

UNIVERSITE PARIS OUEST NANTERRE LA DÉFENSE

TROPISMES

N° 16

The Relevance of Theory

LA Résonance de la théorie

Publié avec le Concours du Conseil Scientifique
de l'Université Paris Ouest Nanterre La Défense

2010

CENTRE DE RECHERCHES ANGLOPHONES

Potentiality, Narrative and Plot: Reading Agamben Reading Bartleby

The fascination of philosophers for the scrivener that has ceased to write is worthy of a lengthy study in an attempt to explore the complicated relation between philosophy and literature, and, by the same token, define the claims of literary criticism. My ambition is far more limited. I will focus on one instance of philosophical reading — Agamben’s *Bartleby or on Contingency* — with the assumption that his concept of potentiality is relevant to Melville’s story not in spite of what it disregards, but because of what it reveals, regarding the text, that prompts critical assessment from the viewpoint of literary interpretation.

Agamben reading Bartleby

In the opening paragraph of his study, Agamben states abruptly: “But Bartleby also belongs to a philosophical constellation, and it may be that it alone contains the cipher of the figure merely traced by the literary constellation to which Bartleby belongs.” (P 243)¹. These premises

¹ I slightly alter the English translation to make it more faithful to the original on a crucial point, that of philosophical deciphering, which is curiously

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have been singled out by Gisèle Berkman who sees in them a philosophical appropriation of the literary figure, in which cipher and figure, philosophy and literature, are heteronomous, with the former having a privileged access to the meaning of the latter (Berkman) and which enlists the literary character in a philosophical dispute.

What is the dispute about? Briefly stated, it is traced back to Aristotle's doctrine of potentiality, for which "all potential to be or to do something is always also potential not to be or not to do (*dynamis mē einai, mē energein*) without which potentiality would always already have passed into actuality and would be indistinguishable from it" (P 245). As a scribe who has stopped writing, always preferring not to do or be something, Bartleby is the figure of "pure, absolute potentiality" (P 254). A consequence of this is that he questions the primacy of will or necessity over potentiality which, according to Agamben, governs the Western ethical tradition:

To believe that will has power over potentiality, that the passage to actuality is the result of a decision that puts an end to the ambiguity of potentiality (which is always potentiality to do and not to do) — this is the perpetual illusion of morality. (P 254)

The traditional perspective privileges potentiality as *potentia ordinata* — which makes it possible for will to "order the undifferentiated chaos of potentiality" — over *potentia absoluta*, the capacity to do absolutely anything. This is the lawyer's error who, faced with Bartleby's "I would prefer not do", equates potentiality with will and impotentiality with necessity, both of which relations the scrivener's formula puts into question. Turning to "Edwards on the Will" and "Priestley on Necessity" (88-9), the lawyer cannot but fail, as the categories he uses can have no impact on his employee. Eventually, what he does not understand or, unlike the philosopher, what he cannot decipher in the figure of the

omitted in the English translation: "But Bartleby also belongs to a philosophical constellation, and it may be that it alone contains the figure merely traced by the literary constellation to which Bartleby belongs." (P 243). The Italian reads: "Ma vi è anche una costellazione filosofica di Bartleby, ed è possibile che soltanto questa contenga la cifra della figura che l'altra si limita a tracciare." (BC 49)

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pallid clerk, is that Bartleby's formula "is the *restitutio in integrum* of possibility, which keeps possibility suspended between occurrence and non-occurrence, between the capacity to be and the capacity not to be" (P 267); that Bartleby is a new Messiah, come to redeem not what was but what was not (P 270). This is enough to boggle the mind of an "unambitious lawyer" who "in the cool tranquillity of a snug retreat, [does] a snug business among rich men's bonds, and mortgages, and title-deeds" (60) and possibly more than enough for the theory-wary to suspect some philosophical hijacking. And yet it seems right to say with Alexander Cooke that if Agamben passes judgement on the content of the story, "the verdict is no longer [as with the ordinary batch of Bartleby criticism] carried out on the text itself, but rather on the fundamental philosophical problem it raises" (Cooke 80). If Cooke is right, there should be no question therefore as to the relevance of Agamben's interpretation. Philosophically speaking at least, it tackles fundamental elements of the text. But there remains to be seen if and how philosophical issues — Agamben's categories — intersect literary ones, which "Bartleby, or on Contingency" tends to ignore. This I will examine in two steps: 1) by defining the nature of Agamben's misprision; 2) by trying to read in the light of his categories of potentiality and necessity two features that are of particular relevance in "Bartleby" — narrative frame and plot.

Agamben's (mis)reading

Let us start with Bartleby's formula, on which most of Agamben's argument, like Deleuze's before, is brought to bear. Such interpretive "preference" raises several problems. To begin with, the isolated fragment is made to resonate almost independently, whatever the context, the speaker or the object, to say nothing of the slight variations in syntax or tone — as if it made no difference whether the preference is conditional ("I *would* prefer not to") or not, whether it concerns reading, copying or "tak[ing] a clerkship" (98), or whether it is used menacingly (Turkey), unwittingly (Nippers) or disapprovingly (the lawyer, preferring Turkey "would withdraw for the present" (81). Furthermore, the formula

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seems then to float free of interlocution, except when it comes to stressing the attorney's failure to find a common ground between Bartleby and himself. With him, the figure of necessity and the issue of the implication of potentiality with necessity are dismissed as irrelevant to the understanding of the poetic formula of absolute potentiality. And so is, by the same token, the narrator's involvement, as narrator, in interpretation, which the philosopher, it seems, would prefer not to see.

It is interesting to notice how Agamben actually reads the following brief exchange between the lawyer, bristling with necessity, and his copyist, who is all preference, over an errand to the Post Office:

'Bartleby,' said I, 'Ginger Nut is away; just step around to the Post Office, won't you? (it was but a three minutes' walk), and see if there is anything for me.'

'I would prefer not to.'

'You will not?'

'I prefer not.' (73)

Agamben rightly stresses the lawyer's deafness to Bartleby's expression of preference, which he can only translate in terms of will and refusal, but in his turn is impervious to significant nuances. He parenthetically remarks the dropping of the conditional in the employee's second rejoinder but strangely reads it as a means "to eliminate all the traces of the verb 'will' even in its modal uses" (P 254). Now, we may wonder whether *prefer* — which implies a choice between options — is so devoid of the modality expressed with *will* and whether it is closer to or more remote from actuality without the conditional, which makes of preference itself an option. If either were the case, then, paradoxically, from "I would prefer not to" to "I *prefer* not", there would be degrees in absolute potentiality. Conversely, when Agamben, on the strength of the same dialogue, faults the man of law for being a bad reader, he invites similar criticism on himself, for not noticing that when the lawyer turns to "Edward on the Will" and "Priestley on Necessity", it is not primarily to understand Bartleby's turn of mind but to "penetrate to the predestinated purpose of my life" (89), of which "these troubles of mine, touching the scrivener" are the signs.

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There may be no difference between that misreading — clearly predicated on the privilege given to the formula as the cipher of pure potentiality — and giving short shrift to the lawyer as the figure / cipher of will and necessity. The formula does not seem to be entirely free of will or necessity. Quite simply, the purest expression of contingency would have to be “I might” and Bartleby’s “I would prefer not to”, in all its significant variations, and its unavoidable confrontation with the employer rather illustrate the impossibility for any human being to live in suspension in absolute potentiality². The eagerness to write off the attorney as a bad reader — and concurrently to side with his employee — can also be a way to foreground by contrast sound philosophical reading. Literature, or more accurately poetry, I would suggest, plays a crucial part in those transferenceal relation between philosopher and characters.

Contrary, say, to “rich men’s bonds, and mortgages, and title deeds”, the formula in the philosopher’s eyes is literary. Besides, a metaphor it is that first gathers the copyist that has ceased copying within the fold of philosophy with his ancestor, Aristotle who was represented as “the scribe of nature who dipped his pen in thought” (qtd P 243) — which is, according to Agamben, an allegory of the suspension of thought *in potentia*. Interestingly, metaphoricity signals the irruption of philosophy in literature and of literature in philosophy, as well as their complex interweaving. And literature seems to mean poetry. It is poetry — not fiction or literature — which, like science or thinking, is said to conduct “experiments without truth”, of which Melville’s story is an example (P 260) and “pure poetry” — and not “pure fiction” or “pure literature” — is Agamben’s translation from the German “*reine Dichtung*” referring to Robert Walser, the poet and novelist’s experiments. The privilege granted to poetry indeed may be explained by their common aim, in Agamben’s view, which is to find the inaccessible originary place of the word and by their common interest in the taking-place of language, its absolute beginning, we may say, in

² This reservation about the conception of the formula as pure potentiality, qualifies all the subsequent references to it although, for the sake of exposition, it will remain implicit.

pure potentiality³. Hence, I venture, the corresponding rejection of the lawyer, that prosaic creature, which I take to be the obverse image of the fascination for the poetical character of Bartleby — i.e. as “an absolutising of potentiality as the absolute beginning of thought” (Berkman 98). But, in Agamben’s view philosophy and poetry are also opposed as rivals and the former is then compared to pure prose (L&D 140) — so that we may suspect that Bartleby fascinates the philosopher not by reason of identity with him but as a rival other, while the lawyer is spurned not because he is opposed to the philosopher but by reason of proximity.

How then does the lawyer fare as a philosopher? Creditably enough. At least we can see him striving after a convincing philosophical expression, in terms of “the doctrine of assumptions”, for instance, of that enigma, “the unaccountable Bartleby”, dropping on the way his former psychological or even dietetic hypotheses. His office arrangements, too, are rather “philosophical” in the way he employs his copyists according to their respective (dis)abilities: using Turkey whose “paroxysms” are post-meridian affairs in the morning, while Nippers, whose fits are of the ante-meridian sort, will serve in the afternoon. “Under the circumstances”, this indeed proved a clever combination of Necessity (business), Potentiality (the employees’ (in) capacity), and Will (their predisposition to work). That is, before Bartleby’s preference put paid to that fragile equilibrium.

Agamben’s categories, as can be seen, are still quite relevant but that is why the complexity of the lawyer’s position in the story must be more accurately discussed, if only because it raises the issue of the relevance of any interpretation and does it twice: diegetically, with the lawyer *qua* character testing his philosophy on Bartleby, and on the level of story-telling, since it is the inadequacy and inefficiency of his psychological, physiological and finally philosophical assumptions that seemingly prompts him to become a narrator. Somehow, this is what Agamben forgets and in the process, he forgets that enunciation

³ See for instance the “Eighth Day” of *Language and Death*, or chapter 9 of *The Man without Content*, on “The Original Structure of the Work of Art” where poetry (*poiesis*) is granted an ontological status as grounding the original place of man’s world.

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participates to the construction of meaning, and more precisely to the staging of an endeavour to decipher the enigma of thought. What loss to philosophy this oversight entails is not my concern here, but rather what literary interpretation would gain by putting Agamben's philosophical concepts to the test on the overlooked issues of narrative frame and plot in Melville's story.

The man of law and the man of letters

Bartleby's strangeness converts the man of law into an interpreter/reader and then into a narrator/writer, in other words, into a man of letters. Rephrasing Melville's story as one of a man who has stopped writing obfuscates the fact that it also the story, told by himself, of a man who has started writing. Actually, he has exchanged the drawing of "recondite documents of all sorts" (66) for the narrating of a story, judgment for imagination — in his efforts "to construe in his imagination what proves impossible to be solved by his judgement" (72). This is a most surprising conjunction, especially coming from "an eminently safe man" who is wary of "poetic enthusiasm". But this, remember, is the very man who lamented as "a loss to literature" the absence of a history of Bartleby. Oddly enough, in fact, the man of assumptions first comes on stage as a man of preference, inclining to the literary:

The nature of my avocations, for the last thirty years, has brought me into more than ordinary contact with what would seem an interesting and somewhat singular set of men, of whom, as yet, nothing that I know of, has ever been written — I mean, the law-copyists, or scribes. I have known very many of them, professionally and privately, and, if I pleased, could relate divers histories, at which good-natured gentlemen might smile, and sentimental souls might weep. But I waive the biographies of all other scribes, for a few passages in the life of Bartleby, who was a scribe, the strangest I ever saw, or heard of. While, of other law-copyists, I might write the complete life, of Bartleby nothing of that sort can be done. I believe that no materials exist, for a full and satisfactory biography of this man. It is an irreparable loss to literature. (59)

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Instead of all the copyists that he *could*, if he *chose* to, write about, the lawyer *prefers* to write about Bartleby or rather about the impossibility to write his “history”. Here is an interesting complication of Agamben’s equation of creation and writing as a passage from perfect potentiality to actuality, which explains the fascination for Bartleby — “The scribe who does not write (of whom Bartleby is the last, exhausted figure) is perfect potentiality, which a Nothing alone now separates from the act of creation.” (247) The lawyer prefers not to actualise what could be actualised. So, Bartleby-wise, he remains suspended in potentiality. Rather he would prefer (conditional potentiality) to actualise what cannot be actualised, because it does not seem to have ever existed even *in potentia*. What the lawyer’s creation does actualise therefore is the impossibility to actualise anything concerning Bartleby but this impossibility.

The above description of creation seems to be at variance with Agamben’s general conception of creation. Nevertheless it doesn’t invalidate it if we assume that creation for him means poetic creation and has to do with pure thought, the ungraspable origin of the word. Fiction, in this respect, is an impure affair, but rather than dropping Agamben’s hypothesis altogether, we need to examine it, in regards to plot especially, as a tension between potentiality and necessity, poetry and prose, imagination and judgment.

Diegetically, the transformation of the man of law into a man of letters can apparently be accounted for by his “more than ordinary contact” with singularity, and especially Bartleby’s. Contact is what is at issue, because it doesn’t imply an absolute opposition between potentiality and necessity, nor their synthesis. Moreover Bartleby’s position also is ambiguous. On the one hand, he disrupts the lawyer’s prose — the continuous string of documents to draw up, copy and certify — while on the other he is the cause of an unexpected flurry of prose in the narrative format. Restated in now familiar categories, his suspension *in potentia* runs counter necessity, the “necessities connected with my business” (83), while not abolishing it, rather re-initiating it in the form of a need to tell. Just as his immobility, his remaining “stationary”, causes turmoil around him and led to the

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lawyer's move to other premises, his silence is what causes the lawyer's narrative.

The image of plot that emerges from this bears examination. It has to be related to the capacity the narrative has to elicit the reader's interest, to *intrigue* the reader, as the French for plot (*intrigue* < *intriguer*) suggests. Being *intrigued* — or plotted against, as a reader always is — means that the reader's attention is drawn between the surmise of what seems inevitable and what seems possible, probable or unexpected. The thrill of the plot lies in the *becoming-necessary* of the *potential* or, conversely, in the *potential not to be* of the *necessary* — with the added complication that we may or may not *will* this or that to happen or not to happen or to “unhappen”. In this sense, plot brings necessity in more than ordinary contact with potentiality — and will in its less conscious forms.

The lawyer's puzzlement after Bartleby declares “that he still preferred to abide with me” illustrates the point:

What shall I do? I now said to myself, buttoning up my coat to the last button. What shall I do? what ought I to do? what does conscience say I should do with the man, or, rather, ghost. Rid myself of him, I must; go, he shall. But how? You will not thrust him, the poor, pale, passive mortal — you will not thrust such a helpless creature out of your door? you will not dishonor yourself by such cruelty? 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. What, then, will you do? For all your coaxing, he will not budge. Bribes he leaves under your own paper-weight on your table; in short, it is quite plain that he prefers to cling to you. (90-1)

The sudden surge, to the point of overflow, of modal verbs is in accordance with Agamben's reading. Potentiality cannot be read in terms of will and necessity. Yet, it seems that it cannot not summon them up, to the precise extent that it baffles them: it is because the lawyer is at a loss for a response that he turns to them for guidance — “what does conscience say ...?”. The monologue also bears out the claim that subordinating potentiality to will is “the perpetual illusion of morality” (P 254). Obviously, “will (not)” in the lawyer's meditation looks

towards actualisation, out of moral considerations, to put an end to “the ambiguity of potentiality” (P 254). The story however hardly stops here, we might rather say this is where it begins. The flow of modal verbs and question marks reveals a man intent on devising a plot to get rid of “this intolerable incubus” (90) and failing to do so — just as before he had tried to find strategies either to adapt Bartleby to office life or to adapt office life to him and ended up with narrating the story of his failing to do so. The difficulty he experiences in fact indicates that plots cannot be modelled on necessity and will only, and that will and potentiality intersect — as the very existence of the illusion of morality suggests. He develops a strategy of containment and exclusion through which the disturbing resistance of what is to be contained shows.

Will comes quickly to the rescue of necessity whose sequence — however powerfully stated: “Rid myself of him, I must; go, he shall.” — cannot be the last word on the issue, but immediately gives rise to a question, which as quickly turns necessity into a decision to be taken. The “dialogue” with conscience that follows shows the strength of the containment. The series of options are no option at all, not only because they repeat each other, but also because they falsely take the interrogative form and, despite the concluding question mark, work more like imperative injunctions to which the lawyer cannot but bow — “No, I will not.” No potentiality is allowed to surface in this, except perhaps from the force of its denial: the declarative syntax in the negative certainly is further removed from pure preference than the interrogative which it substitutes for — “Will you?” But preference at any rate returns discreetly, structurally (“Rather would I...”) and thematically (“... let him live and die here” — i.e. let him remain suspended in pure potentiality). It is more like a trace, bracketed in a moral dilemma, but the suggestion is that plot must allow for some form of potentiality, if only as that which has to be taken into account and resisted. Buttoned-up as the account may strive to be, in the image of its narrator, it ends up, as J. H. Miller notes, as “a serious form of unbuttoning” (J. H. Miller 147).

To sum up, potentiality plays havoc with the lawyer’s legal (narrative) system, which may either resist it or desist completely. The conflict leads to the invention of strategies to accommodate or exclude

the disrupting element and, by the same token, to a narrative that seeks to restate the conflict in terms of necessity and will, and to restore the system along those lines.⁴ Plot, it appears, combines potentiality and necessity and cannot be reduced to the level of the story — of the contact between the characters — but involves as part of the story the issue of story-telling as well. Furthermore, pure potentiality or pure necessity would ruin it. In the former case, it would be stalled, and remain stationary like Bartleby “sitting upon the banister” (93), never really taking off. In the latter, it would resemble the lawyer’s “masterly [but ineffectual] arrangement to get rid of Bartleby” (84), whose beauty would “consist in its perfect quietness” (84) — thus leaving everything and everyone, including the scrivener, in place. It would then be business as usual — and no story.

As a last brief expression of the tension between potentiality and necessity which to my mind defines plot in “Bartleby the Scrivener”, I would like now, before concluding, to consider a little noticed but revelatory moment, a moment almost of *anagnorisis* for the lawyer. It is the episode in which he learns that Bartleby has been taken to the Tombs, as a vagrant. The letter from the landlord of his former office he has just been given informs him “that the writer had sent to the police” (95). This, I argue, is a dramatic moment, because of a tension between potentiality and necessity in the lawyer himself which involves two conflicting images of the writer and writing. It is made explicit in the lawyer’s response. At first “indignant” at a “procedure” he “would not have decided upon” himself (95), that in short he would have preferred, nay did prefer, not to opt for, he agrees upon reflection that “as a last resort, under such peculiar circumstances, it seemed the only plan”. Two kinds of writing are implied then. In reference to the actual writer, writing is of the kind that a lawyer is defined by, dealing in legal documents or writs of justice. Opposed to this is the writing of literary tales, in which the eminently safe man of law indulges. Seen in this light, the story is a portrait of the writer as the writer who would prefer

⁴ Derrida’s comment on the irony of Bartleby’s formula, I believe, hints at that tension inherent to the plot: “to talk in this way so as to puzzle [*intriguer*], to baffle, to question, to make one (the law, the “lawyer”) talk, is to talk ironically” (Derrida, *Donner la mort*, 108).

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not to be of the first kind (of writers), would prefer not to send for the police — or precipitate his characters' end — but feels *eventually* obliged to resign himself to that, as a narrative needs — or does it? — a proper conclusion⁵.

As the above suggests, to interpret the tension in its full complexity would require to reach beyond its reflection in the relation between characters, to which I restrained myself, for brevity's sake, to the issue of writing as process and procedure. Such study would bring us back to philosophy and Agamben whose conception of writing as marking the passage from potentiality to actuality appears as a restriction, which misses writing as that unaccountable process that "Bartleby the Scrivener" exemplifies — that Derridian *différance* which Agamben may be trying to bypass in the name of Bartleby. Philosophical and literary issues once again are sure to overlap, but if the above reading of "Bartleby" with and against Agamben's is any indication, there is insight to be gained from an interrogation of the relevance of philosophical proceedings through the lens of literary criticism — and the other way around.

As can be seen, I have only just begun to read "Bartleby".

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Université Paris Ouest Nanterre La Défense

⁵ In this respect, "Bartleby" would probably provide an interesting variation for the kind of studies that D. A. Miller conducts in his *The Novel and the Police*, but this is outside the scope of the present paper.

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