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THE FESTSCHRIFT: TYPICALITIES OF THE GENRE

Abstract

The Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben gives insight into the suspension of legal and ethical norms. Ultimately, his ‘states of exception’ occur quite often. I find that those brought about by the genre of the festschrift are of great interest. Specifically, this paper goes beyond legal concerns and claims that the making and the use-value of tribute/commemorative volumes are essentially states of exception. In other words, the conventions of the genre show that customary social relations are put on hold (and even disrupted) by celebrations to mark outstanding anniversaries. I argue that paying tribute to community members is a means to an end: it lays bare the relation between individuals and society. The written dialogue with peers and elders enables shared remembering among those looking back on the past. The opportunity to partake in the power of language is a way for all to remember their own kind and foundational figures alike. Conclusively, celebrating local histories is a resilient method of remembering and a means of top-down social control.

Keywords: festschrift, genre, state of exception, Agamben

In his critique of the law, Giorgio Agamben famously distinguishes between “ethical conceptions [and] legal ones” (de la Durantaye, 2009: 364). Except for famous instances of civil and human rights suspension that Agamben himself has pointed out (i.e., homo sacer, the Muselmann, etc.), other – less dramatic yet consistent – states of exception are readily available. I find that those brought about by the making and the use-value of the festschrift are particularly vivid. Explicitly, notions that pertain to states of exception occasion debates regarding memorializing the past through tribute/commemorative volumes. Like other readings of his work, my own attempts to “expand Agamben’s conceptual apparatus” (Svirsky, 2012: 52) too. This paper goes beyond juridical norms and considers the typicalities or the conventions of the festschrift. Agamben’s perspective on issues such as “the philosophical archaeology of the oath” (2012: 2) or “signatures (...) [which] are then that which marks things at the level of their pure existence” (2009: 66) should prove conducive to understanding textual practices that occur within public institutions (for example, universities, hospitals, etc).

Celebratory writing is highly effective in securing “normative commitments from those at the bottom in order to escape the negative consequences of coercion and utilitarian control” (Rhoads, 1991: 297). By consensus, the bright side of the story seem to be that “the festschrift is thus a ritual celebration which confirms that the spirit of a scholar has been passed to others” (Ender and Wälchli, 2012: 156). Heroes celebrated in written word shape “the self-image of societies that allow human freedom and recognize fundamental rights” (Witteveen, 1999: 30). However, various issues sometimes trouble the best students of great scholars. “One criticism of the festschrift genre is that contributors to such a volume too often simply pull ‘an unpublished piece [from] the desk drawer,’ the result being a mixed bag of chapters” (Edson, 2015: xxviii). Agamben’s philosophy discloses such social practices as “mechanism[s] for fulfilling the law” (Mills, 2014: 5). Influential members of the community recall of their own kind each time they resolve on paying tribute to foundational figures. In doing so, the appeal to whatever is held in reverence becomes relevant to “[management as] a non-epistemic paradigm, something that is not a knowledge or a science. As a matter of fact, management is action,

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and action does not need further justification” (Beltramini, 2020). Anyway, the oath “does not concern the statement as such but the guarantee of its efficacy: what is in question is not the semiotic or cognitive function of language as such but the assurance of its truthfulness and its actualization” (Agamben, 2012: 4). The question is answered, for example, each time “festschrift contributions [...] contain hidden allusions” (Ender and Wälchli, 2012: 157). Private jokes, puns, and covert references acknowledge unity of purpose and, importantly, common interests. The reasons behind the celebration of achievement “can only be inferred from common knowledge of the editors and the honoree” (Ender and Wälchli, 2012: 156). Everything seems to occur as a social habit meant to enforce both rights and duties.

The conventions of the genre are revealing of the way customary social relations are put on hold, even disrupted, by celebrations to mark various events. The moment communities pay tribute to foundational figures, the relation between individuals and society is laid bare. When the celebratory mood kicks in, a narrative of institutional history takes over from daily social intercourse. Self-congratulatory and rather complacent cultural practices highlight the mutual benefit of working together. Public displays of gratitude verge on what used to be the Western experience of religious performance, as described by Agamben’s assessment of the oath. The pledge to honor ancestors or the professional excellence of retired colleagues is something of a sacrament, much indebted to language. Ultimately, the festschrift engenders a positive attitude to common goals. A culture of conformity is therefore put in place. The genre promotes shared values and coincidence of interests among those who belong to the same professional body. Allegiance to outstanding scholars requires a sense of shared history. In the long run, this is why community members are expected to come to terms with their own biography too. Fear of those who do not belong and, all the same, try and pretend otherwise, results in “separating and technicizing in specific institutions blessing and sacratio, oath and perjury. The curse becomes at this point something that is added to the oath” (Agamben, 2012: 43). Regardless of such anxieties, honoring the past is all about the power of language. Ostensibly, paying your respects, much like the oath itself, is no guarantee that some other authority than the political one is there to sanction remembrance through textual practices. Both the heroes and the stories that come under the scrutiny are consistent with what is deemed (morally) right or wrong for the profession. Ultimately, it is the written language used in the dialogue with peers and elders that enables shared remembering among those looking back on the past.

The decisive element that confers on human language its peculiar virtue is not in the tool itself but in the place it leaves to the speaker, in the fact that it prepares within itself a hollowed-out form that the speaker must always assume in order to speak – that is to say, in the ethical relation that is established between the speaker and *his* language. (Agamben, 2012: 71)

As seen above, honouring your elders reveals the place the honoree leaves to his/her followers. The hollowed-out form one has to assume in order to choose a particular ancestor (over another) helps the community write down the signature of the past. This poses moral questions that entail taking sides and, sometimes, calling names. As such, tribute volumes can offer to those who partake in the power of written language a way to foster identity. Much like the law itself, words conveying reverence to professional excellence display a disturbing belief in their own effectiveness: communal rules of conduct are “the sphere of signatures par excellence, where the efficacy of the word is in excess of its meaning (or realizes it)” (Agamben, 2009: 75-76). Showing reverence to founding fathers and mothers comes down to the sheer mention of illustrious forerunners by authority figures. Informed attachment to one’s professional identity is “caught within a wider apparatus of the state of exception, an apparatus which leads to the production of human waste, bare life” (Frost, 2013: 7)

The struggle to build a sense of place and worth is commonly seen in the genre of the festschrift. This leads to a number of conclusions concerning textual practices meant to convey a comprehensive picture of one professional body or another. For one thing, because all communities designate, sooner or later, their own heroes, their factual existence is taken for granted the moment shared heritage is celebrated. Secondly, the performance of public memory reinforces the value of taking action on behalf of one’s community. This is of utmost interest to top-down social control,

irrespective of particular contexts. Finally, foundational figures or iconic ancestors, who actually define requirements for social and professional validation, are a means to an end. The festschrift, in most instances of the genre, is supposed to diffuse dissent. It is conducive to institutional design by incentivizing audiences to act consensually: in order to fit in socially, community members choose to reveal or conceal emotions as needed. The festschrift is an opportunity to partake in the power of the written language that helps all to remember both their own kind and foundational figures. The conventions of the genre are revealing of the way customary social relations are put on hold and disrupted by celebrations to mark outstanding anniversaries. The making and the use-value of the festschrift come across as states of exception which shed light on a resilient method of remembering.

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