

# Genius

Giorgio Agamben

Translation by Laurence Simmons

Now my charms are all o'erthrown,  
And what strength I have's mine own.

(Prospero to the public, Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, Act V. 1: 2404-5)

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I. Agamben consistently uses the Latin word 'Genius' when he is referring to the deity but the Italian word 'genio' when he is referring to the earthly quality or attribute [tr. note].

Genius was the name the Latins gave to the god to whom each man was placed under tutelage from the moment of his birth. The etymology is transparent and still visible in Italian in the proximity between *genio* (genius)<sup>1</sup> and *generare* (to generate). That Genius must have had something to do with generation is otherwise evident from the fact that the object pre-eminently considered 'ingenious' (*geniale*) by the Latins was the bed: *genialis lectus*, because the act of generation was accomplished in bed. And sacred to Genius was the day of one's birth, which because of this, is still called *genetliaco* in Italian. The gifts and the banquets with which we celebrate birthdays are, despite the odious and by now inevitable English refrain, a trace of the festivities and sacrifices which Roman families offered to Genius on the occasion of the birthdays of their family members. Horace speaks of pure wine, a two month-old suckling pig, a lamb "immolato", that is, covered in sauce for its sacrifice; but it seems that, initially there was only incense, wine, and delicious honey focaccia, because Genius, the god who presided at birth, did not welcome bloody sacrifices.

"He is called my Genius, because he generated me (*Genius meus nominatur, quia me genuit*)". But this is not all. Genius was not only the personification of sexual energy. Of course, every male had his Genius, and every woman her Juno, both of which were manifestations of the fecundity that generates and perpetuates life. But, as is evident from the term *ingenium*, which designates the apex of innate physical and moral qualities of the person who comes into being, Genius was in some way the divine essence of the self, the principle that supported and expressed its entire existence. Because of this the forehead was consecrated to Genius, not the sex; and the gesture of bringing one's hand up to touch one's forehead, that we perform without even being aware of ourselves in our moments of confusion at a loss, when it seems that we have almost forgotten our very selves, recalls the ritual gesture of the cult of Genius (*unde venerantes deum tangimus frontem*). And since this god is, in a certain way, the most intimate and personal (*proprio*), it is necessary to placate him and to have him propitious in every aspect and in every moment of one's life.

There is a Latin expression that wonderfully expresses the secret relationship that each one of us must learn to entertain with our own Genius: *indulgere Genio*

[to indulge Genius]. It is necessary to agree with and abandon oneself to Genius, we must concede everything that he asks of us, because his demands are our demands, his happiness is our happiness. Even if his – our! – expectations might seem unreasonable and capricious, it is better to accept them without question. If, in order to write, you require – he requires! – that yellow paper, that special pen, if you really need that muted light which cuts in from the left, it is useless to say that any pen will do the job, that all paper is good paper, that any light will do. If you can't live without that light blue linen shirt (for heaven's sake, not the white one with the salesman-like collar!); if you can't carry on without those slim cigarettes in the black wrapping paper, it is not good enough to repeat that these are only obsessions, that it's time to display some common sense. *Genium suum defraudare*, to cheat one's own genius is the meaning in Latin: to fill one's life with sadness, to dupe oneself. And *genialis*, pleasant (*geniale*) is the life that distances death's gaze and responds without hesitation to the spur of genius that has generated it.

But this most intimate and personal of gods is also the most impersonal part of us, the personalization of that, within us, which surpasses and exceeds ourselves. "Genius is our life, in as much as it was not given origin by us, but gave us origin". If he seems to identify himself with us, it is only in order to reveal himself immediately afterwards as something more than ourselves, in order to show us that we ourselves are more and less than ourselves. To comprehend the concept of man which is implicit in Genius, means to understand that man is not only 'I'<sup>2</sup> and individual consciousness (*coscienza*),<sup>3</sup> but that from the moment of his birth to that of his death he lives instead with an impersonal and pre-individual component. That is, man is a unique being in two phases, a being who is the result of the complicated dialectic between one side not (yet) singled out (*individuata*) and lived, and another side already marked by fate and by individual experience. But the part that is impersonal and not isolated (*individuata*) is not a chronological past which we have left behind once and for all, and which we can, eventually, recall through memory. It is always present in us and with us and from us, in good times or bad times; it is inseparable. The face of Genius is that of a young man, his long restless wings signify that he does not know time, that when he is very close to us we feel him as a shiver, just as when we were children we felt his breath upon us and his wings beat our feverish temples like a present without memory. This means a birthday cannot be the commemoration of a day that has passed, but like every true festival, it entails the abolition of time, the epiphany and the presence of Genius. And this presence that cannot be separated from us, that prevents us from enclosing ourselves in a substantial identity, is Genius who breaks apart the pretext of the 'I' that it is sufficient for itself alone.

It is said that spirituality is above all this consciousness of the fact that the being singled out (*individuato*) is not entirely identified (*individuato*), but that it still contains inside itself a certain charge of unidentified (*non-individuata*) reality, that it is necessary not only to conserve but also respect and, in some way, to honour, as one honours one's debts. But Genius is not only spirituality, it doesn't appertain only to things that we are used to considering as the highest and most noble. All that is impersonal in us is ingenious (*geniale*). Above all, ingenious (*geniale*) is the force that drives the blood coursing through our veins, or that which causes us to sink into a deep sleep; ingenious is the unknown power in our bodies that regulates and distributes warmth so delicately, and limbers up or contracts the

2. 'Io' in Italian is the first person singular personal pronoun but also the translation of the Freudian psychoanalytic term 'Ich' (or 'ego' in the English *Standard Edition* of Freud's works). Lacan was to make the distinction between 'je' and 'moi' both of which had been used to translate Freud's 'Ich'. Lacan refers to the 'je' as a shifter, which designates but does not signify the subject of the enunciation. I have translated 'io' as 'I' and retained single quotation marks in order to alert the reader to these associations [tr. note].

3. As well as 'consciousness' in Italian, *coscienza* also carries the meaning of 'conscience' and may be used to convey the idea of capacity or competence in terms of knowledge of a practice [tr. note].

4. 'Proprio' has associations of 'one's own' but also that which is 'correct' or 'proper' [tr. note].

5. The Italian 'conoscenza' can mean 'knowledge' ('una buona conoscenza dell'arabo' – a good knowledge of Arabic) as well as 'consciousness' ('perdere la conoscenza' – to lose consciousness). So 'non-knowing' would be an alternative here [tr. note].

fibres of our muscles. It is Genius who we obscurely exhibit in the intimacy of our physiological life, there where the most personal (*proprio*)<sup>4</sup> is the most alien and impersonal, where that which is closest is the most remote and uncontrollable. If we did not abandon ourselves to Genius, if we were only 'I' and consciousness, we wouldn't even be able to urinate. To live with Genius means, in this way, to live in the intimacy of an alien being, to keep oneself constantly in relation with a zone of non-consciousness (*non-conoscenza*).<sup>5</sup> But this zone of non-consciousness is not a discharge (*rimozione*), it doesn't displace and dislocate an experience from consciousness to unconsciousness, as if it has deposited itself as a disquieting past, ready to flare up again in symptoms and neurosis. The intimacy with a zone of non-consciousness is a daily mystical experience, in which the 'I', in a kind of joyful esotericism, smilingly assists at its own undoing and, whether one is dealing with digestion or with illumination of the mind, it is an incredulous testimony to one's own incessant becoming less (*venir meno*). Genius is our life, in as much as it does not belong to us.

We need therefore to see the subject as a field of tensions, whose antithetical poles are Genius and 'I'. This field is covered by two joined but opposite forces, one that proceeds from the individual to the impersonal, and the other from the impersonal to the individual. These two forces live together, they intersect, they separate out, but they can neither free themselves completely one from the other, nor perfectly identify each with the other. What then is the best way for 'I' to bear witness to Genius? Let us suppose that 'I' wishes to write. Not to write this or that work (*opera*), only to write, that's enough. This desire signifies the following: 'I' feel (*lo sento*) that Genius exists somewhere, that inside of me exists an impersonal power which impels me to write. But the last thing that Genius, who has never taken up a pen (even less sat in front of a computer), needs is a work of art (*un'opera*). One writes in order to become impersonal, in order to become ingenious (*geniale*) and, nevertheless, by writing, we identify ourselves as authors of this or that work, thus distancing ourselves from Genius, who may never have the form of an 'I', and even less that of an author. Every effort of 'I', of the personal element, to take possession of Genius, to constrain him to sign in his name, is necessarily destined to fail. Herein lies the relevance and the success of ironic moves like those of artistic avantgardes, in which the presence of Genius was certified through a process of 'un-creating' (*decreando*) or destroying the work (*opera*). But if only a work that is revoked and undone can be worthy of Genius, if the truly ingenious (*geniale*) artist is without work (*senz'opera*), the 'Duchamp-I' can never coincide with Genius. In the context of general appreciation it proceeds around the world as the melancholy proof of its own inexistence, as if it were the notorious carrier of its own worklessness (*inoperosità*).

Due to this, the encounter with Genius is terrifying. If the life that is held in tension between 'I' and Genius, between the personal and the impersonal, is a poetic one, the feeling that Genius exceeds and overcomes us from every side is one of panic, the panic that something infinitely much greater than what we appear to be able to endure is happening to us. Because of this the majority of human beings flee terrified in front of their own impersonal aspect, or they, hypocritically, try to reduce it to their own minute stature. It may happen then that the rejected impersonal reappears in the guise of tics and symptoms that are even more impersonal, in the guise of a scornful gesture that is even more excessive. But equally laughable and fatuous are those who live the encounter with Genius

as if it were a privilege; the Poet who takes on airs or assumes a pose or, even worse, who with false humility gives thanks for the grace he has received. Before Genius there are no great men, they are all equally small. But some are reckless enough to let themselves be thwarted and beaten by him to the point at which they break into pieces. Others, who are more serious but not as happy, refuse to impersonate the impersonal, refuse to lend their own lips to a voice that does not belong to them.

There exists an ethics of the relationship with Genius that defines the arrangement of all beings. The lowest level of the rank competes with those – and they are often celebrated authors – who rely on their own genius (*genio*) as if they were relying upon a personal sorcerer (“let everything turn out well for me!” “if you, my genius, do not abandon me ...”). How much more agreeable and restrained is the gesture of the poet who can do without this sordid accomplice, because he knows that “God’s absence will favour us”!

Children experience a particular pleasure in games of hiding, and not, because of this, at the end in being discovered. There exists in this state of being hidden, of huddling down in the laundry basket or squeezing behind a wardrobe, of crawling up into a corner of the attic to the point of disappearing, an incomparable delight, a special sensation of fear which they are not ready to renounce for any reason. It is from this childhood fear that the desire which made Walser secure the conditions of his own illegibility (his micrograms) originates,<sup>6</sup> and from which Benjamin derived his obtuse desire not to be recognized. These writers are the custodians of the solitary *glory*, that his hideout has revealed one day to the child. Because in ‘non-recognition’ the poet celebrates his triumph, just as the child anxiously reveals the *genius loci* of his hiding place.

According to Simondon,<sup>7</sup> we enter into a relationship with the pre-individual through our emotions. To become excited (*emozionarsi*) means to feel the impersonal inside of us, to have an experience of Genius as anguish or joy, security or agitation.

On the threshold of the zone of non-knowing (*non-conoscenza*), ‘I’ must lay aside its own propriety and characteristics (*proprietà*),<sup>8</sup> it must be moved. Passion is the rope kept taut between ourselves and Genius, the rope on which life, the tight-rope walker, balances. Even before the world outside of us, what is wondrous and astonishes is the presence inside us of that aspect which is always immature and infinitely adolescent, that hesitates on the threshold of every individuation (*individuazione*). And it is this elusive child, this obstinate *puer* that pushes us towards others in whom we only seek the emotion that has remained incomprehensible inside us, hoping that by some miracle in the mirror of the other we might clarify and elucidate ourselves. If one looks at pleasure, the passion of the other is the supreme emotion, the primary politics, this is because in the other we look for that relationship with Genius in which, on our own, we are unable to bring to a conclusion our secret delights and our self-conceited agony.

With time Genius divides in two (*si sdoppia*) and begins to assume an ethical hue. The sources, perhaps due to the influence of the Greek theme of the two demons inside every man, speak of a good genius (*genio*) and a bad genius, of a white (*albus*) Genius and of a black (*ater*) one. The first counsels and pushes us in the

6. The reference is to the Swiss writer Robert Walser (1878-1956) and his unpublished manuscripts (‘micrograms’) composed in an infinitesimal shorthand [tr. note].

7. See Gilbert Simondon, *L’Individu et sa genèse physico-biologique*. Paris: PUF, 1964; and *L’Individuation psychique et collective*. Paris: Aubier, 1989 [tr. note].

8. The Italian word contains associations of propriety, properties and property. See also note 4 above [tr. note].

9 The poet referred to is Giacomo Leopardi and the philosopher is Walter Benjamin [tr.note].

direction of good, the second corrupts us and turns us towards evil. Horace, probably correctly, suggests that in reality we are dealing with a single Genius that is however changeable, now white then dark, now wise then depraved. This means, and it is worth noting that it is not Genius who changes but our relationship with him, that from luminosity and clarity everything becomes opaque and dark. Our life principle, the companion who directs and makes our life pleasant, is suddenly transformed into a silent stowaway who shadow-like follows our every footstep and conspires in secret against us. In Roman art two Genii are represented one alongside the other, one has a burning torch in his hand, the other, a messenger of death, turns the torch upside down.

In this late moralization, the paradox of Genius emerges into the full light: if Genius is *our* life, in as much as he does *not* belong to us, then we have to respond to something to which we are not responsible, our salvation and our ruin have a childlike (*puerile*) face that is and is not our face.

Genius finds an equivalent in the Christian idea of the guardian angel – indeed of the two angels, one good and holy, that guides us towards salvation, and one evil and perverse, that prods us towards damnation. But it is in Iranian angelology that the guardian angel finds its most pure and unprecedented formulation. According to this doctrine, at the birth of every man an angel called Daena, who takes the form of a beautiful young girl, presides. The Daena is the heavenly archetype in whose likeness the individual has been created and, at the same time, the silent witness who watches over us and accompanies us in every instant of our lives. However, the face of this angel does not remain unchangeable and fixed in time but, like the portrait of Dorian Gray, it changes imperceptibly with our every gesture, our every word, our every thought. So, at the moment of its death, the soul sees its angel who comes towards it transfigured, according to the conduct of the subject's life, into a creature even more beautiful, or into a horrendous demon. The angel whispers: "I am your Daena, formed from your thoughts, your words, your acts". In this vertiginous inversion our lives mould and design the archetype in whose image we have been created.

All of us in one way or another come to an arrangement with Genius, an agreement with that inside us which does not belong to us. The way that each of us tries to disentangle ourselves from Genius, to flee him, is his own nature. This is the grimace that Genius, in as much as he has been shunned and left without means of expression, scores on the face of 'I'. The style of an author, like the grace of every creature, depends however, not so much on his own genius (*genio*), but on that in him which is lacking in genius, on his character. Because of this, when we love someone we don't really love his genius, nor his character (and even less his 'I'), but we love the special way he has of eluding both of these; that is, his quick-witted coming-and-going between genius and character. (For example, the childish grace with which a poet secretly gulped down ice-creams in Naples; or the languid uncoordinated way a philosopher had of walking up and down the room as he spoke, suddenly stopping to fix his gaze on a remote corner of the ceiling).<sup>9</sup>

Nevertheless, for each of us there comes the moment when we have to part company with Genius. It might be suddenly in the middle of the night, when at the sound of a passing brigade, you don't know why but you feel that your god has

abandoned you. Or instead it is we who dismiss him in a very lucid, extreme moment when we know that salvation exists, but we no longer wish to be saved. Go away Ariel! It is the moment when Prospero sets aside his spells and knows that whatever force that is left to him is his alone. It is the final late period of life when the old artist breaks his paintbrushes in half and contemplates. What does he contemplate? The gestures: for the first time they are entirely our own, they are completely demystified (*smagati*) of any incantation. Certainly, life without Ariel has lost its mystery – but, nevertheless, from somewhere we know that now it belongs only to us, that only now can we begin to live a purely human and earthly life, a life that has not kept its promises and can now, because of this, offer us so much more. It is exhausted and suspended time, the sudden shadow in which we begin to forget Genius, it is the night that has been granted us (*la notte esaudita*).<sup>10</sup> Did Ariel ever exist? What is this music which unravels and grows fainter in the distance? Only the leave-taking is true, only now begins the long process of unlearning oneself (*il lungo disapprendimento di sé*),<sup>11</sup> before the idle child returns to take up one by one his youthful blushes, to urgently take up one by one, his doubts (*esitazioni*).

10. The '*notte esaudita*' recalls the '*notte salva*' at the end of Agamben's *L'aperto*. There the phrase is derived from Walter Benjamin's '*Die gerettete Nacht*', 'the redeemed night' [tr. note].

11. The Italian phrase here is a translation of Foucault's *se deprendre de soi*. In turn, Foucault's phrase is difficult to translate; it has all the connotations of 'to shake free of the self', 'getting rid of oneself', 'detaching oneself from oneself', 'unlearning oneself', 'taking oneself out of oneself' [tr. note].