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Deleuze, The Dark Precursor

Kaufman, Eleanor

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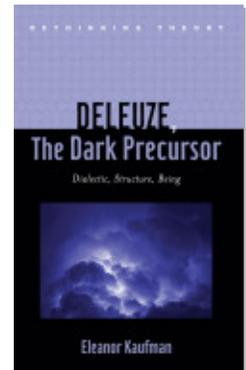
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Bartleby, the Immobile

THESE QUESTIONS OF IMMOBILITY and of transatlantic fascination are supremely condensed in the figure of Melville's *Bartleby*. As discussed in the preceding chapter, there is a powerful disjunction between a rampant tendency to generalize about America and a refusal to view the American literature of interiority — of which *Bartleby* is a preeminent example — as in any way a precursor to twentieth-century French literary and philosophical texts that are also preoccupied with interiority. Moreover, “*Bartleby*” points to the disjunction at the heart of Deleuze's thought that is perhaps best illustrated in his writings on American literature, namely, the loud paean to nomadic mobility and the quiet openness to the stasis of being.

There is, as discussed in the preceding chapter, a significant disjunction between a thought of infinite mobility and one of closed interiority. In the texts I will be examining here, this disjunction is manifested as the tension between a European preoccupation with, on the one hand, the vastness of American space and all that it implies and, on the other hand, a veritable obsession with *Bartleby*, the antihero of Melville's 1853 short story. *Bartleby*, a Wall Street law copyist, slowly refuses some of his copying tasks (to the chagrin and amazement of his lawyer boss), then refuses to do any work whatsoever, and eventually refuses to leave his boss' office. Each refusal is punctuated with the quiet yet firm statement “I would prefer not to.”¹ This is by all accounts one of the most extreme cases of immobility in American literature. It is avowedly the polar opposite — extreme movement — that most fascinates French intellectuals when they write about America. As we saw in the preceding chapter, from Tocqueville to Baudrillard, three related truisms repeatedly surface: that America is synonymous with infinite movement over vast landscapes; that Americans are an unreflective, pragmatic people who do not like to think; and that movement and thought in no way go together.

Given this equation of America with movement, it would seem to be the height of paradox that few works of American literature have been more discussed by contemporary French and European philosophers than Melville's "Bartleby."² Why, then, this fascination with the enclosed and immobile Bartleby (who, as the lawyer boss slowly discovers, never leaves the boss's office)? Why this fascination alongside an equally strong fascination, albeit not as focused on one particular text, with what would seem to be Bartleby's opposite, infinite movement and open space? While the question of immobility and its relation to ontology is developed more fully in chapter 11 (on Blanchot), we might pose the problem initially in terms of this bifurcated fascination and how one might truly differentiate between these two poles of movement and immobility.

Following the claim in the previous chapter that extreme mobility and extreme immobility are distinct in their differences but proximate in their extremity, it is not surprising that "Bartleby" also resonates with a twentieth-century European literary and philosophical tradition that returns over and over again to depictions of enclosure and interiority. Alongside Kafka, there are the similarly excessive examples of Beckett and Blanchot. All of these writers portray characters that enter a diabolical house or apartment space and never leave. Similarly, in contemporary French and Italian philosophy, there has been sustained attention to the concept of unworking (*désœuvrement*), which suggests both the cessation of work (as in labor) and the undoing of the work (as in the *oeuvre*, or work of art). The fact that the first thing Bartleby stops doing is writing (albeit the writing is copying) unites the two aspects of *désœuvrement*, for Bartleby stops working on the *oeuvre* that is the copied (legal) text. This critical gravitation toward "Bartleby" is therefore entirely in keeping with a philosophical lineage that questions the valorization of a work ethic, as it concerns both work as labor and the work of art.³ It is thus quite understandable that such thinkers would gravitate toward "Bartleby." What is curious is that neither the first category, the quest to find the essential Americanness, nor the second category, the attention to unworking (which Bartleby perfectly exemplifies), is in fact the issue in much of the continental "Bartleby" criticism. We find responses from Deleuze, Rancière, and Agamben that are grounded in linguistic concerns rather than those of American space or of *désœuvrement*. The essays in question focus on the character of Bartleby (and with scant attention to other characters, such as

the somewhat unreliable lawyer-narrator, who is so often a significant focal point), above and beyond the action of the story. It is more nearly in Rancière's diagnosis of Deleuze's *proper désœuvrement* (rather than Bartleby's) that this problematic surfaces at all.

Deleuze's essay, entitled "Bartleby; or, The Formula," highlights, as the title implies, Bartleby's repeated formula "I would prefer not to" — the response he gives first when asked if he would like to proofread legal copy, again when asked if he would do any work at all, and finally when asked if he would vacate the premises. Deleuze is generally disinclined to direct great attention to questions of language, especially if the language is English. Yet here he insists repeatedly on what he terms the agrammaticality of the utterance "I would prefer not to," comparing it to E. E. Cummings's line "he danced his did" (which this reader regards as entirely more of a defamiliarization of English than "I would prefer not to"). For Deleuze, this formula produces what he refers to at several junctures as a "zone of indetermination": "The formula I PREFER NOT TO excludes all alternatives. . . . [I]t hollows out a zone of indetermination that renders words indistinguishable, that creates a vacuum within language."⁴ While such an argument for linguistic indeterminacy might be more (but not altogether) typical of a French philosopher such as Derrida, it is not at all typically Deleuzian. And indeed, when Deleuze uses the term "zone of indetermination" to characterize Bartleby's immobility (as opposed to the lawyer-narrator's flight), it is once again in the realm of language that these terms are explored. Deleuze describes Bartleby as

someone who is born to and stays in a particular place, while the attorney necessarily fills the function of the traitor condemned to flight. . . . It is the attorney who broke the arrangement he himself had organized, and from the debris Bartleby pulls a trait of an expression, I PREFER NOT TO, which will proliferate around him and contaminate the others, sending the attorney fleeing. But it will also send language itself into flight, it will open up a zone of indetermination or indiscernibility in which neither words nor characters can be distinguished — the fleeing attorney and the immobile, petrified Bartleby.⁵

Rather than reading these poles of mobility/immobility and the resulting zone of indetermination as somehow characteristic of the concept of America itself (which would seem to be the more characteristic French

philosophical move), Deleuze instead holds up the *language* of the formula as that which opens up the indeterminacy function. America by contrast is in no way associated with this glorious indeterminacy. Here, as elsewhere, Deleuze makes only the most determinate characterizations of America: for example, the idea that Bartleby, like America more generally, “is the one who is freed from the English paternal function” to instead constitute a nation of states, or as Deleuze terms it “a society of brothers.”⁶ Thus, for Deleuze, America is very resolutely the land of the brother and Europe that of the father — and this while the nexus of mobility/immobility is unconnected to America and remains happily indeterminate.

Rancière’s reading of Deleuze’s “Bartleby” essay, “Deleuze, Bartleby, and the Literary Formula,” brings these contradictions to the fore, suggesting that Deleuze rewrites the tension that D. H. Lawrence locates between the Christian idealism of Melville and the democratic fraternalism of Whitman. Rancière writes: “Deleuze seems to resolve the tension by reversing Lawrence’s logic. He gives Melville the reasons of Whitman. He transforms Bartleby, the voluntary recluse, into a hero of the American open road.”⁷ It seems that this formulation by Rancière captures something that Deleuze would want to do but does not do explicitly in this essay: to claim one of American literature’s most stuck and immobile characters as the hallmark of an American openness that is not about mobility per se but nonetheless shares some of the spirit or mystique of the open road that we saw in the readings of Kerouac, Nabokov, and Auster in the previous chapter. Yet like Moses (and Mauss and Lévi-Strauss, as we saw) stranded on Mount Nebo, this is the space over into which Deleuze does not exactly cross. Without endorsing Rancière’s overall reading of “Bartleby,” one that would anchor the text in debates around mimesis that seem far removed from its greatest source of strength, or Rancière’s subtle critique of the way Deleuze fails to achieve a workable notion of politics or equality (which might be read as a merit rather than a shortcoming), I would claim that Rancière touches on a profound dilemma in Deleuzian thought, which thought he reads as being sent into the wall.⁸

Rancière makes a strong distinction between the Aristotelian counterpoles of character and action, and in so doing, he opposes Deleuze to Flaubert, the latter preferring action but sacrificing becoming, the former (that is, Deleuze) choosing character and maintaining the modality of becoming. Rancière writes:

It seems, then, that the molecular revolution of literature returns, in other terms, to the old Aristotelian alternative, the choice between privileging action or character. Flaubert chooses *haecceities* over characters and the law of the *cogito*. But by doing this, he sacrifices the *becomings* to the story. Deleuze, however, makes the opposite choice. By privileging the anti-narrative power of becomings, he concentrates power in the exemplary character, who becomes the operator of becomings and the emblem of becoming.⁹

In other words, Deleuze, who, along with Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*, will favor the *haecceity* (the thisness, or the eventness) of things, is here forced to build his topology from an opposing theory of strong characters. Thus, if Rancière opposes Flaubertian to Deleuzian character, yet Deleuze, following Scotus, champions *haecceity* repeatedly in other contexts, then this discrepancy helps us see a split in Deleuze's work, one, put simply, between becoming and being. Furthermore, and in support of Rancière's contention about Deleuze and character, Deleuze indeed singles out Melville's fiction as depicting the two types of profoundly original character, the greatly strong or evil character (Ahab, Claggart), and the greatly good or weak one (Billy Budd, Bartleby), *Billy Budd* having the particular merit of having two of them together in one setting, "the demonic and the petrified."¹⁰ Notably, and parallel to this, Deleuze remarks in *Cinema 1* that Herzog's films portray either the very large character (Fitzcarraldo, Aguirre) or the very small (Woyzeck, Kaspar Hauser), all of them characters, like Billy Budd and Bartleby, of such dominating originality that the distinction between the name of the work and the name of the character runs together.¹¹

As Rancière notes with respect to Deleuze's essay on Bartleby, all attention falls to Bartleby and very little to the equally fascinating narrator, who is not one of these great original characters according to Deleuze. Rancière does not say this in so many words, but he seems to critique an implicit hierarchy of character — and hence of thought — in Deleuze, which goes along with his veiled critiques of Deleuze's *Proust and Signs*, a study replete with hierarchies, the highest term being the realm of art. Deleuze is fundamentally *not* starting from an axiom of equality or democracy (something that in my analysis is not necessarily a bad thing, simply one that is rarely commented upon),¹² and it may in fact take another thinker (Rancière)

who is working absolutely from an axiom of equality to perceive this difference.

How does Bartleby figure as a limit for Deleuze's theory of becoming? Rancière focuses on a line from Deleuze's essay that evokes "a wall of loose, uncemented stones, where every element has a value in itself but also in relation to others."¹³ Rancière views this image as opposed to "the innocence of vegetable proliferation that is contrasted with the architectural order" (perhaps the rhizome of *A Thousand Plateaus*?).¹⁴ Moreover, he poses the problem of "separating 'nomadic' thinking from that universal mobilism [*mobilisme*] to which it is so easily linked."¹⁵ Again, Rancière does not say this in so many words, but it seems he helps isolate a Deleuze of the mobile, indeterminate, rhizomatic vegetable (the Deleuze of Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*) from the earlier, hierarchical, structural, mineral Deleuze of *The Logic of Sense* and even the Proust and Bergson books (the former being devoted to the question of aesthetic hierarchy and in fact somewhat undermining Rancière's reading of Deleuze on Proust).¹⁶

To return to the question of mobility and immobility, Rancière sees in late Deleuze (1989) something that serves as a limit for, indeed runs counter to, a Deleuzo-Guattarian theory of becoming (and as I hope to have shown in the preceding chapters, there is ample evidence of a greater devotion to being than to becoming in early Deleuze as well). Rancière notes that Deleuze "sings of the great highway of souls set free" but ends by describing "the wall of stones." But then Rancière rightly asks: "[W]hy does the image of the whole in motion that must guide the explorers on the great road have to be the image of a wall?"¹⁷ He goes on to suggest, alongside an excellent critique of the easy way in which Deleuze and Guattari's notion of nomadism is so facily linked to mobility, that in order to make a political difference in this kind of Deleuzian world, one needs a strong ontology or a Platonism, two things Deleuze would seem to be most staunchly opposed to. However, it has been my claim throughout this book that such a strong ontology, albeit rather more Aristotelian than Badiou's Platonic one, is in fact the luminous underside of Deleuze's thought, which comes to the foreground in Deleuze's early works and actually brings him closer to a thinker like Badiou than most would concede or imagine. In short, the question of how to read Bartleby behind his green screen and up against his wall marks the impasse of these two strains

of Deleuzian thought (being and becoming), an impasse I would claim is not a zone of indetermination or a structure of “both/and” but instead represents the true dialectical power of the “or.”

In Giorgio Agamben’s essay “Bartleby, or On Contingency,” it is not so much a characterization or lack of characterization of America that is at issue but rather the way that Agamben’s essay, with respect to Deleuze’s earlier essay, takes on a symptomatic repetition of what might be termed a Bartleby effect. In Melville’s story, Bartleby’s language becomes thoroughly infectious. Even when Bartleby’s coworkers and boss are most disgruntled with his refusal to work, they nonetheless start unconsciously employing the language of preference. Both the lawyer and the fellow copyists nicknamed Turkey and Nippers start using “prefer” all the time. The lawyer points this out to Turkey, and Turkey replies:

“Oh, *prefer*? oh yes — queer word. I never use it myself. But, sir, as I was saying, if he would but prefer —”

“Turkey,” interrupted I, “you will please withdraw.”

“Oh certainly, sir, if you prefer that I should.”

As he opened the folding-door to retire, Nippers at his desk caught a glimpse of me, and asked whether I would prefer to have a certain paper copied on blue paper or white. He did not in the least roguishly accent the word prefer. It was plain that it involuntarily rolled from his tongue. I thought to myself, surely I must get rid of a demented man, who already has in some degree turned the tongues, if not the heads, of myself and clerks. But I thought it prudent not to break the dismissal at once.¹⁸

In a similar fashion, Deleuze’s formulations about Bartleby seem to be taken up unconsciously, as it were, by Agamben. This comes out most notably in the title and subheadings of Agamben’s piece. Deleuze’s essay is entitled “Bartleby; or, The Formula” (perhaps itself an echo of Melville’s earlier work *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities*). Using the same formula of a proper name followed by an “or,” Agamben titles his essay “Bartleby, or On Contingency” and its three parts “The Scribe, or On Creation,” “The Formula, or On Potentiality,” and “The Experiment, or On Decreation.” The two-part title separated by “or,” like the language of preference, is here taken to excess. In the section entitled “The Formula, or On Potentiality,” Agamben cites Deleuze and extends Deleuze’s notion of the “zone

of indetermination” (here, translated as the “zone of indistinction”): “As Deleuze suggests, the formula thus opens a zone of indistinction between yes and no, the preferable and the nonpreferable. But also . . . between the potential to be (or do) and the potential not to be (or do).”¹⁹ This oscillation between the potential to be or to not be is the crux of Agamben’s argument.²⁰ Once again, the very form of the argument (potential to be or to not be) is structured around the pivotal “or,” which is here the contagious marker of oscillation or indeterminacy.²¹ The “or,” then, becomes something like the “both/and,” something that breaks down readability and the dialectic of opposites.

Yet it is precisely this “or” as zone of indetermination that drops out of the picture whenever America comes into the picture. All of the intricacies of mobility are clearly and readably synonymous with America and its landscape, while Melville’s “Bartleby” is eminently applicable to a range of discussions in French philosophy (or ancient Greek philosophy as Rancière would have it). However, these two poles refuse to come together. On the one hand, there is the America of movement, on the other, the excitingly European and indeterminate immobility of Bartleby. This either/or opposition is not unlike that between the two clerks Turkey and Nippers, whose contrary humors are outlined in great detail at the beginning of Melville’s short story. The elderly Turkey works best in the morning but becomes decidedly too energetic and reckless in the afternoon. Nippers, by contrast, is nervous and suffers from indigestion in the morning but is quite docile in the afternoon. Bartleby is introduced into the system and proceeds with all his preferring to wreak havoc on the nicely refined dialectical polarities of Turkey and Nippers. By the same token, it seems that “Bartleby” the story carries the as-yet-untapped potential to introduce into French philosophy a vision of America that is indistinguishable from the eminently European characteristics of immobility and unworking. French critics, while avowedly fascinated by America, have invested immense energy in casting it as mobile, readable, and outside of any zone of indetermination. By linking Bartleby more resolutely to his native America, we might begin to challenge a series of truisms and suggest that a nineteenth-century American literature of immobility is in fact paradigmatic and not accidental to the establishment of a twentieth-century French literary and philosophical canon that is preoccupied with precisely the same issues. Yet that very project must acknowledge the generative

dimension of the impasse between a certain model of European thought and another model of American mobility and not simply leave it as a zone of indetermination. The next three chapters situate this Bartleby-esque encounter with the wall as also and simultaneously an encounter with being.