

Bartleby, the Caller of Conscience. Melancholy in Melville's *Bartleby*, a Phenomenological Approach

by Catherine Chauche

Ce n'est pas un hasard si les oeuvres mélancoliques vieillissent mieux. C'est une conscience aiguë de ce que l'homme est fait de composantes fugitives et de composantes immuables qui est à la base du désir d'éternité. Gilles Barbedette (*Magazine Littéraire*, oct.-nov. 2005)

Melancholy pervades *Bartleby the Scrivener*: Melville's enigmatic short story ends with the death of the frustrating scrivener who refused to obey the narrator's orders, systematically repeating the same answers: "I would prefer not to", "I'd rather not to", "I prefer not to". Furthermore, the very first paragraph introduces the narrator as a perturbed lawyer obsessed with the imperfection of his account, the absence of materials "for a full and satisfactory biography of this man" constituting "an irreparable loss to literature" (65). Such an incipit opens the vertiginous abyss of the reader's *melancholia imaginationis* announcing the presence of an inaccessible truth which could be the actual object of literature, but nevertheless has to do with the simple fact of being a singular man in the world.

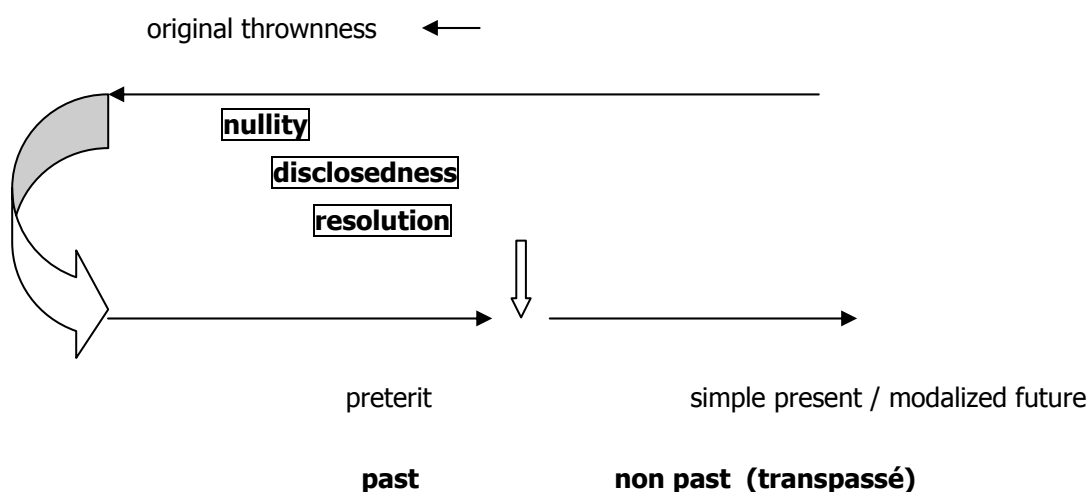
In this essay I will give a phenomenological reading of *Bartleby*, first as a fictitious survey of the temporality of the *Typus Melancholicus* defined by Hubertus Tellenbach (1914-1994), a German psychiatrist; then, relying on Heidegger's reflection in *Being and Time* and Gustave Guillaume's grammatical approach to the time-picture of English in his *Leçons de linguistique*, I will attempt to return to the existential origins of what Enrique Vila-Matas has called "the Bartleby-syndrome".

I. The narrator as Tellenbach's *Typus Melancholicus*.

Hubertus Tellenbach combined the phenomenological theories of Husserl and Heidegger in a work entitled *La mélancholie*, published in 1979. His description shows that melancholy can be a mere mood (*Stimmung*), that is just a mode of being "attuned" to the world; however, the main interest of Tellenbach's contribution lies in the fact that he analyzes how this mood can turn into psychosis and become a mode of being totally impervious to others and closed to the world in general. In his definition of the *typus*, he abandons the notions of subjectivity and objectivity considering with other Heideggerian phenomenologists that there are no boundaries between Dasein and its animate and inanimate environment, since all phenomena are connected. Close observations of his patients have led Tellenbach to posit that the specific features of the *typus melancholicus* result from the continuous overlapping of two more or less pathologized constellations, *includence* (*Includenz*) and *remanence* (*Remanenz*): the former refers to the spatial confinement of the *typus* and his tendency to establish invisible barriers around himself or herself; the latter signifies temporal confinement, that is the reluctance to project into a future that would not be the extension of a reified past-present and the conviction that most existential potentialities are inhibited.

In *Bartleby* the narrator's world is undoubtedly governed by these two stagnating constellations which merge in the stale atmosphere of his Wall Street offices. The place, as it is depicted, can be read as a metaphor of the process of *includence*: "at one end they (my chambers) looked upon the white wall of the interior of a spacious skylight shaft, penetrating the building from top to bottom" (66) and further on, "the other end offered a contrast, the windows commanding an unobstructed view of a lofty wall, black by age and everlasting shade" (66). This black and white opacity reminiscent of expressionist movies is repeated inside the premises by the lawyer who has divided his "chambers" into two parts separated by "ground-glass folding doors" (71); in addition, when Bartleby arrives, the lawyer places the scrivener's

desk behind “a high green folding screen” so as to isolate him from the other clerks and from his sight while having him at his disposal. In the last two quotations, “folding”, a major *actual signified* (signifié d’effet),¹ introduces the main features of the process of *remanence*: on the literal level, it reveals the narrow scope of the lawyer’s activities, restricted to the folding and unfolding of doors and screens according to his “humour” and the supervision of the copyists’ work; on the symbolical level, “folding” announces his desire to manipulate Bartleby the way he has manipulated his other clerks Turkey and Nippers for years, turning them into ill-functioning automatons; lastly, on the philosophical level, “folding” conjures up the motifs of closure and disclosure and thus surreptitiously introduces two major existentials (existentials are ways of being defined by Heidegger): *disclosedness* (*Erschlossenheit*), a basic existential that conditions the temporality of Dasein and *resolution* (*Entschlossenheit*) which discloses the range of possibilities that are usually levelled down in everydayness. These two existentials articulate the time-picture or *chronogenesis* of the English language in tongue (*en langue*), as it has been spatially represented by the French grammarian, Gustave Guillaume:



The existential time-picture in English

This diagram is a simplified version of the English time-picture (the complete picture is rather complex and would require a long commentary). The upper line represents the falling movement of universal time, that is the time all animate and inanimate entities are submitted to; the lower line symbolizes the movement of Dasein’s active, future-oriented time, in the indicative mood of Germanic languages (German and English). In these languages, the indicative mood is divided into two time-spheres: the past (preterit) and the non-past or “transpassé”, that is the simple present prolonged by the modalized future constructed with shall /will / can / must / could etc.... The interface between past and non-past is the grammatical site of *disclosedness* and *resolution*, the existentials I have just defined — the significance of *nullity*, another existential, will be elucidated further down. Note that the ascending indicative mood also contains the undercurrent of descending phenomenological time, an undercurrent which corresponds to the sense of our original *fallenness* or *thrownness* (*Geworfenheit*). This flux carries the throes of existential anxiety (*Angst*) and, of

¹. Guillaume distinguishes two modes of existence for the *signified* (or signifié). It first exists in tongue / *en langue* before any choice is made by the speaker, as a *potential signified* or *signifié de puissance*, that is a limited area of meaning containing certain possibilities. But it also exists in discourse after a choice has been made, as the possibility actualized by the speaker; this is the *actual signified* or *signifié d’effet*. The *significant* or *signifier* also has two modes of existence: it results either from the combination of a *potential signified* with a *potential sign* or from the combination of an *actual signified* with an *actual sign*.

course, the *acedia* of melancholic *post festum* personalities² examined by the Japanese psychiatrist Kimura Bin in his *Essays on Phenomenological Psychopathology*.

Kimura Bin explains that *post-festum* personalities may have a perfect command of English temporality but are unconsciously "past-oriented" and unable to live the present as *festum*, that is as mere presence (*Anwesenheit*). On the contrary, they tend to ruminate as if they were constantly "behind themselves", unable to overcome their nostalgia for an idealized past and the didacticism of *the "they"*.³ The *postfestum* individual⁴ does not necessarily feel depressed; like the lawyer who "had never experienced aught but a not displeasing sadness" (*Bartleby*, 80), he or she may have no conception of what melancholy is and even be regarded as an outgoing busybody by the people around him / her. *Bartleby* precisely deals with the disruption of the narrator's comfortable routine and dependence on the "they-self" — a disruption that discloses the uncanny naked face of "overpowering stinging melancholy" (80) typical of *post-festum* personalities.

II. Bartleby as Dasein moribundus

Melville is careful not to give the slightest piece of information about Bartleby's psychological make-up or social background, except for the fact that he used to work at the Dead Letter Office at Washington — a significant "item of rumor" mentioned at the end of the text (98). Thus, the narrator's attention — as well as the reader's — is immediately concentrated on the scrivener's disquieting presence as the very emblem of melancholy: "pallidly neat, pitifully respectable, incurably forlorn! it was Bartleby" (71). Another element adds to the lawyer's growing uneasiness: the clerk's unshakeable verbal determination exclusively confined to the motif of refusal, always formulated "in a singularly mild, firm voice". In addition to this peculiar combination of "cadaverously gentlemanly *nonchalance*" and stubborn resolution, the lawyer finds out that Bartleby now sleeps in his office like a destitute exile; this sudden realization immediately discloses for him the realm of fraternity and human finitude: "The bond of a common humanity now drew me irresistibly to gloom. A fraternal melancholy... Presentiments of strange discoveries hovered around me. The scrivener's pale form appeared to me laid out, among uncaring strangers in its shivering winding sheet." (80). A premonition actually confirmed at the end of the narrative when Bartleby dies of exhaustion in the New York prison of the Tombs, abandoned by the lawyer who had finally resolved to move to other premises in order to escape from his burdensome presence: "In plain fact, he had become a millstone to me, not only useless as a necklace, but afflictive to bear" (85).

On first reading, one may be tempted to interpret Bartleby as an allegorical figure of bodily demise or a messenger of death in the Romantic tradition. Hence, "huddled at the base of the wall" in a foetal position, with "his dim eyes" open, the dying scrivener would have taught the lawyer a last lesson, reminding him that we have no choice but face our human predicament regardless of John Jacob Astor's most successful commercial strategies. Indeed, this type of interpretation would account for the lawyer's fear and repulsion at the sight of the

². K. Bin relates the *post festum* personality to the being of the melancholic as it has been defined by Henri Maldiney in *Penser l'homme et la folie* (54): "L'être du mélancolique est un redoublement continu de l'ayant-été. L'insistance du passé se subroge à l'existence et ne laisse au présent d'autre extase que l'exclamation de la plainte... la circularité de la plainte exprime rigoureusement la structure temporelle de l'existence mélancolique".

³. The *they* is others, but it also includes myself: in everyday living, Dasein tends to dissolve itself in the "they" and conform to their opinions. This pronoun is the translation for the German definite noun, *das Man*, the "one" or the "they". The Self of everyday Dasein is the "they-self", which is to be distinguished from the *authentic Self*.

⁴. Conversely, the *ante festum* personality is future-oriented and tends to be constantly ahead of itself: "pour pouvoir être soi-même, le moi doit devenir soi-même dans le moment qui suit, nouveau à chaque instant. La raison du "pouvoir être soi-même" se situe toujours en avant de soi... les personnes à tendance schizophrénique font preuve même dans leur vie quotidienne d'une inclination marquée à imaginer des possibilités futures hors de portée et aux idéaux tout à fait impossibles à accomplir" (Bin, 25-53). Lastly, *intra-festum* personalities live in a very narrow ecstatic present, experienced as perfect bliss or unbearable Angst (Bin 59).

scrivener — a sight laden with reminiscences of the spectre of death in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* or *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*. Finally, Bartleby's pitiable destiny would exemplify the mortal pathologies threatening the *typus melancholicus* submitted to maximal *remanence* and *confinement*, and the whole story could then be read as an emblematic charade on Heidegger's definition of the being of Dasein as *sum moribundus* instead *cogito sum* (F. Dastur 22). But for all its consistency such an interpretation remains partial and fails to elucidate the narrator's fascination for the scrivener — a fascination which has to do with Bartleby's disconcerting verbal determination and his equally disconcerting silence.

No reason is suggested by Melville for the scrivener's successive refusals to obey the lawyer's orders, even if the beginning of the narration leaves room for a psycho-sociological approach: Bartleby's protracted stay in a twilight zone, added to his confinement in a Wall Street office among dark lofty buildings, the symbols of triumphant capitalism and the lawyer's tyranny, could have symbolically stifled him, impairing his verbal capacities. If we choose to leave this type of approach aside, a grammatical elucidation of the scrivener's repeated negative formulae is required.

In "I would prefer not to" and "I'd rather not", *would* — (or *had* in its a modalized form) — points out that the scrivener is determined not to engage into any activity that would involve sharing the slightest segment of hypothetical future with the lawyer. Lastly, in the third formula "I *prefer* not to," the anaphoric value of the negation refers to the void of sheer potentiality,⁵ confirming the speaker's firm resolution (*prefer* is printed in italics) to remain on the grammatical threshold of ascending temporality in the simple present, without projecting into the future; moreover, this negation invites the clerk's interlocutor to respond in the same way. Keeping Guillaume's time-picture of English in mind, we can say that whenever the lawyer summons Bartleby to perform a task ("you must go" / "will you or will you not quit me?"), the scrivener's sharp replies virtually hold him back at the existential interface between past and non-past ("transpassé"), on the site where Dasein's possibilities may equally disclose themselves or dissolve into "sad fancyings" or "regrets"; and to cap it all, when the clerk, having nothing else to say, eventually resolves to keep silent, his mute presence carries the same echoes as his very words, compelling the reluctant lawyer to begin a meditation on the motifs of care and responsibility. Taken up by one of his colleagues, this motif turns into an obsessive *burden* in all the acceptations of the word: "you are responsible for the man you left there" (92).

The narrator is never really explicit about the function of the scrivener as a spectral "commander"; throughout the narrative, this function is indirectly alluded to in the references to Bartleby's "wondrous ascendancy" and in the lawyer's report of his melancholy symptoms as if, even in retrospect, he could only have access to the visible part of an iceberg.

III. Bartleby as the Caller of Conscience

The truncated temporality of Bartleby's discourse, poised on the infinitesimal threshold between past and non-past, discloses for the reader the hidden part of the iceberg as "the *nothingness* or *nullity* of the world" (*Being and Time*, 277). Identified by Heidegger as *Nichtigkeit* in German, the existential of *nullity* — sometimes translated *notness* — signifies a *not* that ontologically constitutes Dasein. More precisely, this *not* — Bartleby's grammatical *not* — is the locus of existential *thrownness*, that is the site from where "the voice of conscience" calls Dasein. Most of the time perceived as an alien power entering Dasein, the call is something that "*we ourselves* have neither planned nor prepared for nor willfully brought about" (275); it does not come from someone else who is with me in the world; it comes "*from* me, and yet is *over* me"

⁵. "Bartleby, le scribe qui n'écrit pas, est aussi cette figure suprême du rien, dont procède toute création, il est pure et absolue puissance, ce qu'Agamben, reprenant la rhétorique des théologiens du Moyen Age, nomme *potentia absoluta* (*Creation* 41)". Anne Wicke, in "Bartleby et les philosophes".

(*Being and Time* 275). *The call of conscience (Ruf des Gewissens)* reveals Dasein's ontological *debt (Schuld)*. In *Being and Time* Heidegger points out that this existential — also translated *guilt* or *être-en-faute* — has nothing to do with original sin in Christian religions and should be related to Dasein's primordial incompleteness; in other words, Dasein constantly lags behind its possibilities and has to be summoned by the *call of its conscience* to its own most potentiality-of-being-a-self. For this reason, *debt* is necessarily defined as a *not* or a lack.

The reader of *Bartleby* may assimilate the scrivener to a succubus or a ghoulish figure emerging from Inferno or the Netherworld of Lacan's Real; he may also choose to consider this "unscrutable clerk" as a sacrificial figure or the narrator's ghostly double in the German Romantic tradition. Whatever the system of representation this elusive character may fit in — and there is room for plurality — Melville's main purpose is assuredly to conjure up the lawyer's feeling of uncanniness faced with the progressive intrusion of Bartleby into his existence. "A perpetual sentry in the corner" (75), the scrivener is there to keep watch without saying a word like the *caller of conscience* who reaches Dasein "in the mode of silence" and "with a cold assurance that is uncanny and by no means obvious" (*Being and Time*, 277). Facing the dead brick stone wall as he would the whale's pasteboard mask, Bartleby — the *caller of conscience* — induces the lawyer's first fit of melancholy, his subsequent verbal confusion and flight throughout the second half of the narrative. Here are a few instances extracted from a very long list:

"I resolved upon this — I *would* put certain calm questions to him" (82) / "I *might* give alms to his body, but his body did not pain him... and his soul I *could* not reach" (82) / "What *shall* I do? What *ought* I to do?... Rid myself of him, I *must*; go, he *shall*. But how? You *will* not thrust him, the poor pale, passive mortal.... no, I *will* not, I *cannot* do that. Rather *would* I let him live and die here, and then mason up his remains in the wall" (91) / "since he *will* not quit me, I *must* quit him. I *will* change my offices; I *will* move elsewhere."(91).

All these abortive ventures into the modalized future are indeed responses to Bartleby's challenging *notness*, but they only allow the lawyer's existential inauthenticity to surface through this grammatical "veering about"; a motif that will be long drawn out in the metaphor of his flight through New York suburbs in his "rockaway" and other discursive expressions of his "squeamishness". The main features of the lawyer's inauthenticity can be listed as follows: 1) the inability to face his being as Dasein *moribundus*, a reality of which Bartleby is the constant reminder; 2) the refusal to break the ethic rules of the Puritan *they-self*: "self-interest", "prudence" and reason; 3) the belief in "an all-wise providence" that makes decisions in his place and spares him the necessity of caring for the others.

Inner focalisation follows the workings of the lawyer's conscience haunted by his undefinable *debt* to the "unaccountable" clerk whose mere presence opens for him the chasm of *notness* as "sheer vacancy" (78) in New York streets or in an empty desk, together with the contiguous semantic fields of distress and deprivation. The tonality of this unique, utterly individual experience is conveyed in a terse remark: "indeed, it was his wonderful mildness, chiefly, which not only disarmed me, but *unmanned* me, as it were" (79). Undoubtedly, the ambiguous semantic of "unmanned", eloquent of the lawyer's shame and sense of loss, offers the advantage of expressing both his immediate sensation and his inability to fully grasp the meaning of this peculiar experience as a narrator. To put it another way, the *caller's* voice calling from the basic *nullity* of his own Dasein is perceived by the lawyer — and by the lawyer-narrator as well — as the whispering of a soft feminine voice evocative of symbolical or effective castration. In this connection, the whole narrative could be envisaged as a dream of castration reconstructed with a wealth of details by the dreamer, now awake, but still unable to reach the *potential signified* of the *caller's* message. This signified no doubt has to do with the image of Bartleby's dead body which foreshadows the demise of the lawyer as Dasein, the Symbolic being totally discredited by the scrivener's "unaccountable" resistance. But the cryptic meaning of the *caller's* message is also encapsulated in Bartleby's last words, "I know where I am", which can be deciphered as an ultimate summons urging the lawyer to fathom the intricacies of his own existence : "You know where you are".

However, in spite of his superficial understanding of the Bartleby enigma and before starting his confession, the narrator had already a vague intuition that “a great change” had been wrought in him by the sight of Bartleby’s corpse: “I felt his hand, when a tingling shiver ran up my arm and down my spine” (98). This ultimate confrontation with death definitely turned the lawyer’s unhealthy “curiosity” into a retrospective but authentic solicitude for the scrivener and made him realize that he could have been Bartleby’s “keeper”, like Cain after killing Abel (*Genesis*, 4: 14).⁶ Last but not least, this late realization together with the report about Bartleby’s former job as a subordinate clerk in the Dead Letter Office at Washington also prompt the lawyer to write about his encounter with the scrivener projecting himself into the new, unknown dynamics of ascending temporality for the first time in his life. Relinquishing prudence as practical down-to-earth-mindedness, “his first grand point” (66), the lawyer’s is at last ready to answer Bartleby’s silent call that is the *call* of his own existential conscience. With a delay, his confession will compensate for the loss of the thousand letters that “speed to death” in Washington (98), like Bartleby himself. One day, his narrative will also speed to death, but only after reaching a crowd of anonymous readers who, in their turn, will ponder on the signified of this melancholy story.

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Bartleby reveals the existential facet of a melancholy that, in God’s absence, no longer feeds on spiritual transcendence. Not only do the scrivener’s repeated refusals baffle the lawyer, but they also confront him with the *actual signified* of verbal forms that induce him to question his faith in mercantilism as well as his fascination for hollow signifiers with “rounded and orbicular sound” (66) such as “John Jacob Astor”. For all his passivity, Bartleby looms as the very agent of a process of *de-construction* of the capitalist system legitimated by the qualms of the narrator’s Puritan conscience. *De-construction*, as it is presented in Heidegger’s *Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie*, is an element of the *phenomenological method* which consists of three interrelated phases: *de-construction*, *reduction*, *construction*. The first phase implies the *de-construction* or *destruction* of the concepts related to all the worldviews that have obliterated the horizon for an interpretation of the meaning of being. *Reduction* refers to the return to an ontological understanding of the being of Dasein, aside from any psychological or anthropological approach. Lastly, *construction* unfolds as the disclosure of the being of Dasein in a free, authentic, future-oriented project.

In *Bartleby*, the scrivener’s slow downfall reads as a metaphoric commentary on the theme of *de-construction*, urging “gentlemen forgers” — the lawyer and his like — to explore the signified of the word “conscience” in existential terms, regardless of the Calvinist ideology. Penned by the lawyer in retrospect, the narrative develops as a laborious attempt at clarifying facts in the perspective of *reduction*. This process no doubt preys on the narrator’s mind without his knowing it, stealthily underlying the grammatical temporality of his discourse. *Construction*, the last phase of the *phenomenological method*, is left to the dynamics of reading: confessing his inability to articulate the Bartleby problem, the narrator entrusts the reader with the delicate task of interpreting his own text, however vague and singular. Thus, the Wall Street lawyer will be in a position to vicariously exorcize his melancholy obsession with the case of Bartleby as “an irreparable loss to literature”.

With *Bartleby*, Melville casts a shadow over the Christian myth of prelapsarian innocence and Emersonian “self-reliance”. But he also opens the territories of *notness* later surveyed by other writers engaged in the self-same spiralling circle of a quest which carries the overtones of the noblest melancholy.

⁶. “Then the Lord said to Cain, “where is Abel your brother?” And he said, “I do not know. Am I my brother’s keeper?”

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