



Restoring Art's Original Status: A Study of Giorgio Agamben's *The Man Without Content*

Ms. Vandana Sharma

Department of English, Punjabi University, India

Dr. Sharanpal Singh

Department of Distance Education, Punjabi University, Patiala, India

ABSTRACT:

The aim of this paper is twofold. Firstly, it explores Agamben's theoretical concerns about the essence of art in the modern world in his most significant book about the nature and function of art entitled *The Man Without Content* (1970). Secondly, we seek to identify how his novel ideas and concepts about art and aesthetics blend in productive analysis of literature in general and the writings of Herman Melville and Franz Kafka in particular. We come to conclusion that Agamben's persistent and rational exploration of art history, offers not only valuable insights on key issues such as free creative principle of the artist, aesthetic judgment, reproducibility vs. originality, transmissibility of culture and original structure of the work of art but also add new dimensions to our understanding of literature and contemporary culture.

Keywords: aesthetics; aesthetic judgment; creative principle; originality

The publication of *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* in 1995 gave Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben (b.1942), a global acknowledgment among the prominent contemporary thinkers. *The Man Without Content* is one of Agamben's significant works, which was published in 1970. This inaugural publication of Agamben offers an insightful analysis of the history of art and aesthetics from the Greeks to the present times. In *The Man Without Content*, Agamben underlines the fact that art has become pure potentiality of negation in the present times and nihilism nestles in its depths. According to him, modern aesthetics has overshadowed art and thus a work of art remains no more original measure of man's dwelling on earth. Agamben (1999, p. 6), therefore, wants artistic works to regain the original stature by articulating an urgency for "a destruction of aesthetics that would, by clearing away what is usually taken for granted, allow us to bring into question the very meaning of aesthetics as the science of the work of art." His main intention is "to restore art to its former status as a true shaper of actions and beliefs" by tracing the reasons of "the progressive obscuring of this original space that art offered" (Durantaye, 2009, p.30).

Agamben's productive exploration of art's lost stature, aesthetics and literature expands its route through the pertinent references of literary works of many prominent writers like Honoré de Balzac, Denis Diderot, Dostoevsky, Thomas Mann, Hölderlin and Kafka. His rewarding scrutiny establishes the fact that philosophy and literature converge in a number of places. Although literature and philosophy are two separate disciplines yet they can however enter a complex and productive engagement with each other "in a becoming that sweeps them both up in an intensity which co-determines them" (Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari, 1994, p. 66). E.J.W.M. Maas (2012, p. 2) also claims that both literature and philosophy are "intensely engaged with thinking and the problems literature deals with are often of a philosophical nature." Thus if great literature is often deeply philosophical, and great philosophy is imbued with literariness, the aim of the project is to focus specifically on probing the critical relevance of

the philosophy of Agamben to the disciplines of literature and especially the works of Melville and Kafka, where it can lead to their heightened perception and understanding. The present paper has tried to trace the convergence of theoretic and literary grounds of Agamben's insights.

The creative experience of the artist v/s sensible apprehension of the spectator:

Agamben instigates his analysis with Immanuel Kant's idea of disinterestedness expressed in *Critique of Judgment*. In late eighteenth century, when the focus in aesthetics shifted from sense perception in general to perception of the beautiful in particular, Kant added a new aspect of the selflessness or "disinterest" in an appreciation of pure beauty. He elaborates:

Taste is the faculty of estimating an object or a mode of representation by means of a delight or aversion apart from any interest. The object of such delight is called beautiful (Kant, 1998, p. 50).

In *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche (1967, p. 74) objected to Kant's doctrine of disinterestedness by clarifying that Kant just considered art and beauty from the "position of 'spectator', instead of viewing the aesthetic problem through the experiences of the artist." Agamben (1999, p. 3) sees in Nietzsche's views a call to reverse the traditional aesthetic perception on the work of art, whereby, the sensible apprehension of the spectator is replaced by "the creative experience of the artist who sees in his work only *une promesse de bonheur*, a promise of happiness." Nikolopoulou (2013, p. 85) argues that Agamben follows Nietzsche because he also seems less concerned with Kant's philosophical intentions at this point than "the discursive and cultural legacy Kantian thought generated namely, the rise of public indifference to art." Agamben draws on this ascending public apathy to lay bare the escalating split between the experiences of spectator and artist.

The transfer of effect of inspired imagination from the spectator to modern artist:

While tracing the reasons of the rise of public unresponsiveness to art, Agamben notices that ancient Greeks had a very different experience of art. To illustrate his position, he refers to Plato's condemnation of art in his famous statement: "we can admit no poetry into our city, save only hymns to the gods and the praises of good men" (Plato, 1953, p. 10:607a, qtd. in *Man Without Content* p. 4). The power of art over soul seemed to Plato so great that he thought that it could "make the worse appear the better reason, and blur the lines that divided fact from fiction" (Durantaye, 2009, p. 31). Agamben (1999, p. 5) locates by comparison, composure of emotions in modern audience. According to him, the effect of inspired imagination which Plato defines as "divine terror" has been shifted from the spectator to modern artist. The process of artistic creation remains as little comprehended as ever. Agamben (1999, p. 5) discusses the extent of involvement of artist in his art where it becomes a matter of "life and death of the author." He even illustrates his point concerning this uncanny experience from acclaimed literary writers like Charles Baudelaire, Friedrich Hölderlin and Rainer Maria Rilke.¹ Agamben (1999, p. 5) elaborates: To the increasing innocence of the spectator's experience in front of the beautiful object corresponds the increasing danger inherent in the artist's experience, for whom art's *promesse de bonheur* [promise of happiness] becomes the poison that contaminates and destroys his existence.

The split between form and meaning:

Agamben (1999, p. 7-8) calls this present predicament-"a paradox of terror" which crops up due to the difference between two kinds of writers i.e. Rhetoricians, who look for form and the Terrorists, who follow nothing but meaning. He states that in Balzac's *The Unknown Masterpiece*, the painter Frenhofer worked on his painting for ten years in search for absolute meaning but in the end this quest erased all meaning, allowing only signs and meaningless forms to survive. Agamben (1999, p. 8) finds a paradox of terror gripping Frenhofer's creation because "fleeing from Rhetoric has led him to the Terror, but the Terror brings him back to its opposite, Rhetoric." Moreover, when Frenhofer looks at the canvas through the eyes of his two spectators, Porbus and Poussin, the entire integrity of his work shatters for

¹ Baudelaire says: "where the artist cries out in fright before being defeated ..." Hölderlin wrote on the brink of madness: "I fear that I might end like the old Tantalus who received more from the gods than he could take..." Rilke writes in a letter to Clara Rilke: "Works of art are always the product of a risk one has run, of an experience taken to its extreme limit, to the point where man can no longer go on." (qtd. in *Man Without Content* p. 5)

him. He develops a persona incorporating the engendering state of creative principle as also its sensible and sensitive comprehension by the reader or the audience.

Agamben (1999, p. 9) locates a prevalence of duality in the entire domain of aesthetics since “the side that faces the artist is the living reality in which he reads his promise of happiness; but the other side, which faces the spectator, is an assemblage of lifeless elements that can only mirror itself in the aesthetic judgment's reflection of it.” Kafka projects this duality in a slightly different but subtle form in *The Metamorphosis*. The protagonist Gregor overworks for many years to save his family from the financial crisis. Like Frenhofer, when Gregor glances at the canvas of his life through the eyes of his family members, his vision of fulfilled life and blissful family bond is blurred into meaningless hallucination. His selfless devotion and integrity for his family severs the moment he overhears the conversation of his family members through the door. He comes to know about the family's implicit savings and selfish concerns. His emotional turmoil turns out to be more hurting than the pain inflicted by his physical metamorphosis. Gregor assesses the sole meaning of human relationships in their altruistic nature, whereas, his family members are unable to see beyond the shallow and superficial form of a relationship. Kafka's genius draws on intricacies of human relations to show this marked discrepancy in human perception and interpretation. Similarly, Melville, in *Moby-Dick*, employs the symbol of white whale to highlight the fact that a comprehensive and precise view of life takes diverse meanings into consideration. Life is not made up of only white or black shades but it is an amalgam of diverse colours. Ahab sees the white whale only as a symbol of all evil in the universe. He with the single motif of revenge in mind, “piled upon the whale's white hump the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down; and then, as if his chest had been a mortar, he burst his hot heart's shell upon it” (Melville, 1981, p. 154-155). This takes him to his death. But Ishmael's broad vision not only identifies the duality in the white whale and the universe, but also accepts the creature both in its splendid and terrible projections. Both Ahab and Ishmael differ in their interpretation of life and nature because of the disparity in their values, experiences and perception.

Relating it to work of art necessitates a duality or doubleness in the creator since he creates and also comprehends the creation in its multi-perspectival nature. This view has already been available in English literature where the poet-critics like William Wordsworth and T.S. Eliot were of the opinion that the poet alone could comprehend his poetry in all its versatility and multiplicity of meaning. Theorists like Leo Tolstoy and Benedetto Croce also consider art as the expression of feeling or the intentions of the artist. Tolstoy (1971, p. 681) regards art as a human activity where, “one man consciously, by means of certain external signs, hands on to others feelings he has lived through, and that other people are infected by these feelings, and also experience them.” Croce (1964, p. 556), also deems art as “contemplation of feeling” or ...“pure intuition,” but he does not regard art as bound for the production of effects such as pleasure, enjoyment, utility and righteousness. However many theorists rejected this idea that the intention of the artist can be a correct criterion for judging a work of art. Monroe C. Beardsley and William Wimsatt (1954, p. 5) replace the concept of expression with that of spectator:

The poem is not the critic's own and not the author's (it is detached from the author at birth and goes about the world beyond his power to intend about it or control it). The poem belongs to the public. It is embodied in language, the peculiar possession of the public, and it is about the human being, an object of public knowledge.

Agamben (1999, p. 9) analyses this split between artist and the spectator in the present time from a different perspective. With the rise of modern aesthetics, he notices a schism or “laceration” in our experience of the work of art because the connection of the artist and the audience to a common “lived texture” stands severed. He considers the doctrine of “taste” a reason of this division because the man of taste is asked to judge form independently of content. According to Agamben, the spectator's is the most radical split because his realm of experience is the creative aspect which belongs to the creator and not to him. In addition, Taste in its fullness, is “separate from the principle of creation; but without genius, taste becomes a pure reversal, that is, the very principle of perversion” (Agamben, 1999, p. 16).

Glimpse of split between genius and taste in literature:

Rameau's nephew [Lui] in Denis Diderot's eponymous text *Rameau's Nephew* becomes the best representation of this split between genius and taste because he is a man of extraordinary good taste and at the same time a despicable rascal. Agamben notices the reappearance of this dialectic personified by two major characters- Stepan Trofimovich Verkhovensky and his son Pyotr Stepanovich Verkhovensky in Dostoevsky's *Devils*. Both Stepan and Pyotr talk highly about change and progress, but their views lack in spiritual and moral substance. Stepan, a self-confessed liberal reformer and an intellectual, is basically a vain revolutionary writer and negligent father who uses the money set aside for his son in order to repay his own debts. Pyotr, a brilliant manipulator, aspires for national revolt to establish socialism but his deceiving ways ultimately lead to destructive and nihilistic circumstances. Similarly, Agamben (1999, p. 18) considers Ludovico Settembrini and Leo Naphta of Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain* as the right "descendants of Rameau's nephew." Lodovico is a follower of reason and equality but his extreme unrealistic attitude comes up as a contradiction. Likewise, Naphta is an intellectual Jesuit whose irrational conduct unites asceticism and luxury and his dualism is depicted in his respect for nihilistic ideas about violence and absolute terror. In Melville's *Benito Cereno*, Captain Delano displays the traces of his racist tendencies hidden under the camouflage of his liberal outlook. His fondness of blacks is basically undignified because he treats Negroes not "philanthropically, but genially, just as other men to Newfoundland dogs" (Melville, 1990, p. 41). He admires faithful slave Babo but calls him a "shepherd's dog" (Melville, 1990, p. 7).

Agamben (1999, p. 23) enhances his canvas by alluding to G.W.F. Hegel's insistence on the immediate identity of artist's content and form with the spirit of his age and religious beliefs. Taking Hegel's views as its basis, Agamben adds another productive dimension to it by arguing that the artist's authentic expression enables the spectator to see his own faith and the highest truth of his being in the work of art. Melville's genius stands up to this test of authenticity because the issues raised in his works identify themselves with the spirit of every age. According to A. Robert Lee, this also applies to the global reader because "Melville who renews, even as he challenges, the assumptions not only of his own American culture but also, and quite as exhilaratingly, of the culture through which he is being read" (Lee, 2006, p. 48-49). In *Benito Cereno* and *Billy Budd, Sailor*, Melville moves ahead of his time in his most thoughtful analysis of the issues of slavery and racism. He brings to light the fact that racism breeds a sense of supremacy and control in human beings. This feeling of dominance gradually gives birth to evils like slavery and discrimination. Melville's concern for egalitarianism is clearly depicted when he urges to be "Christians toward our fellow-whites, as well as philanthropists toward the blacks, our fellow-men" (Melville, 1966, p. 268).

Agamben (1999, p. 23-24) observes that in modern aesthetics where art is identified with "absolute freedom that seeks its end and its foundation in itself" leaves the spectator devoid of his highest truth. He considers art as "the shared space" in which all persons, artists and non-artists, come together in living unity. But in western art, he finds a schism between the aesthetic judgement and the artistic subjectivity which is left without content. Agamben (1999, p. 26) says:

...the work of art is no longer, for modern man, the concrete appearance of the divine, which causes either ecstasy or sacred terror in the soul, but a privileged occasion to exercise his critical taste ...about whether it is in fact art and not false art, non-art, and that we subject to our meditation, as Hegel said, the content, the means of its manifestation, and the appropriateness of both.

The predicament of artist:

Agamben (1999, p. 35) compares the artist to a *tabula rasa* [a clean slate] devoid of any content and finds an implication of this ironic condition of the artist in Baudelaire's "*Of the Essence of Laughter*" where he [Baudelaire] calls the artist a living contradiction because his existence exiled from the basic conditions of life has left him devoid of thought. The call to "refine and purify artistic judgement and to separate a formal creative principle from a traditional body of cultural contents" (Durantaye, 2009, p. 33) has not only forced Agamben's artist to leave the contents of his culture but also to forego his identity. Jason Maxwell (2011, p. 20) elaborates:

[For Agamben] the alienation of the artist from the culture in which he lives demonstrates that while works of art still occupy a space within modern society, they lack the capacity to shape and direct that society actively like they once did...Without this central role within society, the creation of art becomes merely a formal exercise.

Manual and intellectual modes of production in an era of modern technology: Agamben notices that the mode of presence of the things produced by man has become double with the development of modern technology, i.e., on the one hand, there are the aesthetic productions and, on the other hand, there are technical products. His central concern is to reveal a “reductive distinction between manual and intellectual production in Western history and... division of human products into aesthetical objects (art works) and products in the narrow sense (industrial, technical)” (Vujanović, 2010, p. 2). Differentiating *technics* from art, Agamben (1999, p. 38) remarks that the essential status of the product of *technics* is reproducibility whereas the basic status of the work of art lies in its “originality.” According to him, originality of a work of art means that the work of art remains in the proximity to its origin and keeps its “origin alive by literally transforming it: putting it into new form” (Nikolopoulou, 2013, p. 76).

Agamben observes that the line of demarcation between *technics* and art has become attenuated because the aesthetical and technical productions have become identical. The existence of this “dual status for man's *poietic* activity” (Agamben, 1999, p. 38) has not only created a radical split in the spiritual life of the artist but also changed the aspect of humanity's cultural production. Agamben glimpses the outcome of this split in the eclipse of sciences (rhetoric and dogmatics), social institutions (workshops and art schools) and the structures of artistic/literary composition (repetition of styles and tropes). He calls for the solution of the present crisis by restoring a “unitary status for human *ποίησις*” [*poiésis*²]. Agamben (1999, p. 38) says:

Everything that in some way constituted the common space in which the personalities of different artists met in a living unity in order then to assume, within the strictures of this common mold, their unmistakable physiognomy became a commonplace in the pejorative sense, an unbearable encumbrance: the artist in whom the modern critical demon has insinuated itself must free himself from it or perish.

Agamben sees an adverse effect of this present crisis on the condition of the artist. He sees an allusion to this danger in Hölderlin's statement:

When being compared with those of the Greeks, other works of art, too, lack reliability; at least, they have been judged until today according to the impressions which they made rather than according to their lawful calculation and their other modes of operation through which the beautiful is engendered (Hölderlin, 1988, p. 101, qtd. in *MWC* 39).

Dali (2006, p. 3) argues that Hölderlin's proclamation that poetry is measured by the impression it makes rather than the manner of creation, is clearly displayed in modernism because it “opposed the conventions of traditional art production with the rejection of technical perfection as an intrinsic necessity, and treasuring more the emotional impression of color in a work of art.”

Agamben (1999, p. 41) observes that the need for authenticity in technical production and that for reproducibility of artistic creation have given birth to two hybrid forms, the “ready-made” and pop art. Moreover, these forms of contemporary art can neither be available for aesthetic enjoyment nor for consumption because their availability and potentiality are turned toward nothingness. In addition, museums and galleries have reduced our relationship with the work of art to a level of mere aesthetic enjoyment through good taste. In this way, the privileged status of the artistic work is gradually changing day by day because the dynamic character of art's availability for aesthetic enjoyment hides the energetic character of its final station in its own shape. Responding to an urgent need of restoring status of art to its original dimension in the present era, Agamben stresses crossing the swamp of aesthetics and *technics* for purposeful action.

² *poiésis* [ποίησις] means creation, production [Source- Webster's Dictionary]

Agamben considers the present predicament of art in our time—a crisis of poetry i.e. of *poiésis* [ποίησις] and *praxis*³ [Ποίησις]. He states that the Greeks made a clear distinction between “*poiesis* (poiein, “to produce” in the sense of bringing into being) and *praxis* (prattein, “to do” in the sense of acting)” (Agamben, 1999, p. 42). So for Greeks, both the activity of the craftsman and the artist had in common the essential character of being a species of *poiésis*, and this *poietic* character related them back to nature. According to Agamben (1999, p. 37-63), Plato considered everything including nature, which brings itself into presence, has the character of *poiésis*. Aristotle, in the *Physics*, however, regards existing by nature as different from that which exists by other causes like *technics* or skill. Agamben argues that Aristotle assigned a higher position to *poiesis* than to *praxis* because the essential character of *poiesis* lies in its “being a mode of truth”. Confirming the same, Agamben gives *poiesis* a higher recognition by claiming that it gives man “a poetic status” on earth by providing him the original space of his world. In this way, man experiences his “being-in-the-world as his essential condition” for his action and his existence. According to Eikelboom, both Heidegger and Agamben attempt to convey this aspect of *poiesis* in Aristotle i.e. *poiesis* as the opening of a world for common human dwelling. He elaborates:

The opening of a world for common human dwelling includes all craft, which functions in common life both in building houses and healing people but also in what we call the fine arts. Painting and poetry serve to open the world for human dwelling in making the divine present to the human world (Eikelboom, 2009, p. 12-13).

Agamben (1999, p. 41-44) underlines that the interpretation of art as *poiesis* is transformed into a “mode of *praxis* as the expression of a will and a creative force” to such an extent that even the most radical critiques of aesthetics have not questioned the idea that “art is the expression of the artist’s creative will.” He finds a loss of distinction between *poiesis* and *praxis* or production and action because all of man’s doing be it the work of a craftsman, artist, worker, or politician is considered *praxis* in the modern era. Agamben (1999, p. 44) cites Novalis’s definition of poetry as a “willful, active, and productive use of our organs,” Nietzsche’s identification of art with the will to power and Antonin Artaud’s aspiration to a theatrical liberation of the will to establish his point that art in the modern time is associated with “the essence of human activity as will and vital impulse and... [in this process] the original pro-ductive status of the work of art as foundation of the space of truth” is completely ignored.

Agamben adopts an altogether different course to discern the original structure of the work of art. He begins his analysis from Hölderlin’s statement exclaimed during his mad years that “Everything is rhythm, the entire destiny of man is one heavenly rhythm, just as every work of art is one rhythm, and everything swings from the poetizing lips of the god” (qtd. in *The Man Without Content* p. 58). According to him, rhythm can also be associated with structure since it plays a function of composing and shaping. Agamben (1999, p. 59) says:

Understood from this perspective, Hölderlin’s sentence would mean that every work of art is one structure, and would therefore imply an interpretation of the original being of the work of art as *ῥυθμός* [rhythm], structure.

Agamben argues that rhythm introduces a split or a stop into the eternal flow of temporal dimension. In a similar way, the experience before a work of art enables us to feel a “stop” in time. It is like we are arrested before something, says Agamben (1999, p. 62), but this being arrested is also “a being-outside, an *ek-stasis* [the state of being beside one’s self] in a more original dimension. Such reserve—which gives and at the same time hides its gift—is called in Greek *ἐποχή*.⁴” This leads Agamben to conclude that rhythm is *ἐποχή*. Thus rhythm holds the essence of man by giving him a gift both of being and of nothingness. Agamben calls rhythm an original ecstasy that opens for man the space of his world in which he can experience freedom and alienation, historical consciousness and loss in time, truth and error simultaneously. Kafka’s universe opens up this space of his world where he can have the courage to hope in “this hideous and upsetting world” (Camus, 1991, p. 87). The greatest aspect of Kafka’s work lies

³ *praxis* [Ποίησις] means action, activity, practice [Source- Webster’s Dictionary]

⁴ *ἐποχή* has a double meaning: it means both to hold back, to suspend, and to hand over, to present, to offer.

in the fact that it “offers everything and confirms nothing” (Camus, 1991, p. 128). What is important to note is that aesthetics attempts to achieve a “dialogue with the work of art, not to experience a divine presence in which catalyzes an ecstasy in the original mind, but a privileged occasion to simply exercise critical judgment” (Dali, 2006, p. 13).

According to Agamben (1999, p. 63), when Hölderlin points towards a work of art as *ἐποχή* and rhythm, he basically situates the original structure of the work of art in a dimension in which the very “structure of man's being-in-the-world and his relationship with truth and history are at stake.” Eikelboom (2009, p. 18) argues that in Agamben's sight historical life drones like “a regular beat endlessly and rhythm represents an irregular event that enables us to see and capture the regular beat within which we live.” In this manner literature does not attempt to create another world but disrupts the everyday world. Kafka's (1990, p.14) parables work like “axe for the frozen sea within us” and jolt our inner consciousness which has hibernated in the unjust and meaningless decrees of materialistic world. In Kafka's parable “Before the Law,” the law remains inaccessible for man because the doorkeeper never allows the man to enter the door of law. The man waits for all his life to gain entry through the gate but the paradox of doorkeeper's rejection never becomes clear to him. The doorkeeper says that he can't “allow him in now, and at the other he says this entrance was intended for him alone” (Kafka, 2011, p. 157).

Eikelboom (2009, p. 18-20) explains that all art in Agamben's vision, disrupt the regular flow of everyday life and this is not only a “disruption felt by the viewer, but is a disruption of the artist's will and subjectivity as well... The artwork functions as a rest in which maker and viewer are pulled out of their respective actualities and into a common space of potentiality and reception.” Agamben (1999, p. 63) points out that work of art in the modern era has turned into a “self-annihilating nothing” and its original structure is no more visible. He situates its cause in aesthetic judgement which focuses on the formal aspects of the work of art, but takes little notice of the essential structure of the work. Agamben declares that the real meaning of art will remain closed to man till the time he remains captive of the aesthetic perspective.

In the last section of the book, Agamben takes up the issue of transmissibility of culture. In a traditional system, connection between past and present is maintained by transmission of traditional beliefs and notions. For him (1999, p. 66), the breaking of tradition means that the past has lost its transmissibility, and will remain an “object of accumulation” till new means are found to enter into a relation with it. Although in this way, man keeps his cultural heritage intact, yet it no more directs his actions and welfare. Agamben (1999, p. 63) elaborates:

Like the castle in Kafka's novel, which burdens the village with the obscurity of its decrees and the multiplicity of its offices, the accumulated culture has lost its living meaning and hangs over man like a threat in which he can in no way recognize himself.

Agamben notices a unique relation between culture and art. Work of art is the present space of truth where the old and the new resolve their conflict. He observes that man is trapped between the past and the future. He glimpses “an immediate threat for humanity: the loss of its poetic being. It is when we reaffirm our poetic being that we may stand firmly once again on the ground of our historicity, and assume responsibility for the future” (Dali, 2006, p. 4). This aspect of art also helps in survival of a culture when it loses its transmissibility. He refers to the ancient times of Greek tragedy when art assumed the task of settling the conflict between old traditional mythic system and the new moral world by projecting the figure of the tragic hero. Agamben (1999, p. 69) views Kafka, in the modern time, as the one author who has taken this mission of resolving the conflict between the old and the new by turning man's inability to appropriate his own historical beliefs “into the very soil on which man might recover himself.” In *The Great Wall of China*, Kafka while describing people's lack of conviction, sees their weakness as “one of the greatest unifying influences among our people; indeed, if one may dare to use the expression, the very ground on which we live” (Kafka, 1971, p. 173 qtd. in *MWC* 70). Walter Benjamin (1926, p. 144) also admires Kafka's genius for sacrificing truth for the sake of clinging to its transmissibility. He says:

Kafka's writings are by their nature parables. But it is their misery and their beauty that they had to become more than parables. They do not modestly lie at the feet of the

doctrine, as the Haggadah lies at the feet of the Halakah. Though apparently reduced to submission, they unexpectedly raise a mighty paw against it.

A study of *The Man Without Content* reveals that Agamben blames modern aesthetic conception for creation of a series of evident splits- between artist and spectator, genius and taste and form and matter. These schisms have constrained art's original stature in the modern time. Consequently, art remains no more the shared space in which all men, artists and non-artists come together in living unity. Agamben (1999, p. 71) finds the original status of the work of art as obscured because it is hidden in the abode of aesthetics and exhorts to burn this dwelling of aesthetics to render the "fundamental architectural problem" visible. Durantaye (2009, p. 29-30) considers Agamben's idea of destruction "as unusual but not unprecedented," because before him, in *Being and Time*, Heidegger had also exhorted fellowmen to destroy the traditional content of ancient ontology to find out the nature of Being. If Heidegger's destruction emphasizes, Durantaye (2009, p. 29-30) adds, the elimination of corrupted material, Agamben's destruction of aesthetics hopes to check "the innermost forms and flaws of their construction."

It may be stated that Agamben's persistent and rational exploration of art history, offers valuable insights on key issues such as free creative principle of the artist, aesthetic judgment, reproducibility vs. originality, transmissibility of culture and original structure of the work of art. There remains no doubt that Agamben's reasoned pursuit of fundamental truths and systematic study of issues not only seeks to provide rational methods of resolving conflicts by establishing standards of evidence but also creates novel techniques for evaluating ideas and arguments concerning art, aesthetics, literature, probity, science and humanities in general. By exploring all of them, he views them both microscopically and macroscopically articulating the perspective of immediate concern vs. larger concerns of human existence. Agamben pursues questions in every dimension of human subsistence and his ideas can also be aptly applied in better understanding of literature which reflects deeply on the human condition and socio political effects. A re-reading of literary works of Balzac, Diderot, Dostoevsky, Mann, Hölderlin, Melville and Kafka in the light of Agamben's insights, provides a rewarding understanding of these works although the present study limits itself to the works of Melville and Kafka. There remains no doubt that the literary creations of these great writers have that redemptive power which can renew art's relation with the real world again by changing the very inability of man to exert his historical status to the "very space in which he can take the original measure of his dwelling in the present and recover each time the meaning of his action" (Agamben, 1999, p. 71).

WORKS CITED

- Agamben, Giorgio. 1999. *The Man without Content*. Trans. Georgia Albert. Stanford University Press, Stanford, Calif.
- Aristotle. 2008. *Physics*. Trans. Robin Waterfield. Oxford University Press, New York.
- Balzac, Honoré de. 2011. *The Unknown Masterpiece and Other Stories*. Dover Publications, New York.
- Baudelaire, Charles. 2008. *Of the Essence of Laughter*. In: P. E. Charvet (Eds.), *Baudelaire: Selected Writings on Art And Artists*. University of Cambridge, New York, pp. 140-161
- Benjamin, Walter. 1926. *Illuminations*. Trans. Harry Zohn. Schocken Books, New York.
- Camus, Albert. 1991. *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Vintage Books, New York.
- Croce, Benedetto. 1964. *Aesthetics*. In: Hofstadter, Albert., Kuhns, Richard. (Eds.), *Philosophies of Art and Beauty, Selected Readings In Aesthetics From Plato to Heidegger*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, pp. 556-561.
- Dali, Salvador. 2006. *The Most Uncanny Thing: A Methodological Analysis on Giorgio Agamben's Ontology of Art*. The Art Syntropy Project. artsyntropy.org, August 25th. <http://artsyntropy.org/the-most-uncanny-thing-a-methodological-analysis-on-giorgio-agambens-ontology-of-art/>(accessed September 14, 2014).
- Diderot, Denis. 1976. *Rameau's Nephew and D'Alembert's Dream*. Trans. Leonard Tancock. Penguin Classics, New York.

- Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari. 1994. *What is Philosophy?* Trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell. Columbia University Press, New York.
- Dostoevsky, Fyodor. 2010. *Devils*. Wordsworth Editions Ltd., Hertfordshire.
- Durantaye, Leland de la. 2009. *Giorgio Agamben: A Critical Introduction*. Stanford University Press, Stanford, Calif..
- Eikelboom, Lexi. 2009. John Milbank and Giorgio Agamben on Ethical Poiesis. Academia.Edu, May 13th. https://www.academia.edu/3381080/John_Milbank_and_Giorgio_Agamben_on_Ethical_Poiesis (accessed September 10, 2014).
- Hegel, G. W. F. 1975. *Hegel's Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*. Trans. T. M. Knox. Oxford University Press, New York.
- Heidegger, Martin. 1962. *Being and Time*. Harper Perennial Modern Classics, New York.
- Hölderlin, Friedrich. 1988. *Remarks on 'Oedipus*. In: Thomas Pfau. (Eds.), *Essays and Letters on Theory*. State University of New York Press, Albany, pp. 101.
- Kafka, Franz. 1990. *Letters to Friends, Family and Editors*. Trans. Richard Winston and Clara Winston. Schocken books Inc., New York.
- Kafka, Franz. 1971. *The Complete Stories*. Schocken books Inc., New York.
- Kafka, Franz. 2000. *The Metamorphosis and Other Stories*. Dover Publications, New York.
- Kafka, Franz. 2011. *The Trial*. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, New York.
- Kant, Immanuel. 1998. *The Critique of Judgment*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Lee, A. Robert. 2006. *Melville's World Readers*. In: Wyn Kelley. (Eds.), *A Companion to Herman Melville*. Blackwell Publishing Ltd, Malden, pp. 35-51.
- Maas, E.J.W.M. 2012. *Literature and Philosophy: Deleuze, Agamben and Rancière reading Melville's "Bartleby"*. Diss. University of Hawaii, <<http://dspace.library.uu.nl/handle/1874/253018>>
- Mann, Thomas. 1996. *The Magic Mountain*. Trans. John E. Woods. Everyman's Library, New York.
- Maxwell, Jason. 2011. *Aesthetics*. In: Alex Murray and Jessica Whyte. (Eds.), *The Agamben Dictionary*. Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, pp. 20-22.
- Melville, Herman. 2008. *Billy Budd, Sailor*. Penguin Classics, New York.
- Melville, Herman. 1981. *Moby-Dick*. Bantam Classics, New York.
- Melville, Herman. 1990. *Benito Cereno*. Dover Publications, New York.
- Melville, Herman. 1966. *Battle Pieces and Aspects of War*. Harper & Brothers, New York.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1967. *On the Genealogy of Morals*. Trans. Walter Kaufmann. Vintage Books, New York.
- Nikolopoulou, Kalliopi. 2013. *Tragically Speaking: On the Use and Abuse of Theory for Life*. University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln.
- Plato. 1953. *Republic*. Trans. Paul Shorey. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass.
- Tolstoy, Leo. 1971. *What is Art?*. In: Hazard Adams. (Eds.), *Critical Theory Since Plato*. a. Trans. Aylmer Maude. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York, pp. 679-690.
- Vujanović, Ana. 2010. *WHAT DO WE ACTUALLY DO WHEN WE ... MAKE ART?*. How To Do Things by Theory. Walking Theory (TkH) platform, May 13th. <http://www.howtodothingsbytheory.info/2010/05/13/ana-vujanovic-what-do-we-actually-do-when-we-%E2%80%A6-make-art/> (accessed March 10, 2014).
- Wimsatt, William, and Monroe C. Beardsley. 1954. *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry*. University of Kentucky Press, Lexington.
- Wilber, Ken. 2001. *The Eye of Spirit: An Integral Vision for a World Gone Slightly Mad*. Shambhala, London.