him by being quite good, although he didn’t know the author and had not been contacted by him (*Introduzione a Giorgio Agamben*, by Carlo Salzani).

He showed me the book, published by Il Melangolo, a slim butter-yellow paperback, the same color as so many houses in Rome. “It’s really not bad,” he said. “You might like to have a look if you can read Italian well enough.” Changes in the publishing world — mergers, acquisitions, corporatization, new digital technologies, and the overall economic recession — have eroded the book trade in most countries. But Italy still has a number of small independent publishing houses, and Italian books are often beautifully designed and carefully produced. Agamben said he was happy with the American

university presses that published a lot of his work in translation (Minnesota, Stanford), but troubles in France and Italy with editors, publishers, and collaborators had forced him to shelve or delay some of his longest-running projects on Walter Benjamin. Agamben was the editor of Benjamin’s collected works in Italian from 1979 until 1994.

“Until I was about 45, I somehow managed to avoid entering the university system full-time,” he said.

Then I had to try to get a job, because I needed money to buy a house and put food on the table. But in Italy it’s very hard to enter academia laterally or belatedly. I have always been on the periphery, because by the time I tried to get in, it was too late; I was considered an outsider and an interloper.

Agamben, now in his early 70s, admitted he was no longer able to keep track of all the secondary literature and criticism about him that is continuously being produced in English, French, German, and Italian, and that he had less and less time to supervise translations into English and French as carefully as he would like. Together with the French intellectuals Jacques Rancière and Alain Badiou, and the maverick Slovenian Slavoj Žižek, Agamben is among the best-known and most influential continental political theorists to emerge in the past 25 years. But, partly out of his refusal to go to or live in the United States, and partly out of the peculiar nature of the Italian intellectual establishment, he has never been associated with a single institution, occupied a well-endowed chair, or assembled a cluster of disciples and interpreters around him.

Some of his isolation could be attributed to his temperament of a loner, and his determination to save his time for thinking and writing. But, he explained to me, it is also about the history of academic institutions in Italian culture. Italy, he said, only became a unified nation-state in the mid-19th century; until then it was a cluster of many different states and principalities, each of which had its own key cities, its own universities, its own intellectual and artistic traditions, modes of patronage, and areas of expertise.

Italy has no intellectual center, like, say, Paris in France, where all the important scholars will gather and then carve out their territories, establish their schools of thought, and compete with one another for prominence. Here you will find someone living in Bologna, someone else in Torino, in Verona, Padova, Milano, Napoli, or Roma. Writers and scholars live in the town they are from, or where they studied, or where they can afford to buy a house. There is no single institution that will act as a magnet for every ambitious intellectual from any corner of Italy.

Besides Agamben, I counted off Italo Calvino, Umberto Eco, Roberto Calasso, Carlo Ginzburg, Primo Levi, and even the controversial Antonio Negri all scattered around Italy without the equivalent of a Sorbonne or an École Normale Supérieure to give them a common academic home or hub (and I’m sure there are many others not known to audiences in the English language).

“I write in Italian,” he said, “I have never understood why Indians don’t write in their languages.

Why do you write in English? We can't all abandon our languages and submit to English!" I didn't want to defend myself for something about which I don't feel entirely convinced, but I did mention hesitantly that I had once written him a letter dealing partially with these questions: whether Western languages and Western theory are appropriate in the non-West; whether and how to translate theoretical frameworks across cultural and historical differences, and what gets lost in the asymmetrical relationship between the knowledge systems of Europe and South Asia.

"You wrote me a letter?" he asked, surprised. "Why did you not send it?" Since I didn't have a copy of the published work on me, I gave him a printout of my 2007 paper, titled "Prolegomena to the Study of People and Places in Violent India." He flipped through it and laughed gently. "It's a bit long, for a letter," he said, smiling. "But I'd love to go through it now that we have met."

When I later researched my father's writings about his meeting with Beckett, I was struck by the uncanny similarity between this exchange with Agamben over language, and what my father wrote in his 1971 article:

We Indians are sometimes compelled to write in a language other than our mother-tongue because of the circumstances peculiar to our country, but I was curious about Beckett voluntarily opting to write in a foreign language, and I asked him how he could explain this. "Well, Vajpeyi, up to 1945 I used to write in English, but one's mother-tongue is something, you know, uncontrollable. It also makes you irresponsible, makes you talk unnecessarily. You can learn and handle a foreign language more efficiently than your mother tongue. So I shifted from English to French." Now of course he writes in both languages. He writes in English and translates into French or *vice versa*.

A week later, just before I left Venice, at Agamben's behest I dropped a copy of my book, *Righteous Republic: The Political Foundations of Modern India* (2012), through the mail slot on his front door.

Agamben and I did not meet again, but I have a feeling we will. He expressed his keenness to return to India, and told me that he now has a publishing arrangement with Seagull Books in Calcutta. The owner of Seagull is a refined and soft-spoken man named Naveen Kishore, someone I think of as a friend. A few months later he would be the one to send me a freshly printed copy of *The Unspeakable Girl*, with beautiful, full-color glossy reproductions of several paintings by Ferrando. Kishore had brought Agamben to Calcutta on that visit to India that I had missed. At the end of the summer, at a conference in southern India, I also met D. Venkat Rao, who turned out to be the scholar who had invited Agamben to Hyderabad and spent three or four days with him in that city. A strange Agamben-centric camaraderie binds us, I feel — Naveen in Calcutta, Venkat in Hyderabad, and I in Delhi — into a sort of fellowship of the ring.

If my understanding of political modernity changed when I first started reading Agamben about 10 or 12 years ago, so too did the geography of Venice change for me this past spring, after I went to Agamben's house; the squares, bridges, and bars around the Frari church, though not far from where my department was located, suddenly felt centered, oriented, aligned to an invisible axis. In a lesser-known piece titled "On the Uses and Disadvantages of Living among Specters," Agamben likens Venice to a specter, distinct from both a living body and a dead cadaver, with a partial, ghostly existence, animated though not quite alive. He has compared the city to Latin, a dead language that

speaks, even though it is not spoken as such by living persons, nor understood in living communities.

He asked me where I was staying. When I told him I lived near the Palanca vaporetto stop, right on the Giudecca canal, he said he loved the vista of the canal and the Zattere waterfront from there. "You could just sit and look at the light change on the waves and in the sky all day. One doesn't get that sort of a view of Venice — you are very lucky." I could hardly agree more: every day I took dozens of pictures of the water and of the clouds, never tiring of the celestial drama unfolding at my doorstep morning and night.

I avoided looking at the smokestacks, cranes, and furnaces of the Marghera Port and Mestre in the far distance, jarring not only because they shattered the impression of Venice as a Renaissance city, *La Serenissima*, with their almost Dickensian ugliness, but because the lagoon is poisoned, the economic base of Venice is defunct, and the manufacturing sector has all but collapsed. For too long chemical factories and oil refineries have dumped their toxic waste into the fragile Venetian ecosystem, devastating the wetlands. Modernity has come and gone, leaving behind only the unseemly shell of an industrial wasteland on the horizon visible from the Giudecca canal, spoiling every glorious sunset, rainstorm, and moonrise. I wanted to ask Agamben to tell me that story properly, the one I couldn't bear to acknowledge, or photograph with my iPhone. But we had run out of time.

When I had first arrived in Venice in early April, at a literary festival called "Incroci di Civiltà" hosted annually by the university, I had heard the Bengali-American writer Jhumpa Lahiri, who now lives in Rome, read a short passage in Italian. She described why for her, writing in Italian — a language not her own — was like walking in Venice, a city not her own. She described the sense of being lost, of being on unstable ground, of constantly having to cross bridges or take boats — stumbling upon spaces of ethereal beauty and uncanny stillness, of knowing that the land was but a thin skin over water.

I do not know the exact words Lahiri spoke, in a meticulously crafted Italian, with a perfect accent, but this is how I remember them. I recalled them again as I stepped out of Agamben's apartment building into the sunlit, roseate Campo San Stin. I had to teach a class at 5:30 p.m. but I felt giddy with happiness. Sometimes what is missing in language is made up in the plenitude of being itself. It didn't matter that I had not recorded what Giorgio Agamben had said, except in my memory; it was enough that I had been there that afternoon, in conversation with him. As my partner predicted, I came to know the elation, the wonderment, the inspiration and the vertigo that my father must have experienced almost 45 years ago, after his evening with Samuel Beckett. ✍

