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Foils and Fools:
"Bartleby" and the Failure of Romantic Possibility

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Abstract: "Bartleby" has elicited an inordinate number of readings, as it strikingly bridges the gulf between the antebellum sensibility and our own, but this essay sees it less as a forerunner of postmodern dislocations or indeterminacies, than as an exploration—or, rather, an exposition—of the limits of Romantic possibility. More specifically, the essay frames "Bartleby" as Melville's response to the illusions or inadequacies of Transcendentalism. As distinct from the few readings that have connected Melville's short story to Transcendentalism, this essay locates Melville's critique of Transcendentalism not only in the figure of Bartleby, but also in that of the lawyer. Further, it points to a confrontation with Transcendentalism which focuses less on self-reliance than on another of Ralph Waldo Emerson's essential notions—that of power—arguing that, far from being a figure of potentiality, Bartleby is an emblem of starkly thwarted possibility, offering one of Melville's harshest comments on the humanist vision of agency, discovery, and insight.

> *After my death no one will find in my papers (this is my consolation) the least information about what has* really *filled my life, find* that *script in my innermost being that explains everything, and which often, for me, makes what the world would call trifles into events of immense importance, and which I too consider of no significance once I take away the secret note that explains it.*
>
> (Kierkegaard 2, 157)

Writing on "Bartleby," after decades of rich, intense scrutiny is admittedly a daunting and perilous task, one that should begin with an acknowledgement that any reading is bound to convey the scholar's impressions, based on their intimate conviction: Melville's short story, like its eponymous character, is indeed one of those writings of which "nothing is ascertainable" (Melville 1987 13).[1] Accordingly, this essay will revolve around my sense that "Bartleby" is closely connected to Transcendentalism,

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while offering a somewhat skeptical response to the prevalent emphasis on the tale's inherent indeterminacy. Indeed, a significant range of the scholarship on "Bartleby" has tended to replicate the scribe's seeming loss of energy, with a lot of critical attention devoted to such themes as suspension, undecidability, or the destruction of meaning. In that view, literature, for Melville, is "about its own failure, about the impossibility of giving a language to what cannot be represented" (Arsić 7). Many scholars have thus foregrounded the postmodern idea that Melville's work deals with the "nonsense that inhabits all sensemaking" (Miller 173–74); that it revels in "indetermination" (Derrida 75, Deleuze 71) or the "suspensive existence of literature"; and that it "finds its source in that zone of indeterminacy where former individuations are undone" (Rancière 86, 149). Those readings have set the terms for most philosophically-inclined approaches to this day, as testified by two recent collections of essays specifically devoted to Melville and philosophy (Cole, LaRocca 2017).[2]

My approach, on the contrary, will accept the complex challenge of what Philippe Jaworski, in his subtly balanced introduction to "Bartleby," calls "the wager of meaning" ("le pari du sens," 1080). This essay is fundamentally driven by the idea that Melville did not cultivate indeterminacy but meant to convey something, rather than suspending meaning *per se*. I here concur with Leo Marx's characterization of "Bartleby" as a "parable."[3] Melville never merely tells stories but rather stages drama—intensely personal, existential, metaphysical drama. While the theatrical dimension of the opening section of "Bartleby" has often been emphasized—as it offers a series of skits—the short story as a whole appears as a stage, which Melville uses to set up the drama of consciousness, exploring his obsessions, desires, and anxieties. This work is a hauntingly personal performance, not a scholastic exercise. If Melville's texts have to do with failure, I will argue, it is not the failure of literature, but that of dreams and illusions.

This is where Transcendentalism comes into play. Whereas "Bartleby" has elicited an inordinate number of readings, as it strikingly bridges the gulf between Melville's antebellum sensibility and our own, I tend to see it less as a forerunner of postmodern dislocations or indeterminacies, than as an exploration—or, rather, an exposition—of the limits of Romantic possibility.[4] More specifically, I will suggest that Melville has his two main characters play a cautionary tale which dismisses them both, while eliciting a subtle fascination for Bartleby. Although that is far from being the prevalent way of reading "Bartleby," I'm certainly not the first one to see a connection between Melville's short story and Transcendentalism. A classic study in this vein, Christopher Sten's "Bartleby the Transcendentalist," suggests that Melville was specifically responding to Emerson's essay entitled "The Transcendentalist." A few years

later, Francine S. Puk argued that "Bartleby" responded to Emerson's "Self-Reliance," as did Michael McLoughlin in a short concluding chapter (128–33). And, in a pioneering essay, Egbert Oliver argued that "Bartleby" echoed Thoreau's notion of "passive resistance" (the phrase being used in Melville's short story, although not in Thoreau's writings), a line which was also pursued by Michael Rogin, who considers that "in refusing to copy, [Bartleby] is simply copying Thoreau. . . . Bartleby's 'I prefer not to' is an echo of 'Civil Disobedience'" (195). The most substantive analysis of the connection of "Bartleby" to Transcendentalism, however, has been provided by Shannon L. Mariotti, who argues that Melville's target, in this short story, was Emerson's two-pronged transcendental effort—motionless meditation and abstract gaze—supposed to allow one to reconnect with the universal. Mariotti concludes that Bartleby's "radical form of self-reliance" is bound to fail, as, Melville wants to point out, "there is no life at all wholly detached from the obligations and conventions that condition our human and worldly existence" (176)—a critique of self-absorption which fundamentally parallels the point made by Leo Marx. Mariotti's larger argument, in her joint analysis of "Bartleby" and "Cock-A-Doodle-Doo!," is that Melville took Transcendentalism to task for failing to contribute in a concrete manner to transforming society (183).

My own take on "Bartleby" is in broad agreement with those earlier readings, and notably with Mariotti's general characterization of this short story as an "exploration of the possibilities and costs of transcendentalism" (164), but my emphases are somewhat different. In the first place, I locate Melville's critique of Transcendentalism not only in the figure of Bartleby, but also in that of the lawyer. And, second, my analysis points to a confrontation with Transcendentalism which focuses less on self-reliance, than on another of Emerson's essential notions, that of power. Teasing out the implications of Melville's complex engagement with Transcendentalism's core tenets will eventually allow me to redress the imbalance introduced by the widely shared critical emphasis on the notions of suspension, potentiality, and impersonality.

The lawyer's *energeia* vs. Bartleby's *dunamis*

Regarding the notion of power as of central importance to "Bartleby" may sound counter-intuitive, since at first sight any idea of energy will seem to be of little relevance to it. Indeed, this short story seems to give pride of place to motionlessness or immobility, stasis, inertia, i.e, in a word, to the lack or loss of energy—"I like to be stationary," the eponymous character says, in a pun *à la* Thoreau (41). Of course things are a bit more complicated: the story actually pits the narrator, who embodies the energetic man of

business and man of action, eager to find solutions, against Bartleby, who spurs questions without solutions, and slowly drifts out of the world altogether. Such an imbalance only happens on the diegetic level, however. In terms of the story's agogics, and anagogics, energy is clearly on the side of Bartleby. But what kind of energy exactly? This is what I would like to explore here.

As one reads "Bartleby," one can fundamentally recognize a search for the power of efficacy on the part of the immoderately energetic lawyer, as diametrically contrary to the mere power of being on the part of Bartleby. In philosophical terms, what is played out is Aristotle's polarity between *energeia* (*ἐνέργεια*) and *dunamis* (*δύναμις*)—which is central to the thought of the Greek philosopher, whether relating to metaphysics, physics, or ethics (see especially *Metaphysics*, Book Θ). According to Merton Sealts, to be sure, "it can be safely said . . . that first-hand knowledge of Aristotle on Melville's part is not reflected to any extent in his works, particularly in comparison with the considerable use he made of Aristotle's teacher, Plato" (171–72). The distinction between *energeia* and *dunamis*, however, is one of the most foundational ideas in the Western intellectual tradition, and was echoed and appropriated in multiple ways through the centuries: the two terms are commonly translated as actuality (or efficacy) and potentiality (or potency), and paired in philosophical discourse as in an actual state / in a potential state. The romance languages all have a corresponding terminological dichotomy (e.g., *potestas* / *potentia* in Latin, or *pouvoir* / *puissance* in French), whereas the English language only has "power" (if we leave "might" aside), which tends to blur the issue, as it conflates the actuality of power with its potential realization.

The lawyer's *energeia*

The narrator is clearly on the side of *energeia*, as his mainstays are work (*energeia* is etymologically related to *ἔργον*, work), action, activity, actuality. The verb, *ἐνεργεῖν*, refers to the communication of energy and efficiency (to energize). Although the lawyer, in his introductory self-portrait, means to differentiate himself from his "proverbially energetic and nervous" colleagues (14), his fast-paced narrative, his emphasis on making office work as productive as possible, and his frantic efforts at resolving "the Bartleby problem" define him squarely as an embodiment of energy. He dreams of his office as a well-run machine, operating smoothly, and he accepts any compromises that he thinks will ensure his "peace" (14) as much as his prosperity ("a snug business among rich men's bonds and mortgages and title-deeds," 14). When seen in contrast with Bartleby, he appears as utterly practical and worldly—his words and deeds meant to be safely governed by "prudence" and "method" (14).

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In more abstract terms, one should also note that *energeia*, in Aristotle's thought, is very close to the notion of form: *energeia* is what enables form to persevere in its being, which is exactly what the narrator seeks to do in various ways.[5] His thinking is indeed saturated with value, as he means to shore up his world and its order through conventional ethical principles. The short story strongly suggests that this makes him blind to the real nature of Bartleby, which is admittedly enigmatic; all in all, his well-meaning attempts are presented by Melville as grotesquely irrelevant gesticulations. Similarly, his use of language is purely directional, vectorized, developing a skein of words which are like so many tentacles striving for connection to, but, even more, for the confinement of Bartleby—i.e., he wishes not merely to compass, but to encompass him (to get a purchase on him, by bringing him down to the known, thus reducing, if not altogether canceling, his alterity). In terms of "Bartleby" as a cautionary tale, the role played by language suggests that words are bound to demonstrate their inadequacy (to being)—rather than their mere indeterminacy. Language is not all there is: "Bartleby" is hauntingly structured around the polarity of speech vs. silence, with language undoubtedly afflicted with weakness. The narrator certainly regards himself as a master of words, but these actually mislead him, because he thinks they can apply universally, and be dissociated from one's own voice (as distinct from Bartleby, who, coming as close as possible to silence, reclaims the individuality of the conveyance of language). Finally, the narrator's energetic behavior is based on a buoyant epistemology: he believes in the possibility of knowing—i.e., of accounting for human experience within a rational framework, thus grasping that "ungraspable phantom of life," in Ishmael's famous words at the beginning of *Moby-Dick* (18)—and of knowing through seeing. In that sense, the short story sounds like Melville's response to Emerson's central stance that "the axis of vision" can coincide with "the axis of things," thus dispelling opacity (Emerson 47). And the narrator keeps trying until he can get it right; to that extent he may be seen as a proponent of what a long tradition—beginning with William James and John Dewey—has been eager to see as the proto-pragmatist strand of Transcendentalism (LaRocca 2013). In the end, the narrator conflates two of Kant's famous imperatives, joining epistemology and ethics: What can I know? What should I do?[6] Because he thinks he can know Bartleby, he also thinks that he knows what he should do about him. Melville's skewed geometry of being undoubtedly rejects such equivalences, and accordingly sounds like the defeat of reason.[7] While Deleuze describes the lawyer as having the "power to 'See'," and as being "capable of grasping and understanding, as much as possible, the beings of Primary Nature" such as

Bartleby (78), the story instead stages, or figures, any such attempts as marred by overconfidence, if not downright folly.

The lawyer, however, should not be regarded as a mere fool, but rather as a foil: a dramatic persona Melville sets up in order to disparage what constitutes our common assumptions—our proneness to compassion and desire for certainty, for instance—and to dismiss the idealism inherent in any epistemology of knowing. Melville also sets up the lawyer to negate the universalism which, as it enacts the principle of an ontological equivalence between all human beings—a kind of taken-for-granted brotherhood—fails to acknowledge each individual as an ontological mystery—a point emphatically conveyed by the construction of Bartleby as enigma. I think that Melville stages that confrontation in order to come to terms with his own growing personal crisis, his developing sense of metaphysical isolation and alienation: by a dizzying mirror effect, he means to explore what it feels like to deal with a drifting individual.[8]

Bartleby's *dunamis*

While the narrator partakes of *energeia*, Bartleby pertains to *dunamis*. *Dunamis* corresponds to power in the sense of potentiality or potency (what allows form to come into being), which is one of Emerson's key ideas, fundamentally corresponding to transformative energies.[9] Melville's short story may be seen as responding to Emerson's notion of power.[10] It dramatizes the paradoxical effectiveness of Bartleby's apparent loss of energy and lack of form—his assumed form giving way to formlessness, or to unrealized form—and the resulting disruption. In his unassuming way, Bartleby literally breaks into shared norms of behavior and value, into the laws, conventions, assumptions, compromises, and expediencies which constitute the narrator's world. He reveals that apparent order to be thinly veiled chaos. Accordingly, the short story registers at length how the "unaccountable" (27, 37), "inscrutable" (35) scrivener questions and baffles the narrator's intelligence and ethics, bringing confusion into the orderly sequence of forms that give shape and meaning to our individual and collective existences. The narrator, faced with a stringent challenge to his world and his worldview, to the stability of his epistemology, frantically, restlessly seeks to fill in the vacuum he cannot comprehend—thus becoming an image of us readers, or misreaders, who cannot leave Bartleby at rest—subjecting him to the repeated question, What does he / all this mean?[11] Even acknowledging him as an insuperable enigma, which some critics advocate is the only valid or sensible approach, still amounts to a desire to encompass him on the cheap. As a result, the tension between the two characters spurs thinking and thus releases energy, by which

the apparently less energetic character becomes the greater mover—the prime mover (also a notion from Aristotle) of the world—or what a long-standing tradition has called the Archimedean point.[12]

To that extent, Bartleby seems to embody a wild, uncontrollable version of the poetic energies celebrated by Emerson, for whom the poet—i.e., any human being in their creative capacity—"unfixes the land and the sea, makes them revolve around the axis of his primary thought, and disposes them anew" (1983 34). Indeed, Bartleby disrupts the narrator's epistemology—puts it to the test, defies it, holds it in check, and foils it.[13] His silence moves the world. This is so, I believe, because his apparent formlessness is precisely a figure of his power, of his *dunamis*: he is poised to seek after a new form. The question will be that of the fate reserved for that pursuit—which, undeniably, is at best a thwarted, smothered quest.

Bartleby's Breaking Off

What makes Bartleby particularly fascinating and powerful as a character is that breaking into is conveyed through what I will call breaking off—a term which I prefer to withdrawal because it better encapsulates the sense of active rupture we experience as readers of the short story. My focus will be on the energy revealed and conveyed by Bartleby's act of breaking off, and the "lesson" inherent in his subsequent "fate."

A lot has been made of Bartleby's famous "formula" ("I would prefer not to," and variations thereof), and especially of its supposed agrammaticality, in the wake of the linguistic turn.[14] Whatever the modalities implied by the utterance, however, Bartleby fundamentally says "No"—albeit not in thunder.[15] The primacy of negation has been overlooked because attention has essentially been on Bartleby's utterance per se, as a pure event of language: Deleuze, for instance, begins his essay by pointing out that he means to consider "the literality of the formula," construing it as a linguistic "procedure," which "hollows out a zone of indetermination that renders words indistinguishable, that creates a vacuum within language" (68, 72, 73). Such an emphasis on language disregards the gesture which underlies Bartleby's expression—i.e., the breaking off which becomes the absolute ground of his being. At the very moment he utters his defiant response, Bartleby becomes a Transcendentalist: while he was caught in the bland continuum of existence, he originates himself through that gesture, thus initiating—or at least striving for—Transcendental-like self-creation.[16] This is an awakening. We don't know what causes that awakening, but it is an awakening—escaping the sleep of consciousness. This is what Thoreau called "to live deliberately": Bartleby may be impelled by a

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similar longing, by an inner necessity, the urgent need "not . . . to live what was not life" (Thoreau 90), i.e., a refusal to go on playing a role in which one no longer recognizes oneself. Through his gesture, Bartleby sloughs off his pseudo-self, and in that he is, in every manner, a Transcendentalist. Whether he personally means it or not, he affirms his existence as a subject, if not his subjectivity. Like Thoreau, he asserts a desire to resist all forms of desubjectivizing experience, which merely copying documents certainly is. Bartleby rejects repetition—his repetitive work as a copyist—through repetition—the repeated statement of his emblematic formula. The difference is that he repeats words of his own choosing.

In so doing, Bartleby appears as a seeker after a new existence (a new form for his existence). As for the Transcendentalists, his is not an individualism of self-assertion, but one of self-recovery. Admittedly, we don't know his motivations. As distinct from Thoreau's explicitly principled motives, Bartleby definitely refuses to account for himself. But the fact that we don't know what his motives are doesn't mean he has none. Neither do we know what he does instead of copying, apart perhaps from just *being* what he is (at long last, so to speak)—we tend to forget that, before slipping away into non-existence, Bartleby is pure presence. We don't know his motives, but he undoubtedly "dives," in the sense intimated by Melville's famous half-praise of Emerson (in a letter to Evert Duyckinck, dated March 3 1849): "This I see in Mr Emerson. And frankly, for the sake of the argument, let us call him a fool;—then had I rather be a fool than a wise man.—I love all men who *dive*" (Melville 1993, 121; Melville's emphasis).

In many respects, Bartleby's breaking off signals that he is spurred by a quest for absolute life. It is not much, for sure, but still, this little is the impetus towards transcendence. Bartleby accepts the trial of non-coincidence with oneself: his stance is a refusal of the deadly power of sameness—the latter being symbolized by the activity of copying, and the narrator's outrageous efforts to turn him into a replica of himself, which the perfect, eager beaver Bartleby is for a while. He takes up the challenge of absolute otherness. Transcendence is that encounter with alterity—a refusal to be a pale copy of oneself as much as of others (which the emphatically "pallid" [19, 28, 45] Bartleby soon becomes). I see Bartleby's breaking off as a revolt or rebellion: a revolt against, not merely or primarily capitalist alienation,[17] but against everything that makes one turn away from the more essential human condition, from exerting or exploring one's freedom of existence.[18] For that reason I also tend to downplay the fact that Bartleby is a scribe. Although it is impossible to ignore the particular significance or resonance of such an occupation for a writer, I am less interested in the fact that Bartleby is a scribe than in the fact that he chooses to stop being

a scribe—just as he could have chosen to stop being anything else, should he have had a different employment. Bartleby turns his back, not primarily upon the alienating task of the copyist, but upon man's being defined in a partial way—being a copyist, being a lawyer, or any other function. In that sense Bartleby is a Romantic, and his gesture is the same as that of Emerson dismissing, in "The American Scholar," the fateful "distribution of functions" in "the *divided* or social state," by which the individual falls short of the "whole man," and is deprived of the "fountain of power" inherent in (prelapsarian) original unity (1983 54, Emerson's emphasis). Bartleby rebels against assignations as much as against assignments.

Bartleby or the Nostalgia for the Absolute

Reading "Bartleby" as built around a contrast between *energeia* and *dunamis* may seem to be rehearsing Giorgio Agamben's argument, which also (albeit in an elliptical manner) associates Bartleby with Aristotle's notion of *dunamis*. Despite that external similarity, however, my reading of "Bartleby" is diametrically opposite to Agamben's. This is the case essentially for two reasons, through which I will outline the gist of my understanding of Melville's short story, which begs to differ, not only from Agamben, but from cognate readings extoling the notions of passivity and the impersonal.

In the first place, my emphasis on Bartleby's breaking off sharply diverges from Agamben's focus on pure potentiality and contingency. Although Melville leaves metaphysical questions unanswered, or at least ambiguous—e.g., whether Bartleby sought to achieve a religious life—I think he was actually hinging on Bartleby a nostalgia for the absolute. Pure potentiality and the absolute are really two distinct modes or modalities: while the former forever shuns the utter urgency of freedom and the imperious summoning of creativity or transcendence, the latter refers to the driving force by which one pursues an ideal, strives for tying (self-)belongingness back into one's existence, evinces a desire for a law other than (the lawyer's) earthly law, or yearns for restoring a sense of the essential unity of the finite and the infinite—an absoluteness which Emerson called "the infinitude of the private man," and regarded as the heart of his thinking (1969 342). This is directly connected to the idea that, in my view, Bartleby's gesture does not point to any "abstention," "abdication," "abnegation," or "passivity" enacting an "abandonment of self" (Blanchot 17), as many readers think, unduly neutralizing Bartleby. But, on the contrary, it is an affirmation—however incipient or tentative—of self, or, at least, of personhood—in so far as his gesture sounds like an assertion of the desire to be oneself beyond assignations.

Second, and most importantly, Agamben merely appropriates Melville's story, and thus fails to treat it as literature, using it instead to explore his own concerns and to build his philosophical system. The point here is not to discuss the validity of the latter, only to raise the issue of its relevance to "Bartleby"—philosophical approaches more generally tend to make it subservient to their broader claims (neither Agamben nor Rancière, for instance, refer to Melville's text outside Bartleby's repeated utterance). What matters to Agamben is the notion of "pure potentiality," which he wants to regard as emancipating—as paving the way for "creat[ing] its own ontology" (259). Agamben's view is echoed by Branka Arsić's emphasis on Bartleby as an exemplar of Melville's "originals," who "announce a new genesis . . . the arrival of a new life" (7), and "the possibility of a new thinking" (10). Both pursue Deleuze's suggestion that Bartleby be understood as "marking the possibility of a becoming, of a new man," signaling "the emergence of the Man of the Future" (74). The problem, however, is that this can only be done if one brackets out the narrative trajectory, which points to a specific enunciative strategy or space of enunciation (both on the part of the narrator, and even more crucially, on the part of Melville, whose authorial agency, here as elsewhere, can hardly be denied). Melville's story seems to me to be glaringly built around the impossibility of a new genesis or of any prophetic announcement. One cannot but be struck by how unresponsive to the utter tragedy of Melville's short story so many commentators have been. Indeed, while Bartleby may achieve some kind of emancipation or transcendence—of his social and material environment at least—through his act of breaking off, i.e. choosing his own isolation, he eventually has to pay the price. How can one ignore the final scene's intense, dramatic focus on "the wasted Bartleby" (45)? Miserably lying on the bare ground of the prison yard, his energy spent, Bartleby is eventually undone, unselfed, his downfall as dreadful as it is irremediable. If he initially radiates with what suggests a numinous power ("advent" [15], "apparition" [26, 38]), then in the end he is no more than a consumed meteor: the fullness of a shooting star has sunk into a black hole, the transient, precarious, evanescent exile ending up walled in. Hardly basking in potentiality or impersonality, he is instead an image of dashed hopes and smashed dreams. Bartleby is dead. Plainly dead. The possibilities and perspectives of one's breaking off, by any reckoning, boil down to nothing but one's demise. Or so we are invited to think, although we should bear in mind that we only have access to Bartleby through the lawyer's narrative, who may simply be totally insensitive to, or even unaware of, any form of insight. But it is hard to deny that Melville forcefully refrains from suggesting that Bartleby achieved any kind of wisdom, awareness, or "Intuition"—as Transcendentalist faith would imply (Emerson defines intuition as "primary wisdom" [269]).

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Bartleby's Failed Transfiguration

Although one could argue that this is reading "Bartleby" the way the lawyer "reads" Bartleby—i.e. according to standard assumptions, which obscure the scribe's real being—the fact is that nothing, of whatever nature, points otherwise: we are certainly not encouraged to think that "the currents of the Universal Being circulate through" him (Emerson 1983 10). And, specifically, the lack or failure of vision is emphasized, and dramatized, in the gruesome ending of the story, a deeply emotional scene, in which the reader is made to sympathize with Bartleby's plight. When the lawyer finds "the wasted Bartleby" lying in the yard of the New York jail, his "dim eyes were open" (45)—not "a transparent eye-ball" (Emerson 1983 10), to be sure, but merely, direly, cruelly, "dim eyes"—as though, until his last gasp, he had made any and all efforts to see, never achieving vision, but bound to the stark darkness of unseeing. Emerson, "standing on the bare ground" of the Concord common, was "uplifted into infinite space," to the privileged vantage point where "I am nothing, I see all" (10). Bartleby, on the contrary, lying on "the bare ground" of the jail as an outstandingly common prisoner (as befits one who is "not particular," seems to murmur Melville in a dark, grating voice), having literally become nothing, sees nothing. While copying "might have temporarily impaired his vision," stopping to copy, and the inherent possibility of self-recovery, plainly failed to restore any kind of vision, so that eventually, more than ever "his eyes looked dull and glazed" (32). In his frantic efforts at vision, spurred by his keeping vigil (and, as time-honored tradition has it, fasting), he has ended in a deadly, and supremely ironical, state of wakefulness, or rather, watchfulness—any sparkle of vision backfiring and withering into deadly mock-vision. As he is thus condemned to keep his eyes forever open while not seeing anything in the process, his plight dramatizes the idea that insight, if any ever occurred, has been abased or humbled to mere sight (if any). This is haunting, terrifying, tragedy, which Melville unsparingly inflicts on the reader, just as he was then deeply, savagely, experiencing it within himself. The physical translates, or reflects, the metaphysical: physical starvation points to spiritual starvation—seeing through his glassy eyes darkly, Bartleby is conspicuously deprived of any hierophany. Melville's entire oeuvre of the period is haunted by the failure of vision and by blindness. Melville seems all the more to respond to Emerson that his short story ends on a bitterly derisive reference to natural greenness, some remnants of grass springing between the cracks of the otherwise bare ground of the yard of a jail aptly named "The Tombs." Such a diminutive scrap of nature—making the latter as much of a

ghost as the scrivener—points to the idea that the world does not open up to the infinite, but is a prison, from which there is no escape. Finally, any suggestion of individual sovereignty is lashed out at by the concluding ironical reference to Bartleby's being on a par "with kings and counsellors" (45): the lawyer's purported tribute to Bartleby, hardly toning down the violence of the closing scene, boils down to authorial dark humor. Bartleby's attempted freedom has failed to produce self-sovereignty.

Melville could not more pointedly convey his savagely ironic undercutting of visionary aspirations or possibilities than by his final depiction of a recumbent Bartleby, his eyes open, as though staring into the nightmarish blankness of an empty world. While Arsić describes Bartleby as a "revolutionizing philosopher" (10), he rather appears as one who—dramatically, hauntingly—fails to revolutionize anything, to ignite new ways of seeing and thinking. Bartleby is, literally, an *energoumenos (ἐνεργούμενος)*, i.e., not only an *energumen* (the rarer word for a quirky or eccentric person), but one whose wild energies have gone awry, as though possessed by the Devil.[19] He points to the idea of Transcendentalism as a misguided, erring, if not utterly dangerous, philosophy—as though one's "abandonment to the nature of things," "beyond the energy of his possessed and conscious intellect" (Emerson 1983 459) unleashed wild, devastating energies. "Unlocking . . . his human doors" does, indeed, put him "at . . . [risk]": through the fate of Bartleby, Melville makes it clear that he cannot believe that his declaration of independence will allow "the ethereal tides to roll and circulate through him" (459). As I see it, Melville meant his short story to be a cautionary tale against all forms of illusion, including—and above all—that of a new ontology. Bartleby's fate is a tragically failed Transfiguration.[20]

Melville thus responded to the appeal of independence and transcendence (i.e., Emerson's belief that "the soul has assurance, by instincts and presentiments, of *all* power in the direction of its ray" (Emerson 1983 100, Emerson's emphasis),[21] but eventually suggested that such an idealistic premise is doomed to fail or won't deliver to its promise, and that Transcendental power is self-dissolving. The fact that Melville not only allows Bartleby to fade away, but, emphatically, glaringly, chooses to put him to death—sentencing him to a harrowing death, even—seems to suggest so.[22] Instead of resulting in emancipation, Melville hints that breaking off is what may plunge us into pure, unredeemed contingency, confining us to formlessness (Bartleby representing *dunamis* that fails to turn into *energeia*). Nowhere is to be seen the effect of that "power" which "resides in the moment of transition from a past to a new state, in the shooting of the gulf, in the darting to an end," as Emerson had proclaimed (271). In other words, Melville depicts Bartleby as claiming a kind

of liberation, but strongly suggests that such liberation is bound to fall short of providing enlightenment—that freedom is mere fantasy. It is as though Melville lodged in Bartleby the possibility of making our life meaningful and insightful, as well as his incontrovertible fear that self-empowerment is impossible.

Breaking off thus fails to be transformative—to effect any significant "transition." Melville steadily refused to be comforted. Melville cannot—will not—give in to hope. Where Kant famously asked his third question, "What can I hope for?," connecting hope and happiness (677),[23] Melville's reply, at bottom, was "for nothing." His short story suggests that the human nostalgia for unity is an illusion—but nevertheless that it is an experience worth trying—that every human being ought to try if they want their life to be meaningful. That is undoubtedly "diving," and, as Melville made clear, that is a sublime gesture, albeit a doomed one. "Bartleby" may be read as unfolding, not exactly a quest—that would be too plainly Transcendentalist—but at least an orientation or a step toward reclaiming that alluring territory. It will eventually leave little doubt as to the cost and effectiveness of the move, but it will simultaneously suggest that this is preferable to the lack of striving. Melville was not the blissful harbinger of the glorious, beatific destruction of metaphysics, but, if anything, a deeply tormented human being in the throes of *Weltschmerz*, poignantly experiencing distress and dread over the ever-receding metaphysical certainties that both enticed and eluded him, as much as lamenting the irresistible triumph of desperately flawed, down-to-earth rationality. No other writer, apart from Emily Dickinson, explored with as much acuteness the gripping sway of metaphysical bereavements. As the tapering shimmering radiance of the absolute still beckoned him, nothing could allay his anxieties. Heroic and ironic, self-conflicted and untamed, but, above all, supremely alive in his excruciating ordeal, Melville devised a story propelled by this hovering concern with the fading of metaphysics—of which Transcendentalism could easily be seen as the final halo.

Conclusion

Bartleby" is Melville's heart-rending elegy for Bartleby, the exile, the fallen angel, the thunderstruck watchman of infinity. Melville herein both registered his sensitivity to the appeal of Transcendentalism, and voiced his eventual belief that, far from sketching out a new "American dream"—one premised on an "affirmation of a world in process," turning Bartleby into "the hero of pragmatism" (Deleuze 78, 86, 88)—and far from "creat[ing] its own ontology" (Agamben 259), that idealist aspiration cannot

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but founder in self-conflicting, monstrous energies, however masquerading as passivity. Through a drama in which the two characters call each other out, revealing one another as both fool and foil, "Bartleby" stages the deluding inadequacies and deceptions of Transcendentalism, whether marred by what Melville regarded as its excessive ontological faith (the lawyer), or by its fruitless dreams or stillborn aspirations (Bartleby). Locked by the firm, merciless grasp of the puppeteer-like author, Bartleby and the lawyer are made to dispel our illusions about the possibility of transforming (one's) life, or of altering the course of (a fellow human being's) life—the lawyer fails to "save" Bartleby, just as much as Bartleby displays all the appearances of failing to "reinvent" himself. Transcendentalism appears as one of those overconfident philosophies which Melville was to methodically excoriate in *The Confidence-Man*: pretending that its transformative energies are an intellectual and social panacea, it merely entraps us in delusive promises. The Melville of "Bartleby" is already that of *The Confidence-Man*—admittedly less ironical, and still refusing, perhaps, however slightly, the utter nihilism of the latter work, but agonizingly skeptical, with nothing to hold him from slipping toward the abyss. Far from being a figure of potentiality, Bartleby is an emblem of starkly thwarted possibility, offering one of Melville's harshest comments on the humanist vision of agency, discovery, and insight. While Emerson, at his darkest, still noted that "Grief too will make us idealists" (473), Melville refuses to sing the paean of transformative energies and human perfectibility. One has to be deaf not to hear his anguished cry in the night.

Ein jeder Engel ist schrecklich.[24]

Notes

[1] Arguably, any literary work is unamenable to the verifiability of scientific demonstration. "Bartleby," however, is particularly elusive and liable to defeat all efforts involving even minimal method. Brian Yothers has premised his invaluable survey of Melville criticism, *Melville's Mirrors*, on the idea of critical readings of Melville's works as mirroring each reader's concerns, emphasizing "his Protean capacity to be more or less what his readers wish him to be" (3).

[2] For a thoughtful survey of treatments of "Bartleby" by continental philosophers, see Attell.

[3] Although my reading agrees with Marx's sense of "Bartleby" as a parable or "a fable" (626), I give the short story a broader relevance than being an allegory of the writer, offering a "rebuke to the self-absorption of the artist" (627). Margarida Vale de Gato echoes Marx's view of Bartleby as a figure of the writer when, pairing Poe and Melville as "heralds of the Romantic crisis of literature," she differentiates them as focusing respectively on the figure of the reader, and on "the man of letters in an expanding marketplace" (50).

[4] Rachela Permenter rightfully cautions us against simplistic dualities regarding Melville vis-à-vis Romanticism, pointing, for instance, to the fact that "all serious Romantic writers, including the Transcendentalists . . . suggest epistemological doubt and ontological insecurity" (267), and quoting Jos de Mul to the effect that "the crisis of consciousness is already inherent to the Romantic project" (274). The difference in tone and worldview between "Bartleby" (which is

barely considered by Permenter) and the writings of Emerson and Thoreau, however, seems to me so sharp as to warrant a reading of Melville's short story as an attack on the main tenets of Transcendentalism.

[5] See Aristotle 7 (*Metaphysics*, Book Θ, Chapter 6, 1048[a]25). *Energeia* is close to *entelecheia*, i.e. fulfilment. Form is defined as *energeia* in Aristole 11 (Chapter 8, 1050[b]). The meaning and import of Aristotle's hugely influential *energeia/dunamis* dichotomy is a hotly debated question and has itself generated a considerable scholarship: I am only referring here to its formative presence within a widely shared Western intellectual history, not to its deep subtleties and intricacies.

[6] "All interest of my reason (the speculative as well as the practical) is united in the following three questions:

1. What can I know?
2. What should I do?
3. What may I hope?" (*Critique of Pure Reason* 677.)

[7] To that extent, the ironic depiction of the narrator of "Bartleby" adumbrates Clarel's despondent musings more than two decades later:

"Why may man know?
[. . .] let him [. . .]
[. . .] reason's endless battle wage,
Make and remake his verbiage—
But solve the world! Scarce that he'll do:
Too wild it is, too wonderful." (Melville 1991, 397–398 [4.3.109–115])

[8] While my reading of "Bartleby" does not purport to be biographical, it comports with recent biographers' description of an increasingly aggrieved, embattled, and struggling Melville in the 1850s. See especially Herschel Parker's narrative of Melville's life following the publication of *Moby-Dick*, notably his consideration of the late additions Melville made to *Pierre* (Vol. II, chap. 4), and John Bryant's plea for "studying the intersection of life and text," resulting in his stated effort "to link the centrality of accident and trauma in Melville's writings to traumas in his life" ("Melville the Life," 20, 14).

[9] In most cases, Emerson's *power* refers to potentiality. In his thought, *power* can always ultimately be traced to the soul. See, e.g., among the innumerable occurrences of the term in his writings, "the highest is present to the soul of man, that the dread universal essence, which is not wisdom, or love, or beauty, or power, but all in one, and each entirely, is that for which all things exist, and that by which they are" (41); or, "That which was unconscious truth, becomes, when interpreted and defined in an object, a part of the domain of knowledge—a new weapon in the magazine of power" (39). The opening paragraph of *Nature* connects *power* and insight: "[. . .] nature, whose floods of life stream around and through us, and invite us by the powers they supply" (7). A phrase such as "the plastic power of the human mind" (11) can be traced especially to Coleridge's "esemplastic power" in *Biographia Literaria* (I, 295 [chap. XIII]). Emerson's notion of power has a characteristic religious resonance, as may be seen in his essay "Art": "The reference of all production at last to an aboriginal Power explains the traits common to all works of the highest art,—that they are universally intelligible; that they restore us to the simplest states of mind; and are religious" (434); "Yet when we have said all our fine things about the arts, we must end with a frank confession, that the arts, as we know them, are but initial. [. . .] The real value of the Iliad, or the Transfiguration, is as signs of power [. . .]" (437).

[10] My approach, then, does not seek to relate "Bartleby" to one specific Emerson text, but to what I regard as the main thrust of Emerson's philosophy, and one of his key terms—which Melville can hardly have failed to notice as he became acquainted with the "Sage of Concord's" thought in 1849–50, although his specific readings in Emerson are unknown until he purchased and annotated *Essays. First Series*, and *Essays. Second Series*, in the early 1860s (see the "Documentary Note on Melville's Marginalia in Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Essays: First Series*"). Melville's comments sometimes find ideas or phrases to praise, but they primarily point to what he characterized as Emerson's "gross and astonishing errors & illusions" in one of his marginal annotations on "The Poet." It should also be noted that Melville was quite familiar with the writings of the Unitarian minister William Ellery Channing, one of the progenitors of Transcendentalism, whose central claim, as stated in

his famous *Self-Culture* (1838), was that "Perfection [is] the end of our being" (13). For a detailed examination of Melville's familiarity with Channing's writings, see Coleman.

[11] In a way, What does he / all this mean? is as recurrent a critical motif as Bartleby's formula. It should be noted that, although we do not know what Bartleby means, that does not mean we cannot seek to construe what "Bartleby" means. "Surely all this is not without meaning," the narrator and the reader muse, in the wake of Ishmael . . . (*Moby-Dick* 18).

[12] Archimedes's alleged saying, that he could lift the Earth if he were given one solid point or fulcrum, and a long enough lever, was especially known through one of the most widely read texts from antiquity, Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*, with which Melville was familiar. References can be found in philosophers as diverse as Descartes (*Meditations*, II) and Søren Kierkegaard, who alludes to "the Archimedean point from which [one] could lift the whole world," in the so-called "Journal of Gilleleje" (I, 10); and in such writers as Thomas Paine (*The Rights of Man*, part II) and Lord Byron (*Don Juan*, Canto XIV). That notion was particularly appealing for Thoreau's brand of Transcendentalism, with *Walden* especially foregrounding the idea that a vantage point offered by a position outside the common bearings of society could provide the required leverage to transform the latter.

[13] I also believe "Bartleby" savagely attacks the narrator's epistemology in so far as the narrator presumes there is an ontological equivalence between himself and Bartleby. Bartleby's breaking off also appears as *an experiment*, meant to emphasize ontological foreignness. Bartleby is a figure of estrangement: Melville refuses to posit a continuum between human beings. What can I know about another human being?: Bartleby silently challenges the narrator (i.e., any of us) to acknowledge that we cannot answer that question.

[14] In particularly influential readings, for instance, Deleuze claims that Bartleby's formula "functions as a veritable agrammaticality" (74), and Derrida considers that Bartleby's "repeated utterance . . . says nothing . . . neither refuses nor accepts anything" and is a "singularly insignificant statement" (75).

[15] Melville, Letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne, [April 16?] 1851: "There is the grand truth about Nathaniel Hawthorne. He says NO! in thunder; but the Devil himself cannot make him say *yes*. For all men who say *yes*, lie; and all men who say *no*,—why, they are in the happy condition of judicious, unincumbered travelers in Europe; they cross the frontiers into Eternity with nothing but a carpet-bag,—that is to say, the Ego. Whereas those *yes*-gentry, they travel with heaps of baggage, and, damn them! they will never get through the Custom House" (1993 186).

[16] One should note, in this respect, that Emerson's Transcendentalist venture is inseperable from his own gesture of breaking off—from the church, resigning his position as a Unitarian minister in 1832.

[17] A very substantial body of scholarship has revolved around the idea that "Bartleby" provides a sharp critique of the workplace and its soulless procedures and implications. See, in particular, James (114), Barnett, Kuebrich, Foley, Reed, Furrh. Although this is not the focus of this essay, Bartleby's occupation of his employer's premises (which are thus repurposed) may indeed be understood as a defiant gesture enacting the revenge of the dispossessed.

[18] Although I do not mean to align Melville with Camus, reading "Bartleby" can readily bring to mind Camus's emphasis on "the strange asceticism of rebellion," and his comment that "in every rebellion is to be found the metaphysical demand for unity, the impossibility of capturing it, and the construction of a substitute universe [. . .] This also defines art" (*The Rebel* 9, 255).

[19] The word *ἐνεργούμενος* is the passive participle of *ἐνεργεῖν*, i.e., not the one who acts, but the one who is acted upon, which perfectly corresponds to the lawyer / Bartleby duality. While originally referring to one inspired by God (as in 1 Colossians 29), *ἐνεργούμενος* slipped towards the idea of claiming to be so, i.e., to the notion of a false prophet or a heretic, who has fallen into the hands of the Evil One. Significantly, Cotton Mather refers to his opponents, "Quakers and Seekers," as "Energumens . . . which have given uggly Disturbances to these Good-Spirited Men" (14 [Book I, Chapter III]). While Bartleby's gesture points to an act of resistance against the idea of economic possession in the marketplace—being owned by one's employer ("a hired clerk," 25)—he eventually appears as possessed by (his?) demons when he seeks to assert his independence or inviolable subjecthood.

[20] One may regard as significant that, when Melville spent a morning reading Emerson's *Essays* in the boudoir of Hawthorne's home in Lenox, in September 1850, he was overlooked by an

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engraving of Raphael's *Transfiguration*, which had been presented to the Hawthornes by Emerson (as noted by Parker, I, 776). In "Art," published in *Essays: First Series* (1841), Emerson referred to this work in words that resonate with my reading of "Bartleby": "The real value of the Iliad, or the Transfiguration, is as signs of power; . . . tokens of the everlasting effort to produce, which even in its worst estate the soul betrays" (Emerson 1983 437).

[21] In this essay, "Literary Ethics," Emerson, significantly, goes on to state that "we must not rest in the use of slender accomplishments,—of faculties to do this and that other feat with words; but we must pay our vows to the highest power, if it be possible, by assiduous love and watching, into the visions of absolute truth" (Emerson 1983 100)—a phrasing which describes quite precisely what Melville has Bartleby attempt.

[22] My reading of Melville's short story thus sharply differs from Deleuze's characterization of "Bartleby" as "a violently comical text" (68). "A violent text" would sound more accurate in my view. Neither can it be reconciled with Agamben's view of a link between Bartleby and salvation, which leads him to remark that "the walled courtyard [in the Tombs] is not a sad place" (271). While Bartleby may appear as a latter-day Man of Sorrows, no redemption is suggested: What does it feel like to be an agonizer? (in the material and the spiritual sense), Melville seems to ask himself, in a way that anticipates the moment when, three years later, he "informed [Hawthorne] that he had 'pretty much made up his mind to be annihilated'" (Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The English Notebooks*, November 20 1856, as quoted in Melville 1989, 628).

[23] "What may I hope? . . . The third question, namely, 'If I do what I should, what may I then hope?' is simultaneously practical and theoretical, so that the practical leads like a clue to a reply to the theoretical question and, in its highest form, the speculative question. For all hope concerns happiness, and with respect to the practical and the moral law it is the very same as what knowledge and the natural law is with regard to theoretical cognition of things" (677).

[24] Rainer Maria Rilke, "Die Erste Elegie" ("The First Elegy,") *Duino Elegies* (4). "Every angel's terrifying" (5).

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