

Resistance as Fidelity in Melville's *Bartleby, the Scrivener*

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to answer the question of how Herman Melville's character Bartleby, in his short story, *Bartleby the Scrivener*, is a figure of resistance, as well as how that resistance affects our understanding of the story. By applying several theoretical models to *Bartleby*, we can better understand his action as well as his non-action. This paper will argue that Bartleby's non-action becomes an action of resistance, and that his resistance leads to his eventual end.

DISCUSSION

It has been suggested that "there are essentially three ethics available to man – action in and of the world, action in the world for other-worldly reasons, and non-action, that is, withdrawal from the world. ... *Bartleby* is a world in which these three ethics directly confront each other" (Franklin 176). Bartleby's ethic of passive resistance, the "engagement of [his] singularity in the continuation of a subject truth" continually submitting to the "perseverance of what is known to a duration peculiar to the not-known" (Badiou 47), is a continual cycle of active withdrawal; this withdrawal is a direct result of his own formula, his *I prefer not to*. The question then remains: how is Bartleby a figure of resistance in the story? Bartleby's resistance to *prefer to* is his own fidelity to his truth event, and may even be Melville's own commentary on being true to your own ethics.

Giorgio Agamben suggests that Bartleby represents a potentiality, and that his formula of *I prefer not to* "emancipates potentiality from both its connection to a 'reason' and its subordination to a being" (258). Simply put, Bartleby's formula creates in him a blank slate, leaving him open to be or do anything; he is pure potential. However, Bartleby's own formula, while at once creating potentiality, creates the inability to fulfill his potential. Bartleby's formula negates his potentiality, it "no longer function[s] to assure the supremacy of Being over Nothing" (Agamben 259). Bartleby becomes "pure patient passivity ... being as being and nothing more" (Deleuze 71). Bartleby's "dead wall reveries" (Melville 18)

could represent the blank slate, the white sheet of potentiality; however, it is more likely that his reveries are a form of passive resistance to life. Bartleby's formula has removed him so far from any ability to act that all that is left for him is to wait for death. Therefore, his "dead wall reveries" are just that, daydreams of his own mortality. Through his reveries, Bartleby becomes "a phantom crawling out of the unconscious dark pool of the narrator's mind" (McCall 268). His resistance to take action in his life relegates him to the status of a nonperson, he is merely a ghost.

In his essay, "Melville's Parable of the Walls", Leo Marx asserts that "'Bartleby' is not about a writer who refuses to conform to the demands of society, but it is, more relevantly, about a writer who forsakes conventional modes because of an irresistible preoccupation with the most baffling philosophical questions" (Marx 240). These "baffling philosophical questions" stem from Bartleby's own formula. His *preferring not to* creates the impossibility of the possibility of his *preferring to*; this may sound dizzying, however, Gilles Deleuze explains that "from the moment he says *I would prefer not to* (collate), his is no longer *able to copy either*" (Deleuze 70). Perhaps Bartleby's "dead wall reveries" stem from his constant inner battle with his own formulaic conundrum. By saying he would *prefer not to*, he has sentenced himself to a life of *not being able to*. Bartleby becomes stuck in his own formula, he is unable to *prefer to* do anything; he is left to merely stare at the wall and contemplate a way out of his predicament. Bartleby's philosophical question may be about how to reverse the cycle which he has found

himself in; his resistance may be an attempt to resist the death sentence of his own formula.

Elizabeth Hardwick suggests that “Bartleby’s reduction of language is of an expressiveness literally limitless,” and that his “‘I’ is of such completeness that it does not require support. ... In his sentence he encloses his past, present, and future, himself, all there is. His statement is positive indeed and the *not* is less important than the ‘I,’ because the ‘not’ refers to the presence of others, to the world, inevitably making suggestions the ‘I’ does not encompass” (257, 259). While Bartleby’s assertion of his self, his “I,” aids in the creation of his resistance, it is precisely his reduction of language that betrays him, causing him to be forever entangled in his own formula. Bartleby’s “formula is devastating because it eliminates the preferable just as mercilessly as any nonpreferred” (Deleuze 71). By asserting his self, his “I,” in a “candid, final, and inflexible” (Hardwick 259) way, Bartleby removes any possibility of an alternative. By enclosing his “past, present, and future” into one formulaic phrase, he is reducing himself to that phrase. The logic of Bartleby’s formula, contrary to Hardwick’s assertions, is that of “negative preference, a negativism beyond all negation” (Deleuze 71), which renders Bartleby helpless to stop its permeating effects; Bartleby is forced to continue to resist *preferring to* simply by the reduction of his own language.

Bartleby’s reduction of language is not limited to his *I prefer not to*, but also encompasses his formula *I am not particular*. As Deleuze suggests, “Bartleby is the man without references, without possessions, without properties, without qualities, without particularities: he is too smooth for anyone to be able to hang any particularity on him. Without past or future, he is instantaneous, *I prefer not to* is Bartleby’s chemical or alchemical formula, but one can read inversely *I am not particular* as its indispensable compliment” (74). Just as Turkey and Nippers are inverse doubles of each other, so too is Bartleby’s formula *I am not particular* an inverse double of *I prefer not to*. The original formula, *I prefer not to*, is a preference, and to suggest that he is *not particular* would suggest that he has no preferences. Bartleby is forever tangled in his own language, and as Hardwick suggests “his language is what he is” (261).

Bartleby’s inverse formula, *I am not particular*, may be his attempt to resist his own resistance.

His formula, *I prefer not to*, “excludes all alternatives, and devours what it claims to conserve no less than it distances itself from everything else” (Deleuze 73). However, his inverse formula may be his attempt to find a way out of his formulaic conundrum. By saying that he is *not particular*, he is attempting to negate his own non-preference. Perhaps in his “dead wall reveries” he has come to the conclusion that he must resist his own linguistically imposed resistance in order to take action in his own life. However, by reducing himself to mere language, as Hardwick suggests, Bartleby removes his ability to resist that language; put simply, Bartleby cannot resist against his own lack of *preferring to*, while at the same time being *not particular*.

Alain Badiou explains a truth ethic as doing “all that you can to persevere in that which exceeds your perseverance. Persevere in the interruption. Seize in your being that which has seized and broken you” (47). Does Bartleby’s resistance to *prefer to* constitute a fidelity to his personal truth event? If we assume that Bartleby’s truth event was the moment when the lawyer “rapidly stat[ed] what it was [he] wanted him to do – namely, to examine a small paper” (Melville 10), and Bartleby’s response was “I would prefer not to” (Melville 10), then we must also assume that all of Bartleby’s subsequent inaction and *preferring not to* is his version of a fidelity to his truth event. Bartleby’s resistance to *prefer to* becomes ethically correct for him, and becomes an “action in and of the world” (Franklin 176). Bartleby’s resistance in the novel represents fidelity to one’s own truth event. In essence, Bartleby embodies “the *possibility* that no asceticism may be necessary for an ethic of truth” while at the same time he is submitting to “the perseverance of what is known to a duration peculiar to the not-known” (Badiou 47, 55).

The underlying commentary in the novel is arguably Melville’s own attempt to be true to his own truth event. In a letter written to Nathaniel Hawthorn in the spring of 1851, Melville confessed that “what I feel most moved to write, ... is banned, - it will not pay. Yet altogether, write the other way I cannot” (quoted from Marx 239). It is clear that Leo Marx’s assertion that *Bartleby the Scrivener* “is a parable about a particular kind of writer’s relations to a particular kind of society” (240) is true, and the particular kind of writer is Melville, the particular kind of society, his publishers.

Melville gave Bartleby the ability to *prefer not to*, as he himself *preferred not to*. Melville's giving Bartleby the ability to resist through language is his being true to his truth event. Melville's *Bartleby* answers the ethical questions of "how will I, as some-one, *continue* to exceed my own being? How will I link the things I know, in a consistent fashion, via the effects of being seized by the not-known?" (Badiou 50). Melville uses Bartleby's formula as a way of asserting his own preference; he will write that which moves him most, and will not conform to the pressures imposed upon him by society. Just as Bartleby *prefers not to* copy, so too does Melville *prefer not to* write merely to satisfy his publishers.

Throughout the story Bartleby is a figure of resistance. Bartleby passively resists his own life, as well as the conundrum his formula has imposed upon him; he even attempts to resist his own resistance through the use of his inverted formula. In the end, Bartleby is consistent in his "disinterested interest" and stays true to his ethical self. Melville's underlying commentary, that one should be true to one's own truth event, is made clear through Bartleby's resistance to write (copy) the way he is expected, and may just give the readers insight into Melville's own struggle for authorial preference. Melville's *Bartleby, the Scrivener*, *prefers to* engage "in the subjective composition" which is "identical to the one that pursues his interest" (Badiou 54).

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