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Wind on the Beach: Vestiges of Biopolitics Unthought; Review of *On Biopolitics: An Inquiry into Nature and Language* by Marco Piasentier¹

Marco Piasentier's book is an attempt at "critical naturalism,"² with the aim of better understanding "the intertwining of society and science, politics and biology."³ Piasentier makes it clear from the outset that he is following Michel Foucault, or more precisely what Foucault took from Friedrich Nietzsche, namely the idea of a philosophical perspective that combines the historical and the physiological. From this perspective, one tries to think beyond the bipolar structure of philosophical-biological and philosophical-philological, or to try to answer the question of what it is that prevents us from thinking biologically *and* philologically of biopolitics.

For, as Foucault, the father of modern biopolitics, points out, whenever we start talking about biopolitics, questions of biological life and politics, nature and language come into play, and the key is not only to define these concepts, but to define the relations between them.⁴

The methodological aspect of Piasentier's work also needs to be addressed. As we have already mentioned, his focus is on Foucault, or more precisely, he wants "to reveal the flaws of two philosophical positions that inform, but do

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² Davide Tarizzo, "Cosa chiamiamo naturalismo," *Prometeo* 29, no. 115 (2011): 41.

³ Marco Piasentier, *On Biopolitics: An Inquiry into Nature and Language*, (New York: Routledge, 2021), 8.

⁴ Piasentier, 1.

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not exhaust, his [Foucault's] work."⁵ Therefore Piasentier's methodology ranges "from the Heideggerian linguistic turn to neo-Darwinian naturalism."⁶ Instead of limiting himself to certain philosophical traditions that are otherwise considered incompatible, he seeks, according to the principle of the best of both worlds, to find the commonality that cannot be ignored. This commonality is precisely what allows us to think more precisely, or even to think at all, what was hitherto unthought.

Piasentier's work departs both methodologically and in terms of content from the dominant debates in the field of biopolitics, attempting with his specific approach to address what he identifies as one of the main shortcomings of the biopolitical debate, i.e. a thought that is both philosophical and biological. In other words, Piasentier joins two "dangerous" metaphorical ends, Foucault's famous face "drawn in sand at the edge of the sea"⁷ and Darwin's "blowing of the wind."⁸

With the first, "the interplay between sea and sand—namely the interplay between subjectivation and desubjectivation,"⁹ he refers to the definition of the human being, which is always a product of the "ontology of actuality"¹⁰ or rather "ontologies of actuality," in which any "analytics of truth" about the human being is kept or, that there is no nature of the human being "before or beyond *ek-sistence*."¹¹ The second refers to the potential of Darwin's theory of evolution, which "allows us to open up a non-teleological view of the organic world,"¹² a decline in prominence of the argument of design in nature after the discovery of the law of natural selection or with Darwin:

We can no longer maintain that, for example, the beautiful hinge of a shell must have been made by an intelligent being, like the hinge of a door by man. There

⁵ Piasentier, 1.

⁶ Piasentier, 2.

⁷ Piasentier, 68.

⁸ Piasentier, 87.

⁹ Piasentier, 58.

¹⁰ Michel Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1982–1983*, ed. Frédéric Gros, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2010), 21.

¹¹ Piasentier, *On Biopolitics*, 57.

¹² Piasentier, 87.

seems to be no more design in the variability of organic beings and in the action of natural selection than in the course in which the wind blows.¹³

The meeting point of the two is language, or rather, “the command of language,”¹⁴ in which no metaphor is *just* a metaphor. This language which, throughout the book, returns again and again to its beginning, where it is always reappearing: anthropomorphism. Thus, it is no coincidence that Piasentier’s first, introductory chapter is entitled “Vestiges of Anthropomorphism.” Piasentier’s work shows the dimensions of the metaphorisation of biology, the extent to which biology is precisely dependent on tropology, and the crucial role it plays in mediating biological teleology’s “purposive and normative views of the organic world.”¹⁵ However, before we delve into this extremely important focus of the book, a question that could easily be said to be primarily stylistic in nature, let us first, in the next two paragraphs, briefly outline the overall trajectory of the book.

Roughly speaking, the book can be divided into two parts. The first three chapters are devoted to Martin Heidegger’s biopolitical influence on both Foucault and Giorgio Agamben, or more precisely, the legacy of his thought on the importance of language as “the home of the essence of the human being.”¹⁶ Heidegger’s linguistic turn is addressed by Piasentier through his reading of the development of the concept of “voice,” or more precisely, the transition from the voice of conscience (*Stimme des Gewissens*) to the voice of being (*Stimme des Seins*),¹⁷ which at the same time illustrates the transition from logocentrism to logomorphism, where the former is characterised by the fact that it “entails a voice more authentic and original than everyday language” and the latter is “the pure will to signify which ‘dictates’ the impossibility of stepping outside everyday language.”¹⁸ In short, and with regard to one of the main emphases of this

¹³ Charles Darwin, *Autobiographies*, ed. Michael Neve and Sharon Messenger (London: Penguin, 2002), 50.

¹⁴ Piasentier, *On Biopolitics*, 23.

¹⁵ Piasentier, 7.

¹⁶ Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings: From “Being and Time” (1927) to “The Task of Thinking” (1964)*, ed. David Farrell Krell (London: Routledge, 2010), 424.

¹⁷ See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010).

¹⁸ Piasentier, *On Biopolitics*, 13.

work, in the first three chapters of the book, Piasentier outlines the anthropomorphism that characterises the command(ment) of language.

In the second set of three chapters, Piasentier addresses the question of biological teleology and its biopolitical implications. Indeed, he sees the question of teleology as crucial to the philosophical-biological biopolitical perspective that he seeks to develop in his work. In particular, he devotes himself to a critique of those biopolitical theories that are nourished by “purposive and normative views of the organic world.”¹⁹ The question at the centre of these chapters is the question of life or, as Davide Tarizzo puts it, “the willfulness of life.”²⁰ Piasentier is again on the trail of *human, all-too-human* worldviews, right up to one of Agamben’s favourite passages from Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*.²¹ In this passage Aristotle “wonders about the function of man,” because the answer to the question of whether man has a function like that of the hand or the eye, i.e. the question of purposiveness and teleology, is in fact also crucial to Aristotle’s conception of politics.²²

Much of the focus of the third chapter is on Heidegger’s legacy of the definition of language in the work of Foucault’s “outside” and Agamben’s “paradise of language.”²³ The latter, following the opening words of the Gospel of John—“In the beginning was the Word”—places language at the beginning,²⁴ as “the most radical dimension of the outside one can conceive.”²⁵ In the wake of Agamben’s analysis, Piasentier points out, “by posing signification absolutely at the beginning, the revelation of language introduces an anthropomorphic principle, a pure will to signify, which keeps enchanting the world.”²⁶ Thus, the only outside

¹⁹ Piasentier, 7.

²⁰ Davide Tarizzo, *Life: A Modern Invention*, trans. Mark William Epstein (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

²¹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. David Ross (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 11.

²² Piasentier, *On Biopolitics*, 110.

²³ Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

²⁴ See Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

²⁵ Piasentier, *On Biopolitics*, 63.

²⁶ Piasentier, 63.

of language, the only “in-significance”²⁷ that can be imagined, is where Bartleby, the scrivener,²⁸ Agamben’s angel, dwells: pure *Dichtung*, the essence of the in-human.

Moreover, just as there is no way out of language, or rather, it is precisely this command(ment) of language, “the impossibility of stepping outside it,”²⁹ that Piasentier calls logomorphism, there is no way out of anthropomorphism, or rather, anthropomorphism is a constant spoiler both of the idea of life and of the idea of language. According to Piasentier, it is only by undermining anthropomorphism that we can “weaken the conflict between the two [historical and biological] Foucauldian perspectives.”³⁰ Further, this anthropomorphic residue manifests itself above all in the Heideggerian fact that man is always supposed to have already existed in language, that it is language that is decisive for world-making. Yet, “in order to occur essentially,”³¹ language needs a human being, and it is this essential lack on which the event of language rests.

As already mentioned, if man is always a product of an “ontology of actuality” in which every “analytics of truth” about man is kept, and if it is crucial for the definition of anthropomorphism to define, with Heidegger, “who is man?”³² then who is this *anthropos* that defines anthropomorphism? If we are always in search of “the last man,” so is anthropomorphism. Therefore, as much as “man [. . .] is a historical invention resulting from specific regimes of discourse and power,”³³ the same could be said of anthropomorphism. However, when Piasentier refers to anthropomorphism in his book, he never *explicitly* encourages this idea, but rather gives the impression that anthropomorphism is an omnipresent and transhistorical phenomenon.

²⁷ Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains. A Commentary on the Letter to Romans*, trans. Patricia Dailey (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 103.

²⁸ Herman Melville, *Billy Budd, Bartleby, and Other Stories* (London: Penguin, 2016).

²⁹ Piasentier, 65.

³⁰ Piasentier, 1.

³¹ Piasentier, 65.

³² Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche: Volumes One and Two*, trans. David Farrell Krell (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991), 102.

³³ Piasentier, *On Biopolitics*, 4.

The anthropomorphic remnant also and necessarily lurks in the in-human, and it is here that we can observe its pervasive logic. Piasentier proposes two definitions of the in-human: the first is the in-human already briefly mentioned, whose essence lies in the in-significance of language, and the second is the in-human whose essence can be found in the natural world. Piasentier addresses the criticism of this second definition in the second chapter of his book, and this criticism is informed by Heidegger's rejection of biologism, or more precisely the error of biologism, which for Heidegger is linked to anthropomorphism, in a sense that biologism forgets that it "is itself an attempt undertaken by human beings."³⁴

Nietzsche's philosophy is "characterized by a strong criticism of anthropomorphism."³⁵ For Nietzsche it is crucial to de-anthropomorphize nature, but in order to de-anthropomorphize it, it also has to undergo the process of de-deictification. At this point we can see one of the key historical connections between the anthropomorphism of nature and deities, or as Lorraine Daston points out, anthropomorphism was first a theological sin before it became a scientific one.³⁶ Similarly, Jacques Derrida speaks of anthropo-theo-morphism.³⁷ It is precisely this "organic" connection that informs Piasentier's critique of natural theology and its successors.

Heidegger claims that Nietzsche's attack on anthropomorphism is an attack on all forms of traditional natural theology and also on its substitutes, but Nietzsche's conception of nature—in making purposes and norms an inescapable feature of the biological world—is, according to Piasentier and Heidegger, still anthropomorphic. Crucially, this is the point of connection between biologism and anthropomorphism, or rather, according to Heidegger, a point of overlap: "Biologism

³⁴ Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, 100.

³⁵ Piasentier, *On Biopolitics*, 78.

³⁶ Lorraine Daston, "Intelligences: Angelic, Animal, Human," in *Thinking Animals: New Perspectives on Anthropomorphism*, ed. Lorraine Daston and Gregg Mitman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 39.

³⁷ Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, ed. Marie-Louise Mallet, trans. David Wills (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008).

is anthropomorphism not because it fails to free biology from the teleological ‘shadows of God,’³⁸ but because it forgets the question of language.”³⁹

Therefore, any biopolitics informed by an “anthropomorphic conception of biological life,”⁴⁰ by normative and purposive views of life, whether it is the biopolitics of error or its opposite, could also be seen as “a form of secularized political theology.”⁴¹

Here we can recall the passage from Matthew Ratcliffe’s critique of David Dennett’s questionable use of Mother Nature as the personification of natural selection, which Piasentier analyses.⁴² Not to mention that the trope with which anthropomorphism is most closely associated is precisely personification, to the point that it is often difficult, if not impossible, to draw a line between the two. Personification is already implied in Foucault’s famous face drawn in the sand, and as Piasentier notes, “since Darwin, the imaginary personification of natural selection has had a useful heuristic value.”⁴³ It is therefore not surprising that Piasentier detects an excessive use of anthropomorphism in Dennett’s use of Mother Nature, to the extent that Matthew Ratcliffe writes: “Remove Mother Nature and everything else collapses.”⁴⁴ We could add to this: remove anthropomorphism and everything collapses.

Since one of the main focuses of Piasentier’s research is tropological, we can now turn to another Nietzschean passage on anthropomorphism, quoted in Paul de Man’s essay “Anthropomorphism and Trope in the Lyric.” De Man begins his essay by quoting Nietzsche’s characterisation of truth as an army of tropes: “Was ist also Wahrheit? Ein bewegliches Heer von Metaphern, Meton-

³⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, ed. Bernard Williams, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff and Adrian Del Caro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 110.

³⁹ Piasentier, *On Biopolitics*, 79.

⁴⁰ Piasentier, 114.

⁴¹ Piasentier, 115.

⁴² Matthew Ratcliffe, “A Kantian Stance of the Intentional Stance,” *Biology and Philosophy* 16, no. 1 (January 2001): 29–52, <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1006710821443>. See also Daniel C. Dennett, *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meanings of Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995).

⁴³ Piasentier, *On Biopolitics*, 7.

⁴⁴ Ratcliffe, “Kantian Stance,” 36.

ymien, Anthropomorphismen [. . .].”⁴⁵ De Man recognises in Nietzsche’s statement “the gesture that links epistemology with rhetoric.”⁴⁶ In this martial metaphor, anthropomorphism can be understood primarily as a means of power, which in a sense brings us back to Foucault.

In Piasentier’s work, anthropomorphism resembles de Man’s sense of the term. Anthropomorphism is something that precedes or even enables tropology and is, therefore, not on the same level as metaphor and metonymy, not on the same level as tropes.

In addition to anthropomorphism (and, inevitably, personification), much of the second half of the book is devoted to a specific use of metaphor, namely the analysis of “metaphors of design.” Not only the relevance but also the precision of his findings regarding, on the one hand, the persistence of teleology and, on the other, the dimensions of the inevitable and dangerous metaphorisation of evolutionary sciences, which is crucially linked to it, can be observed by bringing into the paradigm the most recent developments in the field of evolutionary theory. Take, for example, the concept of symbiogenesis developed by Lynn Margulis. According to Margulis, symbiogenesis means “the origin of new tissues, organs, organisms, even species, with the formation of long-term or permanent symbiosis.”⁴⁷ Through symbiosis, bacteria gave rise to eukaryotic cells (those of protocists, fungi, animals, and plants).⁴⁸ In her book *Acquiring Genomes: A Theory of the Origin of Species*, Margulis not only described her theory in “highly racialised terms,” as Zakiyyah Iman Jackson observes in her work *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World*,⁴⁹ but also used the same metaphorical and anthropomorphic devices that are at the centre of Piasentier’s critical inquiry.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, “Über Wahrheit und Lüge im außermoralischen Sinn,” in *Werke in drei Bänden*, ed. Karl Schlechta (Munich: Carl Hanser, 1966), 3:314.

⁴⁶ Paul de Man, “Anthropomorphism and Trope in the Lyric,” in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 239.

⁴⁷ Lynn Margulis, *Symbiotic Planet: A New Look at Evolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1998), 6.

⁴⁸ Lynn Margulis and Dorion Sagan, *Acquiring Genomes: A Theory of the Origin of Species* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 55–56.

⁴⁹ Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World* (New York: New York University Press, 2020).

⁵⁰ “The co-opting of strangers, the involvement and infolding of others into ever more complex and *miscegenous* genomes [. . .]. The acquisition of the reproducing other, of the

Symbiogenesis is already being used in “scientific discourse”⁵¹ as a new teleological story for our time, characterised by the “crisis of the commons” and thus the “crisis of the community” and, ultimately, the crisis of (also conceptual) excavations from these states. Donna Haraway and Graham Harman have used the concept of symbiogenesis as a metaphor to build on the already accepted idea of symbiosis as a paradigm for understanding (human) relations.⁵²

Thus, to end with what else but ends, in the end, the ends of ends are, according to Piasentier, following Nietzsche, to circumvent *horror vacui* and it is the idea that man has no purpose that is the reason that feeds the literal and metaphorical explanations of natural ends. It is only “in light of this lack of any ultimate ends for biological life that we can start thinking about a new way to place our existence as living beings at the center of political intervention.”⁵³ Furthermore, this “unfolding of the lack [. . .] can allow us to imagine new ways of being-in-common.”⁵⁴ In the end, Piasentier equips us with the possibility of a new vision, a Sellarsian stereoscopic vision,⁵⁵ with the possibility of *the answer that is blowing in the wind*,⁵⁶ perhaps *the wind of change*.

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microbe and genome, is no mere sideshow. Attraction, merger, fusion, incorporation, co-habitation, recombination—both permanent and cyclical—and other forms of *forbidden couplings*, are the main source of Darwin’s missing variation.” Margulis and Sagan, *Acquiring Genomes*, 205; italics added.

⁵¹ Piasentier, *On Biopolitics*, 46.

⁵² Donna Haraway wrote about symbiogenesis in her book *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016) and Graham Harman in *Immaterialism: Objects and Social Theory* (Cambridge: Polity, 2016).

⁵³ Piasentier, *On Biopolitics*, 115.

⁵⁴ Piasentier, 8.

⁵⁵ Piasentier, 118. See also Wilfrid Sellars, “Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man,” in *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* (New York: Routledge, 1963), 4.

⁵⁶ Piasentier, 110.

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